

MICHAEL ALEXANDER KIRKWOOD HALLIDAY FBA FAHA

1925–2018



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Michael Halliday, who founded the Department of Linguistics at the University of Sydney in 1976, passed away at Uniting Wesley Heights Nursing Home in Manly aged 93. Michael, often known as ‘MAK’, was a world authority in socio-linguistics, and a scholar whose influence on the field was extensive and revolutionary. One of the Academy’s longest serving Fellows, he was elected in 1979 and served as a Council member from 1981 to 1983.

Michael was born in Leeds, Yorkshire on 13 April 1925, the son of Wilfred Halliday, an English teacher and a poet of the Yorkshire dialect, and Winifred Kirkwood, a French teacher. After the war, and following a voluntary post in the Chinese Intelligence Unit in Calcutta, Michael obtained a grant from the University of London to study Chinese at Peking University, where he also taught English. Upon his return to England, Michael attended the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) initially studying Chinese language and literature before changing his focus to linguistics and joining the Chinese department at the University of Cambridge, where he completed his PhD in 1955 under the supervision of leading English linguist John Firth.

It was at Cambridge that Michael began to develop and apply his insights into language with a particular focus on language development and how children attribute ‘meaning’ to elements in their environment. In contrast to arguments that the human capacity for language was innate rather than acquired, and drawing on Firth’s work, Michael came to see language as a social construction,

the mechanism by which society is reproduced and, occasionally, transformed. This eventually led to the publication of his seminal work *Learning How to Mean: Explorations in the Development of Language* (1975) the first detailed model for prospective “developmental sociolinguistics” and a landmark work in the study of language acquisition and development.

By now internationally acclaimed as the founder of the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Michael was appointed Foundation Professor of Linguistics at the University of Sydney in 1976. Here, he built up the Department, developing an undergraduate pass and honours program and the first Master of Applied Linguistics program in the Southern Hemisphere; and played a key role in attracting an energetic cohort of PhD students. He also continued his work on cohesion, lexicogrammar and prosodic phonology in particular. The fourth edition of his most cited publication, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (first published in 1985) was published in 2014. Unlike many of his peers he conceived of linguistics as an ideologically committed form of social action, and devoted his career to the development of an applicable linguistics that could be used to productively address secular concerns; his interest in education and the critical role played by language in teaching and learning is well-known. As Ron Carter comments on the collection of interviews with Halliday edited by J.R. Martin (2013):

The phrases ‘major figure’, ‘significance’ and ‘international influence’ are commonly overblown in the contemporary academic world; but these interviews with Michael Halliday require no exaggeration. They represent the richest of testimonies to his centrality, significance, impact and enduring influence as a linguist.

Michael retired in 1987, an occasion which was marked by the Department with the founding of the Halliday Medal awarded annually to the leading students in its applied linguistics program. As recently as 2014, Michael presented the award personally at the School of Literature, Art and Media’s prize-giving ceremony. Yet even in retirement, Michael remained an active and influential scholar, holding visiting appointments at Singapore, Birmingham, and Copenhagen, at the International Christian University in Tokyo and at both the University

of Hong Kong and the City University of Hong Kong. In 1987 he was awarded the status of Emeritus Professor at the University of Sydney and Macquarie University. He was awarded honorary doctorates from the University of Birmingham, York University, the University of Athens, Macquarie University, the University of British Columbia and Lingnan University. In addition to his election as a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, Professor Halliday was a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy and Foreign Member of the Academia Europaea. He had previously held chairs at the University of London, the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, and the University of Essex.

Those who had the good fortune to know Michael as a teacher, mentor, colleague, comrade and friend will remember him as a warm and humble yet inspirational figure who made time for those around him, regardless of their status. He suffered terribly from the loss of his beloved wife, colleague and companion Ruqaiya Hasan in 2015, but was comforted in his final years by frequent visits from family and colleagues from around the globe, and the loving care of his son Neil and his partner Shaye. His work continues to influence teaching and research in the Department and around the world – an enduring touchstone for everyone interested in language and the ways in which people make meaning to live.

JAMES MARTIN FAHA AND MONIKA BREDNAREK