Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics
ISSN: 2345-3303 – E-ISSN: 2588-3887 – https://rals.scu.ac.ir
Published by Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz

Please cite this paper as follows:
Matthiessen, C. M. I. M., & Yousefi, M. (2026). Engaging with L2 motivation: Towards a language-based interpretation of learner motivation. Part II: Semiotic interpretation. *Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics*, *17*(1), 3-28. https://doi.org/10.22055/rals.2026.50284.3615

Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz



Research Paper

Engaging With L2 Motivation: Towards a Language-Based Interpretation of Learner Motivation. Part II: Semiotic Interpretation

Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen[1] & Moslem Yousefi[2]

[1]Visiting Professor, Department of Humanities and Languages, Sona College of Technology, Salem, Tamil Nadu, India; *cmatthie@icloud.com*
[2]Corresponding author, Ministry of Education, Tehran, Iran; *M.Yousefi.tesol@gmail.com*

Received: 27/07/2025 Accepted: 11/12/2025

Abstract

This article is the second in a three-part series in which we explore second language (L2) learner motivation through the lens of systemic functional linguistics (SFL). Building on the inter-organism, language-based perspective introduced in Part I, we further examine the semiotic and social dimensions of motivation in Part II, contrasting them with dominant intra-organism approaches rooted in cognitive and psychological traditions. Drawing on Halliday's (1978a) framing of language as a semiotic system (a resource for making meaning), we propose a semiotic interpretation of language learning that foregrounds the contextual and socially situated nature of meaning-making. Central to our argument are the concepts of intersubjectivity, transactional contextualism, and scaffolding, through which we highlight the interpersonal and distributed nature of language development. Learners are viewed as both social and semiotic selves who gradually develop their meaning potentials by participating in diverse meaning groups and institutional settings. We explore how the contextual parameters of field, tenor, and mode shape the L2 learning experience, with particular emphasis on tenor as a site of motivational investment. We also examine how expanding learners' personal registerial repertoires through scaffolded engagement with functional language varieties can enhance motivation and foster learner agency. Like other systemic functional linguists engaged with language and education, we draw on sociocultural perspectives, including the work of Vygotsky and Bruner, and connect these insights to pedagogical models such as genre-based literacy instruction. By viewing sociocultural theory in terms of SFL, we argue for a transdisciplinary, socially grounded account of L2 motivation. This framework reconceptualises motivation as a dynamic, relational phenomenon embodied in meaning-making practices, empowering learners to negotiate their roles, identities, and linguistic repertoires in various institutional settings within the overall context of culture. We problematise the assumption that motivation is a human universal and instead view it as a linguistically and culturally varied phenomenon, construed and enacted within different conceptual frames across diverse linguacultures. We will return to this topic in Part III of our three-part series.

Keywords: L2 Learner Motivation; Language-Based Theory of Learning/Teaching; Systemic Functional Linguistics; Semiotic Selves; Intersubjectivity; Scaffolding; Registerial Repertoires.

1. Introduction

In Part I, entitled *Engaging with L2 motivation: Towards a language-based interpretation of learner motivation. Part I: The inter-organism perspective*, we introduced Halliday's (1978a) inter-organism perspective as a complement to the intra-organism perspective that has historically dominated research on second language (L2) learner motivation. The intra-organism perspective is rooted in cognitive and educational psychology and is situated within the broader macro-discipline of cognitive science. We traced the development of L2 learner motivation research, interpreting its phases through the inter-organism perspective of systemic functional linguistics (SFL). We then compared the intra-organism perspective of L2 learner motivation research with the inter-organism perspective of SFL. Next, we identified key characteristics of the inter-organism perspective that are particularly relevant to approaches to the conception of L2 education (for details, see Matthiessen & Yousefi, 2025). In Part II of this series, we further develop these key characteristics in relation to our subtitle, 'semiotic interpretation'. In Part III, we take a step back so that we can view

'motivation' in terms of systems operating within different phenomenal realms (physical, biological, social, and semiotic), problematising the notion of 'motivation' as a semiotic construct dependent on English and closely related languages embedded in cultures that are largely similar when viewed globally against the background of humanity's richly varied and diverse linguacultures.

The inter-organism perspective has provided a foundation for the development of social semiotics as a thematic alternative to the macro-discipline of cognitive science (Halliday, 1978a; Matthiessen, 2017, in press). The social semiotic interpretation of language has played a significant role in applied linguistics informed by SFL (e.g., Gebhard & Accurso, 2020; Hasan & Martin, 1989; Martin, 2009; Mickan, 2019; Mickan & Lopez, 2017). The concept of 'social semiotics' was introduced as a theme by Halliday (1978a), who adopted the term 'socio-sémiotique' from Algirdas Julien Greimas (e.g., Greimas, 1976). It has remained a central theme within SFL, shaping understandings of language and other semiotic systems (e.g., Caldwell et al., 2022). At the same time, it developed a trajectory of its own and became the subject of a number of introductions and overviews, which have explored its implications and applications (e.g., Andersen et al., 2015; Hodge & Kress, 1988; Maagerø et al., 2022; Matthiessen, 2017; van Leeuwen, 2005, 2026). It also became the focus of a journal launched in 1991, *Social Semiotics* (Cranny-Francis et al., 1991). Importantly, it provided a foundation for the development of multimodal studies informed by SFL in the 1980s, involving a number of scholars who were also contributing to the advancement of social semiotics (e.g., Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; van Leeuwen, 2026). The development of multimodal studies is particularly noteworthy since multimodality in language education has now emerged as a field of enquiry that clearly has significant implications for understanding the ways in which people communicate (for overviews, see Jewitt, 2014; Jewitt et al., 2025; Rose, 2023). This trend was already anticipated by Mohan (1986).

We begin by elaborating on the semiotic interpretation of language learning as 'learning how to mean' (Section 2). This inter-organism view of language learning leads to our exploration of intersubjectivity (Section 3), rather than focusing on individual subjectivity—the notion that has dominated studies informed by cognitive science. Finally, we draw out the implications of our interpretation of L2 learners as persons and as *meaners*—users of language expanding their meaning potentials in the course of language learning by adding new registers to their registerial repertoires (Section 4).

2. Semiotic Interpretation: Language as Meaning Potential, Learning How to Mean

The inter-organism perspective invites a semiotic interpretation of language learning, encompassing both first (mother tongue) and second or foreign language acquisition, rather than a purely cognitive one—that is, an interpretation focused on *meaning* rather than on *knowledge* in the first instance (Halliday, 1993). The cognitive approach, which emphasises the individual learner, is characterised by Ushioda (2020, p. 17): "we focus attention primarily on the internal psychology of language learning motivation". Just as the inter-organism and intra-organism perspectives are complementary, so too are the semiotic and cognitive interpretations of language learning (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2006). For Halliday (1993), language learning is a semiotic process: "learning is learning to mean, and to expand one's meaning potential" (p. 113). The meaning potential is the collective resource for making meaning of a community of speakers (a 'speech fellowship' in J. R. Firth's terms), embedded in their context of culture. Individual meaners are 'custodians' of some part of this collective meaning potential (which follows directly from Halliday's, 1978a, inter-organism perspective; cf. the notion of distributed language, e.g., Cowley, 2011; Thibault, 2011, and the idea of brain to brain coupling, e.g., Hasson et al., 2012, which is mediated by the exchange of meanings). They have built up their own personal meaning potentials through the exchange of meanings in text with other meaners, gradually expanding their personal meaning potentials through life. We now turn to a more detailed examination of this interpretation.

2.1. Learning How to Mean, Learning How to Mean in an L2

The semiotic interpretation of language enables us to view key aspects of the ontogenesis of language, namely, the growth of children's personal meaning potentials. Halliday (1975, 2003b [1998]) conducted a pioneering longitudinal case study of a young child learning how to mean (McCabe, 2021). Adopting a semantic-functional-contextual frame of interpretation of language as a resource, he was able to show that language learning starts well before children begin to learn the mother tongue in the second year of life, thus placing the starting period earlier than Brown (1973) suggested.

Halliday (1975, 2003b [1998]) identified a number of developmental stages, beginning with a pre-symbolic stage, followed by three phases of learning how to mean (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Developmental Stages for Intersubjectivity*

Stage	Phases	Characterisation	Organisation	Approximate Age
Pre-Symbolic		Primary intersubjectivity		Birth–0;5
Transition				0;5–0;8
Symbolic	Phase I	Protolanguage (secondary intersubjectivity)	Micro-functional and bi-stratal (content > expression planes)	0;8–1;4
	Phase II	Transition from protolanguage into language (the mother tongue[s])	Macro-functional and fission of content and of expression planes	1;4–2;0
	Phase III	Language	Meta-functional and quadri-stratal (content [semantics > lexicogrammar] > expression [phonology > phonetics]	2;0–6;0
		+ Additional language(s)—L2s in school		Variable, starting around 6–8;0

(i) Phase I: Interacting with their immediate caregivers, young children construct a child tongue, or protolanguage, around the age of five to eight months. The protolanguages children begin to construct during this phase of language development are not versions of the mother tongue(s) spoken around them; rather, they are simple semiotic systems adapted to their contexts of use, enabling them to learn to mean and are organised around a small number of Microfunctions (initially regulatory, interactional, instrumental, and personal) associated with the contexts of use.

(ii) Phase II: Such protolanguages help them make the transition into the mother tongue in the second year of life. When they begin to make the transition, young children have already been processing the language(s) spoken around then, already during the protolinguistic phase, as shown by studies drawing on neuroscience. Focusing on the expression plane, Patricia Kuhl and her team have demonstrated that very young children 'take statistics' on the sounds of the language(s) spoken around them (e.g., Garcia-Sierra et al., 2016; Kuhl, 2007, 2010). This resonates powerfully with Halliday's theory of language as a probabilistic system, and of learning as involving distilling systemic probabilities from texts in contexts that learners engage with (e.g., Halliday, 1993). An additional area of convergence between Kuhl and Halliday is her emphasis on learning in social interaction; according to her, learning is possible because of the nature of the 'socially gated brain'. This makes excellent sense within the general notion of intersubjectivity that Halliday and Trevarthen have developed (see Section 3.1).

(iii) Phase III: Once they have made the transition into post-infancy language (i.e., the adult language spoken around them), children will continue expanding this system throughout their lives (cf. Matthiessen, 2009; McCabe, 2021)—or systems, if they grow up bilingually or multilingually. The 'adult' language is a full-fledged meaning potential, organised into simultaneous modes of meaning—metafunctions (ideational [logical and experiential], interpersonal and textual), and stratified into four strata, two within the content plane, semantics and lexicogrammar, and two within the expression plane, phonology and phonetics (in the case of spoken language). Gradually, as they move towards institutions of formal education, learners increasingly grow their meaning potentials by adding new registers (functional varieties of language in contexts of use), thus expanding their registerial repertoires. Starting around upper primary school, the registers that they need to engage with and try to master will increasingly embody grammatical metaphor within the ideational metafunction (e.g., Derewianka, 1995, 2003). For many adolescents, this is the way into the academic registers of tertiary education.

During Phase III, learners will be introduced to additional languages, L2s (e.g., Matthiessen, 2009)—the timing and number depending on the educational system they are part of; but in order to accommodate the introduction of additional languages we need the theory of the multilingual meaning potential (Matthiessen, 2018). How they are taught L2s will of course depend on the educational system and prevailing L2 education pedagogy; but there seems to be a growing consensus that L2 teaching and learning should draw on all the linguistic resources available to the learners, thus involving translanguaging and translingual practice (e.g., Canagarajah, 2013; Mazzaferro, 2018) in the school just as in the community at large (e.g., Schleppegrell et al., 2025). Learners' registerial repertoires can now involve their

multilingual meaning potentials, and if their L2s gradually become resources for learning content (i.e., learning through language, in Halliday's (1993) formulation), this will increase their value for learners.

Halliday's research was *naturalistic*: he observed and transcribed the child's interaction with his immediate caregivers. The data were *authentic texts in context* (rather than elicited data), presented in Halliday (1984). This study was then followed up by other similar longitudinal case studies (for overviews, see McCabe, 2021; Painter, 2017; Torr, 2015). In a later, parallel development, working within another disciplinary framework—broadly developmental psychology, Tomasello (e.g., 1995, 2003) has produced an account of how children learn language that in many ways resonates with the work by Halliday from the 1970s: both show that young children are active in constructing their systems in interaction with immediate others, sharing attention and intention; both provide 'usage-based' interpretations showing how grammar emerges through use in context, with children distilling systems/constructions from instances. Similarly, based on empirical evidence from language development, both reject Chomsky's innateness hypothesis and postulation of universal grammar (for detailed explanations, see Evans & Levinson, 2009; Tomasello, 2003). The resonance between the two lines of research is promising for approaches to L2 education.

Halliday's interpretation of language learning as learning how to mean has also been extended to second/foreign language learning (e.g., Arús-Hita et al., 2024; Byrnes, 2019; Hasan & Perrett, 1994; Matthiessen, 2009; McCabe, 2021). Learners are interpreted as constructing their meaning potentials as they interact dialogically with other meaners—distilling systems from the texts in context that they process, not as acquiring something ready-made (for an interpretation of the evolution of language in terms of phylogenetic phases, see Matthiessen, 2004b). Halliday rejected the metaphor of 'language acquisition', which began to appear in the 1960s, and which has since become prevalent. Thus, Halliday (2003b [1998], p. 26) characterises early language development as follows:

> For a long time children's language development, or "language acquisition" as it came to be rather misleadingly called, was thought of as a kind of progressive approximation to a goal, a goal that was extrinsically fixed and defined, so that each new step was seen as an imperfect attempt to attain it. Although the child's efforts are no longer dismissed as irrelevant "mistakes", but rather are seen as strategies and tactics for learning, there is still the view that the mother tongue is what the child is striving to "acquire" right from the start. In my view this conception is wide of the mark. What small children are doing is learning how to mean; and the guiding principle is neither approximative (imitating what is around) nor performative (guided by an innate grammar) but epigenetic. The child is building up a potential; and in doing so is essentially tracking the processes whereby language first evolved.

More recently, outside SFL, Larsen-Freeman (2015) has argued cogently that the metaphor of language acquisition is seriously misleading, preferring the older term 'language development' (see also Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008); she identifies over ten problems, for example, the metaphor suggests that language is a 'commodity'; it is 'irreversible', whereas development is not (since it allows for attrition and loss); it implies that 'completion is possible', whereas development is 'never complete'; it obscures the development of personalised meaning potentials; it encourages the view that there is a 'native speaker target'. Similarly, Anderson (2022, p. 428) questions the validity of the term 'second language acquisition' and suggests replacing it with 'additional language learning' or 'additional language development,' which he considers more logical and inclusive.

Within SFL, McCabe (2021, p. 3) elaborates on the reasons for the avoidance of the metaphor 'acquisition' and provides a detailed account of the alternative perspective.

> While SFL-based researchers view the metaphor of *acquisition* as a less effective term for the process of language development, Halliday viewed language *learning* as a semiotic process: "learning is learning to mean, and to expand one's meaning potential" (Halliday, 1993, p. 113). In this sense, learning language means developing one's repertoire of language for interaction in ever-widening contexts, from the informal, everyday contexts of the home to the formal contexts of schools, workplaces, and institutions. For Halliday, language *development* refers to three aspects: "learning language, learning through language, and learning about language" (Halliday, 1980 [2003], p. 308), which suggests that, for Halliday, *learning* and *development*, with respect to language, refer to the same phenomena. Even further, "the ontogenesis of language is at the same time the ontogenesis of learning" (Halliday, 1993, p. 93); thus, as we learn language, we simultaneously learn the social and cultural worlds we inhabit. We see here a further term that is used alongside *learning* and *development*: *ontogenesis*. In SFL, ontogenesis, or change in the linguistic repertoire of an individual over time, is theorized alongside two other sites of semiotic change: logogenesis, or the evolving semiosis in

a given text as it unfolds over time; and phylogenesis, the ever-evolving system of semiotic choices available within a given language.

The *semiotic* interpretation of people learning language is thus inherently environmental or ecological: people learn language in context, typically through processing text in context as they interact with other meaners in the most immediate meaning groups (for a distinction between natural and induced language learning, see Halliday, 1978b). The contextual approach to language has been central to the tradition within which SFL developed. Context is not an add-on or an afterthought (as it has arguably tended to be in strands within the macro-discipline of cognitive science); the contextual approach ultimately derives from Bronisław Malinowski's (1923, 1935, 1944) groundbreaking anthropological work in the Trobriand Islands in the 1910s (Bartlett, 2017; Bowcher, 2019; Hasan, 1985, 2009), and was adopted and adapted for linguistics first by J.R. Firth (e.g., 1957a) and then developed further by Michael Halliday and other systemic functional linguists starting in the 1960s (e.g., Butt & Wegener, 2007; Halliday et al., 1964; 1978a; Matthiessen, 2017; Wegener, 2011). It has a robust empirical base, and has been central in educational linguistics informed by SFL since the 1960s, including language teaching and learning (e.g., McCabe, 2021; Ryshina-Pankova, 2019; Troyan et al., 2022).

2.2. L2 Learners as Meaners and Persons

In the inter-organism perspective, the learner is viewed in terms of the context of learning (Halliday, 1991). Like all contexts, the context of learning consists of the three contextual parameters of field, tenor and mode (Ghadessy, 1999; Halliday et al., 1964; Halliday, 1978a; Matthiessen & Teruya, 2024):

- Field—what is going on in the context: the field of activity (socio-semiotic processes) and the field of experience (domains of subject matter);
- Tenor—who are taking part in the context, viz. the roles, relationships, and values: institutional roles, power (status) roles, familiarity (contact) roles, sociometric roles (affect—including the positive ones of rapport and empathy that are crucial to learners), speech roles, and the valorisation of the field;
- Mode—what roles language, other semiotic systems and social systems are playing in the context: medium (spoken, written, or some mixture—including mixtures enabled by the new technologies of the channel), channel (aural-auditory, visual, or some mixture; face-to-face, computer-mediated), rhetorical mode (e.g., didactic, persuasive, hortatory, exhortatory), orientation towards field or tenor, and division of socio-semiotic labour among systems involved.

Viewed in terms of context—specifically the tenor parameter—the L2 learner is best understood as a person constituted by a configuration (or a bundle, aggregate, repertory) of personae or social roles, developed from early childhood through interaction with others in complementary roles within social networks operating within social groups (e.g., Butt, 1991; Firth, 1950, 1957a; Halliday, 1978a; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2006; Lemke, 1995). These roles are enacted across different fields of activity, each tied to particular institutional contexts. For instance, as a student, the L2 learner participates in the educational practices of the classroom, engaging with teachers and peers in institutionally defined ways (see Rose, 2023, for a discussion of pedagogic roles). In other contexts of situation, however, the learner adopts different roles, drawing on L2 resources appropriate to each new configuration of tenor, field, and mode values—assuming, of course, that their personal L2 meaning potential has developed sufficiently. As learners develop their personal meaning potentials, they become able to undertake a wider variety of social roles and participate more fully in the various institutional activities where the L2 is used.

There is, therefore, a chain of connections linking individual learners—as persons enacting various roles within local contexts such as L2 classrooms—to the broader societies in which they are embedded. Between these poles lie various intermediate regions, including communities, institutions, and specific institutional settings. This perspective on person, personae, personality, and language in society has been further developed within systemic functional linguistics, particularly in research on language development. Notably, Halliday (1978a, p. 15) examined the dynamic and emergent relationship between the individual and the group as part of what he termed the 'inter-organism perspective' (see Figure 1):

> Social roles are combinable, and the individual, as a member of a society, occupies not just one role but many at a time, always through the medium of language. Language is again a necessary condition for this final element in the process of the development of the individual, from human being to person to what we may call 'personality', a

personality being interpreted as a role complex. Here the individual is seen as the configuration of a number of roles defined by the social relationships in which he enters; from these roles he synthesizes a personality.

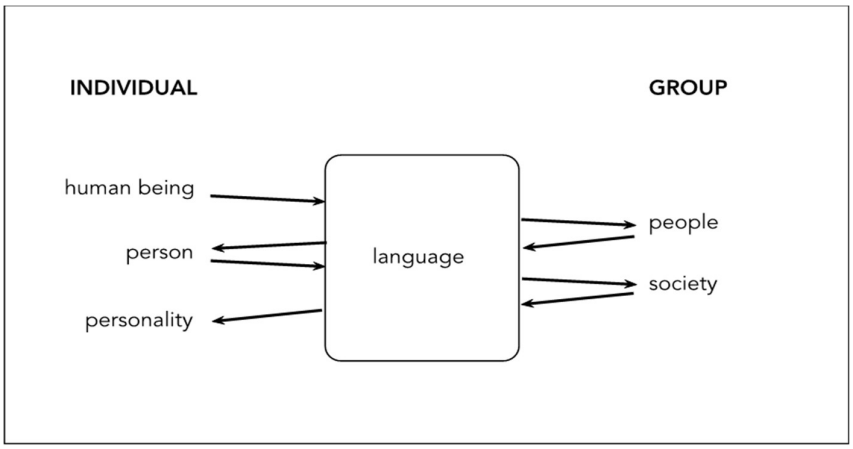


Figure 1. Halliday's (1978a) Representation of the Ontogenesis of Individual Persons and Personalities in Interaction with the Group, Mediated through Language

Let us now interpret this in terms of a perspective on language. We have gone some way round in order to reach this particular angle of vision, certainly oversimplifying the picture and perhaps seeming to exaggerate the importance of language in the total process. The justification for this is that we have been trying to achieve a perspective that will be most relevant in an educational context. From this point of view, language is the medium through which a human being becomes a personality, in consequence of his membership of society and his occupancy of social roles. The concept of language as behaviour, as a form of interaction between man and man, is turned around, as it were, so that it throws light on the individual: the formation of the personality is itself a social process, or a complex of social processes, and language—by virtue of its social functions—plays the key part in it. Hence just as the view of language as knowledge, which is essentially an individual orientation, can be used to direct attention outwards, through such concepts as the speech act, towards language in society, so the essentially social interpretation of language as behaviour can be used to direct attention onto the individual, placing him in the human environment, as we expressed it earlier, and explaining his linguistic potential, as speaker-hearer and writer-reader, in these terms. This does not presuppose, or preclude, any particular theory about the nature of the mental processes that are involved in his mastery of language, either in how he speaks and understands or in how he learnt to do so in the first place. There are conflicting psychological theories on these questions, as we will see in the next section; but our present perspective is neutral in this respect.

As Halliday (1978a) observes, the ability to speak and understand, along with the developmental process through which this ability emerges in the child, is fundamental to the life of the social human being. To approach language as an inter-organism phenomenon is to adopt a functional perspective that places the social functions of language at the centre, rather than viewing them as secondary to biological processes. Viewed in this perspective, the social aspect of language becomes the primary reference point for understanding its biological dimensions.

The 'self', in discussions of L2 learning and L2 motivation, is understood as a person—a social self. This has long been recognised also by scholars outside the Firth-Halliday tradition, which starts with Firth (1950) (e.g., Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Ziller, 1973; see also Henry & Liu, 2024). Within systemic functional linguistics, however, the social self is also interpreted as a semiotic self. Semiotically, a person is a *meaner*—someone formed through the exchange of meanings within the various meaning groups in which they participate; and just as a social self is a bundle of social roles, so a semiotic self is a bundle of semiotic roles (i.e., communication roles)—and a social personality is also a semiotic personality. This notion of the semiotic self is particularly evident in SFL-based studies of ontogenesis referred to earlier. As an individual learns through interaction with others in a range of social roles, they develop two interrelated potentials (Halliday, 1973):

- as a social self—that is, as a person—they develop a behaviour potential, which is the resource for acting and interacting with other people.

- as a semiotic self—that is, as a meaner—they develop a meaning potential, which is the resource for making meaning in social contexts.

Both the social self and the semiotic self are enacted through various roles in interactions with other *selves*. Through these interactions, they jointly constitute an individual's socio-semiotic identity (Bednarek & Martin, 2010; Etaywe & Zappavigna, 2022; Foley, 1991; Tann, 2010; cf. also Bernstein, 2000, whose work has been in dialogue with SFL since the 1960s: e.g., Halliday, 1995; Hasan, 2005b). This identity emerges at the intersection of the role relationships in which the individual is involved as a person and as a meaning-maker (cf. Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009). Relevant insights are also found in sociocultural theory, particularly in the work of James Lantolf and colleagues (e.g., Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000), as well as in Bonny Norton's research on social identity and language learning (e.g., Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton, 2000, 2013). Norton (1995) notably argues for "a conception of *investment* rather than *motivation* to capture the complex relationship of language learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desire to speak it" (p. 9). Both conceptions are typically related to tenor considerations, but different in interesting ways: while motivation derives from an intra-individual perspective, investment is situated, involving commitment and an explicit orientation towards social relations. Norton's notion of 'investment' therefore aligns more clearly with the inter-organism perspective (see Section 3.1).

In the L2 motivation literature, a distinction is often made between personal and social sources of motivation (e.g., Henry & Liu, 2024; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2008). This distinction has emerged within the intra-organism perspective adopted in the L2 motivation tradition of research, but in the inter-organism perspective, persons are gradually formed in interaction with social groups (see Figure 1 above, and Halliday's account), so personal motivation also needs to be understood in relation to social groups (like Norton's analysis of investment). Thus, what is often classified as a personal source of motivation is itself *socially and semiotically constructed* in innumerable interactions mediated by language (and other semiotic systems), precisely because the person/meaner emerges through interaction with other persons/meaners, critically mediated by language and other semiotic systems. This relationship is represented diagrammatically in Figure 1 above.

The roles that individuals play as persons and as meaners are defined in relation to specific institutions. As Malinowski (1944, p. 54) observed, institutions are "the real isolate of cultural analysis" (see also Turner, 2003, for a sociological perspective on, and development of, the account of institutions and their evolution). Culture can therefore be understood as a network of interrelated institutions (see Figure 2 below), and cultures evolve through the transformation of these institutions. Over time, the institutional composition of a culture changes in response to shifting social needs and circumstances. Existing institutions may be modified or disappear, while new institutions emerge to meet new demands—like institutions of formal education during certain periods in a variety of cultures (but obviously not all).

In systemic functional linguistics, institutions are interpreted as sub-cultural domains positioned along the cline of instantiation between culture, which represents the potential pole of the cline (the cultural potential of a society), and contexts of situation, which occupy the instantial pole (e.g., Halliday, 1991; Matthiessen, 2007, 2015b; Matthiessen & Teruya, 2024). Just as cultures are assemblies of networks of institutions, institutions themselves are assemblies of networks of situation types. A situation type is instantiated at the instance pole of the cline as innumerable contexts of situation; situation types thus evolve as repeated contexts of situation—similar enough to form a type (see Figure 2).

In the institution of a school, for example, L2 learners enter into the institutional role relationship of student and teacher. It is within this relationship that they gradually learn how to mean in the L2 or are motivated to learn and show greater engagement during lessons (e.g., Henry & Thorsen, 2018; Lambert & Zhang, 2019; Lambert et al., 2017). As they progress, L2 learners become capable of taking on new roles in other institutional contexts as well. This may occur within the classroom through simulated contexts involving structured activities such as role play or drama (e.g., Belliveau & Kim, 2013; Bessadet, 2022), where learners begin to understand the "lines" that accompany a given "part," as Firth (1950 [1957a, p. 54]) described it. In this way, learners expand their L2 meaning potentials, developing the semiotic resources required to participate meaningfully in a wider range of institutions beyond the school (for an insightful study, see Zhang et al., 2025). These may include domains such as friendship, recreation, workplace relationships, administration, media, the legal system, and healthcare (for the characterisation of different 'institutional voices' in SFL, see Bartlett, 2012). In

other words, they expand their repertoires of L2 uses, growing as meaners and becoming part of speech fellowships, where they establish bonds with other fellows (Firth, 1950, 1957b).

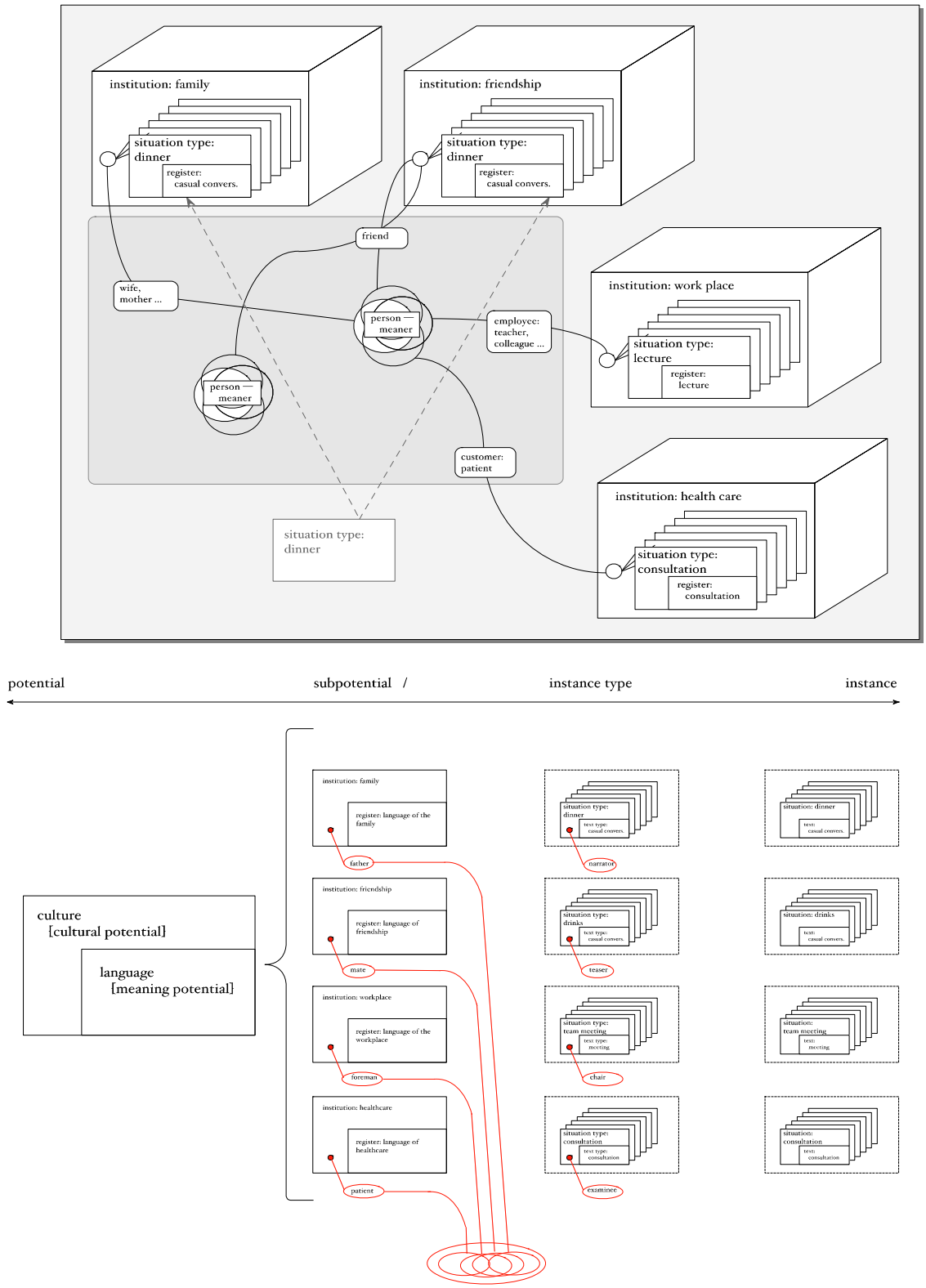


Figure 2. The Cline of Instantiation at the Stratum (Level) of Context

The interpretation of the individual as a person, or social self, and as a *meaner*, or semiotic self, offers a way of addressing a gap identified in much of the L2 motivation research. Ushioda (2020, p. 17) points to a prevailing tendency in the field to adopt what she describes as (in our terms) an intra-organism perspective, which centres on individual psychology while giving limited attention to the broader social and political contexts in which language learning takes place. As she comments:

> What our field of inquiry somehow does not do is look beyond individual-psychological and associated pedagogical perspectives to examine language learning motivation from political, ideological, or sociological perspectives, and to consider critical implications for language and education policy, social integration, social justice, or other locally and globally relevant societal challenges. […] Since, as a field of inquiry, we focus attention primarily on the internal psychology of language learning motivation, we tend to give only superficial attention to the wider social, political, and ideological structures that shape, position, and interact with individual motivations to learn specific languages. In much research on L2 motivation, this wider perspective is limited to brief descriptive characterizations of the 'context' or 'setting' in which a study takes place, or to specific external factors included as independent variables in the study, such as parental influence or cultural background. Rather little research in our field has approached the study of language learning motivation from a macro-sociological perspective, examining the political and ideological structures affecting the motivations of individuals or communities to engage with other languages and cultures, or exposing social inequalities, barriers, or discriminatory practices where motivations to learn and use particular languages are critical issues.

These wider social, political, and ideological structures, seen in "a macro-sociological perspective", come into view from the start when our point of departure is the inter-organism perspective: the view "beyond individual-psychological and associated pedagogical perspectives" is inherent in the inter-organism perspective. This approach can also reveal the rich linguistic and socio-cultural diversity found around the world (including the diversity of conceptualisations of the domain of experience that in English is construed as 'motivation'—see further in Part III), allowing us to identify alternative traditions and approaches, where the 'Anglo' notion of 'motivation' is not an operational part of the 'linguaculture'. From a systemic functional point of view, it is important to note that learners are never isolated individuals. They are always situated within networks of social roles and meaning-making practices, and their motivations are shaped by the institutions, ideologies, and discourses that surround them. Interpreting learners as both social selves (persons) and semiotic selves (meaners) offers a view of motivation that is not limited to internal drives or individual goals, but is embedded in broader socio-cultural and political contexts (Matthiessen & Teruya, 2024). If we view this 'from below', from the point of view of the brains of individual organisms as biological individuals, this is highlighted by Barrett (2020) in her chapter 'Your brain secretly works with other brains' (cf. our reference above to Kuhl's notion of the socially gated brain; see also Mercer's (e.g. 2013) account of the social brain in relation to thinking and learning). A great deal of this work is semiotic—the continuing exchange of meanings with others (see further our discussion in Section 3.2 of Bruner's (1990) transactional contextualism, which conceives of knowing as both 'situated' and 'distributed', as well as our reference at the beginning of this section to collective meaning potential and discussions of 'distributed language'). We will explore correlations between the biological, social and semiotic realms of phenomena in relation to learners and 'motivation' further in Part III, including accounts of dialogic minds and dialogic selves (cf. Halliday, 2004) and dialogic pedagogy (e.g., Thwaite et al., 2023).

As learners continue to develop their personal registerial repertoires, they are likely to have greater resources to project versions of their future selves in the L2, especially if the relevant registers are included in the curriculum, such as those for keeping diaries, logs, learning journals, planning activities, and so forth. Thus, they should benefit from being given opportunities to learn the relevant registers as part of their L2 curricula (Matthiessen & Yousefi, 2025).

Beyond the issues identified by Ushioda (2020), Al-Hoorie et al. (2021) argue that language motivation research is experiencing an 'identity crisis' (see Part I), highlighting the marginalisation of context, the impact of graduate (mis)training, and the urgent need for rigorous transdisciplinary research. This identity crisis thus includes the problem that social factors have largely not been considered, as noted by both Ushioda (2020) and Al-Hoorie et al. (2021). In contrast, the consideration of social factors follows from the inter-organism perspective outlined by Halliday (1978a), which we discussed in Part I, where we contrasted with the intra-organism perspective dominant in L2 motivation research (Part I, Section 4). In her reflections on ethical issues in L2 motivation research, Ushioda (2009) advocates for "a focus on people or 'persons', rather than on learners or individual differences in an abstract theoretical sense" (p. 216). Al-

Hoorie et al. (2021) similarly emphasise the contributions that sociocultural theory and complex dynamic systems theory can make in advancing the field (see also Part I, Section 3).

We suggest that this is an invitation to draw on systemic functional linguistics to address the identified gap. Indeed, we hope that the growing emphasis on transdisciplinary research will encourage greater consideration of contributions from SFL. These include not only the works cited here but also the wider body of literature shaped by systemic functional approaches to language and education. Halliday (1978a) conceptualises social semiotics as a thematic formation, situating problem-oriented inquiry at the very centre of SFL, both in its theoretical elaboration and its practical application (Mahboob & Knight, 2010; McCabe et al., 2025). This thematic orientation is further reinforced by recent and forthcoming contributions to the field, particularly the chapters in Wegener et al. (2026), which explicitly address transdisciplinary SFL (e.g., Benelhadj, 2026; Harman et al., 2026), alongside the work of Matthiessen (2026, in press).

3. Intersubjectivity, Transactional Contextualism, Scaffolding

As we argued in the previous section, the inter-organism perspective invites us to interpret learners as both persons (or social selves) and meaners (or semiotic selves), understood as bundles of personae and roles enacted through participation in the various meaning groups that constitute the extended speech fellowship.

3.1. Intersubjectivity

In the inter-organism perspective, the focus shifts away from isolated individuals and towards persons and meaners located in a relational ecology of meaning-making. This perspective brings into view a network of interrelated properties, beginning with a reconceptualisation of persons—not as self-contained subjects endowed with internally generated motivations, but as meaners, constituted as bundles of roles dynamically enacted across diverse role networks (see Figure 2). These roles do not pre-exist interaction; rather, they emerge, stabilise, and transform in and through interaction with others, mediated semiotically by language (see Figure 1).

Within this view, individuals are understood *dialogically*: cognition, affect, and orientation to action are co-regulated in interaction, rather than originating solely within the construct of the 'individual mind'. Meaning-making thus involves the coupling of social brains through dialogue, where the meaners align attention, stance, and intentionality interpersonally over time. What appears, from an individualist standpoint, as 'motivation' is here reinterpreted as an intersubjective phenomenon—a product of participation in shared semiotic activity, sustained by patterns of negotiation in dialogue—response, recognition, and alignment.

Centrally, this invites us to re-orient theoretically from subjectivity to intersubjectivity. Motivation is no longer construed as a private psychological state that precedes action, but as a *relational accomplishment*, emerging within historically and culturally grounded practices of interaction. In this perspective, learner motivation can be understood not in terms of internal traits or dispositions, but in terms of how learners are positioned, and position themselves, within ongoing networks of social meaning.

In a section entitled *The Intersubjective Angle*, Halliday (1978c [2004, p. 137]) comments on the view of ontogenesis that has emerged in the intra-organism perspective:

> A child's construction of language is at once both a part of and a means of his construction of reality; and it is natural to Western thinking to view both these processes largely from the standpoint of the individual. We tend implicitly to define the aim of the investigation as that of explaining what happens to a child in his development from infancy to maturity.

This preoccupation is embodied in and reinforced by prevailing metaphors such as 'language acquisition' and 'primary socialisation'. After elaborating on the consequences of this intra-organism view, he continues, arguing for the inter-organism view (1978c [2004, p. 138]):

> I think we need to interpret language development more in terms of a conception of social or intersubjective creativity. Learning to mean is a process of creation, whereby a child constructs, in interaction with those around, a semiotic potential that gives access to the edifice of meanings that constitute social reality. There is ample evidence that children engage in communicative interaction from birth. A newborn infant's orientation towards persons is quite distinct from his orientation towards the objects in his environment; he is aware of being addressed, and can respond. He exchanges

> attention with the persons who are the "others" in his social system (Bruner 1975; France 1975; Trevarthen 1974b [= 1974]).

Halliday's approach aligns with the work pioneered by the psychologist Colwyn Trevarthen (e.g., Trevarthen, 1974, 1979, 1980, 1987, 2009, 2011). Halliday's account of early language development, which we introduced in Section 2 (summarised in Table 1), has served as a key source of insight for Trevarthen (1987, pp. 177–178), who highlights the significance of Halliday's contributions:

> Halliday's theory of language systems and functions invites a psychological enquiry into the motives for linguistic communication (Halliday 1973, [1976]). It is founded on developmental considerations, asking how a child can enter into the symbolism of words and sentences and master the representing code. Above all, the theory is oriented to put in first place the social or interpersonal benefits that people get from using language. Halliday's description and analysis of the antecedents to language in communication of his infant son is the broadest, most philosophically subtle, most psychologically penetrating and most linguistically sophisticated of the studies that, since 1970, have changed our perception of how children master speech from living in the special protected relationship of a family. This work has been a great help to my efforts to understand the interpersonal motives underlying the earliest stages of human engagement, when a child picks up and returns understanding, uses it to perform negotiations and dialogue-like exchanges, and learns to control and share the forms of knowledge on which the parental culture depends.

This intersubjective angle foregrounds the social and interpersonal benefits of using language and offers a productive pathway to enrich our understanding of L2 learner motivation. It shifts the focus from learners as isolated individuals towards learners participating in different institutional roles, interacting with others across various meaning groups and situation types.

In terms of context, the intersubjective conception relates to the inter-organism perspective, enabling us to see phenomena earlier and more clearly than if we start with the intra-organism perspective: the intersubjective approach foregrounds the centrality of the tenor parameter of context in the semiotic ecosystems in which learners participate. It highlights the interpersonal meaning-making resources that learners must develop in order to enact tenor roles, initiate, sustain and negotiate relationships, and align with the values of the social groups they interact with. It also brings out affective (sociometric) aspects of the role of teachers as mentoring learners (cf. Martin, 2015; Martin & Matthiessen, 2014), empathising with their students and enacting relations of rapport. Systemic functional accounts of interpersonal meaning have shown that such meanings are typically realised *prosodically*—that is, they extend like a prosody or colouring across stretches of discourse, rather than being expressed as separated segments (for reference to such patterns across the languages of the world, see Matthiessen, 2004a; for the relationship between metafunctional modes of meaning and modes of expression, see Halliday, 1979; Martin, 1996; Matthiessen, 2025b).

Insights from goal pursuit and planning models in artificial intelligence also help clarify this point (Sacerdoti, 1977). There is a distinction between 'achievement goals' and 'maintenance goals'. In systemic functional terms, achievement goals are field-oriented: they involve incremental planning and the execution of plans to attain a defined outcome. Maintenance goals, on the other hand, are tenor-oriented: they require the ongoing enactment and negotiation of interpersonal relationships among interactants. For example, maintaining empathy, rapport, supporting student voices, calibrating emotional alignment, and politeness—especially in long-term relationships such as friendship and teacher–learner relations—is a continuous process. The task is never completed; interactants must continue to work at it over time, much like a prosody—they must keep pursuing it. Motivating L2 learners can therefore be understood as a tenor-based maintenance goal that is fundamentally intersubjective in nature (Matthiessen & Yousefi, 2025). It needs to be pursued prosodically, through sustained interaction that enacts rapport, empathy, and other positive affective states.

3.2. Transactional Contextualism: Scaffolding

The intersubjective perspective also connects with Bruner's (1990) pedagogically significant discussion of what he terms transactional contextualism. Bruner (1990, pp. 105–106) characterises this approach as follows:

> It was the view that human action could not be fully or properly accounted for from the inside out-by reference only to intrapsychic dispositions, traits, learning capacities, motives, or whatever. Action required for its explication that it be *situated,* that it be conceived of as continuous with a cultural world. The realities that people constructed were *social* realities, negotiated with others, distributed between them. The social world in which we lived was, so to speak,

> neither "in the head" nor "out there" in some positivistic aboriginal form. And both mind and the Self were part of that social world. […]
>
> Consider first how contextualism affects ideas about knowledge and how we acquire it. As Roy Pea, David Perkins, and others now put it, a "person's" knowledge is not *just* in one's own head, in "person solo", but in the note that one has put into accessible notebooks …. in the friends one call up … All of these, as Perkins points out, are parts of the knowledge flow of which one has become part. And that flow even includes those highly conventionalized forms of rhetoric that we use for justifying and explaining what we are doing, each tailored to and "scaffolded" by the occasion of use. Coming to know anything … is both *situated* and (to use the Peak-Perkins term) *distributed*. To overlook this situated-distributed nature of knowledge and knowing is to lose sight not only of the cultural nature knowledge but of the correspondingly cultural nature of knowledge acquisition.

Bruner's reference to "the inside out—by reference only to intrapsychic dispositions, traits, learning capacities, motives, or whatever" can be understood in terms of Halliday's (1978a) intra-organism perspective. Bruner's (1990) characterisation of transactional contextualism resonates strongly with the inter-organism perspective that Halliday developed in the 1970s, drawing on Malinowski's contextualism in anthropology among other sources, empirically on his own longitudinal case study of one child learning how to mean (see Section 2.1). Furthermore, Bruner's (1983) theory of scaffolding in learning, influenced by Vygotsky (e.g., Vygotsky, 1962, 1978; Wertsch, 1985; Wells, 1999), aligns closely with the findings of systemic functional case studies of early language development. This theory has been integrated into pedagogical approaches—centrally embodied in the Teaching–Learning Cycle associated with the Genre Model, developed by J.R. Martin and his team for education since the 1980s (e.g., Gibbons, 2002, 2006, 2007; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Martin, 2015; Martin & Matthiessen, 2014; Martin & Rose, 2005; McCabe, 2021; Rose, 2023; Unsworth, 1997) and also in the general approach of dialogic pedagogy (e.g., Thwaite et al., 2023). Its significance for motivation and engagement is discussed in Matthiessen and Yousefi (2025).

Vygotsky's perspective offers a potential point of connection and interface between the inter-organism perspective of systemic functional linguistics and the expanded intra-organism perspective that has been central to L2 learner motivation research. As Ushioda (2013, p. 3) explains:

> One approach to integrating the individual and context has been to draw on sociocultural theory as an analytical framework for exploring the socially constructed growth of motivation. Central to Lev Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of mind is the principle that higher order cognitive functions are internalized from social interaction with more competent others.

This 'social interaction' is fundamentally semiotic, involving the continuous exchange of meaning by interactants in dialogic interaction. Her remarks can be understood in relation to Halliday's (1993) call for a language-based theory of learning, developed to complement prevailing educational psychology–based theories of learning. We can also emphasise that the complementarity of Halliday's and Vygotsky's theories has been highlighted and developed in considerable detail in various contributions (e.g., Byrnes, 2006; Feez, 2023; Foley, 1991; Hasan, 1992, 1995, 2004, 2005a; Jeung & Kellogg, 2019; Shrestha, 2020; Wells, 1994, 1999).

4. Users of Language, Uses of Language

The inter-organism perspective on persons as users of language (see Halliday, 1978a; Halliday et al., 1964) embodies the conception of language as a resource—a resource for making meaning, or meaning potential—rather than merely as a set of rules (see Halliday, 2003a [1977]; Matthiessen, 2015a).

4.1. L2 Learner as Language User

Learning a second or foreign language is therefore conceptualised as learning how to mean in the L2, as noted above. While this process of learning is typically induced rather than natural in institutions of formal education (Halliday, 1978b), the learner remains a potential user of the L2. Over time, the learner will almost certainly be able to use the expanding resources of the L2 taking on different meaning roles in increasingly diverse contexts. In other words, a fundamental measure of success is whether learners are able to use the L2 effectively, and whether they can apply it in different roles in a growing range of situation types within various institutional settings (see Figure 2 above). One key challenge in L2 education, therefore, is to support learners not only in developing the L2 but also in using it effectively.

Halliday (1992, p. 61) pinpoints this problem by distinguishing between the themes of learning and meaning as "two modes of processing language":

> Our practice as language teachers depends more on our being able to adopt the complementary perspectives of two conflicting themes, that of 'learning' and that of 'meaning', than on putting together pieces from linguistics with pieces from psychology and sociology. The reason learning a foreign language can be so extraordinarily difficult for an adolescent or adult who has not grown up multilingual is that there is a real-life contradiction between these two modes of processing language: that of learning it for future use, and that of using it. They can no longer both learn language and 'mean it' at the same time. The teacher cannot resolve this contradiction, but has somehow to transform it from a constraint into a condition which enables, and even enforces, the learning process.

Drawing on research into language development and education (McCabe, 2021), we outline several key considerations at this point, while acknowledging that the topic merits more extensive treatment in its own right.

- As learners proceed on their L2 learning journeys, they will benefit from, and presumably be motivated by, learning semogenic strategies to grow their personal L2 meaning potentials: in SFL, the emphasis has tended to be on empowerment rather than motivation (see Section 4.2). It should be noted that empowerment and motivation can both be related to the notion of 'readiness', but whereas motivation foregrounds inclination or willingness, empowerment foregrounds potentiality or ability (e.g., Gebhard & Accurso, 2023; Harman, 2018). These strategies include attending to a systemic progression based on systemic probabilities inferred from the relative frequencies of features in texts. For example, by engaging with texts in context, learners need to master the systems both of MODALITY and of POLARITY, which are simultaneous interpersonal systems in the grammar of the clause defining a paradigm of possible combinations of various types, degrees, orientations, and manifestations of modality with positive versus negative polarity (Arús-Hita et al., 2024; Matthiessen & Xuan, 2025). However, not all combinations are equally probable. The frequency of combinations varies depending on the registers of the texts learners encounter. For instance, *may* is much more frequent than *mayn't*, but learners may also come across a significant number of negative forms such as *can't* or *cannot* alongside the positive form *can*. Moreover, exposure to texts in registers that regulate behaviour—such as laws, constitutions, or agreements—provides learners with the opportunity to integrate *shall* as a modal expressing high obligation, whereas *must*, *have to*, or *needn't* are more likely in other types of registers. In other words, learners gradually construct different linguistic systems such as that of MODALITY, by distilling patterns from texts in contexts of situation they engage with—texts belonging to different registers, and these patterns include quantitative ones: they transform relative frequencies in texts into systemic probabilities (see Halliday, 1993)—an aspect of statistical learning (e.g., Erickson & Thiessen, 2015; Saffran et al., 1996, and the reference to Patricia Kuhl's research above). Thus, learners are guided by relative frequencies in texts belonging to different strategies. We can interpret learning semogenic strategies as helping L2 learners become autonomous learners—that is, learners who take control of their own learning pathways, developing 'agency', and prepare to become lifelong learners. This will also help learners move from intermediate to advanced mastery of the L2—a significant challenge in L2 education, discussed by Byrnes et al. (2010) and Ryshina-Pankova (2018).
- As L2 learners work to expand their personal L2 meaning potentials, they often need support in accessing new areas of this vast potential. In other words, they require guidance in identifying effective learning gateways into these areas. Systemic functional research on first language development has shown that these gateways are frequently, if not always, interpersonal in nature. Learners often gain access to new areas of meaning through contexts that are *interpersonally significant to them*, such as regulations, warnings, threats, opinions, teasing, and gossip (Halliday, 1993). This insight highlights the importance of Eggins and Slade's (1997) study of casual conversation for L2 education. Their work includes analysis of English registers that are particularly relevant for immigrant learners of English as a second language who are preparing to assume institutional roles in a new cultural context, taking on new identities. These registers are often rich in interpersonal strategies essential for functioning in key institutions such as friendship networks, the workplace, and educational settings. For example, according to Eggins and Slade's findings, in Australian workplaces, male learners need to develop strategies for teasing one another, whereas female learners may need to master the interpersonal strategies associated with gossip and the concomitant value systems (pejorative evaluations of colleagues who are not part of the in-group).

- As L2 learners strive to expand their personal meaning potentials, they can be significantly empowered when given opportunities to add new registers—that is, new functional varieties of language used in different institutional settings. In other words, learners benefit when they are supported in expanding their personal registerial repertoires through carefully designed curricula, textbooks and materials, syllabi, and lesson plans. Different groups of learners will require access to different ranges of registers, depending on their goals, educational trajectories, or professional pathways. This is reflected in areas such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), or language instruction tailored to particular domains such as medicine. These needs can be identified and characterised through appropriate needs analysis. The general principle is that as learners expand their registerial repertoires, they are increasingly able to take on a wider range of institutional roles—roles associated with new fields of activity and experience that are relevant and meaningful to them. It is reasonable to assume that learners will find such expansion highly motivating. As they develop the semiotic resources to participate more fully in the communities they wish to belong to, their growing meaning potential becomes a source of personal agency and empowerment.

4.2. Expanding Registerial Repertoires

Since it is central to students' L2 learning journeys, let us elaborate on the concept of 'personal registerial repertoire'. It seems reasonable to assume that the ability to use the L2 in an increasing range of varied contexts will motivate learners to continue expanding their L2 meaning potential. This motivation arises because learners can then use the language in ways that are significant to them, particularly in terms of the contextual parameters of field and tenor. As L2 learners progress along their learning paths, they are *empowered* by expanding their registerial repertoires, provided that their language programme is designed to support such development. Moreover, the mastery of registers within their institutional contexts can be linked to the discussion of task-based research and instruction in the L2 field (e.g., Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Lambert et al., 2023). Tasks may be interpreted as registers within institutional settings, or as genres within the Genre Model developed by J.R. Martin and his colleagues in systemic functional linguistics, as Byrnes et al. (2010) do in their account of teaching German as an L2 in an undergraduate programme. This model, originally focused on education in Australia (e.g., Christie & Martin, 1997; Gardner, 2017; Martin, 1992, 2009; Martin & Rose, 2008; Schleppegrell & Colombi, 2002), was developed through collaboration between systemic linguists, educational experts, and front-line teachers (Rose & Martin, 2012). Building on this tradition, Feez (1998) proposes the framework of text-based syllabus design as a practical adaptation of the genre-based approach to L2 English instruction. This framework is grounded in the view that "language occurs as whole texts which are embedded in the social contexts in which they occur and people learn language through working with whole texts" (Feez, 1998, p. 3). Within this model, teachers select topics based on learners' needs and interests, identify model texts representing relevant genres, and guide learners through both the linguistic and contextual features of those genres. Learning and assessment tasks are then designed to help learners develop the lexicogrammatical resources and discourse strategies needed to participate meaningfully in the associated social contexts (Feez, 1999).

The register- or genre-based literacy pedagogy developed in the Department of German at Georgetown University under Heidi Byrnes' leadership clearly demonstrates the relevance of this approach to L2 education (e.g., Byrnes et al., 2006, 2010). The project was initiated in the late 1990s as a response to declining enrolment numbers and retention rates in the undergraduate German major—indirect indicators of lack of learner motivation. In response, the department completely redesigned its programme, drawing heavily on the highly successful systemic functional educational linguistics work conducted in Australia by J.R. Martin and his team, often referred to as the 'Sydney School' of SFL (e.g., Rose & Martin, 2012). The results were spectacular: students graduated with advanced mastery of German, sufficient to continue their studies at the Master's level in German-speaking programmes. Moreover, it turned out that their enhanced academic German skills also positively influenced their mastery of academic English.

Accordingly, from the point of view of systemic functional linguistics, two questions emerge: (1) First, what does it mean to learn to use the L2 in an expanding range of contexts of use? The answer has been clear since the 1960s (e.g., Halliday et al., 1964): as learners progress on their learning paths, they must be given opportunities to expand their L2 meaning potentials by engaging with, and learning, new registers of the language within their institutional settings. As students move forward, they need chances to grow their personal registerial repertoires so they can take on an increasing range of meaning roles and participate in a growing number of meaning groups. The sequence in which these registers

are introduced is crucial. They can be effectively sequenced through a spiral curriculum, a concept introduced by Bruner (1960) and further developed by Martin (2000, 2009) and Martin and Rose (2008). In this approach, learners encounter simple uses of L2 systems first and then, once they have progressed further, revisit more elaborated uses as they progress through successive registers, each offering new learning opportunities.

(2) Second, what are the registers that are relevant to different individual learners and different groups of learners? The answer can be developed through some form of needs analysis. For example, we can consider L2 learners who have embarked on their learning journeys in order to process academic discourse within particular disciplines, or learners who aim to interact with their communities in immigrant nations, such as learners of heritage languages (e.g., Colombi, 2009; Roca & Colombi, 2003; Schleppegrell & Colombi, 2002). Different groups of learners will need to engage with, and master, partially distinct repertoires of registers. However, the fundamental point is that mastering the registers necessary to expand their *lifeworlds* can serve as a strong motivating factor. They will be inspired by the rewarding experience of taking on an increasing repertoire of meaning roles.

When L2 learners are given the opportunity to expand their registerial repertoires in a carefully staged way, providing them with a judiciously informed sequenced selection of registers that offer new learning opportunities, this can clearly be connected to language learning across the curriculum and content-based language learning. In Vancouver, Bernard Mohan and his team investigated how L2 learners of English could be supported with strategies for learning content in different subjects through English. They found that teaching learners how to translate subject knowledge between different semiotic systems, such as language and maps or language and flowcharts, was particularly helpful (Mohan, 1986); this was an example of a trans-semiotic practice. Providing L2 learners with strategies for learning content *through* their second language can be highly motivating, as it demonstrates that the L2 they are learning is not only a language but also a valuable resource for learning subject matter (cf. Rose, 2023, on the complementarity of different semiotic systems in science education).

The challenges that students face when using their L2 as a resource for learning naturally vary widely across different school subjects and university disciplines, as well as across different educational systems. Halliday (1989) highlights specific difficulties that learners, both first and second language users, are likely to encounter in subjects such as mathematics and science. These include interlocking definitions, technical taxonomies, specialised expressions, lexical density, syntactic ambiguity, grammatical metaphor, and semantic discontinuity. Halliday emphasises that addressing these challenges is a crucial educational task—but ideally both L2 teachers and subject area teachers should know enough about the L2 as a resource for learning (cf. Halliday, 1993) to help their students overcome challenges of the kind Halliday has identified. Ultimately, this work supports L2 learners in becoming more proficient and empowered users of the language they are studying.

5. Conclusion

In this article, we have examined the inter-organism perspective on L2 learner motivation, emphasising its significance for understanding language learning as both a social process and as a semiotic one—situated within contexts as a system of meanings. By comparing and contrasting this approach (framed in terms of the theme social semiotics) with the traditional intra-organism view (framed in terms of the macro-discipline of cognitive science), we have highlighted the limitations of interpreting language development as mere ‘acquisition’ within a solely cognitive framework. Instead, we propose a more holistic understanding that recognises learners as active participants within their social environments. In this perspective, language is not a set of rules to be ‘acquired’ but rather a dynamic resource for meaning-making to be learned through text in context in interaction (Halliday, 1993, 2003a [1977]).

We have argued for the importance of contextual factors—specifically the contextual parameters of field, tenor, and mode—in shaping the L2 learning experience. By conceptualising learners as both social and semiotic selves, we gain a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between individual motivations and the broader sociocultural contexts in which such ‘motivations’ are situated and emerge as part of processes of ‘socialisation’. This perspective not only enriches our understanding of L2 motivation but also reflects current calls for a transdisciplinary approach that integrates insights from sociocultural theory and systemic functional linguistics (Matthiessen, 2026; Matthiessen & Yousefi, 2025). Furthermore, we have discussed and highlighted the critical role of expanding learners’ registerial repertoires in helping them become more motivated and engaged. By providing learners with opportunities to navigate

an expanding range of contexts and roles to develop their own personal repertoires, teachers can support them in developing their personal meaning potentials so as to become effective users of the L2—but teachers obviously need the support of the broader educational systems in which they operate, including curricula, syllabi, and teaching materials (Yousefi & Hooper, 2025). This approach not only advances linguistic mastery of the L2 but also facilitates social integration and personal identity formation, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable language learning environment, which has long been a concern in systemic functional linguistics (e.g., Chang et al., 2025; Gebhard & Accurso, 2023; Harman, 2018; Harman et al., 2025).

As the field moves forward, it is essential for future research to bridge the gap between the individual psychological perspective and the broader inter-organism perspective—within which researchers can investigate social, political, and ideological structures that shape language learning. Such an integrative approach can contribute to a more comprehensive framework for understanding L2 motivation—a comprehensive framework that reflects the rich linguistic and cultural diversity of our global society. This shift has the potential not only to deepen theoretical understanding but also to inform pedagogical practices that empower learners as they work towards becoming proficient and confident users of their additional languages.

In Part III, we reconceptualise motivation by situating it within an ordered typology of systems operating in different phenomenal realms: physical, biological, social and semiotic, where the semiotic and biological orders are beginning to be explored in the emerging research arena of 'neurosemiotics' (e.g., García & Ibáñez, 2023; Matthiessen, 2025a). This view, based on the ordered typology of systems, links motivation to broader meaning-making processes and investigates how learners' language experiences are shaped and modulated across these interconnected domains. We also critically examine the ways in which motivation has been construed in English as an abstract, virtual phenomenon within L2 motivation discourse. In response, we propose a more grounded and systemic account, which offers deeper insights into the nature of language learning motivation while also problematising the implicit assumption that the English conception of 'motivation' is universal (cf. Levisen, 2024, the 'Anglo-for-human fallacy' noted in Part I). Our approach advocates observing, describing, reflecting on, and documenting the rich variation in motivational experiences across the varied contexts of richly diverse linguacultures.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the Journal Editor-In-Chief, Professor Alireza Jalilifar, for their invaluable suggestions and insights.

Author Contributions

Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen: Conceptualization, writing – review & editing, project administration.

Moslem Yousefi: Conceptualization, writing – review & editing, submitting/correspondence.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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