

BOOK REVIEWSLEARNING HOW TO MEAN-EXPLORATIONS
IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGEM.A.K. Halliday
published by: Edward Arnold

This is a fascinating book for all those interested in the development of child language; in it, Halliday suggests that language learning is synonymous with learning how to mean.

Halliday starts off by making a very clear distinction between language acquisition and language learning. He claims that until recently the acquisition of language was looked upon as the acquisition of structures, that in environmentalist terms the acquisition of language was seen as gaining possession of some exterior force. If we talk about language learning, however, we are talking about a process in which the child is seen as an active participant.

Halliday says that we should keep in mind that language development involves much more than the acquisition of structures. As he says, the interpretation of structures does not account for meaning in what the child says. "Nor does it easily suggest how or why the child moves from his own system into the adult system: if language development is primarily the acquisition of structure, why does the child learn one set of structures in order to discard them in favour of another?" The fundamental question, then, is how does the child learn language? And how does he set about building up a "multiple coding system consisting of content, form and expression: a system of meaning relations, together with their realization as configurations of words and structures and the realization of these in turn as phonological patterns?"

These are some of the questions Halliday takes in this book and he suggests that an approach which takes into account the different functions to which language is put by children gives us the starting point for providing some of the answers. Putting the emphasis on how a child learns a system of meanings throws a functional light on investigations into language learning and development. This in turn means that we have to "look beyond the language itself... without presupposing a particular conceptual framework, because this is precisely what the child is using language to construct."

Another factor which must be taken into account is the social foundations of language which obviously presuppose a concept of "cultural transmission." Within this transmission the part played by language can be defined. All this would mean that a functional interpretation of meaning and of learning to mean can be studied from a sociolinguistic point of view where "the learning of the mother tongue is interpreted as a process of interaction between the child and other human beings."

The linguistic system can thus be analyzed as a whole "having a (functionally organized) meaning potential or sematic system, at one end, and a vocal potential or phonological system, at the other." Thus, structure ceases to be the centre of attraction, although it must obviously still be analyzed, but now this will be done in terms of being one form of the realization of meanings. Language is thus analyzed in terms of "what has the child learnt to do by means of language?"

This book, as is to be expected, provides a wealth of information, for all those prepared to delve into it. It would be of particular interest to those involved in language teaching of young children for all the explicit information it contains, and for those involved in language teaching for all the implications which can be derived from it.

Maggie Best
UAM-Xochimilco