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## Halliday's View of Child Language Learning: Has it been Misinterpreted?

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*Abstract:* This paper gives a brief summary of Halliday's theory of how children learn to talk, illustrating the development of children's language from the microfunctions through the macrofunctions and into the metafunctions of adult language. The paper points to a possible source of the misinterpretation of Halliday's theory in the work of Frank Smith (1983), which appears to have "trickled down" into some of the textbooks written for pre-service teachers in Australia. Links are made to teachers' knowledge about language (KAL) and the current Australian Curriculum English (ACE). It is suggested that while any number of functions of the language of school-aged children may be described, it is perhaps misleading to refer to the microfunctions as "Halliday's functions".

**Key terms:** Child language learning, Preservice teacher education, Halliday

### Introduction

Over more than half century linguists and others have discussed the fascinating question of how children learn to talk. This not only has many implications in the field of education, but also teaches us about the nature of language itself. Some of the greatest insights in this area have come from the work of Halliday (e.g. 1973, 1975, 1978) and developments from this. However, the question of how children learn language is very complex, and it is possible that some of this work may have been misinterpreted, or at least misapplied, in the field of language education. To investigate to what extent this might be the case, the ten textbooks cited by publishers as the most commonly used in Language and Literacy education in Australia (Troy Alexander, personal communication 16.01.2018) were investigated. Listed in alphabetical order, these texts are Derewianka & Jones (2016); Emmitt, Zbaracki, Komesaroff & Pollock (2015); Fellowes & Oakley (2014); Henderson (2012); Kalantzis, Cope, Chan & Dalley-Trim (2016); McLachlan, Nicholson & Fielding-Barnsley (2013); Seely Flint, Kitson, Lowe & Shaw (2014); Tompkins, Campbell & Green (2012); Winch, Johnston, March, Ljungdahl & Holliday (Eds.) (2015); and Wing Jan (2015). Some current texts widely used in pre-service teacher programs, i.e. the First Steps materials (DETWA 2006); Hill (2015) and Krause, Bochner, Duchesne & McMaugh (2010), were also examined.

The discussion below gives a brief summary of Halliday's theory, points to a possible source of the misinterpretation in the work of Frank Smith (1983), examines how child language learning is presented in the most popular Australian textbooks, and makes links to current curriculum priorities.

## Halliday's Theory

Halliday's work (1973, 1975, 1978; Halliday & Webster 2004) is based on a description of how his son Nigel learnt to talk. It has been supported by later studies for English, notably by Painter (e.g. 1984/2015, 1985, 1989, 1999, 2009) and Torr (1997, 2005, 2015), and also for other languages such as Chinese (Qiu, 1985). Halliday recorded his son's developing language in the form of extensive notes, which included pronunciation, intonation and stress. He did this beginning from when Nigel was at a very early age, from a time when the general public, and indeed many linguists in those days, would say, "He can't talk yet!" In Halliday's view, language learning is a social and cultural practice:

*In the development of the child as a social being, language has the central role. Language is the main channel through which the patterns of living are transmitted to him, through which he learns to act as a member of a 'society' ... and to adopt its 'culture' (1978, p. 9).*

Halliday deliberately uses the term 'learning', rather than 'acquisition', seeing language as constructed by interaction, not something that is out there to be 'acquired' (1978, p. 16): "If there is anything which the child can be said to be acquiring, it is ... his 'meaning potential' " (1978, p. 19). Halliday sees small children as engaged in "learning how to mean", the title of his groundbreaking 1975 book.

Halliday states that, "what the child hears ... is functionally related to observable features of the situation around him." (1978, p. 18). That social interaction is a necessary condition for language learning has been indicated by unfortunate cases of children deprived of it, such as the so-called 'wolf-children'. Through engaging with parents and caregivers the child not only learns the language, but learns the culture through that language.

Interaction with caregivers begins very soon after the child is born. As soon as the child begins to make meaningful expressions like smiling or crying, then communication is taking place and language is present. We do not need to wait until the child starts saying recognisable words to start studying their language; they are already making meaning a long time before this. It may sometimes be difficult to interpret what children are saying before they have recognisable words and structures. This is partly because the types of meaning that children make are typically different from the ones produced by adults. Halliday's research into his son's language set out to answer the question, "What are the functions that language serves in the life of an infant?" (1978, p. 18).

In attempting to ascertain what the child means by any particular utterance, Halliday suggests we ask the question, "What has the child learnt to do by using language?" For example, children may learn very early that if they cry they will get attention; Deaf children learn to drop things, or to throw small objects at their parents to get the same result. Halliday (1975, pp. 54-59; Halliday & Webster, 2004, pp. 66-70) describes three main stages that children traverse in learning language:

Phase I is the first language system that the child has.

Phase II is the transition from the child's system to the adult language.

Phase III is the learning of the adult language.

We can see how children progress through these stages by examining what their language is like at each phase, and especially by looking at what they use their language for. We also should keep in mind that all children are different and the ages at which a child is in a particular stage should be seen as approximations only.

### **Phase I: The First Language System**

The first phase is when the child is about six to eighteen months old. At this stage we can describe approximately seven basic purposes or *functions* for which the child uses language (Halliday 1978, p. 33), known as ‘developmental functions’ or ‘microfunctions’. It is important to note here that Phase 1 language is not necessarily connected to the mother tongue; the combinations of sounds may have no resemblance to words in the child’s first language.

#### ***Instrumental Function***

One important thing that children use language for is to get what they want. Halliday calls this function the Instrumental function. The child may have a particular group of sounds that they use to show that they want something where it is obvious what they are asking for, such as their teddy bear which is on the table. Or they may have a more specific combination of sounds for a particular object or toy. There might also be a form to answer adult “Do you want ...?” questions.

#### ***Regulatory Function***

Related to the Instrumental function is the Regulatory function, language used to regulate or control other people’s behaviour, an all too obvious function for anyone who has observed young children. Children realise very early that they can use language for this purpose, because other people do this to them so often, for example, to stop them touching things they should not. The difference between the Regulatory and Instrumental functions is that when using the Instrumental function the child is focussing on the object that they want, but does not particularly care who gets it for them, but with the Regulatory function the utterance is directed towards a specific person.

#### ***Interactional Function***

Language used by the child to interact with the people around them, as opposed to controlling their behaviour, is known as language in its Interactional function. Included in this are utterances such as greetings, or responding to being called. The caregiver’s name is usually first used in this interactional way. For instance, it is not unusual to hear children overgeneralising their father’s name in its Interactional function, when ‘Dadda’ becomes any male in the vicinity.

Another way in which language can be used in its Interactional function is when the child wants to focus someone’s attention on something: for example, a small girl in the author’s family would often take her on a tour of her garden, saying ‘Ook!’ whenever they came across another fascinating stone or twig. Another example comes from a young European child of the author’s acquaintance, who became confused about whether adults were using this function or the Informative function (See below.). When walking in the forest with him his caregivers would use the word in their language for ‘Wow!’ when they came across a particularly big tree. Instead of interpreting this as Interactional, the child took this as Informative, and from then on called all trees ‘wow’, regardless of their size.

### *Personal Function*

A fourth function of the children's language is that they use it to express their awareness of themselves and of the fact that they are separate from the surrounding environment. This function includes the expression of personal feelings, such as the noises children make when they find something interesting, or when it tastes nice.

### *Heuristic Function*

Once children have recognised the boundary between themselves and the environment, then they can start exploring what is around them. Halliday calls this the Heuristic function of language. An early use of this function is to use it to ask for the name of something. Later this develops into the whole range of questions a child uses; an example is when children go through a stage where they ask 'why?' about everything.

### *Imaginative Function*

The Imaginative function is used by children to create an environment of their own. This may start off with requests for "peek-a-boo" (pretending someone is not there) and develops into use in contexts such as story-telling and pretend games where the child takes on the role of someone else.

### *Informative Function*

The final function, the Informative function, comes later than the others because it is actually quite a complicated idea to think that you can tell something to somebody who does not already have that information. Many young children are not yet able, for example, to tell one caregiver what has happened during a day spent with another caregiver. The seven functions described above, the microfunctions, are used by children until approximately the age of eighteen months.

## **Phase II: Between Child and Adult Language**

(Halliday, 1975, pp. 41-51; Halliday & Webster, 2004, pp. 55-64)

Children use language to perform the Phase 1 functions well before they are at the stage of using recognisable words or phrases. Groups of sounds and intonation are used, but there is a lack of identifiable vocabulary or grammatical structures. Children are quite aware of what they can do with language, but they do not use it for the same purposes as adults do.

During Phase II, children very quickly increase their vocabulary and use of structures, also expanding their ability to engage in dialogue. This occurs from approximately the age of 18 months to two years. By the end of Phase I the child can express about 50 different meanings, but during Phase II this develops very rapidly. Most of the meanings are transmitted by recognisable words. At first they are on their own, so that a single word functions as a complete utterance, e.g., 'blankie' means "I want my sucking blanket". But children soon start using more than one word. It is not particularly significant whether they say one, two or three words, although some writers seem to allocate great importance to this (e.g. Brown, 1973; Hill, 2015 and some other textbooks). The crucial point is what a child can *do* using language, not how many words it takes to do it.

Firstly, the child's utterances will have just one function, as in the example in the previous paragraph. But later, they come to have more than one function at a time. Halliday gives the example of "Cake!" spoken with a wide rise and fall in pitch, meaning:

- a. "There's a cake!" AND
- b. "I want some!" simultaneously.

The ability to express more than one function at a time is a very significant development and means that the child's language has come to be much more like adult language; all adult utterances mean more than one thing at a time, as in the example below:

Example 1

"By the way, darling, could you get me another cup of coffee please?"

This utterance functions to express the relationship between the speakers ('darling'), to get someone to do something (politely: 'could', 'please'), and to make links to what has gone on previously: to what was said before ('By the way') and to what was done before ('another cup').

In Phase II, the child has begun the transition towards *multifunctional* utterances. As part of this transition, their linguistic system is organised into *macrofunctions*. These Phase II functions are known as macrofunctions because they incorporate more than one of the functions from Phase I, i.e. they are larger in scope than the microfunctions. The primary motivation for the child's great increase in vocabulary knowledge in Phase II is to learn about the environment. Children separate themselves from the environment, find out about it and react to it, interpreting it in the light of their own experience and categorising it. Language is used as a means of finding out about their surroundings. The Phase II function of using language to explore the environment in this way is called the Mathetic macrofunction. During this time, children of course still use language to obtain what they want. Instead of focussing on an object or on a particular person as in Phase I, they may turn to a third person to get them involved in the action. The Phase II function of using language as action, getting what you want and getting people to do things, is called the Pragmatic macrofunction.

Thus, the Phase II functions consist of the Mathetic macrofunction or "language for learning", which has a referential or experiential function, and the Pragmatic macrofunction or "language as action", which has an interpersonal or "speech functional" meaning (Painter, Derewianka & Torr, 2007, p. 567). The distinction between these Phase II functions is a very important one for the child, as it is for adults. Children will find a way of marking the difference between the two. For example, Nigel, Halliday's child, said all mathetic utterances with falling intonation and all pragmatic utterances with rising intonation. Thus he was doing what adults do, distinguishing between finding out about things and doing things with language, although he was not doing this in an adult way. By the end of Phase II, children are adult-like in the way that they distinguish between the main functions of their language; this is the beginning of the Speech Function system. (See the section below on Speech Function.) They have also developed the ability to engage in dialogue, and are thus well on their way towards the adult language.

**Phase 3: Adult Language**

(Halliday, 1975, pp. 51-59; Halliday & Webster, 2004, pp. 64-51)

Painter states of the children whom she studied that, "By about two years of age, the children had adopted the defining features of the adult language." (Painter, et al., 2007, p. 568). The final stage of language learning is when the child not only can use language to do things and to find out about things, but can do both at the same time, as adults can do. This

usually begins in the child after the age of about two years. To do this the child has to forget the strict distinction they have made between language for learning and language for doing. For example, asking someone for information is a way of getting them to do something (give you information), but it is also a way of finding out about the world. There is a third function present in the adult language but not in the child's system: language is also used for joining one utterance to another, like 'By the way' in Example 1 above. This is one of the last adult functions that the child learns to use successfully.

Halliday's theory of language describes the adult language in terms of these three major functions, known as metafunctions. The Experiential metafunction is language in its function of experiencing and interpreting the world around us; the Interpersonal metafunction is language in its function of establishing and maintaining the relationship between speaker and listener; and the Textual metafunction is language as it functions in the ongoing unfolding of a text in its context. It is recognised in the Australian Curriculum English (ACE) Language strand that this is the way in which the language of school children is organised; the ACE is "functionally oriented" (Kalantzis et al. 2016, p. 304) and the Language strand includes the three metafunctions in its structure, as outlined below in the section on the Australian Curriculum.

By the end of Phase III, that is, by about the age of three, the child is able to produce utterances that contain one or more of these metafunctions at the same time, and is also becoming more skilled in the rules of dialogue. The child has "adult-like speech functions realised by the grammatical system of mood" (Painter et al., 2007, p. 568). (See the section below on Speech Function.) This does not mean that children of this age have mastered their home languages, because they still have a lot to learn, but they now have the framework that they can base their learning on, the framework of the adult language system:

*By the end of Phase II, the child has entered the adult language. ... From this point on, he is adding to what he already has. He has learnt how to mean; his language development now consists in extending the range of his meaning potential to broader cultural horizons. (Halliday, 1975, p. 58; Halliday & Webster, 2004, p. 70).*

By this time, there is no point in simply allocating a function to each of the child's utterances:

*By the time the child is, say, 2½, we will no longer be able to give any kind of significant general account of his uses of language. By this time ... he already uses language for so many different purposes that if we try to list them we will simply get an endless catalogue. (Halliday, 1975, p. 16).*

Halliday's theory has enormous implications for education. Teachers are responsible for much of a child's language development on entry to school, so it is important to recognise the abilities with which a child enters school. All of these abilities may be present in more than one language:

1. The child knows the sound system of the languages.
2. The child knows rules about how words are formed, and sometimes overgeneralises these rules (e.g., 'sheeps').
3. The child knows most of the main grammatical features of their mother tongue(s), although there are some constructions they will be less confident with.
4. The child can become involved in conversations where speakers take turns at talking.

Children thus have the basic structures of the languages they know by the time they start school, but they need to learn more about language in different contexts, in particular written contexts. This is where the notion of register comes in. (See the section below on the Australian Curriculum English).

## Speech Function

Speech Function, which, as we have seen, begins to develop in Phase II, is also a concept which has possibly been misused by some writers, or about which they are rather vague, as they may be about the relationship between function and form. Halliday’s concept of Speech Function is briefly outlined here.

Speech Function basically describes the role of speech in an exchange between two or more speakers. Either information or “goods and services” are exchanged, and the speaker who initiates the interaction is either ‘giving’ these commodities or ‘demanding’ them. This gives rise to the four main Speech Functions, as shown in capital letters in Table 1, below:

	<b>Giving</b>	<b>Demanding</b>
<b>Information</b>	<b>STATEMENT</b>	<b>QUESTION</b>
<b>Goods &amp; Services</b>	<b>OFFER</b>	<b>COMMAND</b>

**Table 1: The four main Speech Functions**

Each of these four main Speech Functions is expressed by typical forms, as shown in lower case letters in Table 2, below:

<b>STATEMENT</b>	<b>declarative</b>	<b>QUESTION</b>	<b>interrogative</b>
<b>OFFER</b>	<b>interrogative imperative</b>	<b>COMMAND</b>	<b>imperative</b>

**Table 2: Typical realisations of the four main Speech Functions**

Thus, there is a usual (or ‘unmarked’) relationship between form and function. If this relationship is disrupted, there are implications for meaning; for example, if a Command is expressed as an interrogative it is generally considered more polite. As an example of how Speech Function is used in the textbooks examined, Winch et al. (2015, p. 312) list three different ‘sentence types’: Statements, Questions and Commands (imperatives). Then in an exercise on “Types of sentences”, they include declarative, interrogative, imperative and exclamative (p. 323). The speech function of Offer is not mentioned, as is common in traditional grammars; perhaps Speech Function is being interpreted as corresponding to punctuation? The traditional approach taken by Winch et al. is also evident in their use of the term “parts of speech” for word classes, and their inclusion of ‘interjection’, as a word class.

In this section the basic principles of Halliday’s theory of language learning have been outlined, starting with how children begin to communicate right from birth, using language to fulfil the functions that are important to them, even though their utterances do not at first resemble the adult forms of their mother tongue(s). By approximately the age of three they have the adult systems in place, even though they still need to develop these from experience in different contexts. Well before the age at which they start school, children have a multifunctional way of expressing themselves, as adults do.

While there is a large body of work building on Halliday’s theory of language learning, including that by Painter, and Torr, mentioned above, the following sections will illustrate how his views could possibly have been misinterpreted by various writers in the field of Language Education.

## **Possible Misrepresentations of Halliday's Theory The Work of Frank Smith**

As far as can be ascertained, the original source of much of the misinterpretation of Halliday's theory appears to be in the work of Frank Smith, a psycholinguist who was active from the 1960s to the 1980s. Smith was primarily a reading theorist, whose views can be exemplified by his claim, "Children learn to read by reading" (1983, p. 5). As well as being popular in Australia in the 1970s, his ideas were also influential in Canada (McLachlan et al., 2013, p. 25). Smith's work began at a time when many linguists believed that children had an innate predisposition for language learning, a black box-like device in their brains called a Language Acquisition Device (LAD). Linguists of that time did not always understand language from the point of view of children, who need to use it to do things, as this example indicates: "Animals and children have little to communicate, and great care is required to understand even that." (Smith & Miller, 1966, p. 2). It was not always recognized that children start to communicate virtually from birth, and child language was viewed through the perspective of adult grammar, which caused it to be seen as sadly lacking in many ways. For example, McNeil states that "Grammatical speech does not begin before one-and-one-half years of age" (1966, p. 15).

While Smith (1983, p. 53f) seems to have been inspired by Halliday, he has taken some liberties with the functions. For example, he has added three functions to the original list of microfunctions: 'Diversionary', which includes joke-telling; 'Authoritative/contractual' and 'Perpetuating'. (These ones mostly have been not been taken up in the later language education literature, however.) Smith also lists corresponding "non-language alternatives", which are intended to relate to the microfunctions. For example, 'architecture' supposedly has an 'Authoritative/contractual' function, 'cosmetics' have a 'Personal' function and 'magic' has a 'Diversionary' function.

The main issue is that Smith does not acknowledge that what he calls "Halliday's functions" (actually the Phase 1 microfunctions) are only intended to be used to describe the language of children up until eighteen months of age. As Halliday says, in relation to Nigel at the age of 1 year and 4.5 months:

*NL5 is already characterized by the presence of a considerable number of expressions that are taken from the adult language, and are recognizable words of English; but, more important, it is characterized by the opening up of new functional meanings. (1975, p. 26f).*

But Smith's description does not go beyond Phase I, so he does not recognize meanings beyond the microfunctions, for reasons that are not provided.

### **Language Education Textbooks**

Some popular Language Education textbooks in Australia appear to have taken their information about Halliday's child language theory largely from the work of Smith, or to have neglected it altogether. It is not suggested here that pre-service teachers obtain all their knowledge about language learning from their textbook, or even from a combination of textbooks, but it is of concern if fundamental work such as this is misrepresented. Textbooks were analysed by identifying relevant content through the contents and index pages and examining it closely. Each textbook was then skim-read to ensure that no pertinent content had been missed.

Some texts do not cover the topic of how children learn to talk in any detail. An example is McLachlan et al. (2013), which is promoted as "a comprehensive introduction to literacy teaching and learning" (p. i) but, while stressing the importance of children's

experiences in the home and dealing at some length with phonological awareness, only briefly mentions 'oral language' as one of the five "early literacy skills" which are "moderately correlated with at least one measure of later literacy achievement" (p. 29). Again, it should be emphasized that a textbook does not represent a whole program, and perhaps students who use this book are provided with other opportunities to learn about spoken language; however, there is very little reference to theories about spoken language learning in the text.

Tompkins et al. (2012) is an Australian version of an American textbook that presents a 'balanced' approach to literacy. This text is similar to McLachlan et al. (2013) in that it is very difficult to find any mention of spoken language, apart from in relation to reading. We are told that "The phonological system plays a crucial role in reading instruction during the primary years." (p. 13) and that phonemic awareness and phonics are among the "essential components" in the reading process (p. 36) but the text does not deal with the development of talk in the child or the role of spoken interaction in learning to read and write.

Winch et al. (2015) is a very popular and comprehensive Australian text, with a large section on children's literature, the lead author's specialty. Like the two previously mentioned texts, it is also focused on reading and writing. The authors do not go into depth about child language learning, although they do emphasise that spoken language is the foundation of writing. They simply note that, "Within the context of their families, children learn to use the basic structures of their home language before they go to school" (p. 41). The main concern here is that this is the only text used by some Language Education programs, so that some pre-service teachers are missing out on learning about how children develop their spoken language.

Neither is spoken language learning covered in Wing Jan's textbook (2015); this is understandable as the book is clearly focused on writing, taking a genre perspective with a practical focus, and does not claim to be a comprehensive text about literacy learning. While Wing Jan specializes in writing, Kalantzis et al. (2016) take a much more multimodal perspective on the whole of communication and learning, related to both the Australian Curriculum and the US Common Core Standards. In this text spoken language is seen as but one of the meaning systems available to the child: the written, visual, spatial, tactile, gestural, audio and spoken semiotic systems. The visual and tactile systems are especially important in the early life of the infant. For example, "We learn vision before we learn language" (p. 346) and "Babies learn to be meaning-designers when they see, and language adds new layers onto this initial cognitive experience, this first experience of themselves as meaning-makers." (p. 353). Tactile meaning (touch) is also seen as primary: "The main thing that language adds to tactile meaning after the age of about 18 months is to support a kind of conscious reflexivity that is only found in human communication and cognition." (p. 381). Kalantzis et al. also emphasize the importance of switching between meaning systems, of making meaning in multiple ways, which they call 'synaesthesia' (p. 233): "synaesthesia is a powerful path to learning how to mean. If we can't quite mean something fully one way, we can perhaps mean it better in another." (p. 398). The text does refer to Halliday's *Learning How to Mean* (Kalantzis et al., p. 155) and has an interactionist approach: "Young children learn to speak by ... engaging with the community of people into which they are born" (p. 238). However, the emphasis is on learning how to mean multimodally, so the text does not go into detail about Halliday's theory of child language development.

Henderson (2012), likewise, takes a multimodal and sociocultural perspective. The text, which is an edited collection, is entitled *Teaching Literacies in the Middle Years* and therefore theories of early language development are outside its scope. Some other texts widely used in pre-service teacher programs, such as Campbell & Green (2006), the First Steps materials (DETWA, 2006); Hill (2015), Seely Flint et al. (2014) and Krause et al. (2010), display varying levels of familiarity with Halliday's work on child language

development. These texts use various terms, such as “Halliday’s functions”, “Halliday’s communication functions” and “Halliday’s speech functions”, for the microfunctions.

For example, Campbell and Green, in their text *Literacies and Learners*, state that: “Halliday ... provided a coherent view of children’s development of spoken language when he published his model of the seven functions of language (1975).” (2006, p. 33). They go on to list these “seven functions of language”, with examples from children up to six years old (p. 34) and claim that, “There is no suggestion that any function disappears with age. All functions are further developed in social contexts”. (p. 35). Thus, the reader is led to believe that the Phase I functions continue through the life of the child, with no mention of the transition towards adult language in Phase II, or the development of the metafunctions thereafter.

A similar view is presented in materials from Western Australia and South Australia. The First Steps materials, originating in Western Australia, are known both around Australia and internationally. In a discussion of the speech of primary school children in the *First Steps Speaking and Listening Resource Book* (DETWA, 2006), we are told that, “The best-known functions, and among the most widely cited, are Halliday’s functions” (p. 41); this is followed by a list of the microfunctions. Interestingly, the first edition of this book, which is organized by spoken genres, does not mention “Halliday’s functions” and so does not introduce the misunderstanding. Susan Hill’s (2015) textbook from South Australia, *Developing Early Literacy*, is popular with both Early Childhood and Primary teacher educators. Hill refers favourably to Halliday’s work: “Halliday’s systemic functional linguistic work (1973, 1975, 1985) is useful for understanding the many functions of children’s talk in different contexts.” (p. 29). Again, this is followed by a list, with examples, of the microfunctions, this time called “Halliday’s seven speech functions” (p. 30).

Seely Flint et al. (2014, p. 46ff), in their section on “Halliday’s model of language acquisition”, refer to Halliday as ‘another theorist’ and use the microfunctions not only to describe primary school children’s language but also that of their teachers, aiming to “assist teachers in achieving a balance of the different language functions” (p. 46). They also apply the functions to modes other than speaking: “These functions ... are the purposes we have for engaging in meaningful linguistic acts (reading, writing, talking and speaking) in various social contexts” (p.46). The double mention of “talking and speaking” appears to be unintended. Their source is referred to as Halliday (1975), although it is noted that Frank Smith is also mentioned earlier in their chapter on “Oral language learning in and out of the classroom”. They frame Halliday’s views of “learning language, learning about language and learning through language” as “Halliday’s three-part model”; strangely, they describe the syntactic cueing system as “very similar to Halliday’s notion of learning about language” (p. 57). They later (p. 121) go on to describe the “Halliday + model” (attributed to Egawa & Harste, 2001), which includes critical literacy.

Seely Flint et al. do display knowledge of the metafunctions as applied to images, when they describe how images work at the ideational, interpersonal and textual ‘levels’ (p. 302). It is unfortunate that these understandings do not seem to be translated to other modes of language, as reflected in the Australian Curriculum. The text has a stated socio-cultural approach but could be further developed in its treatment of the functions of language.

Finally, a general, but very popular education text by Krause et al. (2010) has a section on “Language development during infancy” (p. 19), but seems to take a word-based approach (i.e. language learning is seen in the light of the number of words a child can put together). The text refers to Halliday (1975), but it is not at all clear where the theory has been used.

In contrast, texts by Fellowes & Oakley (2014) and McLeod & McCormack (2015) show a greater familiarity with Halliday’s theory. McLeod and McCormack’s text is intended for students of speech pathology and linguistics, as well as education, in Australia and New

Zealand; it aims to provide students with knowledge of both typical and less typical development of language and literacy. The text has sections on language learning which include “Learning to take and hold the floor”, “Learning politeness” and “Increasing the range of language functions” (p. 312ff). The authors state:

*when (children) start using language, they do so in four ways ... (Halliday, 1975). Children use language to express their needs (e.g. 'want drink'); to tell others what to do (e.g. 'go away'); to interact with other people (e.g. 'bye bye'); and to express feelings, opinions and identity (e.g. 'I'm big now'). This is referred to as early language... (p. 312)*

McLeod and McCormack also mention that children learn to request information from the ages of approximately 18 months to 2 years, and that, “From 2 years of age, children begin to use language to describe things...” (p. 313); that “From 3 to 3½ years old, preschool children begin to make requests using more complex language. ...” (p. 314); and that as they grow older, they use language in its ‘heuristic’, ‘imaginative’ and ‘representational’ functions, and to tell jokes (p. 315). Here they refer to Halliday (1975), but it is likely that this information came from Smith, who has inserted joke-telling into the mix. We note that the age range for some of the microfunctions has been extended, and that the transition into the adult language through the macrofunctions and into the metafunctions is not mentioned.

Fellowes and Oakley (2014) is a textbook originating in Western Australia, popular in both Early Childhood and Primary teacher education. The authors demonstrate an appreciation that the microfunctions are relevant to very early language learning: “Michael Halliday’s (1973, 1975) model focuses on the language use of very young children. He identifies seven distinct categories of language functions that are taken up as children initially acquire language.” (2014, p. 29). Fellowes and Oakley (p. 30f) also present models of children’s language use devised by Wilkinson (1982) and Tough (1976, 1979). Thus, they show that they understand the restricted use for which the microfunctions were intended, although they do not present a functional view of how the child moves towards the adult system, nor do they go into the multifunctionality of this system.

Emmitt et al. (2015) is a very established textbook, currently in its 6<sup>th</sup> edition, with quite a linguistic orientation. The authors present a mixed picture in regards to knowledge of Halliday’s theory: they describe what they refer to as “Halliday’s speech functions” (See the above section on Speech Function.) as the seven functions listed by Smith (2015: p. 40f). Elsewhere (p. 237) they list only four of the microfunctions. They refer to the metafunctions as three major functions “that became the basis for functional systemic linguistics” (p. 41), but do not discuss how the microfunctions develop into the metafunctions. However, they do add that:

*Halliday’s description has been misunderstood by some writers who have recommended that teachers should plan to develop each of these functions. These writers have missed the point that by the time the child starts school, these separate single language functional forms have been replaced by a much more complex way of speaking, in which multiple functions are served. (p. 238).*

It seems that perhaps the various chapters of the book have been written by different authors, and a coherent picture of children’s language learning is not presented.

The most developed understanding of Halliday’s view of child language in the textbooks examined comes from Derewianka and Jones (2016), a text grounded in a functional perspective and clearly aligned with the Australian Curriculum. The authors present a brief but comprehensive description of a functional view of language development. The text contains a section on “Language development in early childhood” (pp. 37-40), which summarises in a readily comprehensible way how children progress from the microfunctions into the metafunctions as they use language for different purposes in their early years.

As pre-service teacher education programs can be heavily based on these textbooks, the misinterpretation has carried over into unit materials and assessment items in Australian teacher education programs. Some of these materials exhort student teachers to make sure schoolchildren use a wide variety of language by demonstrating the microfunctions. It is unfortunate that these materials are not developed more in line with the Australian Curriculum English. (See the section below on the curriculum.)

### **Alternative Models**

Alternative models for language use at primary school have been devised by Tough (1976, 1979), who describes children's language in terms of Self-Maintaining, Directing, Predicting, Reporting, Reasoning, Projecting and Imagining; and Derewianka (1992), who describes a pupil-constructed list of what they did with spoken language in class: asking questions, making suggestions, giving instructions, sharing information, making observations, asking what someone means, explaining, giving reasons, comparing, building on each other's ideas, predicting and hypothesizing (p. 92). This seems to be just as good a list as any adult-derived one. More recently, Jones and Chen (2016) have developed the Speech Function network from Eggins and Slade (2006, pp. 191-213) to specify some of the functions used by children at school. Eggins and Slade's Speech Function network primarily distinguishes between opening and sustaining moves in the discourse, and they have quite a developed network for these sustaining moves that keep the conversation going. While their network was firstly devised for casual conversation, Jones and Chen have elaborated on it for the school context. This appears to be a promising direction, as it enables moves in the discourse to be described in a situation-specific way, while relating them back to the original Speech Function network (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999, p. 524), which centres around the differences between exchanging information and goods-and-services, beginning, as we have seen, in Phase 2 of the child's language development. Through using these elaborated Speech Function networks we can relate what the child says in class to the grammar of the language as a whole. This is a contextually-appropriate description of children's talk, identifying moves such as 'elaborating', 'extending' and 'monitoring'.

The problem, as raised by both Searle (1965/72, 1969) and Martin (1981), is that there is a potentially infinite number of speech acts, or functions that may be used to describe what we do with speech. For this reason it is helpful to have specific descriptions that can relate both to the context and the grammar, and, in the case of Australia, to the curriculum.

### **Metafunctions and the Australian Curriculum English**

While it is important for all teachers to understand how children learn how to mean from birth, it is arguably even more crucial for teachers in the primary school to appreciate the increasing demands placed on children's language from the ages of five to eleven years, given that they have the systems of their mother tongues more or less intact on entry to school. As mentioned earlier, the concept of register (context of situation) has a crucial role to play here. Painter (1985, p. 44) states:

*a school child ... will be a far more effective communicator at certain times than at others. This is because the child will have had greater experience in some contexts of situation than others. Thus it is in terms of register that the question of language development for the school-age child can be most profitably pursued.*

The Language strand of the Australian Curriculum English is largely organized around the concept of register, with three of the substrands corresponding to the register variables of Field (the topic or action occurring), Tenor (the relationship between participants) and Mode (the medium of communication). Table 3 (below) summarises the organization of the Curriculum.

LANGUAGE SUBSTRAND	REGISTER VARIABLE
Language for interaction	Tenor
Text structure and organisation	Mode
Expressing and developing ideas	Field

**Table 3: Organisation of the Australian Curriculum English Language strand**

Thus, with these understandings and all the materials provided by the curriculum, Australian teachers are well-placed to develop students' language along the lines of register theory, so that they can become effective communicators in different contexts of situation.

## Conclusion

It is suggested here that there may be historical reasons for the misinterpretation of the microfunctions, stemming from the work of Frank Smith and possibly others. As well as this, questions have been raised about the extent of knowledge about functional grammar of Australian teachers (Jeurissen, 2012) and pre-service teachers (Harper & Rennie, 2009).

Educators may know that the grammar is associated with Halliday, but may find the metafunctional hypothesis a little difficult to interpret. Australian teachers know that they should be taking a functional approach to children's language learning, and therefore may grasp inappropriately at the microfunctions, without following through the rest of the theory that describes children's language learning after the age of eighteen months. An understanding of the metafunctions is particularly relevant now in Australia, as the Australian Curriculum English Language is structured around them.

There are alternative functional frameworks for describing the spoken language of school age children, including those of Tough (1976, 1979), Derewianka (1992), and the adaptation by Jones and Chen (2016) of the work of Eggins and Slade (2006), all mentioned above. The latter makes use of the concept of "speech function", which has also been misinterpreted in the educational literature, where it is sometimes used to describe the microfunctions. As can be seen from above, the notion of 'function', intrinsic to Systemic Functional Linguistics, has not always been well understood. School-age children use language for many different purposes. Of course, educators are free to describe as many functions as they like, but it is perhaps misleading to call them "Halliday's functions". It is hoped that the discussion presented here can contribute to greater understanding of Halliday's views on language development.

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