

20 July, 2008

Dear Dr. Ferguson,

I am writing to you because I have been asked by Prof. Rodney Huddleston to comment, as President of the Australian Linguistic Society (ALS), on the disagreement that seems to have developed between you and him.

I should first tell you something about myself. Aside from being President of the ALS, I am Chair of Linguistics and also Director of the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology (RCLT) at La Trobe, and Editor of the refereed journal *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area*. In the latter two roles I work usually within a form of typologically informed traditional grammar (traditional grammar is not static, but is constantly being improved as we learn more about linguistic typology), but I am also a great admirer of the work of Prof. Michael Halliday, and have taught Prof. Halliday's Functional Grammar (FG), using the second edition of his *Introduction to Functional Grammar (IFG)* as the textbook, more than a dozen times at the university level. My personal view is that Prof. Halliday is one of the most insightful linguists alive today, and his *IFG* is one of the best books ever written in linguistics, and I never miss an opportunity to recommend this book to colleagues and students (I do not recommend the third edition to people not already familiar with the theory, though, as a layer of complexity purposely left out of the second edition has been included in the third edition). In the course of teaching the subject so many times, I have read *IFG* cover to cover more than a dozen times, and each time, as my experience with the theory and with working with language and communication deepened, I got more out of the book, and was impressed anew with how profound the book is and how brilliant and insightful a linguist Prof. Halliday is. Best of all, the theory is explanatory, and very useful for anyone who wants to get more out of language and communication in general, not just for linguists.

Linguists certainly would like to see more linguistics taught in the schools, as now we get first year undergraduates who do not have a clear conception of “noun” or “verb”, never mind more complex topics, and this means we have to spend time at the university level teaching concepts that are taught at the primary school level in most other advanced countries, and also means the Australian students are at a disadvantage compared to their non-Australian classmates. I applaud you for writing the articles you did trying to clarify grammatical concepts for teachers, so that they can introduce more of these concepts into their teaching, and I understand the difficulties you face trying to make them simple enough for teaching in the schools.

The first part of your first article, “Grammar at the coal-face: the structural basics”, is very good, situating grammar in the social and cultural context, and explaining why and how grammar should be taught. Beginning with the first column on p. 35, though, it becomes clear

that what was published was not the final, polished version of the paper, but an earlier draft. There are a number of inconsistencies, typos, and obvious clues like “the glossary on page XX”. There are also a large number of problems in the analysis in this article and the second article as well. It is hard to know which of the errors in the paper are true errors of analysis and which are simply things that would have been corrected in the polished version. I will then have to comment on it as it was published, and which you have defended.

The fundamental basis of FG is the concept of constituent and function (see the first two chapters of *IFG*). The idea of constituent and function is easy to teach, and is the same concept that underlies our understanding of non-linguistic systems as well. I have even at times given my students short lectures on human physiology or auto mechanics to show that the idea of constituent and function (looking at the constituents of some system, and seeing how they interact to form functional structures (sub-systems), and how the functional structures interact and overlap) is the same in all three cases. What is key is that it is the functions that form the systems. In language you have the word classes as a way of talking about the grammatical potential of a word, but what we mainly talk about in FG is the functions they have in particular texts. And the same word or word group can have a function in several different systems at the same time, just as the crank shaft of the automobile engine participates both in the drive train functional structure and in the cooling system functional structure of the automobile. So in a particular clause a noun group may be a Subject in the interpersonal functional structure, and an Actor in the ideational functional structure, but it only has those functions in relation to the other elements in each of the functional structures. A single type of constituent can realize a number of different types of functions in different texts, such as a noun being a Classifier (*school building*) or a Thing (*primary school*), and different types of constituents can realize the same type of function, such as in *He did it quickly and without a word*, where an adverbial group and a preposition phrase can be conjoined because they have the same circumstantial function in this clause (see *IFG*: 275ff.). The distinction between constituent and function needs to be clear, and the different systems need to be clearly differentiated.

What is also unique and fundamental to FG is the idea of grammar as a paradigm, a set of choices that a speaker or writer makes when constructing a text (grammar is a process, not a thing). There are unmarked and marked choices at each point in the development of the text, and selecting the unmarked or marked choice will have consequences in terms of the meaning being marked or unmarked. In your article you often present the unmarked choice as if it is the only choice, but this misses some of the genius of Prof. Halliday’s system. Because of this concept of marked and unmarked choices, FG is the only theory of grammar that is useful for judging the quality of texts, and particularly translations. I heard Prof. Halliday do a brilliant lecture comparing the Chinese translation of the last two paragraphs of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* with the original, and, using an analysis of the different choices Darwin and the translator made, showing how the translator had failed to adequately capture the essence of Darwin’s text. I would suggest trying to stay within the system of FG. Because the particular terms and the way we talk about the systems, and what systems we identify are part of the theory of FG, it isn’t a good idea to try to mix different approaches to grammar. This could lead to confusion.

When I read your articles, I wrote down a number of comments and corrections before I read Prof. Huddleston's comments on your articles. Prof. Huddleston is one of the most respected experts on the grammar of English, but I didn't expect him to know anything about FG. When I read his comments on your article I was quite surprised to find that he has a very good grasp of the theory, and his criticisms of your articles (in Part 1 or his paper) were largely from the viewpoint of FG, and so were essentially the same as mine, and not criticisms that could be said to be due to him having a different theoretical stance. Your criticisms of his grammar are not only misplaced, they are irrelevant to the academic issue involved here, which is whether your articles as published represent a correct and useful tool for teachers to use to bring grammar into the classroom, and if they are not, what you should do about them.

What I suggest, and hope that you do, is revise the articles, taking Prof. Huddleston's comments in Part 1 of his paper into account, have some colleagues look them over for consistency and clarity, and then either publish them again in the journal, saying that there had been a mistake, and the wrong version of the articles got published (it happens occasionally with journals), and so readers should disregard the earlier ones and use the newer ones, or publish a statement to this regard and put the new versions on the web site.

I realize you are a very well known and respected education consultant, as well as the Editor of the journal, so you may feel there would be a loss of face in correcting the articles in the journal (and they do need to be corrected), but precisely because you are a respected education consultant, you of course want anything with your name on it to be of the highest possible quality. The mark of a good scholar is humility and a mind that is open to the challenge of academic criticisms, because it is only in being open to being shown to be wrong that one can learn.

Sincerely,

Randy J. LaPolla

Randy J. LaPolla, PhD
Chair of Linguistics
Director, Research Centre for Linguistic Typology
La Trobe University
Victoria, 3086, AUSTRALIA
Tel.: +61 3 9479 2555
Fax: +61 3 9479 1520
E-mail: r.lapolla@latrobe.edu.au

Responses to Professor LaPolla's letter

Professor LaPolla's letter was summarily dismissed by both Dr Ferguson and the ETAQ President, Mr Collins, to whom he had sent a copy.

Dr Ferguson's response.

Dr Ferguson wrote in reply:

[1] 'You are misinformed. I have no academic dispute or disagreement with Professor Huddleston, ...'.

This is not true. I had said that two of her articles in the *Grammar at the Coalface* series contained a large amount of error, inconsistency and confusion, the scale and seriousness of which made them unusable as a teacher's resource: this was argued at length in a paper 'Problems with the Coalface Grammar' that was posted for a period on the ETAQ website. (I use 'Coalface Grammar' as a cover term for the two articles.) Dr Ferguson disagreed with this judgement, acknowledging only four errors in the March 2008 *Words'Worth*. This disagreement was over an academic issue, the soundness or otherwise of an account she had given of various topics in English grammar written predominantly from the perspective of functional grammar. An evaluation of this material must draw on principles and methods developed within the academic discipline of linguistics, and my 'Problems with the Coalface Grammar' was accordingly written as an academic paper. Dr Ferguson, however, did not provide an academic response that argued on the basis of linguistic evidence that the great majority of my criticisms were invalid. Nor had she given me any indication in the weeks of discussion that we had prior to the submission of the final version of my 'Problems' paper that she took this view: quite the contrary, as will become apparent below. It was for these reasons that I sought to draw attention to the errors by contacting *The Australian*.

A few weeks after assuring Professor LaPolla that she had no academic dispute or disagreement with me, she had her lawyer write to me informing me of her intention to commence legal proceedings against me for defamation – an intention that was not carried out.

It is unfortunate that in her reply to Professor LaPolla Dr Ferguson said nothing about the content of his letter. One important point he made was that:

[2] [Professor Huddleston's] criticisms of your articles ... were largely from the viewpoint of [Functional Grammar], and so were essentially the same as mine [i.e. Professor LaPolla's] and not criticisms that could be said to be due to him having a different theoretical stance'.

Yet in 'Reflections on *Grammar at the Coalface*' published in the September 2008 *Words'Worth* Dr Ferguson claimed that I was treating as errors statements that merely reflected a difference in perspective. I argued against this claim in my recent paper 'Errors in the Coalface Grammar' (accessible from the same website as the present one), citing Professor LaPolla's testimony and also demonstrating by reference to Halliday & Matthiessen's *Introduction to Functional Grammar* that there are numerous places where the Coalface Grammar misrepresents Functional Grammar. It is good to see that in her response to 'Errors' she has abandoned this claim: if she had given Professor LaPolla's letter the attention it deserved she could have done this more than a year earlier.

A second important feature of Professor LaPolla's letter is that he explains at considerable length the fundamental distinction in Functional Grammar between constituent [or class] and function: he does so because this is something that the Coalface Grammar conspicuously fails to do. This is a criticism that I myself had made to Dr Ferguson in discussions we had in January 2008. She admitted that she had not covered this topic, and suggested that I deal with it in the article I was preparing for the March 2008 *Words'Worth*: significantly, the title she proposed was 'Omissions with the Coal-face Grammar'. The failure to distinguish properly between function and class is the source of numerous errors in the Coalface Grammar. Take, for

example, the statement:

[3] Determiners appear as determining adjectives in noun groups.

This is incoherent because determiner and adjective are mutually exclusive class terms: instead of the class term determining adjective a function term is needed (Functional Grammar's term for the function of determiners is Deictic); see 'Errors', item [25] for further discussion. Similarly, it is an error to say that *by himself* is an adverb: it is a preposition phrase, and in *He did it by himself* its function is that of Adjunct: see 'Errors', item [20]. In spite of the fact that in January 2008 Dr Ferguson was admitting that she had omitted a fundamental distinction in Functional Grammar, the errors just mentioned are not included in the 'Errata' list in the March 2008 *Words'Worth* and there has been no acknowledgement since then of this major gap in the Coalface Grammar: her response to 'Errors' acknowledges only

[4] a small handful of editing/proofing errors

Moreover, in this same response (posted on the ETAQ website in January 2010) she again makes the same kind of error as I have illustrated from the Coalface Grammar. Thus she writes:

[5] 'porcelain' in 'porcelain figurine' functions as an adjective (*What kind?*), and therefore is an adjective in that context.

Adjective is the name of a class, not a function; *porcelain* doesn't function as an adjective: it functions as modifier, or classifier. And just as not all adjectives can function as modifier/classifier (e.g. you can't say **an afraid child*), so not all modifiers/classifiers are adjectives (e.g. you have a common noun in *a government inquiry* and a proper noun in *the Rudd government*) – see 'Errors', item [9]. This construction is specifically dealt with in Professor LaPolla's letter (p. 2), with the noun *school* a classifier in *school building*. Dr Ferguson would have done better to study the letter with care instead of dismissing it.

Mr Collins's response.

Mr Collins dismissed the letter on two grounds. In the first place, he claimed that:

[6] there was no situation that would properly merit the use of the word “dispute”

– or, more particularly, “academic dispute”. This is trivial: nothing of consequence hinges on it. There was a situation where I had provided detailed evidence that the Coalface Grammar was full of errors, whereas Dr Ferguson had denied this, acknowledging only four. And Mr Collins, writing in his capacity as President of ETAQ, had endorsed her denial. In *The Australian* of 13.06.08 he is reported as saying:

[7] the mistakes were relatively minor ... If coming upon these couple of minor inaccuracies caused teachers to be having conversations about grammar in classrooms then I would see that as not a bad thing

Then, in an email of 19.06.08 replying to an overseas correspondent, David Vaux, he wrote:

[8] The few real errors that appeared in the ETAQ journal **last year** were ones of proofreading in moving through several versions of a document. They were acknowledged and corrected in the next issue.

Whether Mr Collins thinks this situation constitutes a dispute doesn't matter: it is certainly a matter of serious concern, for the Coalface Grammar was presented as a teaching resource. This means that ETAQ members were invited to use it in the preparation of their English language

classes: it is of great importance, therefore, that all significant errors in it be acknowledged and corrected, and there was a huge gap in our views as to whether this had been done. Moreover, whereas I had provided detailed evidence and argument for my position Mr Collins did not offer any for his. In addition to my 'Problems' paper, I had sent him an email on 10.04.08 giving examples of errors not accounted for by [7]–[8], and therefore challenged him to substantiate claim [8]; he didn't reply.

Following publication of the report in *The Australian* of 13.06.08 Dr Ferguson acknowledged, in the September 2008 *Words'Worth*, two further errors, bringing the total to six (and refuting claim [8]). None have been acknowledged since then but no one has been willing to enter into academic debate over the other errors I have catalogued, answering the arguments I supplied.¹ Neither Dr Ferguson nor Mr Collins has acknowledged that it is an error to classify *set of* as an adjective, but neither of them has actually said that this isn't an error, let alone provide evidence for such a view: the issue has simply been ignored. Similarly, no one has denied that it is inconsistent, and hence an error, to say first that prepositions function as head in preposition phrases and then that preposition phrases have no head, but it hasn't been acknowledged as an error: it hasn't been mentioned. Likewise for around sixty other errors. For this reason one could say that there has not been a bilateral academic dispute, but this is no reason for rejecting Professor LaPolla's letter. The letter did provide an academic account of a basic concept in Functional Grammar that the Coalface Grammar had failed to deal with, and it provided authoritative evidence against the position espoused by Dr Ferguson and Mr Collins.

The second factor in Mr Collins's dismissal of Professor LaPolla's letter was that it was from someone who was not a member of ETAQ:

[9] I see that your attached letter includes a suggestion about what we should publish in our journal. One thing you can be certain about is that our decisions about what will appear in any of our publications will not be made on the basis of the views of people who are not members

Professor LaPolla's letter was written with great tact, and he was clearly concerned with finding a solution that was in the best interests of both author and readers: it didn't deserve this kind of response. Mr Collins has more than once commented on the fact that I am likewise not a member. I find this idea that non-members should in effect mind their own business parochial and misguided. We are not concerned here with a document dealing with, say, arrangements for the Association's annual meeting: we are dealing with a TEACHING RESOURCE. The Coalface Grammar was provided to members so that they could use it in the preparation of their classes. The fact that it is so defective is a matter that concerns the community in general, not just ETAQ. The material has the potential to affect what is taught to Queensland school students – and they would be seriously disadvantaged if they were taught that *Sam's* is a possessive pronoun, *set of* an adjective, and so on. It is of the utmost importance that a teaching resource should be free from significant error. If a teaching resource is published that contains errors they should be corrected, regardless of who it is that first draws attention to the errors.

Conclusion

The ordinary rank-and-file members of ETAQ have had a very raw deal from their association. In the first place, they were given, in the Coalface Grammar a teaching resource that was riddled with errors. Secondly, the great majority of these errors remain unacknowledged and uncorrected more than two years after publication. Members have been given to understand that there was very little wrong with the original, and that what was wrong has been put right through announcements in *Words'Worth*. This is incontestably false: less than 10% of the errors

¹ In her response to 'Errors' Dr Ferguson does mention the issues of the classification of *Sam's* as a possessive pronoun and of *porcelain* in *porcelain figurine* as an adjective, but without mentioning the points I made in 'Errors' about these errors. See my 'Reply to Dr Ferguson's response to "Errors in the Coalface Grammar"', accessible on the same website as the present paper.

have been acknowledged. Dr Ferguson acknowledged just four errors in March 2008 and a further two in September 2008: the others that I identified she has virtually ignored, refusing to enter into academic discussion based on theoretical principles and empirical evidence. Mr Collins, as we have seen, endorsed her position. The untenability of that position was confirmed in Professor LaPolla's letter, but members have not been informed of the existence or content of this letter. It is indefensible that they have been deprived of this information, which would have been of great importance to them in evaluating the Coalface Grammar.

Rodney Huddleston

20 January 2010.