

Reflections on the early days of Functional Discourse Grammar

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I first met Kees in 2000 at one of the weekly Functional Grammar (FG) seminars he hosted at the University of Amsterdam (UvA) and we immediately developed a strong rapport, which was in large part due to Kees' welcoming, egalitarian, and generous approach to colleagues and students alike.¹ Although I did my PhD at the Vrije Universiteit under Professor Eep Talstra in the Old Testament Department, Kees soon joined as a co-supervisor, as I intended to use Functional Grammar (FG) in my analysis of Biblical Hebrew linguistics.

It was fortuitous that I arrived when I did, as it was an exciting time in the evolution of FG. In September 2000, shortly after I moved to The Netherlands from Australia, Kees presented a paper at the 9th International Functional Grammar Conference, entitled "The Architecture of a Functional Discourse Grammar", which was the first presentation of this new framework (Hengeveld 2000). Kees had been working on this framework for some time (cf. Hengeveld 1997), spurred in part by the burgeoning linguistics scholarship of the day, especially from the fields of linguistic typology and cognitive linguistics.

Kees' interest in developing FG did not occur in a vacuum. FG in fact had been in constant evolution from the first "proto-FG" – sketched in Simon Dik's 1968 doctoral thesis and labelled in my history of FG from 1968 to 2000 (Anstey 2004; cf. Mackenzie 2016, 2024 for more recent history) as FG₀ – through to Kees' 2000 FDG model, which I labelled FG₄, being the fifth significant adaptation of FG. Like all major linguistic theories, FG was engaged both in self-evaluation from within and in responding to external critique and review from without.

In this regard, the positive impact of the monumental 2-volume work of Christopher Butler (2003) can not be under-estimated, as it placed FG on equal footing as it were with two other major functionalist theories, Halliday's SFG and Van Valin's RRG, and demonstrated to a much larger readership the explanatory efficacy of FG.

Butler, who was an enthusiastic participant in many FG conferences, also knew about the emergence of FDG, but it was not developed enough yet to

¹ It would be remiss of me not to note that I found the entire FG community in Amsterdam to be similarly welcoming and it made my eighteen months in the Netherlands a wonderfully interesting and enriching experience. Lachlan Mackenzie in particular became a good friend, colleague, and co-editor (Anstey & Mackenzie 2005).

receive an extensive review in his work. He did say however: “Very recently, several quite radical proposals have been made within FG, making sweeping changes to the overall model.”

Butler’s reference to “proposals”, plural, is also noteworthy, for Kees’ FDG was one of many variantions to FG that were being proposed in those early years of the twenty-first century. For instance, Butler reviews Kees’ FDG alongside Mackenzie’s Incremental FG, and other proposed variations to FG.

Butler would not have known then however that the authors of these two “radical proposals” would go on to co-author the ground-breaking monograph *Functional Discourse Grammar: A typologically-based theory of language structure* (Hengeveld & Mackenzie 2008) and in so doing, establish FDG as a new linguistic theory in its own right and making FDG accessible to a much wider readership. For although FDG emerges from FG, it is fundamentally different from FG in almost every way and accordingly, the International FG Conference became the International FDG Conference from 2010 onwards.

Allow me here to digress. As I mentioned, Butler discussed a number of variations, including a detailed evaluation of the “radical revisions” (2003: 94) I proposed to FG in Anstey (2002). Interestingly, that publication refers to a paper: “Anstey, Matthew P. & Kees Hengeveld, forthcoming, ‘A synopsis of Functional Discourse Grammar’”. In 2001, Kees and I spent several months drafting this paper together, which was to be on another version of FDG, but it never came to fruition. Nevertheless, I have very fond memories of our many meetings together, as we strove to design an improved FDG model. We debated and discussed the problems we saw in FG and how to solve them. But above all, I was most encouraged (and surprised at first) that Kees engaged with me as a fellow academic, rather than as a supervisor-to-student, and I have sought to emulate Kees in this regard in my own supervision since. (I also remember fondly Kees’ endless attempts to draw diagrams of various FDG models!)

Through this period, I also came to realise just how much Kees’ knowledge of linguistic typology shaped his thinking, and although Simon Dik had established “typological adequacy” as a criterion for evaluating linguistic theories, Dik himself did not have the breadth of knowledge in this regard that Kees does. To this end, the subtitle of Hengeveld and Mackenzie’s 2008 monograph is telling: “...A typologically-based theory of language structure”. For FDG, Dik’s criterion of typoligical adequacy becomes paramount, and as proof one only has to compare the “Index of languages” in Dik (1997), a smallish list dominated by English, Dutch and Latin, to the lengthy and typologically diverse list in Hengeveld & Mackenzie (2008).

Kees’ collaborative and generous nature I believe was also instrumental in FDG gaining a keen following in Brazil (and in consolidating interest in FDG in Spain, where Dik’s FG had a following from the early days), such that the 2006

International FG Conference was held in São José do Rio Preto, Brazil. That turned out to be my last major engagement with FG/FDG, and although I left academia in 2022 to become an Anglican parish priest in South Australia, I still spend one day a week working in the area of Biblical Hebrew linguistics, preparing a new liturgical translation of the Psalms. For this project, I continue to draw upon the rich and insightful understanding of language and linguistics that I gained from Kees and others in the FDG community, for which I remain forever grateful.

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