# Lecture Five: Systemic Functional Linguistics

# Systemic Functional Linguistics

- Systemic Functional Linguistics is an approach to language developed mainly by Michael Halliday in the UK and later in Australia.

- While American-style linguistics evolved in the modelling of the world's languages, SFL was developed to address the needs of language teaching/learning.

- Central: language use must be seen as taking place in social contexts. Language is not good or bad, it is appropriate or inappropriate to the context of use.

- Language function (what it is used for) is often more important than language structure (how it is composed).

# Definition of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

❖ Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a framework for describing and modeling language in functional rather than formal terms. The theory is *functional* in that language is interpreted as a resource for making meaning, and descriptions are based on extensive analyses of written and spoken text.

❖ The theory is also *systemic* in that it models language as a system of choices.

## Systemic Function Grammar: The Early Days

- Systemic Linguistics grew out of the work of J.R. Firth in London (first chair of general linguistics in the UK), who in turn took ideas from Malinowski (the famous anthropologist).

- Both Firth and Malinowski believed one could only look at language in relation to the context it occurred in.

- In SFL, context is one of the central concerns.

# Linguistic Options and Context of Situation

- In SFL, the **appropriateness of linguistic options** is conditioned by the current "*context of situation*".• E.g.,

- **Context of situation:** the situation in which the language event unfolds, at least those parts of the situation which condition that language use.

- Student talking to teacher:

  ▪ statement

  ▪ question

  ▪ ~~command~~

## Illustrative Examples

The following two sentences say the same thing, but say it in ways appropriate to different contexts of situation:

- a) *I handed my essay in late because my kids got sick.*

- b) *The reason for the late submission of my essay was the illness of my children.*