

Obituary for Michael Halliday

By Monika Bednarek

16 April, 2018

Michael Halliday, who founded the Department of Linguistics at the University of Sydney in 1976, has passed away at Uniting Wesley Heights Nursing Home in Manly – aged 93. While Professor of Linguistics at Sydney, Michael built up the Department, developing an undergraduate pass and honours program and the first Master of Applied Linguistics program in the Southern Hemisphere; and he played a key role in attracting an energetic cohort of PhD students. He retired in 1987, becoming Emeritus Professor of the University of Sydney. He had previously held chairs at the University of London, the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, and the University of Essex.

Born in Yorkshire in 1925, Michael's undergraduate and postgraduate studies, which he pursued in Beijing, Guangzhou, Cambridge and London, focused on Chinese. He later concentrated on English (cohesion, lexicogrammar and prosodic phonology in particular), and is internationally acclaimed as the founder of the theory of language known as Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). 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 (Bloomsbury 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.”

Those who had the good fortune to know Michael as a teacher, mentor, colleague, comrade and/or 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.

The Department honoured Michael with the founding of the Halliday Medal upon his retirement, awarded annually to the leading students in its applied linguistics program. As recently as 2014, Halliday presented the award personally at the School of Literature, Art and Media's prize-giving ceremony. 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. The Department extends its sympathy to Michael's surviving family. His life has passed but the amazing treasure of his intellect will thrive in all those touched by his work for generations to come.