

---

## BOOK REVIEW

---

### MODELLING PARALANGUAGE USING SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL SEMIOTICS: THEORY AND APPLICATION

Authors: Thu Ngo, Susan Hood, J. R. Martin, Clare Painter, Bradley A. Smith and  
Michele Zappavigna

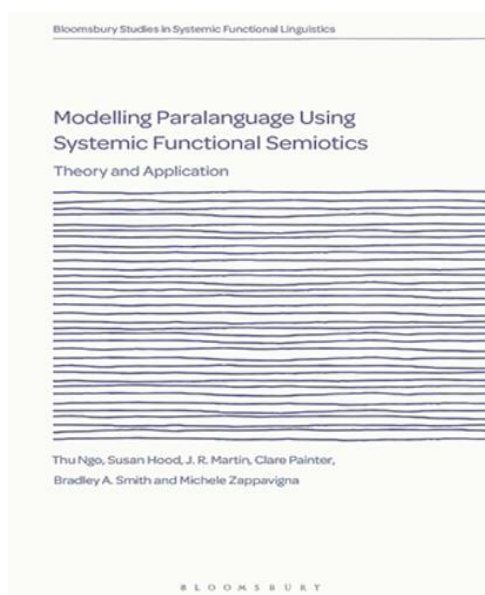
Publisher: Bloomsbury Academic, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2021

Nguyen Hong Lien\*

*Faculty of English, Hanoi National University of Education,  
136 Xuan Thuy, Cau Giay, Hanoi, Vietnam*

Received 13 July 2023

Revised 4 August 2023; Accepted 24 August 2023



Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) has been increasingly favored in multimodal studies, with contributions at the theoretical and practical levels expanding over a wider range of semiotic modalities. Among these semiotic modalities, dynamic discourse such as vlogs, video clips, face-to-face lectures, etc. have been coherent entities to embrace meanings with their multi layers. Concerning these registers, as communication is transmitted, both verbal language and non-verbal language supports communicators to send and receive information effectively. Following the SFL approach, Thu Ngo, Susan Hood, J. R. Martin, Clare Painter, Bradley A. Smith and Michele Zappavigna (2021) work together to suggest a new term “paralanguage” for the non-verbal language including gestural resources, facial expression, posture, body movement, and vocalizations. Based on

this definition, the authors further develop their discussions on a model to investigate paralanguage that accompanies spoken English discourse in their book named “Modelling Paralanguage Using Systemic Functional Semiotics: Theory and Application”, which is in a Bloomsbury Studies in Systemic Functional Linguistics series. This book has provided linguistics and researchers an unprecedentedly comprehensive framework following social semiotic approach to analyse the meaning making of semiotic resources via non-verbal communication.

---

\* Corresponding author.

Email address: [nguyenhonglien@hnue.edu.vn](mailto:nguyenhonglien@hnue.edu.vn)

The book consists of seven chapters, and the contributions of the authors are clearly specified. Brad Smith's expertise on prosodic phonology, Clare Painter's proficiency in language development and Jim Martin's discussions on general modelling issues are illustrated in Chapter 1, 2, 3 and 7. The remaining chapters, chapter 4, 5 and 6 describing the application of SFL's metafunctions in the paralanguage model are co-authored by Michele Zappavigna with her research in social networking, Thu Ngo with her work on animated films and Susan Hood with her study on academic discourse.

**Chapter 1 “Embodied meaning: A systemic functional perspective on paralanguage”** offers an overview of the book, and is definitely the chapter that readers should read first. It commences with a brief introduction of the SFL and how this theory influences the authors' model of paralanguage. Furthermore, the authors emphasize that the term “paralanguage” for this framework refers to “semiosis dependent on language and is realized through both voice quality and body language (including facial expression, gesture, posture and body movement)” (p. 3). In addition, this chapter also explains how semiosis (systems of signs), which paralanguage belongs to, is distinguished from somasis (non-semiotic behavior). To address the relationship between language and paralanguage from two dimensions, considered by Zappavigna and Martin (2018) as “linguistic body language” and “epilinguistic body language”, Ngo et al. (2021) propose a more transparent terminology. The former is named as sonovergent paralanguage - “paralanguage that converges with the prosodic phonology of spoken language” (p. 22) and the latter as semovergent paralanguage – “paralanguage that converges with meanings made possible by having language” (p. 22). These are the key systems to be applied in the model. The chapter ends with a summary of the model and examples of the application of the framework.

After the introduction, in **Chapter 2 “An ontogenetic perspective on paralanguage”**, the authors employ an ontogenetic approach to the theorization of paralanguage since this approach highlights the expression of meaning via face and body during communication. The chapter discusses the phases of language development, from the child's first semiotic system, the protolanguage, with its multimodal expression forms, to the transition into the mother tongue and the adult communication. Each of these stages includes various expressive resources, allowing language users to express “paralinguistically alongside verbal language, with both eventually organized along metafunctional lines” (p. 45). The view on the transition from infant protolanguage to adult language has convincingly argues why paralanguage is vital from the beginning in communication.

**Chapter 3 “The semiotic voice: Intonation, rhythm and other vocal features”** provides a description of the phonological systems of language that illustrate the model. Following the viewpoint that English is a stress-timed language, the authors present key terms in the system, namely salience and rhythm, tone, tonality and tonicity and other features of the semiotic voice such as pitch change, pitch range, or pitch height in addition to the phonological transcription conventions. The authors advise analysts to “get to know the discourse semantic functions of various choices in intonation, rhythm and other systems of the semiotic voice” (p. 88) to be able to perform such meticulous phonological analyses.

In the remaining chapters, Ngo et al. (2021) elaborate on employing SFL's concept of metafunction to manifest degrees of convergence of paralanguage with language – degrees of concurrence for ideational meaning, degrees of resonance for interpersonal meaning and degrees of synchronicity for textual meaning. In particular, ideational meaning involves resources for construing reality, interpersonal meaning involves resources for enacting social

relations and textual meaning involves resources for composing information flow.

**Chapter 4 “Ideational semovergence: Approaching paralinguistic from the perspective of field”** focuses on how ideational meaning is comprehended in paralinguistic. The authors study entities and figures as resources for embodied ideational meaning across language and paralinguistic with hand shapes or hand/arm movements. A detailed system network of paralinguistic entities and paralinguistic figures is presented with examples from a YouTube Vlog. This chapter also discusses the degrees of concurrence between language and paralinguistic, in particular, some paralinguistic is realized only in language (e.g a specific brand name), some co-realized in language and paralinguistic (e.g a syringe) and some are realized only in paralinguistic (to be further argued in chapter 7). In addition, the chapter claims that only semovergent paralinguistic in terms of ideational meaning can be illustrated. Phonology, adversely, does not construe ideation; therefore, the model is not comprised of ideational semovergence.

**Chapter 5 “Interpersonal paralinguistic: Approaching paralinguistic from the perspective of social relations”** explores the ways that facial expression, voice quality, body movements, and placement, in conjunction with spoken language, communicate sentiments and enact social interactions with instances from an animated movie. From an interpersonal perspective, semovergent paralinguistic resonates with tone and entails movements of parts of the body or face that rise and fall in tune with the intonation contours of the prosodic phonology. On the other hand, semovergent paralinguistic potentially resonates with appraisal resources through facial expression, bodily stance, muscle tension, hand/arm position and motion and voice quality. The semovergent paralinguistic adapts the system of appraisal from Martin and White (2005) with Attitude (only Facial Affect and Voice Affect are applicable), Engagement (Monogloss, Heterogloss) and Graduation (Force, Focus). This chapter also argues how social relations are realized through three paralinguistic systems from Painter et al. (2013), including Proximity, Orientation and Power. The authors close the chapter on discussion on how these paralinguistic resources can interact with each other, that is, intrasemiotically and how these paralinguistic resources can interact with language, that is, intersemiotically.

The last metafunction, textual, is demonstrated in **Chapter 6 “Textual convergence: Approaching paralinguistic from the perspective of information flow”**. It focuses on how paralinguistic interacts with spoken language to control the flow of information. The identification (introducing and tracking entities) and periodicity (structuring waves of information in discourse) are two linguistic discourse semantic systems that are involved. Semovergent paralinguistic support these resources with pointing gestures, whole-body positioning and movement while hand beats that converge with giving textual prominence are affordances of semovergent paralinguistic. The framework is explained with a range of live lectures in various fields of natural science, social science and language classes. These studies specifically highlight the value of intermodality in educational settings.

**Chapter 7 “Afterword: Modelling paralinguistic”** offers a brief reflection on the model of paralinguistic presented in the book, taking into account its significance for non-verbal communication research. This chapter stresses on the authors’ purpose to demonstrate how semiotics and SFL may be utilized to understand paralinguistic while taking gesture, body language, face expression, and voice quality into consideration. This chapter also mentions mime as an exception to the principle of the proposed model with instances from the vlog in Chapter 4. The authors consider mime as semovergent paralinguistic that does not accompany language. In the meantime, emblems are treated as part of the expression form of language and

not as paralanguage. Other notes on interdisciplinary, intermodality, altermodality and register variation are presented in the final sections of the chapter.

The value of the book lies in the subsequent points. Initially, this book has successfully brought together many specialist disciplines to fit into the approach of SFL, inventing a comprehensive framework for paralinguistic research. The authors adapt different concepts and models, ranging from prosodic phonology, language development to discourse semantics and paralinguistic system. Secondly, having combined a number of frameworks/models, the authors provide logical and coherent explanations to the paralinguistic adaptation of the linguistic system. This can be evidently shown in the description of interpersonal semovergence in Chapter 5 and that of identification in language in chapter 6, as the authors briefly review the system in language prior to explicating and mapping it with the paralanguage model. Thirdly, the framework is visualized and accompanied with examples, which is very reader-friendly. This is especially beneficial to early-careered researchers wishing to delve into the realm of social semiotic approach. With all the figures and networks distinctly depicted, readers are able to recognize the relationships among all the parameters, realizing them in such complex data that videos have to offer. Last but not least, as the first-ever comprehensive framework for paralinguistic studies, the model has been illustrated via various types of data namely, a vlog, an animation and live lecturers. This proves the wide-range applicability and flexibility of the proposed model and also motivates academics to conduct more alike research in different semiotic modes.

However, the authors might consider some weaknesses as follows. First, a number of examples in the book show paralanguage is independent of language, which is contradictory to their definition that paralanguage is “semiosis dependent on language” (p. 3). For example, in chapter 5 (p. 127 and 128), instances (7) and (8) demonstrating Facial Affect contain no verbal language; yet, they are still considered as paralinguistic affect. In addition, the system of Paralinguistic Proximity experiences the same issue. As in instance 25 in page 148, although the two characters move closer to each other without saying anything – meaning there is no phonological analysis, Paralinguistic Proximity is still deemed as Personal. Therefore, reasonable explanations should be provided for such cases. Moreover, the distribution of information into tone groups in chapter 3 is relatively inconsistent. One piece of information can be divided into one or two tone groups, depending on Tonality and Tonicity to make it either a marked or unmarked choice. The authors claim that “it is evident that there are potentially many choices afforded by intonation and rhythm systems, however short is the text” (p. 80). Nevertheless, some choices might not be in parallel with their Praat visualization – a software that the authors employ to show all features of phonology analysis. In such situations where a number of choices are available regarding the division of tone groups, the Praat visualization may be of no contribution. Lastly, there is a minor shortcoming which is chapter 6 does not have a conclusion, unlike others. This leads to chapter 6 being possibly incapable of exerting the same influence as other chapters do.

In summary, the book “Modelling Paralanguage Using Systemic Functional Semiotics: Theory and Application” is worth all the efforts and expertise that the authors have put in. It not only provides an original comprehensive framework to study paralanguage from SFL approach but also proves that SFL can be successfully applied in many aspects of language.

### References

- Martin, J. R., & White, P. (2005). *The language of evaluation: Appraisal in English*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Painter, C., Martin, J. R., & Unsworth, L. (2013). *Reading visual narratives: Image analysis of children's picture books*. London: Equinox.
- Zappavigna, M., & Martin, J. R. (2018). *Discourse and diversionary justice: An analysis of Youth Justice Conferencing*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.