

## RESEÑAS

M. A. K. HALLIDAY

*Aspects of Language and Learning*

Edited by Jonathan J. Webster

The M.A.K. Halliday Library Functional Linguistics Series, 2016. 149 pages

ISBN: 978-3-662-47820-2 (paperback)

Published as one of the “M.A.K. Halliday Library Functional Linguistics” Series, this volume is based on a series of lectures given by Professor Michael A.K. Halliday at the National University of Singapore in 1986. The theme of these lectures is to construct a linguistically theory of education from a linguistic interpretation of learning. The volume is divided into eight chapters related to education and learning: 1) Language, Learning and ‘Educational Knowledge’, 2) The Evolution of a Language of Science, 3) Learning to Learn Through Language, 4) Language and Learning in the Primary School, 5) The Language of School ‘Subjects’, 6) English and Chinese: Similarities and Differences, 7) Languages and Cultures and, finally, 8) Languages, Education and Science: Future Needs.

The lectures become an essential framework for Halliday’s ideas on language, education and knowledge. Halliday is notable for his theory and descriptions, published in his book *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (1985). Halliday’s conception of grammar – or “lexicogrammar” (he argues that lexis and grammar are part of the same phenomenon) is based on a more general theory that considers language as a social semiotic resource. His descriptive work has been focused on English and Chinese, and this volume is a very good example of his investigation. The author clearly states that these lectures are not updated because doing any extensive revision of the content and bibliography of each lecture would have been a very exhausting work, therefore, he decided to leave the text just as it was, exactly as a framework.

The first chapter of the book, «Language, Learning and “Educational Knowledge», aims to demonstrate that learning —all learning— is always a linguistic activity. To do that, Halliday refers to the ontogenetic beginning of a human child with the objective to establish if the protolanguage that a child uses with others is an effective way to learn. Through observation Halliday shows that a child not only uses the language to express (curiosity, interest, pleasure) but also to act. Therefore, the author assigns language an active role in the construction and creation of the semiotic experience because, through language, the context and the personal and family relationships, the child constructs his first language, as an imitation of family patterns and interests. From this perspective, learning is not an individual process, but a social one, so going to school (learning to read and write), from a linguistic point of view, is exploring some capacities that the child already develops. Now the question is to apply them in new contexts and new functions. At this point, Halliday differentiates between two kinds of knowledge: “commonsense knowledge”, associated with speaking and listening, and “educational knowledge”, associated with reading and writing. In other words, knowledge that a child has to know through a special language: the language of scientific texts. Learning is, briefly, a transition from “commonsense knowledge” to “educational knowledge”, with linguistic and learning abilities a child already has.

In the second chapter, «The Evolution of a Language of Science», Halliday presents a diachronic perspective of the scientific text through the examination of passages written by four

masters in the field from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> c. (Geoffrey Chaucer, Isaac Newton, Joseph Priestley and James Clerk Maxwell), in order to identify the difficulties a child may have with educational discourse. As a result of the comparison, Halliday provides certain characteristics of scientific texts: the vast majority of lexical content expressed through nominal structures (names, nominal groups within larger structures or nominalizations) and each nominal structure references a kind of process (action, event, etc.), while the use of verbs are reserved to express relations (of attribution, identity, time, causality, similarity, etc.) between one element and another.

The next chapter, the third, «Learning to Learn Through Language», first develops the possibilities of linguistic application to early childhood education. The first lecture demonstrated that a child is able to develop his protolanguage for his own purposes ('give me (that)', 'do (that) for me, go on doing it', 'that's interesting' 'I'm tired'). Therefore, for children to start being understood, they develop the language sense through two functions: the ideational one (it is about something) and the interpersonal one (it is doing something). Although the factors that contribute to develop the learning ability of children are not clarified yet, Halliday points out that the experience of everyday spoken language plays an important role in formal education. Thus, the gap between the language of preschool children and scientific discourse of the school is not as wide as generally supposed, but he talks about continuity. Halliday suggests seven principles that learning skills should be based on by using a functional meaning-based grammar: a distinction between symbolic and non-symbolic action; a language based on iconic grammar (not arbitrary); the semiotic difference and taxonomic classification of words (classes); a grammar based on configurations process-proposition-message; a distinction between abstract and general; a recognition of partial similarities; and, finally, a recognition of logical-semantic relations.

Chapter four, «Language and Learning in The Primary School», explores the learning process through four perspectives: early literacy, style and records in primary school, the beginnings of scientific discourse and the spoken and written language in education. Concerning the first one, Halliday states that reading and writing are actually extensions of what the child has already been doing: speaking and listening, so that learning is the result of a process of language awareness. Regarding the second perspective, the author holds that the more this process improves, the more the writing style does too, in a transition from simple accounts to narrative texts with a distinctive structure, complication and resolution; i.e. the child learns how to use language that he already knows but now in different contexts and different registers. As far as the third perspective is concerned, Halliday points out that the best way to learn scientific writing is using the report, which is a text that consists of just functional elements: general classification, followed by description. Regarding the fourth perspective, the author develops the idea that children gradually realize the differences between spoken and written language, i.e., grammatical complexity of spoken language vs. lexical density (metaphorisation, generalization and abstraction) of written language.

Chapter five, «The Language of School "Subjects"», Halliday investigates learning in secondary school. The author argues that teachers should not be limited to explaining the content of each subject but also paying attention to how the content uses the language. Thus, the learning environment is not only limited to the space of the classroom but takes many forms and includes textbooks, literature searches, tasks, etc., that share the same field, but not the tenor (prediction of interpersonal meaning) and mode (prediction of textual meaning). The tenor and mode define and classify patterns of learning, rather than the field of subject. So every teacher becomes, himself, a master of language, different kinds of language, so that all the learning process acquires a linguistic sense.

In Chapter six, «English and Chinese: Similarities and Differences» he presents is a comparative study from a linguistic perspective. Halliday states that regardless the language; all the children build a protolanguage from symbolic expressions that represent the first phase of the evolution of human language. The process involved in mother tongue acquisition in English and Chinese shows many similarities: both take the pragmatic distinction between “do something” or “say something”. Towards the end of the second year of their life, children are able to build clauses that combine both metafunctions though grammar acquired by the grammar of the mother tongue with the familiar clause patterns of transitivity, mood and theme. Despite the distance between English and Chinese, Halliday shows that the speakers of both languages learn them in the same way i.e., learning to represent language in another context. Thus, there are no significant differences in the understanding of the academic subject by English and Chinese students, just a few curiosities, for example, while English represents time in the form of tense (past, present or future), Chinese does it in the form of aspect (completed or not completed). From the English perspective, Chinese organizes the names of things in a more strict way: there are words for general categories and general terms that are used where they are enough to make the meaning clear (if not, they use the specified one). From the Chinese point of view, however, English is a language that tends to taxonomies lacking general terms.

The next chapter, the seventh one, «Languages and Cultures», provides an overview of language from a cultural perspective, that is, through the relationships and differences between languages, with a special focus on the English of Singapore. Halliday argues that new cultural contexts in a particular language tend to change the meaning styles of the new speakers of this language. Thus, new speakers of a language can modify their grammar adding elements, styles, expressions or patterns as an imitation of their mother tongue. To the extent that this process of internationalization of the language develops, the old contexts disappear (some dialectic forms, for example), and the language tends to the standardization of the speakers in terms of functionality. Social dialects for certain social classes, fulfil a clear function: expressing distribution in society. Therefore, unlike the general mechanism of languages, dialects do not disappear but become more distinctive to the point of becoming almost different languages. The concept of standard language is functional to the extent that it has a special function in society.

Finally, Chapter eight, «Languages, Education and Science: Future Needs» aims to provide an orientation regarding the direction in which linguistic education should develop. Halliday points out the importance of speaking as system of expression and as a way of understanding how people learn, and considers grammar as a sum of all the words of the language plus all possible combinations of the words to form meaningful sentences. Therefore, it is important for teachers to increase the potential meaning using both speaking and writing input and output (the four language skills) and understand mistakes as a positive step, not something to be punished for. The meaning of learning, therefore, has more to do with how the knowledge of the subject is codified and is transmitted through language. So it is important to explain how the language works in the educational process (how knowledge is organized and how the teachers become an active part of the process, a guide for students and axis of application of language learning).

Despite the time these lectures were presented they are essential in the development of studies about language and learning throughout three decades from different perspectives: the science literacy in primary and secondary school (Halliday & Martin 1993) or the study about the relationship between language, knowledge and education (Martin & Veel 1998; Christie & Martin 2007; Rose & Martin 2012; Maton 2013, among others). As a conclusion, this is a very recommendable book for teachers and those involved in language learning as well as in education.

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