Bridging Boundaries between Systemic Functional Linguistics and Translation Studies: An Interview with Erich Steiner (Part I)

Erich Steiner, Bo Wang, Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen, and Yuanyi Ma

Abstract

Erich Steiner, as a leading scholar in systemic functional linguistics (SFL), has been involved in various important strands of research on SFL and translation. In this interview, he discusses his motivation of studying linguistics, and introduces his works in different areas, including machine translation in the 1980s, corpora, register, explicitation, grammatical metaphor, integration of product- and process-based researches, as well as language description and comparison.

Keywords: systemic functional linguistics; translation studies; machine translation; corpora; register; explicitation; grammatical metaphor; integration of product- and process-based research; language description and comparison

Affiliations

Erich Steiner: Saarland University.
Bo Wang: Sun Yat-sen University. email: bo.wang@connect.polyu.hk (corresponding author)
Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen: The Hong Kong Polytechnic University.
Yuanyi Ma: Guangdong Polytechnic of Science and Technology. email: yuanyi.ma@connect.polyu.hk (corresponding author)
Introduction

Erich Steiner is professor in the Department of Language Science and Technology, Saarland University, Germany. He is a leading scholar in systemic functional linguistics (SFL), and is known for his works on translation studies, register studies as well as language description and comparison. This transcript is based on an interview with Professor Steiner on 23 March 2018 during his visit to Hong Kong. In the interview, he talks about his motivation of studying linguistics, reflects on the Eurotra project on machine translation that he was involved in earlier on, introduces his research on corpora, register, explicitation and grammatical metaphor, provides details of the cooperation between product- and process-oriented studies, as well as discussing his research on language description and comparison.

1. Motivation of Interest in SFL and Translation

Bo Wang: What motivates you to study systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and translation studies? Is it related to your PhD thesis?

Erich Steiner: My PhD thesis was written a long time ago. It appeared as a publication in 1983 (Steiner, 1983). At that time, I had not actually done much in translation. I had studied English and German philology, and my final thesis was on the application of SFL to language teaching, which was a slightly different field. What motivated my interest in SFL was: in the courses I studied, I had encountered very few linguistic theories that provided an interface between language and context. So, while I was doing my PhD, I asked my supervisor if he could give me a hint to a linguistic theory that works on the interface between language and context. This was what motivated me to take up SFL or ‘British contextualism’ (e.g. Malinowski, 1923; Firth, 1957; Halliday, 1978; Halliday and Hasan, 1985) as a major topic for my PhD thesis.

My PhD thesis was on the history of British contextualism from the nineteenth century until the 1980s. It was a study of the applications to language teaching in England, which was a topic that had not been extensively researched before then, at least from a German perspective. I went to London for a couple of months, and talked to various people who had previously been involved in the School Council’s Program in Linguistics and English Teaching, which Michael Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan had been deeply involved in. That was my original interest. At that point in 1982 and 1983, my research still had little to do with translation, but was focused on linguistic theory and language teaching.
2. Involvement in Eurotra – A Project on Machine Translation

Bo Wang: According to a list of your publications, many of your early works are on machine translation related to the Eurotra project (e.g. Steiner, 1986; Steiner et al., 1988). Would you introduce this project to us?

Erich Steiner: That came after my PhD. I started working for Eurotra (the machine translation project) in 1985, and stayed until 1989, after which I went to the German Gesellschaft für Mathematik und Datenverarbeitung. Between 1985 and 1989, much of my work was indeed on machine translation. Later on until the early 1990s, I extended that to text generation. In any case, Eurotra at the time might indeed have been the largest project on machine translation, which intended to cover all the working languages of the European Union. In 1985, there were around 17 official languages included.

The idea of the project was to build a machine translation system that would be able to translate between any of the language pairs involved. The major backgrounds of the project were feature-based linguistic theories, such as Function Unification Grammar (e.g. Kay, 1979), Generalized Phrase Structure Grammar (e.g. Gazdar, 1985) and Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar (e.g. Pollard and Sag, 1994), which were used as formalisms to notate the linguistic information. Different teams in the project used different linguistic frameworks as their theoretical backgrounds. The German team, which I was part of, had quite a substantial input of SFL, including in particular the clause grammar and semantics. For example, we used SFL to constrain the mapping of participant roles onto grammatical functions.

For Eurotra as a whole, Durand et al. (1991) provided a description and that was one of the widely read publications. Towards the end of the project, we extended our approach to the representation of discourse knowledge. In a sense, this work is now historical, because it was in the period of applying the so-called symbol processing approaches to machine translation and to other computational implementations like text generation. What people usually did was to use linguistic symbol processing theories, including SFL, to model the computational processes of machine translation and text generation. A well-known example of text generation was Nigel – the systemic generation grammar of the Penman text generator developed at the Informational Sciences Institute, University of Southern California at that time (e.g. Mann, 1985; Mann and Matthiessen, 1985; Matthiessen, 1985). We had also cooperated with their team.

Since then, the field of machine translation has changed dramatically. From the early 1990s onwards, the trend went away from the symbol processing approaches. What came later were statistic-based and example-based machine translation. Then, after around 2005 to 2010, there was a heavy input from
machine learning in computer science. The current major drive of innovation in machine translation is neural-network technologies. Hardly any of these later approaches used linguistic theory directly. Depending on the groups developing them, there may or may not be some bits of linguistic information involved. To become part of the development in machine translation, we have to use linguistics in very different ways. However, we do have spin-off projects on machine translation in our own team. For example, Ekaterina Lapshinova-Koltunski (e.g. Lapshinova-Koltunski and Vela, 2015; Lapshinova-Koltunski and Zampieri, 2018) has published a whole series of papers on applying our register-based statistical work in contrastive studies to improve the quality of the input of statistic-based machine translation.

3. Applying Corpora in Translation Studies

Bo Wang: Many of your studies are corpus-based. What are the corpora that you have built? How have you applied them in your research?

Erich Steiner: Our research team in Saarbrücken started to build up corpora for contrastive linguistics and translation studies in 2004. There had been some preliminary work before, such as Elke Teich’s (2003) work, which was a major forerunner to our early work on corpora. From 2005 onwards, we had long-term funding to build up our corpora from the German Research Foundation (DFG) until 2010 and then again 2011–2016. The first family of corpora that we built was called CroCo (Crosslinguistic Corpora for Translation), which consisted of eight written text types, i.e. registers. In terms of the mode of production, it included essays, fictional texts, instructions, popular science texts, economic texts, political speeches, tourism texts, and websites. The eight text types consisted of original texts and their official translations into the other language. We also had a neutral representative corpus for the two languages – English and German. CroCo had about one million words, consisting of samples of roughly equal size, so that they could be compared. Most importantly, they were annotated from phrase structure upwards to sentence level. We had annotation of part of speech (POS), chunk (flat phrase structure), syntactic function, and divisions into clauses. Such annotation was actually more difficult than one would think. CroCo was mainly used to investigate properties of translated texts, in particular explicitation in translation, by answering questions like whether translated texts are different from the source texts and register-parallel original texts in terms of explicitation. This led to a whole range of studies published over several years (e.g. Steiner, 2008, 2012). The book titled Cross-linguistic Corpora for the Study of Translations (Hansen-Schirra et al., 2012) provided a good collection of the papers, but there were numerous other publications.
The second family of corpora, under the name of GECCo,\textsuperscript{2} was an extension of CroCo. We added eight written text types and five spoken text types, including interviews, classroom discourse, speeches, sermons and so on. One of the motivations for us was to compare English and German registers along this whole scale of text types in terms of cohesion (Kunz \textit{et al.}, 2017). Our analysis of cohesion was largely based on Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) description of cohesion in English. We considered the standard work on cohesion in English as our major linguistic and theoretical input. Since we had to apply the description of cohesion to German, we had to adapt and develop it further. The following research questions were involved: (a) What types of differences can be found in these texts in terms of reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion? (b) How different are the registers within the languages? In particular, how different are the spoken registers from the written ones?

GECCo is documented in a whole series of papers that have appeared over the past five or six years (e.g. Kunz and Steiner, 2012, 2013; Kunz and Lapshinova-Koltunski, 2014; Kunz, 2015; Lapshinova-Koltunski, 2016, 2017). Our research domain shifted a bit from translation to contrastive linguistics, but we still worked on translation.

I should mention that all these works owe a lot to the help of quite a number of people, the most important ones being Silvia Hansen-Schirra, Stella Neumann, Oliver Čulo, and Kerstin Kunz, who are now professors at different universities in Germany, and Ekaterina Lapshinova-Koltunski and Mihaela Vela, who are still working with us.

4. Register and Translation

\textbf{Bo Wang:} Many of your papers are related to register and translation (e.g. Steiner, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2004a). What are the important studies in this area?

\textbf{Erich Steiner:} All of the chapters in my book \textit{Translated Texts} (Steiner, 2004a) are based on the assumption that texts instantiate specific registers. Whatever you do with a text, especially in a pre-translation of a text, or an evaluation of a translation, or if you want to apply different methods and procedures in translation, you have to know which register it comes from and what the intended register of the target text is. In that sense, the concept of register underlies all the papers in Steiner (2004a), and it also plays a role in Hansen-Schirra \textit{et al.} (2012). Steiner (2015), which discusses how knowledge about cohesion specified for different registers helps to improve translation, provides another example. In a sense, the idea of register has been a core influence in my entire work on translation.
Christian Matthiessen: Similar to what you have mentioned, if you are translating medical discourse, you then have to get it accurate in terms of the scientific knowledge of the source text; but if you are translating advertisement, the translation is then target-culture-oriented, and you have to communicate in the target culture (see Steiner, 2004a; Matthiessen et al., 2017a). In machine translation, it is called target language-driven oriented translation. That is related to your sense of variation in the methodology of translation and orientation of translation.

Erich Steiner: I have always paid attention to target-culture-oriented multilingual text production, which involves texts with special purposes and advertising texts. The overriding concern of the multilingual text producer is to produce a text that optimally fits the target culture and its context of situation (‘fluency’). The translator, related but different, has to look very closely at the most likely goals of the original author (‘adequacy’). Readers of a translated work have the right to expect a translation that is as closely as possible to the meanings of the original author in the original context, even though that will often sound strange. In fact, a translation in this sense makes us aware of cultural differences, and it does not fool us into believing that every culture is like the target culture (see Venuti, 1995 for ‘domesticating versus foreignizing’ translation). We need to use register in context throughout translation and depend on the configuration of the intended target language context. You may or may not diverge from the original text, but you should make your strategy explicit to the receiver.

5. Explicitation in Translation

Bo Wang: Based on your research on register and corpus, you have also studied explicitation or explicitness (e.g. Steiner, 2008, 2012). What have you found from these studies? What are your opinions on the search for translation universals (cf. House, 2008, 2018)?

Erich Steiner: Our main interest of the CroCo project was to investigate explicitation as a possible property of translated texts. There are other assumed translation properties. Sometimes they are called translation universals, such as ‘simplification’, ‘levelling out’, ‘normalization’, ‘sanitization’, and ‘explicitation’. We have always been very careful about postulating these properties. We do not know how widespread these properties of translation in fact are around translation contexts, although nowadays we know a bit more about them than before. If we want to identify such properties, we have to compare the target texts both with their sources and with comparable non-translated texts in the target language. We have to ask some questions such as: What is
explicitation relative to? To the source text? Or relative to other texts from the same context and the register? What do we mean by explicitation?

I tend to be very hesitant about the term ‘universal’: People in translation studies have not yet looked at a sufficiently large number of language pairs to make such strong claims. Whenever we find these properties (such as our findings on explicitation), we are interested in the causes of explicitation. There can be a whole range of causes: the translators have not been sufficiently trained; there may have been time pressure, some typological contrastive differences between the two languages, intentional change of register in the process of translation, or simply fatigue on the part of the translator.

We tend to believe that explicitation is a very good candidate for a widespread property of translated texts, because understanding the source texts is particularly important for translation. Understanding has one important component: the de-metaphorization of the source text, and this may to some extent carry over to texts in the target language (see Steiner, 2001, inspired by Halliday’s notion of ‘grammatical metaphor’ [Halliday and Matthiessen, 2006]).

As you said, other colleagues such as Juliane House (2008, 2017) have a very similar skeptical attitude towards ‘translation universals’. But a skeptical attitude does not mean that the phenomenon does not exist. In fact, we tend to believe that there are good reasons at least for explicitation, possibly also for levelling out. Yet we cannot claim that there is conclusive knowledge at this stage, even if we have learned a lot about translation in studying translation universals.

**Christian Matthiessen:** Given the very large number of languages still spoken, there would be a very large number of language pairs; but on the whole, the languages that have been studied in detail tend to be the standard languages. It seems to me that we have known much less about the translation between very different languages. A scholar named George Grace (1981, 1981–1983) made one point with respect to the languages spoken in Papua New Guinea, and Andrew Pawley (1987) followed up on that. I wonder what your sense on this is, following up on what you have said about the database of language pairs available at this point and the typological differences.

**Erich Steiner:** I think we do not have to investigate all possible combinations of language pairs. But what we desperately need are investigations of at least a number of language pairs from the major language families, and then look at what we find. This should be done and will be very interesting. But even when we find phenomena such as explicitation, simplification, levelling out and so on, then the question arises again: What are they due to? Because there are very different cultural traditions of translating, translation is often done
in underspecified contexts. For example, recently we had a visiting professor specialized on a language spoken on some very few Pacific Islands only. The data he used were translations of the Bible, which was the only data available. The translations he collected were very different types of texts. People who did these translations usually did very good jobs, but they understood ‘translation’ very differently. So, the data are still problematic. Corpora of Bible translations are now available, which span at least hundreds of languages. But the translations have been produced under conditions in which there is no strict specification of translation. I am looking forward to studies of more languages, which have to come from very different language families in the world. Obviously, before we have done those studies, we do have a very weak empirical basis of making any strong claims about translation universals.

6. Grammatical Metaphor in Translation

Bo Wang: You have done some interesting studies on grammatical metaphor (e.g. Steiner, 2002, 2004b). Could you introduce some of these works to us?

Erich Steiner: The concept of grammatical metaphor that I use originally comes from Michael Halliday’s (1985) Introduction to Functional Grammar (IFG) and the latest version of IFG4 by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). Grammatical metaphor is a very inspiring concept to look at in ontogenetic development (individual), in phylogenetic development (historical) or in semogenetic development of how a text unfolds. Translation is of course a very specific type of unfolding text, and there has been a lot of theorizing in the community of translation studies about translation methods and translation procedures (e.g. Vinay and Darbelnet, 1995; Newmark, 1988). More or less everyone who has written on translation postulates certain methods or procedures in translation.

Grammatical metaphor provides a very comprehensive and theoretically-based framework for modeling translation methods and procedures. That is why I have used the concept in quite a range of studies, such as my papers on explicitation or implicitation in translation (e.g. Steiner, 2001, 2008, 2012). So have other people around me, including Teich and Fankhause’s (2010) study of texts for special purposes, Stella Neumann’s (2014) comparison of registers across languages, Silvia Hansen-Schirra’s (e.g. Hansen and Hansen-Schirra, 2012) work on information density in texts based on the notion of grammatical metaphor, and Kerstin Kunz’s (2010) study of noun phrases in English and German. All of these works, including those of my own, have studied grammatical metaphor not only for modeling processes in translation, but also for modeling texts with special purposes, for example, scientific English as opposed to popular science or everyday English, and scientific German as opposed to
popular science German or everyday German. While working with Fabio Alves and Adriana Pagano at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG) in Brazil, Silvia Hansen-Schirra, Stella Neumann and I also did process-based studies by using the concept of grammatical metaphor to look at what translators actually translate and why they are translating like that (see Alves et al., 2010).


Bo Wang: Talking about the collaboration between your group based in Germany and Fabio Alves’s group from UFMG in Brazil (Alves et al., 2010), what insights can we have by integrating product- and process-oriented studies? Is the cooperation still going on (cf. Matthiessen et al., 2017b, 2018)?

Erich Steiner: The cooperation was funded for altogether five years by the Brazilian and the German academic exchange services. That was the intense period where we cooperated and spent some time at each other’s institutions. But the younger people, who were at the time doing their PhDs, came out of that cooperation. They have continued that line of research. In that sense, the series of process-based studies are going on.

We used the concept of grammatical metaphor in two experimental scenarios, i.e. in translating the website of a major company and in translating physics texts. Especially for the second type of text, we investigated the different translation strategies by subject-field expert physicists, trained translators (translators with some training background in scientific texts) and novice translators without such background. We were interested in seeing whether and how different strategies were used by the three types of translators. For the commercial web-based texts, the same questions were also asked.

There were dependent variables in the research. We looked at keystroke logging for the patterns of typing, which included deletion and pausing. The second dependent variable was eye movement, and we looked at eye tracking. We also examined the ‘histories’ of translation units, involving questions like:

(a) What were the intermediate stages in translating? (b) How many different stages did the translators go through? and (c) How did the translators reach the final stage?

We also did post-hoc interviews to give us an account of what people think they had done, while the other three dependent variables had given us a window of what they had in fact done. The two things did not always match. Interestingly, we found different styles of pre-translational text analysis: depending on whether the translators are subject field experts, trained translators or translators with little training, people read the source texts very
differently. There were very different patterns for them in scanning and analyzing the source text. One pattern was that the trained translators spent more time on reading the source text; while for the rest of the process, they went much faster than the other group members. They also identified very different points as difficulties. For example, translators predictably looked at the passages in the original text that they regarded as difficult, which they perceived as potential difficulties due to their training. The experts in physics, for example, would look at the passages that they think as difficult in terms of field knowledge, and may not spend too much time on linguistic structures. As a result, the output tended to be somewhat different.

As I said, these investigations are still going on. The group around Fabio Alves and Adriana Pagano are very active in pursuing that line of research. People around Stella Neumann in Aachen have produced a whole series of papers, and they also have well-funded projects in looking precisely at process studies in translated texts (see e.g. Heilmann et al., 2019). Silvia Hansen-Schirra has at least two projects, which are still continuing (e.g. Hansen-Schirra and Grucza, 2016; Hansen-Schirra, Czulo, and Hofmann, 2017; Hansen-Schirra, Nitzke, and Oster, 2017). For many of us, there is a strong impetus to look at translation process by essentially using ideas from grammatical metaphor as a modeling background.

8. Language Description and Comparison

Bo Wang: Another interesting area that you have worked on is language description, including your works that describe the language of German and compare German with English. How has German been described from the SFL perspective?

Erich Steiner: I have always been interested in the differences between English and German, the two languages of my first university degree. The question is: Is it possible to systematize these differences? You do not want to simply give a long list of the differences between the given language pair, even if such lists are useful.

In my own case, relevant work started with the Eurotra project we mentioned earlier. At that point, I was working on English, German, three major Romance languages and to some extent Russian (with the help of others). Throughout the 1990s in the framework of an EU-funded project DANDELION on multilingual discourse representation, I looked at Theme in English and German with Wiebke Ramm (e.g. Steiner and Ramm, 1995; Steiner, 2006), who used to be my colleague and is now in Oslo. Elke Teich (e.g. 1999) worked on text generation in German, and studied the comparison of German with English, based on which we later produced Steiner and Teich (2004) – an overview of the grammar
of German in an SFL-book on language typology (Caffarel, Martin, and Matthiessen, 2004). Since then, whenever I had time, I attempted to systematize my knowledge about German. Relatively speaking, the language pair of English-German is well investigated. There are other researchers, like John Hawkins (e.g. 1986, 1992), Harald Weinrich (e.g. 1993) and Monika Doherty (e.g. 1991), who have published insightful works on the comparison of English and German over the past 30 years. I also wanted to take positions vis-à-vis that kind of tradition, exploring an SFL-perspective on such a comparison.

Let me summarize some differences between English and German: In terms of experiential meaning in lexicogrammar, English tends to assemble the expressions of meanings in the center of the clause, whereas German tends to shift these towards the right or later part of the clause. In terms of logical meaning, the main difference seems to be that English is frequently ‘metaphorical’ in the sense of ‘grammatical metaphor’, and is often implicit in non-Finite constructions, whereas German tends to be more congruent and more often explicit (the two go hand in hand). These differences are also supported by our empirical findings on contrastive grammar and contrastive cohesion (English-German).

In terms of interpersonal meaning, the core of mood meaning in English is tied to the Subject-Finite complex, as is widely known; whereas in German, mood is not tied to the Subject-Finite complex, but rather to the position of Finite as such. The sequence of Subject and Finite in German has very little functional load, and is not related to the encoding of mood. For modality, English has a strong tendency towards encoding modality in the Finite or phasal verb in the Finite auxiliary. If you look at the frequencies of modality in English, it is strong both systemically and certainly instantially. In German, the situation is different: there is a narrower range of auxiliaries in German systemically, and they are less frequent instantially. Modality is frequently not expressed in the Finite but in somewhere else in the clause or is even prosodically spread throughout the clause. Further, various interpersonal meanings are expressed through intonation, particles, and some lexical items in English, whereas in German, there is a strong tendency towards modal and focusing particles.

In terms of textual meaning, Theme in English includes the Subject and possibly other functions, whereas in German, it can be conflated with any experiential function of the clause, and it is very hard to get an additional function into the Theme position. The encoding of information in English is strongly grammaticalized through various types of identifying structures, topicalized structures, and thematically marked Themes, which are very often expressed through grammatical constructions, whereas in German, information is more often expressed through word order and particles, which are focusing particles rather than modal particles. When we compare the two languages, we notice
that the range of grammaticalized constructions for expressing information structure in English is a bit larger than that in German. As a result, not everything possible in English can be found in German, such as the different types of thematization and predicking Themes. Even if the systemic possibilities are there in both languages, instential frequencies are very different.

Finally, I would like to make some generalizations: In English, if you want to know which experiential function a given phrase has, then participant order is a strong indicator. Mood is strongly grammaticalized through the relative sequence of Subject and Finite. In German, on the other hand, participant order encodes information structure strongly and mood weakly, so the sequence in the clause has very different functions. The mapping in English of a figure and its semantic roles onto grammatical functions is more flexible than that in German with implications for grammatical metaphoricity. Nothing of what I have said here is descriptively new, but the perspective is shaped by SFL (e.g. Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014) and the metafunctional prism to systematize descriptions and to generalize from them.

Christian Matthiessen: If one looks at this in terms of the family of Germanic languages, it would seem that English is the outlier language. With respect to a number of the features you have mentioned, I have a sense that German is more characteristic of other Germanic languages.

Erich Steiner: I am not entirely sure whether this holds for all features of the comparison in equal strength. I would agree that English and German are on opposite poles within the continuum of Germanic languages. On the one hand, English is probably the one out in terms of how mood is tight to Subject and Finite, complexing and how Theme is realized. On the other hand, German is certainly the odd one out in having the core of the clause towards the end of the clause. In that sense, it depends on which feature we are focusing on. English is also special because of the historically strong influence of French during the Middle English period. But what I would agree with is that along most of these dimensions English and German would be at opposite ends of the Germanic continuum.

Christian Matthiessen: It reminds me of something that Michael Halliday said. His impression is that the textual metafunction may be most likely to adapt to the areal features. In the case of English, it may be influenced by Norman French and the Celtic environment.

Erich Steiner: Yes, that is quite possible and is a very interesting point to pursue.
9. Conclusion

Speaking from the perspective of a scholar in SFL and translation studies, Erich Steiner has provided valuable insights to his various research areas in the past four decades. We hope that the interview transcript can help summarize Steiner’s contributions, promote the interaction between SFL and translation, and give some suggestions to novice scholars. In the coming issues, we will present the second part of the interview to address more topics on SFL and translation.

To be continued.

Notes

1. See https://www.uni-saarland.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Professoren/SteinerE/Dokumente_Steiner/veroeffentlichungen070119.pdf.
2. See http://www.gecco.uni-saarland.de/GECCo/ for more information about the GECCo corpora.

About the Authors

Erich Steiner is professor in the Department of Language Science and Technology, Saarland University, Germany. He is a leading scholar in systemic functional linguistics (SFL), and is known for his works on translation studies, register studies as well as language description and comparison.

Bo Wang received his doctoral degree from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and is currently associate research fellow at School of International Studies, Sun Yat-sen University. He is also an active member of the PolySystemic Research Group. His research interests include systemic functional linguistics, translation studies, discourse analysis, and language description.

Christian M. I. M. Matthiessen is Chair Professor of the Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, where he is a member of the PolySystemic Research Group. He has degrees in linguistics from Lund University (BA) where he also studied Arabic and philosophy, and from University of California, Los Angeles (MA, PhD), and has previously held positions at Sydney University and Macquarie University.

Ma Yuanyi received her doctoral degree from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. She is currently lecturer in the School of International Cooperation, Guangdong Polytechnic of Science and Technology. She is a member of the PolySystemic Research Group, and her research interests include systemic functional linguistics, translation studies, discourse analysis, and intercultural communication.
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