

Appliability and Semiotic Theories¹

Zhuanglin Hu

Peking University, China

Abstract

The obsolete word “applicable” has been revitalized by M.A.K. Halliday in his call for “applicable linguistics” in the twenty-first century. This paper argues for the fact that the thematic notion “appliability” and its accompanying principles for linguistic research also hold true for our development of semiotic theories. As we all know, signs and symbols play a very important role in our daily communication; thus it will argue that a powerful semiotic theory should be closely related to practice and proved workable and effective in practice. It follows that the study of meaning should be the chief concern of semiotic theories, and that a dynamic view toward the relation between signifier and signified is needed. The paper will argue that we should learn to pinpoint the choice of the expected meaning according to social accountability, that is, the culture, the topic, the participants, the circumstance, etc., and that because of the development of science and technology, we should also see the importance of multimodality in communication. Finally, it will conclude that an applicable semiotic theory should learn how to improve and revise itself constantly in order to meet new challenges.

Keywords: applicable linguistics, appliability, semiotics, meaning, social accountability, multimodality

1. The Revitalization of “Applicable”

In the twenty-first century, the theory of “applicable linguistics” advanced by M.A.K. Halliday has drawn the attention of systemic-functional linguistics. This can be illustrated by the appearance of the term “applicable” in Halliday’s *Complementarities in Language* (2008b), the anthology of a collection of papers entitled *Applicable Linguistics* (Mahboob & Knight, 2010), and the founding of the “Martin Research Center of Applicable Linguistics” at Shanghai Jiaotong University.

It is also noteworthy that the term “applicable” is not to be found in contemporary

British or American dictionaries. Even when “applicable” or “applicability” is entered into a word processor, it very often comes up automatically as “applicable” or “applicability”. The problem can be partially solved by consulting *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged* (Gove, 1971), in which the following information can be found: “applicable, adj. 1. obs: COMPLIANT 2. APPLICABLE—appliedly, adv.” Obviously, the “applicable” in “applicable linguistics” carries the obsolete meaning COMPLIANT.

A new question has turned up. Why does Halliday intend to revitalize the obsolete words “applicable” or “applicability” instead of using “applicable” or “applicability”? To answer the question, we have to dig into Halliday’s rearrangement of his academic thoughts of the past 30 years, especially his re-evaluation of “applied linguistics”.

In the earlier stage of Halliday’s academic life, he spoke highly of the importance of “applied linguistics”; he even started an “applied linguistics” program for postgraduate students when he was chair of Sydney University’s Department of Linguistics (“applied linguistics” suggests the application of linguistic theories, methods, and findings to the elucidation of language problems that have arisen in other domains) (Crystal, 1997, p. 418).

In the course of his research, Halliday has shown significant concern about the relation between theory and practice or application. According to his view, “the value of a theory lies in the use that can be made of it”, and he has “always considered a theory of language to be essentially consumer-oriented” (Halliday, 1985, p. 7). Here, it is not a matter of “theory first, practice second”; a good researcher should always have both theory and practice in mind; or more exactly, he should know what is expected or needed by the consumer of the theory. However, he hadn’t come up with the word “applicable” at that time. Even in 1994, in his second edition of *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Halliday pointed out that there was still a lot of work for systemic-functionalists to do in dealing with functional semantics.

It took Halliday about 20 years to settle on the word “applicable” to define the nature of theories that should be expected in linguistic research. In late 2005, at the National College English Teaching Forum held at Fudan University, Shanghai, Halliday delivered a paper entitled “Some Factors Affecting College-Level English Teaching in 21st Century China” (Halliday, 2006a, b). It was here that the term “applicable linguistics” was used for the first time, though Halliday failed to go deeper into its implication. At about the same time, when Halliday was interviewed by Anne Burns of Marquarie University, he time and again reminded her of the improper use of the terms “applied linguistics” or “applicable linguistics” in discussing his ideas, saying “My notion is to use the word ‘applicable’” (Burns, 2006b).

It was only on March 16, 2006, at the ceremony of the founding of the Halliday Centre of Intelligent Application of Language Research at the City University of Hong Kong, that the theory of “applicable linguistics” was formally introduced to the academic world in Halliday’s opening speech: “Working with Meaning: Towards an Applicable Linguistics” (Halliday, 2008a). After discussing the complementarities between grammar

and lexis, system and text, and speaking and writing in his book *Complementarities in Language*, Halliday openly declared that his concern was not to try to construct some more powerful theoretical apparatus; rather, he is “committed to working towards a coherent account of language which is ‘applicable’” (Halliday, 2008b).

All this led to the publication of an anthology of papers with the title of *Applicable Linguistics*, co-edited by Ahmar Mahboob and Naormi K. Knight. The list of contributors included names such as M.A.K. Halliday, Ruqaiya Hasan, J. Martin, etc. (Mahboob & Knight, 2010).

What I have introduced above about the theory of applicable linguistics is meaningful to semiotic research, since linguistics is an aspect of semiotics. In the following sections, I will explore the interpretation and value of the theory based on “applicability”, by dealing with the principles of applicability and its value in improving and developing semiotic theories.

2. The Inseparability of Theory and Practice

The reason Halliday argues for the applicability of theory is to reject what he sees as an erroneous view in the academic circle. Take linguistics for example; there is a tendency in that field to work on the belief that theory and practice are disjointed. For a long time, some scholars have only talked about the importance of theory, but not practice; whereas other scholars have openly declared they don’t need the guidance of theory, especially linguistic theories. Because of this misunderstanding, people see theoretical linguistics and applied linguistics as two different disciplines, and thus there is no dialogue between the two. As mentioned above, Halliday argued that theory should serve the practical needs of consumers, and should be seen as a resource for solving practical problems. In this case, applicability is not a notion restricted to a particular theory or school, but a guiding principle to help researchers learn how to develop and work on an efficient theory and methodology. Consequently, an applicable theory should be comprehensive and powerful, otherwise there would be no sustainable and effective practice (Halliday, 2008b, p. 203; Mahboob & Knight, 2010, pp. 1-12).

Naturally, Halliday’s view of applicability is also meaningful and valuable to the study of semiotics. We have to admit that the separation of theory and practice has been an obstacle in current semiotic research, starting at the top. The China Academy of Social Sciences has not set up any semiotic research institute, the Ministry of Education does not have any separate department of semiotics to train competent professionals, and the Department of Civil Administration does not accept directly any application for a semiotic research organization, which, if there was any, could only be attached to the China Association of Comparative Literature or the China Association of Rhetoric. The status of the Chinese Association of Language and Semiotics Research is a case in point. All this shows that the role of semiotic research is not highly recognized in China.

From within, there is a lack of a comprehensive and powerful theory for semiotic research. In the past, when we talked about semiotic theory, we tended to cite time and

again Saussure's theory of arbitrariness, but generally ignored convention. If we stick to the theory of arbitrariness as before, we can't go very far, but if we put more focus on convention and explore the use of signs in human life, it will allow us to make new discoveries and ultimately disclose the value of such a theory.

Semiotic research plays a very important role in the development of our country and the improvement of our social life. We can see this with the standardization of Chinese characters, the maintenance of dialects and languages of minorities, foreign language planning and teaching, the design and representation of public signs and advertisements, the automatization of banking systems, music, dance, drama, etc. These are all related to the development of semiotic theory and practice. To facilitate all these projects, appliability helps with the naturalization of the boundary between theory and practice in China's semiotic research. A powerful semiotic theory is inseparable from the solving of relevant problems about the use of signs and symbols in practical life. Problems arising from practical life need the development of new theories and methods; only through the clarification and solution of these problems can a theory reach perfection and be efficiently employed and highly valued.

3. Meaning—The Chief Concern of Semiotics

Halliday's speech at the 2006 conference held at the City University of Hong Kong was entitled "Working with Meaning: Towards an Applicable Linguistics". This confirmed that the basic objective of applicable linguistics is "the study of meaning". The key feature of language lies in the fact that language is the source of making meaning; it is a system of semogenesis (Lai, 2006). This actually is a reflection of Halliday's long-standing conception of meaning, which is the center of both linguistics and semiotics.

In the first half of the last century, the mainstream in linguistic research was dominated by "structure" and "form". However, Halliday pointed out that Firth did not agree with this prejudice. According to Firth, all linguistic theories should study meaning; this can be metaphorized by the spectrum of light diffusion, that is, that meaning exists in sounds, phonology, words, grammar, and context, and that the efforts and strategies of all linguistics in these fields lead to the development of semantics (Halliday, 2010, p. 13).

Then, why does the study of semantics lag behind that of phonetics, phonology, and lexico-grammar? Halliday gave his answer in 1994. In the preface of *Introduction to Functional grammar* (2nd edition), he discussed the question: "Why a functional grammar, and not a functional semantics?" His answer was: "At the present state of knowledge we cannot yet describe the semantic system of a language. We can give a semantic interpretation of a text, describe the semantic system of a fairly restricted register, and provide a general account of some of the semantic features of a language; but in one way or another semantic studies remain partial and specific" (Halliday, 1994, p. xx). From this, we can glean the following two points:

First, in the study of language, meaning is primary and important. Nevertheless, the

conditions for exploring meaning were not ripe at the end of the twentieth century. As a result, all linguistic theories, structuralistic, generativistic, and functionalistic, do not contribute much to the description and development of semantics.

Second, through the efforts of and knowledge gained in the past two decades, Halliday is now able to call for the study of meaning through applicable linguistics. This can be seen as a call to linguists in general and semioticians in particular as Halliday argues that the nature of semiosis is meaning, and the system underlying the semiotic process is realization. The relation between meaning and realization is not a matter of cause and effect, but a relation between signifier and signified. The relation between signifier and signified can also be seen as one between value and token. Now, theory as well as its value can only be realized in the process of practice. If all aspects of the phenomena that are being theorized are implicated in the making of meaning, this means any application of a theory will vary where their energies are directed (Halliday, 2010, p. 13). Thus, we should pay attention to the application of Halliday's views on meaning today as they will push forward our semiotic research.

It is also important to notice that when discussing with Chinese linguists, Halliday often suggested the re-translation of the term "semiotics" into Chinese. According to his understanding, semiotics would be better translated as "the discipline of meaning", rather than "the discipline of signs" (Huang, 2010).

4. The Way to Get Hold of the Right Meaning

In the anthology *Applicable Linguistics*, Halliday contributed a paper entitled "Pinpointing the Choice: Meaning and the Search for Equivalence in a Translated Text". In this paper, Halliday exhibits how our application of the linguistic framework can always be located as choice in the linguistic systems of meaning. This proves a compliant theory is made manifest and "realized" in the process of being applied (Mahboob & Knight, 2010, pp. 4-5).

Halliday has further pointed out that meaning exists in various situations or environments. We should not only see language as "meaning", but also see meaning as "choice" (Halliday, 2010, p. 15). All languages have to undergo a process of choice when they are used, without which it would be difficult for one to get the right meaning expected in a context. For instance, an experienced translator learns to make "choices" in order to get the right meaning, whether he is involved with human translation or machine translation.

Such an observation also holds true in decoding the meaning of a sign. For example, in the chat app WeChat, when sending a "face image" to someone, the choice of a facial impression, smiling or sad, depends on the exact meaning of the message.

For another thing, the reason Halliday emphasizes "pinpointing the choice" is to argue for the fact that the relation between "signified" and "signifier" is not immutable. As a matter of fact, their relation is alterable in the course of time and context. This understanding draws the attention of semioticians. For instance, when people see the sign

“△” they tend to think it is a “triangle”, but its “upgoing” meaning can only be decoded when they stand before a lift-door.

The question of how to “pinpoint the choice” leads us to another principle, “social accountability”.

The construction and interpretation of the meaning of language, signs and symbols, their acceptability and appliability, and their selection criteria and evaluation have all to be performed by the “social man” in social, as well as cultural, contexts. Only by following this principle, can theories, linguistic or semiotic, and their employment be carried out reasonably and effectively. For instance, why do we have a different interpretation, different response, and therefore a different evaluation in performing the cheek-to-cheek act or movement at some social gatherings? This has to be explained by resorting to factors such as the expected behaviour of a culture, nationality, sex, age, location, etc.

The evaluation and choice of a particular research program are also guided by social accountability. Examiners of an evaluation team, when reviewing applications for research funding or awards, will always ask questions such as: What’s the objective or value of this research project? Can this project be completed in time? Is the applicant qualified or competent to do this project?

Based on this understanding, social accountability should be stressed in semiotic research. Appliability suggests that the objective and value of semiotic research should be judged externally and socially. The establishment of relation between signifier and signified, its evolution, and its complexity cannot be cut off from the mutual understanding, consultation, and recognition of the participants in communication. In the same way, the evaluation and approval of a semiotic research project also depends on social accountability. For example, Professor Yang Yonglin of Tsinghua University has been working on public signs, and has won the attention of China’s Ministry of Education and Higher Education Press. This is due to the fact that the topic of his research project is closely related to national development and social life, and his research findings were published in three books: *Picture Manual for Sign Translation* (2012), *Sign Translation, Part One: Theory* (2013a), and *Sign Translation, Part Two: Practice* (2013b). Some of the theoretical contributions made by these works include the concept that a global perspective must be taken in sign translation, that professional criteria have to be considered in translation practice, and that sign language represents a special type of grammar on its own, whether in English or Chinese.

5. Multimodality—Modes and the Realization of Meaning

In practical life, apart from language, meaning can also be realized by other modes based on the different natures of signs and symbols, which are ready to be chosen and used by participants in accordance with practical situations.

This is especially so today, as we witness the rapid development of science and technology in general, and computer science and information technology in particular.

At the founding ceremony of the Halliday Center of Intelligent Application of Language Research at the City University of Hong Kong, research projects focusing on the following three topics were chosen as a start: the automatic manipulation of abstracts, machine translation, and the evaluation of learning achievements (Gibb & Zhen, 2006). The way in which the hypertexts involved in these projects are analyzed is a reflection of the development and employment of multimodal means.

The progress of multimodality can also be accounted for by the anthology of *Applicable Linguistics* (Mahbook & Knight, 2010), in which quite a few papers are related to the study of multimodal discourse. For instance, the category of “rank” in systemic-functional linguistics cannot apply directly to modes other than language (Zhao, 2010). This implies semioticians should go beyond the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified and try their best to work for a powerful semiotic theory to account for the meaning of signs and symbols in real life with their own metalanguage. As Zhao commented, a multimodal text is not made up of constituents or parts but “a meaning making process, in which choice from one semiotic system is constantly coupling with or decoupling from the choice in another system.” To put it another way, a powerful semiotic theory should manage to employ language and other semiotic resources to study the dynamic relation of signs and symbols in a hypertext. This opens a new way to construct new knowledge, since we come across numerous multimodal texts in our contemporary daily life, such as public signs, advertisements, video programs, etc. Even in the contemporary classroom, apart from speech and writing, a qualified and experienced teacher should learn how to make use of gestures, pictures, videos, Powerpoint presentations, apps, etc. to illustrate his lecture points and to engage in discussion with the students.

6. Constant Revision and Development of Theory

The research objectives and applications of systemic-functional linguistic theories have undergone changes and revisions time and again in order to meet various challenges and solve new-emerging language problems. As emphasized by Halliday in a postgraduate course in the early 1980s, if one cannot find any problem within a theory, it implies that this particular theory will come to an end, as there will be no motivation for its further development. The reason Halliday emphasizes the notion of applicability is to guide functional-systemicists to move forward by meeting a variety of challenges in applying the SFL theory.

With this understanding in mind, we will find that the notion of applicability can also apply to other linguistic schools or theories. Applicable linguistics is not a theory monopolized by systemic-functional linguists. All researchers and practitioners of a particular linguistic theory should think about these principles if they want to perfect or even extend the life of their theories so as to deal with more problems. In my memory, Chomsky managed to revise his transformational-generative theory several times.

Finally, it is important to remember that the notion of applicability is meaningful to

the research of semiotics. This is particularly true if we acknowledge the insufficiency of powerful semiotic theories as well as the impracticality of some of the existing theories. We know that there are signs and symbols around us, but we still know little about how to describe and analyze them, to say nothing of arranging them into a comprehensive and powerful system.

Note

- 1 This paper first appeared as “On the Appliability of Semiotic Theories” in Chinese in *Language and Signs*, 2016 (1): 5-12. Adjustments have since been made.

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About the author

Zhuanglin Hu (yyhzi@pku.edu.cn) was born in March 1933 in Shanghai, China. He studied at the Department of Western Languages of Peking University and received his B.A. in 1954; from 1979 to 1981, he studied linguistics with M.A.K. Halliday at the University of Sydney where he graduated with an M.A. (Honours). He served as Chair of the Department of English at Peking University (1985-1993) and Director of Peking University's Australian Studies Centre (1996-2014). He was a visiting scholar at the University of California at Santa Barbara (Jan-Sept, 1992), the Chinese University of Hong Kong (Sept 1995-Jan 1996), Lingnan University of Hong Kong (Aug-Sept, 1998) and Hong Kong University (Nov-Dec, 2009). He has been Professor Emeritus of Peking University since January 2005. He is currently Honorary President for the Chinese Association of Language and Semiotic Studies (since 2016), the Chinese Association of Functional Linguistics (since 2003), the Chinese Association of Stylistics (since 2003), and the Chinese Association of English and Chinese Discourse Analysis. His major books include *Linguistics: A Course Book* (chief editor, 1988), *On Systemic-Functional Grammar* (co-author, 1989), *Cohesion and Coherence of Discourse* (1994), *Contemporary Linguistic Theories and Application* (1995), *A Comprehensive Review of Functionalism*, (2000), *Theoretical Stylistics* (2000), *Advanced Course of Linguistics* (co-editor, 2002), *Cognitive Metaphology* (2004), *A Survey of Systemic-Functional Linguistics* (co-author, 2005), *Collection of Hu Zhuanglin's Papers on English Education* (2008), *Linguistic Theories and Schools* (co-author, 2010); *Recall at 80—PKU Emeritus Professor Hu Zhuanglin* (2012), *Language, Sign, Education—Collection of Hu Zhuanglin's Essays* (2015), *Collins-FLTRP New Century English Chinese Dictionary* (Editor-in-Chief, 2016), and *Crossing the Pacific—A Collection of Hu Zhuanglin's Essays on Australian Studies* (2016).