# GRAMMATICAL METAPHOR AND LEXICAL METAPHOR: DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON SEMANTIC VARIATION

MIRIAM TAVERNIERS

*University of Ghent*
*E-mail: miriam.taverniers@ugent.be*

Abstract

This paper focusses on the concept of 'grammatical metaphor' as it is conceived of in the framework of systemic functional linguistics. After an illustration of major sub-types of grammatical metaphor, the concept is explained in relation to lexical metaphor, using onomasiological and semasiological perspectives as two complementary viewpoints on metaphorical meaning in general.

---

### 1. *Grammatical metaphor*

In an appendix chapter of his *Introduction to Functional Grammar* (1985), Michael Halliday, the founder of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), discusses a number of grammatical phenomena which he regards as "metaphorical modes of expression." A range of diverse types of constructions in English are brought together in this chapter as instances of "grammatical metaphor". Since its introduction in 1985, the notion of "grammatical metaphor" has come to be studied from a multitude of perspectives. It has proved to be an intriguing concept in a functional theory of language and a valuable tool in applied linguistics, including language teaching.[1]

Expressions which Halliday (1985: p. 322) regards as metaphorical include examples such as the following:

> (1) a. Mary came upon a wonderful sight.
>    b. A wonderful sight met Mary's eyes.
> (2) Advances in technology are speeding up the writing of business programs.

(1a) and (1b) are interpreted as metaphorical variants of *Mary saw something wonderful*. Likewise, example (2), which is more complex, is contrasted to a non-metaphorical alternative:

> (3) Because technology is getting better, people are able to write business programs faster.

It will be recognized that both (1) and (2) above are based on nominalizations: the meaning of '(Mary) seeing something wonderful' is encoded as *a wonderful sight*. Example (2) builds on two nominalizations: there is *the writing of business programs* and the meaning 'that technology is getting better' is encoded as *advances in technology*. What (1) and (2), as examples of grammatical metaphor, share, is the fact that a process meaning is rendered in a nominal type of construction. However, there is more to the examples than just the "nominalized" style. In the examples in (1), the Actor of the seeing, Mary, is expressed in different ways: as the Actor of the main clause in (1a) and as Determiner in *Mary's eyes* in (1b). In (2), *advances in technology* is not just a nominalization – understood as a grammatical transformation – of *technology is getting better*. Similarly, the meaning 'people are able to write business programs faster' is not rendered by the nominalization *the writing of business programs* as such. Hence, the grammatical metaphors adduced so far are more than just instances of the well-known phenomenon of nominalization. We will return to this in the next section.

That "grammatical metaphor" is more than just nominalization, in which a process meaning is expressed by a nominal construction, becomes clear if we consider further types of expressions which are equally regarded as instances of grammatical metaphor in SFL:

(4) a. It's quite likely that we'll be in France this time next year.
    b. We'll probably be in France this time next year.
(5) a. I think John has already left.
    b. John must have left already (, because the lights are off.)

In each of these pairs of examples, the expressions indicated by (a) are regarded as instances of grammatical metaphor, while the (b) expressions are seen as alternative non-metaphorical constructions. Here, a modal meaning – a certain degree of certainty, which is by default encoded within the clause by modal elements, such as the modal adverb *probably* in (4b) or the modal verb *must* in (5b), is expressed, not within the clause, but through a separate expression, i.e. *It's quite likely* in (4a) and *I think* in (5a).

A third group of metaphorical expressions can be illustrated by the following example:

(6) a. Could you send your proposal by email, please?
    b. Please send your proposal by email.

In this pair, (a) is interpreted in SFL as a metaphorical variant of (b). Both expressions ask for a particular action to be carried out, viz.,

someone has to send a proposal to the speaker by email, in other words; they are commands for actions. Now, the default encoding of a command, in the SFL framework, is an imperative, as in (6b). In this vein, a command which is expressed by extra encoding tools such as the interrogative form, the explicit expression of the addressee *you*, and the modal verb *could*, as in (6a) is regarded as a metaphorical variant of the default imperative.

Having looked at various diverse expressions which are seen as "grammatical metaphor" in SFL, we are now in a position to formulate a number of specific questions that immediately spring from the picture sketched above: (1) What do the different examples adduced above have in common?; (2) Why are they regarded as metaphorical? These two questions will be taken up in the remainder of this paper.

In the initial illustration of grammatical metaphor above, I have given examples in three steps indicating three groups of expressions. In order to come to a well-founded understanding of what all these examples have in common, it is necessary to consider the different sub-groups of grammatical metaphor. These sub-groups will be briefly discussed in Section 2, and in this discussion, a preliminary answer to questions (1) and (2) will be formulated. This answer will then be further underpinned in Section 3, in which the notion of 'grammatical metaphor' will be compared to 'metaphor' in its traditional and well-known sense of a figure of speech (as in *He's in the* spring *of his life*; *the* legs *of the table*).

### 2. *Interpersonal and ideational metaphor*

Being a functional theory of language, SFL conceives of language as being organized in terms of three general functional components, which are called metafunctions. The *ideational metafunction* has to do with the way in which we construe our human experience in and of reality through language. This experience is seen as being encoded in language through processes (*write*, *surprise*), participants in these processes (*she*, *him* and *a long letter* in (7), *her candid remark* and *me* in (8)), and circumstances (*yesterday*), or through entities (*letter, remark* in (8)) and qualities (*long* in (7), *candid* in (8)):

(7) Yesterday she wrote him a long letter.
(8) Her candid remark surprised me.

The *interpersonal metafunction* has to do with the way in which we enact interpersonal relations and create intersubjective positionings

through linguistic interaction. The working of the interpersonal metafunction can most clearly be seen in language in the expression of subjective meanings through evaluative language (as in *you damn fool, a stupid remark*), but it is also present in the system of modality, by which we express, for instance, different degrees of certainty:

(9) She might/may/can/could/will come to the meeting tomorrow.

Another area of language which is regarded as part of the interpersonal component in SFL is the grammar of mood. This is the grammar of interrogatives, declaratives, imperatives, and the like, by which speakers argue about propositions (they can ask or give information by means of a question or a statement, respectively) and negotiate about actions to take place (e.g. the speaker expresses a command by means of the imperative).

The ideational and interpersonal metafunctions are complementary and constitute the major components of language. They are further supported by a third metafunction, the *textual metafunction*, which is of less importance to the aims of this paper. The textual metafunction has to do with the textual organization of language and deals with, for example, the positioning of new and given information in a stretch of spoken or written language.

Now it will become clear that the different metaphorical expressions cited in Section 1 have been set out in three steps which reflect the metafunctional organization of language as seen in SFL. Examples (1) and (2) are *ideational metaphors*: they illustrate different possibilities of construing the same experience. Figure 1 is a visual representation of this variation, illustrated by means of example (1). Figure 1 shows how the process-participant configuration is organized differently in the metaphorical and non-metaphorical variants.

Examples (4a), (5a) and (6a) above are *interpersonal metaphors*. The sentences in (4) and (5) have to do with the expression of modality, and

**Non-metaphorical**

| Mary | saw | something wonderful |
|------|-----|---------------------|
| participant: Senser | process: mental:perceptive | participant: Phenomenon |

| A wonderful sight | met | Mary's eyes. |
|-------------------|-----|--------------|
| participant: Actor | process: material | participant: Actor |

**Metaphorical**

**Non-metaphorical**

| Mary | saw | something wonderful |
|------|-----|---------------------|
| participant: Senser | process: mental:perceptive | participant: Phenomenon |

| Mary | came | upon a w. sight. |
|------|------|-------------------|
| participant: Actor | process: material | Circumstance: location |

**Metaphorical**

*Figure 1.* Ideational grammatical metaphor.

the metaphorical variants ((4a) and (5a)) are, therefore, referred to as interpersonal metaphors of modality. Because (6a) is an alternative expression of a command, as explained above, it is seen as an example of an interpersonal metaphor of mood.

Each metafunctional component has its own grammatical categories, and its own distinct types of constructions. In this vein, ideational meanings are typically construed in the clause through configurations of processes (expressed by verbs) and their participants, while interpersonal meanings are typically encoded in the clause through modal verbs and adverbs, or through different types of mood (e.g. interrogative, imperative, and so on). It is precisely at this level that we have to consider the nature of "grammatical metaphor", by focussing on the general means of expression typical of each metafunction. In other words, what all the examples given above have in common, and why they are metaphorical has to do with these typical metafunctional means of expression. In ideational metaphors, a process meaning (such as "Mary seeing something wonderful") is not expressed through a clause (a configuration of verb/process and participants), as in the common, default type of encoding, but, rather, as a nominal group which then enters into a new clause configuration: *a wondeful sight* enters into a new clause to make up *Mary came upon a wonderful sight*.

Likewise, in interpersonal metaphors of modality, the modal meaning, for example of probability, is not expressed by a modal element, but by a separate clause, which is then combined with the proposition that is assessed in terms of its probability: *I think (that)* in combination with the proposition assessed, *John has already left*, in contrast with the non-metaphorical, *John probably has already left*, where the assessment occurs within the same clause. Interpersonal metaphors of mood are based on a similar construction type: the meaning of a 'command'', for instance, is not expressed by the English mood-type 'imperative'', but rather, by adding further elements: Could you *send your proposal by email, please?*. In this vein, a broad range of expression types can be seen as metaphorical encodings of the same command:

> (10) a. Send your proposal by email, please. (non-metaphorical)
> b. Could you send your proposal by email, please?
> c. I would advise you to send it by email.
> d. It is recommended that you send your proposal by email.
> e. It is advisable to send proposals by email.

In both types of interpersonal metaphor, the metaphorical expression has additional elements as compared to the non-metaphorical variants.

These additions can be more or less extensive, as the illustrations in (10) show. In general, there are two possibilities. [1] An explicit auxiliary and an explicit subject can be added to a bare imperative (10b). [2] In a second possibility, the proposition which is being assessed (metaphors of modality) or the action which is being negotiated (metaphors of mood) and which is the main clause in a non-metaphorical construction (*John probably has left already* or *Send it by email please*) becomes a sub-clause in a metaphorical construction. In these cases then the modal or mood meaning is expressed by another clause, i.e. the main clause or matrix clause (*I think ...* or *I would advise you to ...; It is recommended that ...*).

In this section we have looked at the way in which various types of constructions are regarded as metaphorical in SFL. This has been explained in terms of the different types of expressions characteristic of the two major metafunctions, i.e. ideational and interpersonal. Figure 2 offers a summary of the distinction between ideational and interpersonal metaphor as discussed so far.

### 3. *Grammatical metaphor and lexical metaphor: two cases of semantic tension*

'Metaphor' in general is intrinsically a 'second-order' phenomenon in language: a linguistic expression can only be labelled 'metaphorical' by virtue of there being a comparable non-metaphorical expression. In the previous section we have seen how various types of grammatical metaphor contrast with and build upon other, non-metaphorical resources.

Because of its inherent second-order nature, a metaphor can only be recognized as such precisely because of its contrast with non-metaphorical expressions. This can be most clearly illustrated by means of an example of metaphor understood in its traditional sense,

|  | Ideational component | Interpersonal component | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Meaning | 'process' meaning | modal meaning | mood meaning |
| Non-metaphorical encoding | a clause = a configuration of process (verb), participants and circumstances | a modal element, i.e. modal verb or modal adverb | a specific mood-type, e.g. imperative |
| Metaphorical encoding | a nominal group, which can then enter into a new process configuration | extra clause, the original clause becomes a subclause in the metaphorical construction | extra elements: explicit auxiliary, explicit subject |

*Figure 2*. Ideational and interpersonal metaphors compared.

*the* legs *of the table*. In relation to 'grammatical metaphor', *tableleg* is regarded as a *lexical metaphor*, because its metaphorical nature is based on the use, not of a grammatical construction type, but of a single word or lexeme. The use of the word *leg* in this expression is recognized as metaphorical, precisely because it retains part of its literal meaning, i.e. 'a body part of a living being (human or animal)', and this meaning is used in a transferred sense to refer to part of a piece of furniture.

The variation, contrast or even tension between a metaphorical or transferred meaning on the one hand, and a non-metaphorical or literal meaning on the other, is a feature of metaphor which has puzzled numerous scholars ever since Aristotle began to study the phenomenon of metaphor. In the present section, we will have a closer look at the semantic variation in both lexical and grammatical metaphor. This will be done in a comprehensive way, by taking two complementary viewpoints from which semantic variation in general can be studied. In this discussion it will be shown that the feature of semantic tension, which is so typical of metaphor in its traditional sense, is also present in grammatical metaphor. By thus comparing grammatical metaphor in a detailed way to the more well-known traditional (lexical) metaphor, the reason why exactly 'grammatical metaphor' is 'metaphorical' will be further corroborated.

In order to get an initial picture of the 'second-order' nature of metaphor in general, it is useful to take a more familiar *lexical* metaphor as a starting point. Consider the variation between the following examples:

(11) a. Transamerica will *sweep out* the senior managers.
    b. Transamerica will *dismiss* the senior managers.
    c. You've got to *sweep* the street in front of the shelter.

In these examples, the metaphorical expression in (11a) contrasts with two non-metaphorical expressions, indicated in (11b) and (11c). The two non-metaphorical examples with which (11a) is contrasted, indicate two alternative perspectives on metaphorical variation, which can be visualized as in Figure 3. In this figure, the metaphorical variant is represented between the two non-metaphorical expressions given above. The two alternative perspectives, which will be further explained below, are indicated by eyes at the top and the bottom of the figure.

In the contrast between (11a) and (11c), the element which remains constant is the word or lexeme *sweep*. What is highlighted in this opposition, is that lexical metaphor is an *alternative use* of a lexeme, a
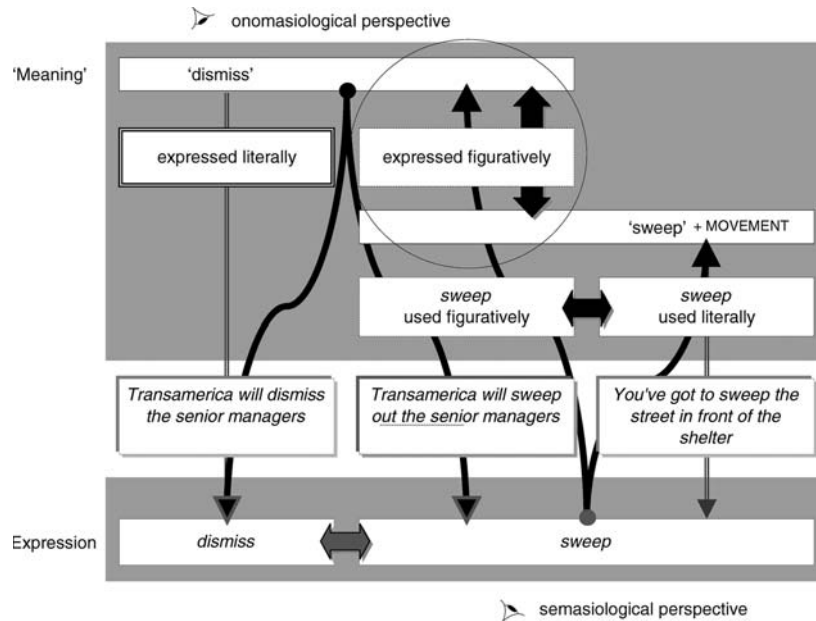
*Figure 3.* The semantic tension in lexical metaphor, seen from two perspectives.

use which is at variance with the use of this lexeme in a more literal sense. In this alternative use, *sweep* serves to express a figurative, transferred meaning which it otherwise does not have: *sweep* meaning 'to dismiss'. The perspective from which this opposition becomes clear has been called a semasiological one,[2] since the starting point is a particular form or expression, and the central question is: what kinds of *meanings* are or can be expressed by this form? The movement from form to expression is indicated by downward arrows in Figure 3. In this perspective, then, metaphor is based on a variation between different meanings expressed by the same form – in the present example, the lexeme *sweep*.

An alternative, complementary perspective, is an onomasiological one, as shown in Figure 3. Here, the starting point is a certain meaning, such as 'dismiss someone' in the examples at hand, and the central question is: how is or can this meaning be *expressed*? The movement from meaning to expression is indicated by upward arrows in Figure 3. In the onomasiological viewpoint, the metaphorical construal in (11a) is contrasted with an expression such as (11b). What

is kept constant in this opposition is the overall meaning of 'dismiss'. The metaphorical and literal sentences in this contrast are then regarded as metaphorical and literal variant expressions of the 'same meaning'.

The variation inherent in grammatical metaphor can now be related to this framework of a twofold characterization of lexical metaphor. Examples of the major types of grammatical metaphor – ideational metaphor, interpersonal metaphor of modality and interpersonal metaphor of mood – are given in (12a), (13a) and (14a) respectively, together with alternative non-metaphorical construals with which they contrast.

> (12) a. John's writing a letter surprised his father.
> b. John wrote a letter.
> c. The results of the experiment surprised her.
> (13) a. It's quite likely that we'll be in France this time next year.
> b. We'll probably be in France this time next year.
> c. Another rise in prices later this month is quite likely.
> (14) a. Could you open the door please?
> b. Open the door please.
> c. Was the door open?

Figures 4 and 5 show how the alternative constructions in the example sets illustrating grammatical metaphor can be modelled in a way which is completely parallel to the characterization of lexical metaphor given above. In the remainder of this section, we will look at each of the major types of grammatical metaphor in turn.

Let us start with the interpersonal type of grammatical metaphor. In the previous section, it has been argued that examples such as (14a) are regarded as metaphorical in SFL because the meaning of a command is encoded by means of an interrogative clause with an explicit subject and a modal auxiliary, rather than as an imperative, which is seen as the default construal of a command. It is clear that this character-ization is based on an *onomasiological* perspective: a certain type of interpersonal meaning is taken as a starting point, and alternative construals of this meaning are distinguished, amongst which there is a 'default' non-metaphorical construal (12b), and a metaphorical con-strual, such as (12a). This perspective is visualized by the downward arrows in Figure 4.

Interpersonal metaphor can also be looked at from a *semasiological* perspective. In this view, metaphors of modality are based on a par-ticular use of certain expressions which enables them to construe
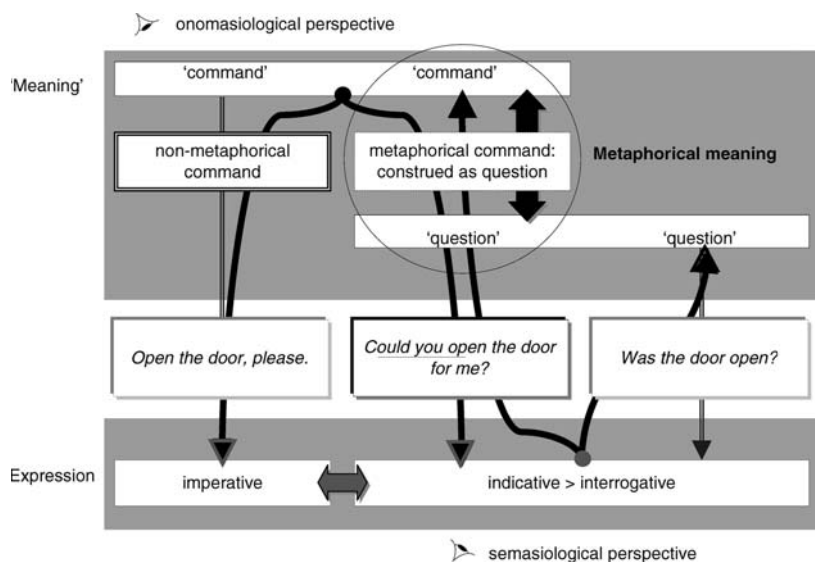
*Figure 4.* The semantic tension in interpersonal grammatical metaphor, seen from two perspectives.

interpersonal, modal meanings. These expressions can be adjectival, as in example (13a) and also (10c) given above, but they can also be verbal (as shown above in examples (10c and d)), or nominal, as in the following example:

(15) There's only a slight possibility that we'll be in France this time next year.

Similarly, metaphors of mood are based on the use of certain types of moods (especially the interrogative mood) that construe a meaning which is regarded not to be its default meaning: the metaphor illustrated in (14a) exploits the interrogative mood, whose default meaning is a question, i.e. a request for information. Strictly speaking – i.e. non-metaphorically or literally speaking, the answer to *Could you open the door please*? could be *Yes* or *Yes, I could*, without any further action being undertaken by the hearer. In such an interpretation, the hearer reads the expression as a literal yes/no-question, a question which is parallel to *Was the door open?*, which in most contexts plainly *is* just a request for information and does not have a metaphorical interpretation. The semasiological perspective on interpersonal metaphor, starting from a particular meaning, is shown by the upward arrows in Figure 4.
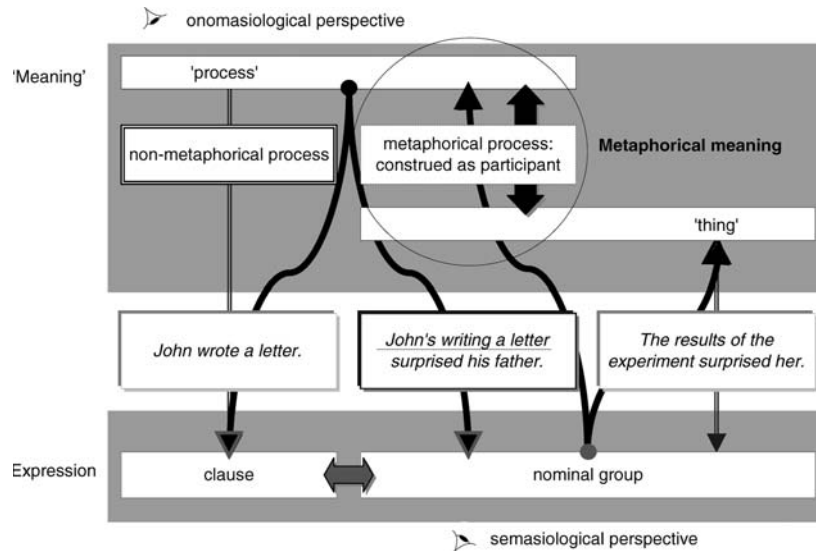
*Figure 5.* The semantic tension in ideational grammatical metaphor, seen from two perspectives.

When taking a *semasiological* perspective, example (12a) above can be regarded as an instance of ideational grammatical metaphor, because the nominal group *John's writing of a letter* designates a process rather than a default 'entity', which is regarded as the standard meaning construed by a nominal expression, as can be seen in examples such as *the result of the experiment* (12c). The *onomasiological* perspective, in this case, takes as its starting point the meaning type 'process', or something 'going on' in reality, and considers the way in which this meaning can be designated in language. In this vein, then, the clause is regarded as the 'default', non-metaphorical construal of a 'process', while the nominal group, whose own default type of meaning is 'entity', is defined as an extra, metaphorical possibility for construing the meaning of a 'process'. Again, these two perspectives are indicated by upward and downward arrows in Figure 5.

It can be concluded from this section that the general onomasiological and semasiological approaches to variation in meaning and in forms in language can be useful in recognizing and characterizing grammatical metaphor, qua *metaphor*, in relation to lexical metaphor.

4. *Conclusion*

This paper has focussed on the notion of grammatical metaphor as a general mode of expression – a construction type – in the grammar of English. The metaphorical nature of this construction type has been illustrated across the two major types, viz. ideational and interpersonal metaphor, and in relation to the more familiar, traditional type of metaphor, which, in the present framework, is to be further specified as lexical metaphor.

## Notes

1. Areas of study in which the notion of grammatical metaphor has proven to be useful include the following: scientific writing, and the history of scientific discourse, language development, the teaching of academic writing. For recent representative papers in each of these areas, see Simon-Vandenbergen et al. (2003). For discussions of grammatical metaphor on an introductory level, see, for example, Downing and Locke (1992), Thompson (1996). Butt et al. (2000) offer an introduction which is especially written for English language teachers.

2. On the difference between semasiological and onomasiological perspectives in the study of linguistic meaning, see, for example, Coseriu (1988, p. 137).

## References

Butt, David, Rhondda Fahey, Susan Feez, Sue Pinks and Collin Yallop. *Using Functional Grammar: An explorer's guide*. Sydney: National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research. 2nd edn. Macquarie University, 2000.

Coseriu, Eugenio. *Einführung in die Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft*. (Uni-Täschenbucher, 1327) München: Finck, 1988.

Downing, Angela and Philip Locke. *A University Course in Englsih Grammar*. English Language Teaching Series. New York: Prentice Hall, 1992.

Halliday, M.A.K. *Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Arnold, 1985.

Simon-Vandenbergen, Anne-Marie, Miriam Taverniers and Louise Ravelli Eds. *Grammatical Metaphor: Views from systemic functional linguistics*. (Current Issues in Linguistic Theory, 236.) Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2003.

Thompson, Geoff. *Introducing Functional Grammar*. London: Arnold, 1996.