Editor’s introduction

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The papers in this special issue of *Linguistics and the Human Sciences* have been selected from those presented at the sixth International Free Linguistics Conference (FLC) held in October 2012 at the University of Sydney, Australia. Following the tenets of the FLC initiative, they employ diverse linguistic concepts and approaches, demonstrate a range of themes and topics and, overall, represent the diversity and openness of the forum. The conference provides the opportunity for linguists, scholars, students and those who share an interest in language to present their work free from the restrictions of fixed presentation themes and linguistic subfields as well as exorbitant conference fees; it is and has always been completely free to attend and present at the FLC.

This is the fourth special issue of LHS dedicated to the FLC (in addition to two dedicated book volumes from previous conferences) and it includes four papers that explore different areas of languages and showcase the quality of the presentations that were given in 2012. In this issue, McCormack discusses the similarities and differences between Sydney School Genre Theory and the ancient theory of rhetoric in ‘Reading Mandela: Genre pedagogy versus ancient rhetoric’; Cook takes on lexical change and the systems for analysing these changes in Mandarin Chinese in ‘Lexical coinages in Mandarin Chinese and the problem of classification’; in ‘Similar Place Harmony: A possible learning bias?’, Brown focuses on phonology and articulatory development in child language; and in their paper, ‘The interpretation of plural definites in discourse: The case of spatial adpositions’, Ursini and Akagi examine how we interpret particular parts of speech in English in relation to their syntactic environment. Each of these papers challenges systems and ideas surround-
ing their subject in research thus far, providing stimulating new concepts and proposing forward-looking frameworks for future study into each respective topic.

McCormack’s paper, ‘Reading Mandela: Genre pedagogy versus ancient rhetoric’, is an engaging and entertaining read, but it presents an important examination of the power of Genre Theory in language education in relation to its historical context. McCormack presents his discussion in a creative and humorous format: as an imagined scripted contemporary debate ‘contest’ between Jim Martin and ancient rhetorician Marcus Fabius Quintilianus, with the latter supporting the teaching of the theory of rhetoric over genre theory. Utilizing the illuminating text of Nelson Mandela’s (1995) ‘Long Walk to Freedom’ to display their varied points, he provides a measured comparison of schools of thought, with each side of the discussion representing a different – but not opposing – perspective on how best to teach language. McCormack argues that the linguistic theory behind the Sydney School Genre Pedagogy – that of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) – offers the most beneficial set of tools in terms of a metalanguage or set of terms for describing language. Through his analytical breakdown of the Mandela text, McCormack also shows that values from the theory of rhetoric are not entirely dissimilar to notions in SFL: for instance, he demonstrates a strong correlation between the rhetorical concepts of ‘inventio’ (creating the ideas), ‘dispositio’ (arranging the ideas) and ‘elocutio’ (styling the ideas linguistically) and the SFL metafunctions of ‘ideational’, ‘textual’ and ‘interpersonal’, but also notes that what distinguishes the metafunctions is that all three are considered to be in play at once. Further, he explains that it is in fact a rhetorical perspective in literacy teaching that Systemic Functional linguists are attempting to restore through the concept of genre. Despite the imaginary ‘points’ being re-assigned away from our distinguished contestants in the paper’s humorous conclusion, the points made in this paper are valuable for those in language education or with an interest in our ancient past in language learning.

In ‘Lexical coinages in Mandarin Chinese and the problem of classification’, existing classification systems for lexical change in Chinese are problematized, and Cook presents a new system for classification that she argues is broader in scope. This is demonstrated in her comparison to coinages in English utilizing the same model. By focusing on phonological and morphosyntactic neologisms, Cook’s classification system divides lexical coinages according to: (1) whether they are compositions, reductions (from longer words) or substitutions (new elements in place of original ones); (2) whether they are from autochthonous or nonautochthonous linguistic units; and (3) whether they are written using standard or non-standard (e.g. letters, numerals) script elements. Through the analysis of a range of Mandarin and English data employ-
ing this new system, this paper demonstrates that ‘Mandarin speakers employ a wide range of strategies to expand the lexicon of their language’, and shows that while a significant number of unique strategies for creating new lexical items are employed within each language, a larger overall number of similar strategies are used in both Mandarin and English. Further, Cook presents evidence that the writing system of Mandarin Chinese is ‘tending increasingly to be used with a primarily – sometimes even purely – phonetic function’, suggesting important implications: that it may be becoming unnecessary for Chinese speakers to follow traditional orthographic principles in their written expressions, leading to their potential disuse in the evolving Chinese writing system. Lexical change is shown to make significant waves not only in our use of a language but in our cultural systems.

Brown explores phonotactic restrictions and particularly the English language development over time of a child in a single case study in ‘Similar Place Harmony: A possible learning bias?’. The paper first zeroes in on the phenomenon of ‘Similar Place Avoidance’ (SPA), or the rule against consonants in a root word sharing the same place of articulation, that is claimed to be a language ‘universal’ – but, Brown notes, only according to most studies done on adult language. The speech of children is thus considered for evidence of similar effects in relation to place of articulation, and Brown discovers an interesting difference: while there are similar homorganicity effects, they are not driven by ‘avoidance’ of place as in adult language, but are driven by ‘agreement’ in place, following patterns of consonant agreement in child speech (called ‘Similar Place Harmony’ or SPH). This SPH phenomenon, and not SPA, is shown to be exhibited early as an innate mechanism of grammar that is reduced over time as the child’s articulatory abilities mature. Based on his findings, Brown offers a useful description of SPH in a two-stage process in child phonological development, explaining that SPH first guides the child into a limited set of acceptable phonological patterns as an early learning bias, and then dissolves over time so the child becomes free to select more lexical items at will in more complex structures. This insight into child language development offers an exciting window into phonology, challenging and widening our scope on common notions of universal characteristics of languages in this area.

Finally, Ursini and Akagi’s paper, ‘The interpretation of plural definites in discourse: The case of spatial adpositions’, questions how we interpret meanings depending on their influence by other meanings in the linguistic environment. While previous studies have discussed the interaction between predicates and plural definites in English (e.g. ‘the tank engines’ where ‘the’ is a plural definite), this paper presents a close study of the influence of spatial adpositions (e.g. ‘to’, ‘at’) on these definites, exhibiting the complex role
adpositions take in their interpretation. Adpositions are shown to be just as important as other predicates in how we read a sentence like ‘The boys are back in town’, in that they determine whether we take a ‘collective’ (i.e. ‘all the boys’ have come back) or ‘distributive’ (i.e. ‘each’ of the particular boys spoken about have come back) interpretation. The authors also find that there are differences in interpretation between types of spatial adpositions: while ‘to’ may license both collective and distributive readings, ‘at’ only licenses a collective reading, and further, ‘at’ denotes not an ‘external’ location but a ‘general’ location relation. By directing our attention to this particular combination of linguistic items in a sentence, Ursini and Akagi not only present new evidence and analysis in the interpretation of plural definites in discourse, they shed light on the very intricate workings of sentence structure in language.

In broad terms, these four papers combined provide a useful and intriguing lens on the multitude of areas of linguistic research, as well as its long-ranging background, that make up this enormous field. By bringing them together within this issue dedicated to the FLC, we hope that they stimulate similar efforts to expand our scope on language and learning both within and across fields.