

# Social Semiotic Contributions to the Systemic Semiotic Workpractice Framework

Rodney J. Clarke  
University of Staffordshire, UK  
[r.j.clarke@staffs.ac.uk](mailto:r.j.clarke@staffs.ac.uk)

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## ABSTRACT

The workpractices associated with the use of an information system can be described using semiotic theories in terms of patterns of human communication. A model of workpractices has been created called the Systemic Semiotic Workpractice Framework that employs two compatible but distinct semiotic theories in order to explain the complexity of information systems use in organizational contexts. One of these theories called Social Semiotics can be used to describe atypical workpractice realizations, where a user renegotiates one or more canonical sequences of activities typically associated with a specific system feature. In doing so the user may alter the staging of the workpractice, redefine the goal of the workpractice, or renegotiate the usual role they adopt within the workpractice. Central concepts in Social Semiotics are explained and applied to an actual atypical renegotiated workpractice associated with the loan of materials to students in a small operational level information system called ALABS.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the contribution provided by Social Semiotic concepts in the development of a Systemic Semiotic framework suitable for theorizing workpractices in organizational contexts. In contrast to traditional approaches to workpractice analysis which utilize processes, business processes, or process modeling, Systemic Semiotics defines a workpractice as consisting of one or more *text types* and zero or more *action types*. We exclude action types from this discussion concentrating instead on text types in workpractices. The term Systemic Semiotics, coined by Fawcett (1986) in Ventola

(1987), designates a composite of two related sets of theories. The first theory is called Social Semiotics (Lemke 1988; Hodge and Kress 1988; Kress 1985; Thibault 1991). A Social Semiotic description of texts associated with workpractices is provided in §2. The second theory is a semiotic model of language called Systemic Functional Linguistics or SFL (Halliday 1985; Hasan in Halliday and Hasan 1985; Martin 1992). An SFL description of the texts associated with workpractices has been described elsewhere (Clarke 1996, 2000). Although these two theories are historically related to each other, they draw upon different theoretical traditions. As a consequence, a number of core concepts are defined differently. However, the framework described here can be used to analyze workpractices in organizations, including those associated with systems use, by identifying theoretical affinities between sets of concepts in Social Semiotics and SFL. These theoretical affinities are used as the basis for describing workpractice texts associated with information systems use in organizations. In §5, the framework is applied to the use of an actual systems feature in order to demonstrate how Social Semiotics can augment SFL descriptions of workpractices under unusual or atypical situations.

## 2 SOCIAL SEMIOTIC ELEMENTS

Social Semiotic concepts used in the Systemic Semiotic Workpractice Framework are based primarily on the work of Bakhtin. Interestingly, Bakhtin's development of *translinguistics* was a result of his studies of the novel, which at the time was a relatively recent literary genre. He focused on developing a dynamic theory of language and meaning emphasising the interrelationship between three categories: (i) the active and productive capacity of language; (ii) the evaluative nature of meaning; and (iii) social subjectivity. According to Todorov's (1984) reading of Bakhtin's work, the first category involves *discourse*, which is theorized in terms of the production of actualized meaning in a communicative event (*text*), as a responsive interaction between social beings. The second category involves the fact that an apparently initial utterance is never actually the first utterance in any sense. In effect, every word or utterance looks back to the word or utterance it is answering, while simultaneously looking forward to the anticipated word or utterance it will partly determine in advance. This is the *dialogic* property of language attributed to workpractices, see below. The third category involves the social basis of meanings since Bakhtin viewed language and thought as intertwined. For Bakhtin, language cannot exist without thought, nor can thought exist without language, consequently both are social not individual. The development of social constitution of the individual (see Dore 1995: 151-176), referred to as *social subjectivity*, is having a profound impact

on a range of disciplines, including psychoanalysis (Henriques et al 1984). Re-theorizing communication using translinguistics means that the analytical emphasis is placed on understanding communicative processes operating as organisational practices in specific organisational contexts. Elements of the theory are described in turn, discourse in §2.1, texts and genre in §2.2, subject positions and reading position in §2.3, and social subjectivity in §2.4.

## 2.1 DISCOURSE

The concept of *discourse* (Bahktin in Holquist 1981: 426 and 428; Althusser 1971; Foucault 1972) was introduced as a way of thinking about how ideology functions in culture, institutions, and ourselves, although discourse has proved to be a much more flexible concept than ideology. A useful definition of discourse is provided by Kress (1985: 6-7):

Discourses are systematically organised sets of statements that give expression to the meanings and values of an institution. Beyond that they define, describe and delimit what it is possible to say and not possible to say (and by extension-what it is possible to do or not to do) with respect to the area of concern of that institution, whether marginally or centrally. A discourse provides a set of possible statements about a given area, and organises and gives structure to the manner in which a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about. In that it provides descriptions, rules, permissions and prohibitions of social and individual actions.

In organizational settings, discourses dictate how members of organizations, objects or activities, are defined, what values are ascribed to them, and the particular sets of options that might apply to them in a specific situation. In part, discourse theory suggests that much of our experience of organisation has already been preordained. In effect, members of organisations will already be locked into specific courses of action, which are already in part predetermined if they comply with the available discourses. As a consequence, members of organisations are actively involved in a kind of ‘collective’ and unacknowledged blindness to entire courses of action. This collective blindness is inscribed in the discourses that circulate within organisations, predisposing *but in no way determining*, what constitutes appropriate organisational behaviour. It is important to note here, that discourses never directly operate on members of organisations or others. Discourses inform texts, see §2.1, which in turn are ‘read’ by members of organisations or others in specific organisational contexts, that is discourses must have participants in order to function.

Discourses are inescapable, operating in organisations, institutions, and society. Academic institutions and disciplines are no exception. In a large number of modern 'scientific' disciplines, including modern Management Studies and its related disciplines of Information Systems and Accounting, the psychological individual is viewed as the origin of meaning in social and cultural practices (Clarke 1992). An example of this in Information Systems discipline is the process model of communication, especially its interpretation by Weaver (Shannon and Weaver 1949), as having attained the status of 'commonsense' (Belsey 1980). This is possible because a particular type of discourse, referred to as *liberal-humanist discourse*, operates throughout western culture, including the academy. The effect of this type of discourse is to *naturalise*, that is to allow to operate unchallenged, the view that individuals are single, unified, originators of meanings. In turn, liberal-humanist discourse has influenced academics and practitioners to uncritically reproduce these discourses as 'commonsense' when creating theories about information systems. Theorizing speakers as the originators of meanings favours those who can speak in specific circumstances, and issues of power and control in organisations are often discussed from just such an individualist standpoint. Power in organisations is treated as if it were a commodity: the possession of individuals. This individualism obscures the way organisations operate as product and process. Even the discipline of Organisational Behaviour, becomes reduced to a study of individuals compared to standards of behaviour against which dysfunctional characteristics can be treated and new functional behaviours reinforced. These standards are accepted as an objective reality, permitting the production and social use of these discourses to be left untheorised. As these traditional models pass into the literature and are adopted and enacted by practitioners, the 'commonsense' nature of the individual producers and consumers of information is reproduced.

## 2.2 TEXTS AND GENRE

Social Semioticians view language as a social process. The argument for this is as follows recognising that, (i) language derives meaning from the social activities in which it is embedded, that (ii) knowledge is communicated in social contexts, that (iii) activities have social agents and goals, and that (iv) language, knowledge and activities utilise relationships defined and inextricably bound to value systems in the specific cultures of social institutions. The operational semiotic 'unit' of language that may be used to examine the complexity of a specific organisation, is the *text*. If language derives its meaning from social activities, text is language, which is functional to some extent within the social institution. Halliday (1978: 10) clarifies the distinction between language and text:

... [text] looks as though it is made of words and sentences, it is really made of meanings. Of course, the meanings have to be expressed, or coded, in words and [linguistic] structures... in order to be communicated; but as a thing in itself, a text is essentially a semantic unit. It is not something that can be defined as being just another kind of sentence, only bigger.

Texts operate in specific social contexts within organisations. Organisations are constantly being reproduced and reconstituted in texts; without this process organisations would cease to exist. A text may be defined as “a structure of messages or message traces which has a socially ascribed unity” whilst discourse “refers to the social process in which texts are embedded... text is the material object produced in discourse” (Hodge and Kress 1988: 6). Texts can be critically examined to reveal discourses in operation and the contestation of meanings in institutions, see Halliday (1978); Belsey (1980); Kress (1985, 1988); and Hodge and Kress (1988).

Any utterance in a social setting is referred to as a text and always operates in specific social settings within organisations. The term ‘text’ is used to indicate that organisational activity involves language or is reproduced in language. The plural form of the term is generally used to simultaneously signify two important aspects of the theory. First, organisational practices generally produce more than one text. If studying a specific workpractice a tape recording of what was said between the interactants would form one text, which might be then used to produce a transcript of what transpired during the enactment of the workpractice. Collecting associated written texts would also assist in understanding what took place (forms and documentation). All of these kinds of texts can be thought of as ‘products’. Second, meaning-making occasions are ‘processes’. Its constituent messages, and consequently the text itself, can *never have a single, fixed meaning*. This point requires further consideration. Belsey (1980: 26) states that whilst language provides the possibility of meaning, any text exhibits multiple meanings because meanings never remain static. However, the most significant factor determining the plurality of meaning is that a text’s possible set of meanings will vary according to the way discourses are recognised by readers. So it is possible to have a single position from which a text is intelligible, because, as Belsey (1980:19-20) puts it ‘texts are rooted in specific discourses’. Meanings are subjective only to the extent that the contradictions and the superimposition of discourses construct different sets of meaning in specific situations for each member of an organisation. These points are taken up more fully below.

Apart from being simultaneously a product and process, a text will also utilise genres and other social conventions to assist in the construction of meaning. Of particular interest here is the category of *genre*, the specific staging of a text. Examples of genres commonly found in organisations include memo, calendar, invoices, interviews, meetings, and so on. Knowing the purpose that a text serves in a particular social setting enables us to anticipate to a surprising degree of accuracy both the overall text structure and also its internal organisation of messages. As a part of our lived experience within institutions (Martin 1992), we learn to ascribe certain kinds of meaning to certain kinds of texts. Specific genres assist in constructing or reinforcing some of the meaning of the text, how it is to be ‘read’, identifying the agent(s) of the text, and specifying the audience. Members in organisations understand texts in social contexts because they have prior experience of them, since meanings are conventional, requiring familiarity not intuition (Belsey 1980: 26).

### 2.3 SUBJECT POSITIONS AND THE READING POSITION

Social subjects are *positioned* (with respect to themselves and others) in relation to particular discourses and practices. Because of social positioning, a member of an organisation will tend to assume specific roles in interactions and texts. Kress (1996 in Copley ed/ 1996: 311) refers to this as a “...habitual, though socially determined, conjunction of a certain subject position and certain textual and reading practices. That conjunction determines the use of certain forms of language”. Accordingly, discourses and texts always address subjects. They will usually appear coherent since parts of the text work together to construct its meaning. Texts will appear meaningful to a reader who adopts the particular configuration of discourses that is negotiated in and by the text. Texts address and position social subjects by constructing a *reading position* which instructs the social subject “about who, what, and how to be in a given social situation, occasion, interaction...” (Kress 1985: 39). A reading position is the dominant position from which a specific text appears meaningful, and usually coherent. In adopting the reading position of the text, the subject gives tacit agreement to the negotiation of discourses constructed in the text, and is referred to as a *compliant subject*. Reading positions and subject positions are interrelated by the operation of discourses (Kress 1985, 37). Occupying the reading position, the subject is defined and described by, and may identify with, the discourses of the text. The idea of social subjects is based on Althusser’s (1971) concept of the *interpellated subject* where subjects recognise themselves being called or interpellated in the text. Compliant subjects are actually positioned by the text so that they do not see any contradictions it may contain. Compliant subjects in or-

ganisations may be socially rewarded depending on the circumstances. However, subjects may resist the obvious reading position in the text. If the subject views the semiotic practices as operating from a different position then they are referred to as a *resisting subject*.

The term *negotiation* refers to the ways in which specific texts construct meanings. Negotiation commonly involves the textual construction of (some of) the major discourses operating in the organisation (and society). Various discourses in a text need not necessarily be in harmony with each other- they may be in conflict since texts are both the material realisation of sign systems, and also the site where this change constantly takes place (Hodge and Kress 1988: 6). All participants negotiate texts according to the specific discourses, which define and delimit permissible subject positions. In other words, discourses position social subjects/participants to comply with or to resist particular readings, that is, to see only some as 'natural'. This process of negotiating specific subject positions may generate conflict and contradiction, a kind of social dissonance.

## 2.4 SOCIAL SUBJECTIVITY

Having defined the concept of discourse, and seen that members of organisations negotiate specific sets of meanings (discourses) in specific social occasions (texts), we turn our attention to the final major concept used in a social semiotic theory of workpractices, that of *social subjects*. Organisations are conventionally viewed as consisting of collections of individuals. By recognising that individualism is a commonsense category (Belsey 1980), our responsibility becomes one of questioning the prevailing assumptions implied by it. We will adopt the term social subject to replace 'participants'.

Because subjects are socially and discursively formed, each will bring to organisations different sets of institutional and linguistic experiences (Kress 1988). It is possible for those who share similar institutional experiences (for example, workplaces, schools, and churches) and similar linguistic experiences (nationality, class) to appear to comply with similar discourses. However, as no two subjects will share identical discourses, it is unlikely that they will consistently share the same meanings. Kress (1988: 127) notes:

... the individual participant in communication is significant... as both socially formed and socially agentic. Individuals are formed by and in their institutional and linguistic experiences and histories; in most or all encounters the meanings we encounter, produce, contest, and reshape are socially, culturally and institutionally given. Yet they are encountered, contested and reshaped, imposed perhaps by individuals as social agents in communication.

Following Henriques et al (1984), theories of the subject emphasise how the social domain constitutes 'subjectivity'. *Subjectivity* refers simultaneously to the condition of 'individuality' and self-awareness, which is continually formed and reformed under changing social, economic, and historical circumstances. Furthermore, social subjects are considered dynamic and multiple- not as single, isolated individuals. For an illustration of this type of theorization, see Urwin (in Henriques et al 1984: 264-322), who applies certain ideas of Foucault with revised theories of Lacan. It is often the case that readers encountering this concept for the first time recoil in horror at the thought that they are socially constituted, not unified, individual free agents. This effect is discursively produced! It is the operation of liberal-humanist discourse that constructs the subject of psychology known as the 'individual'. Dore (1995: 151-176) provides an excellent description of social subjectivity and describes why we can never be outside of 'discourse'. Rather than being determined by discourses, we are socially agentive because of them. This apparent contradiction is resolved by recalling that: (i) discourses never directly operate on social subjects but in turn are 'read' by them in specific organisational contexts, and that (ii) discourses must have social subjects in order to exist. Bound up with the concepts of discourse, text and social subjectivity is the concept of positioning, see §2.3.

By using social semiotic concepts, a model has been produced based on Clarke (1991: 57) which addresses some of the issues identified in classical process models of communication readily used in the Information Systems literature, see Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Social Semiotic Relationships between Discourse, Text and Social Subject (based on Clarke 1991: 57)

In the following sections, these concepts will be applied to describing the atypical behaviour of an actual systems features, based on Clarke (1997c).



### 3 INTEGRATION AND SEPARATION IN SYSTEMS USE

Having introduced the necessary concepts, these are then applied to the use of an information system in support of a workpractice. Goldkuhl (1993) questions a prevailing assumption within the Information Systems discipline that designers should work to create a tight integration between workpractices or activities in organisations, and the information system features designed to support them. While current design practices assume Integration, he notes that there have been periods throughout the history of IS design when a Separation between workpractices and systems features has been assumed—a conclusion easily substantiated in the literature. Goldkuhl (1993) proposed that IS designers simultaneously consider each system feature from two positions. *Integration* assuming system features are tightly coupled to a workpractice, and *Separation-* assuming system features are loosely coupled to a workpractice. In order for system designs to be evaluated simultaneously from these two standpoints, either distinct integration-oriented and separation-oriented design practices must be used, or alternative practices must be applied or developed which can facilitate this kind of design evaluation. Modelling the design of any given system feature twice using integration-oriented and separation-oriented design practices is generally impractical in terms of time and effort. However, Goldkuhl (1993) employs methods, originally developed in the ISAC systems development methodology, to demonstrate how several system features may be considered from both integrationist and separationist standpoints.

Goldkuhl's (1993) work has important implications for the development of organisational semiotics, since the *use* of an information system could also be considered from integrationist and separationist standpoints. A movement from the domain of system design to that of systems use requires two steps. First, substitute the *planned functionality* afforded by *systems design* with the *actual functionality* afforded by *systems implementation* of specific information systems features. Second, substitute the *proposed organisational activity* to be supported or created using the information system, with *enacted workpractices in organisational contexts*

The only exception to a general agreement with Goldkuhl's (1993) thesis, is that there is, or should be, a *dialectical relationship* between Integration and Separation in design and, by extension, systems use. Williams (1988: 106-108) defines 'dialectic' in terms of the "continual unification of opposites, in the *complex relation* of parts to wholes [emphasis own]". As there appears to be no complex relation evident between Integration and

Separation, there is cause to question the existence of a dialectical relationship between these concepts in systems design and by extension in system use. In the following section, integration and separation will be reconsidered as a dichotomy to be deconstructed using Derrida's reading tactics (Norris 1982).

#### 4 SYSTEMS USE AS DIALOGIC

In the previous section, Goldkuhl's (1993) thesis was applied to systems use although doubts are raised about the dialectical relationship presumed between these approaches. Here, this dialectic is *deconstructed* using Derrida's reading tactics (Norris 1982) to reveal that the relationship between workpractices and systems features is actually a dialogic one. Integration and Separation appear to be end-points along a simple cline or grade- the degree of *binding* between a workpractice and a system feature. Consequently, in systems design and use, a 'large' degree of Integration presupposes a 'small' degree of Separation, and vice versa. In demonstrating that Integration and Separation are in an inversely proportional relationship rather than a dialectical relationship, the relationship between these entities appears to be a *dichotomy*. Dichotomies in social theory often function to suppress one of their terms, that is, dichotomies are not equally balanced. Derrida's *deconstruction* provides a set of *reading tactics* for interrogating dichotomies (Norris 1982).

The first deconstructive tactic used to interrogate the Integration/Separation dichotomy, is *reversal*, that is, we reverse the relative positions of the two terms in privileging Separation. Reversal enables us to demonstrate that Integration and Separation are not logically necessary or unalterable in their relationship to each other. As noted earlier, Goldkuhl (1993) uses the literature to disrupt the dominance of Integration, while at the same time valuing the repressed term Separation. However, such an operation still preserves the dichotomous relationship between the two terms. Derrida's second deconstructive tactic is referred to as *displacement*. The repressed term Separation must be displaced, not out of the dichotomy altogether but by positioning it within the core of the dominant term as its *logical condition*. This makes explicit the unacknowledged debt that the dominant term of Integration owes to the secondary term of Separation. By demonstrating that the Integration/Separation dichotomy may not be logically necessary, the tactic of displacement foregrounds the fact that the dichotomy could be replaced by entirely different concepts.

The third reading tactic for interrogating dichotomies is the creation of a relevant *hinge term* which is ‘outside’ the binary opposition between integration and separation but which participates in both terms. A hinge term may be derived from texts being examined or it might be a neologism devised to interrogate a specific dichotomy. The function of the hinge term is to provide a *logical precondition* from which the dichotomy is constructed. The hinge term is in effect that which is leftover, unrepresented and uncontained by the dichotomy. Parenthetically, we have used the term ‘reading tactics’ as a way of avoiding using the term method since Derrida's ‘reading tactics’ do not suggest, for example, any candidates for the hinge term. The hinge term employed here to interrogate the dichotomy is *negotiation*. Negotiation is the logical precondition from which the Integration/Separation dichotomy is constructed in information systems theory. In using this term we foreground the fact that Integration or Separation between workpractices and information systems features is never historically fixed, but rather is always at risk. As a hinge term, negotiation is compatible with Goldkuhl’s (1993) aim of describing a ‘dynamic view’ of the relationship between information system features and organisational activities. The choice of the term negotiation is strategic because it enables the relationship between workpractices and information systems to be theorised as *dialogic* according to Mikhail Bakhtin’s sense of the term (Todorov 1984), and as applied in Clarke (1992).

In applying Bakhtin’s concepts to information systems in organisations, workpractices may be defined as texts that conform to Bakhtin’s notion of the *dialogic*. The characteristic of workpractices as ‘negotiated’, proposed above, accords with Bakhtin’s theories of *text* (Todorov 1984). This is demonstrated in the ways that relevant social subjects actively renegotiate workpractices, so that workpractices may exhibit more than one preferred realisation. However, the imposition of information systems into workpractices often acts to create an opposite tendency toward what Bakhtin refers to as the *monological*, or “the reduction of potentially multiple 'voices' (or characters) into a single authoritative voice ...[reducing the production of actualised meaning which] is sometimes inescapable.” (Fowler 1987, 58-60).

## 5 APPLICATION TO WORKPRACTICES

Translinguistics is useful as a means for theorising how systems position users and others in organisations, and for providing a dynamic view of systems use. However, it does not provide methods for the analysis of actual work texts (for example transcripts) in specific situational and cultural contexts. Bakhtin was critical of the traditional linguistics of his

day, developing substantial critiques of formalism and structuralism in linguistics. Specifically, he viewed traditional linguistic theories as monologic in that they attempting to account for discourse as if it consisted of single meanings. Therefore, translinguistics resists the kind of operationalisation necessary in a design discipline such as information systems.

In order to study texts associated with workpractices, we need methods that can be applied to the task. As a consequence SFL is used to analyse transcripts associated with workpractices. The development of Social Semiotics, can be seen as a theoretical move to situate Systemic Functional Linguistics within a broader critical framework using the work of Bakhtin as a foundation (in Todorov 1984), Althusser (1971), and Foucault (1972). Given the historical relationship between them (Hodge and Kress 1988; Kress 1985, 1988) and the pragmatic importance of combining them (Fawcett 1986), the use of Social Semiotics together with Systemic Functional Linguistics is a conservative pairing of theories compared to many multiple theory research strategies routinely employed in field research (Burgess 1982: 163-167). Denzin (1970) cautions against the ‘theoretical incongruence’ that results by attempting to use incompatible theories in conjunction with one another and advocates the use of *theoretical triangulation*. This is a commonly used approach in multiple theory research strategies in which researchers investigate how different theoretical approaches are linked to one another within individual studies, and evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of combining theories in the course of a particular study. In order to permit Social Semiotics and Systemic Functional Linguistics to be used in conjunction with each other, various *theoretical affinities* or links between compatible theoretical entities, have been developed (Clarke 2000).

It is necessary to consider an example that reveals the advantages of combining these theories in organisational semiotic studies of workpractices in workplaces. SFL genre theory was used to extract from interviews the qualitative, *typical* arrangement of stages (shown as dashed circles) in the enactment of a Student Loan work practice associated with the ALABS system (Clarke 2000), forming the *genre digraph* in Figure 2a. Related realisations of this workpractice are shown using alternative paths above or below the typical so-called *base line sequence* that starts with the triangle on the left hand side of Figure 2a and finishes on the right hand side with the upside down triangle. From a social semiotic perspective, negotiating the typical arrangement of stages in a workpractice corresponds to an adoption of the dominant *reading position* of the system feature. The reading position is adopted by users who comply with the dominant discourses informing the workpractice, that is, the discourses which produce the ‘coherence’ of the workprac-

tice. From this position, the system feature will appear to be the most obvious, natural, and uncontested negotiation of the workpractice. In adopting the dominant reading position, users comply with those discourses that produce centripetal forces tending to a monological or integrationist instance of systems use.

Current SFL genre theory emphasises a synoptic view of genre, and as a consequence it is not well suited to explaining divergences from the typical arrangement of stages in workpractice genres. One such departure from the typical staging of the workpractice is shown in Figure 2. Usually students are required to provide a Student Identification card, which is subsequently retained at the point of borrowing. One student, who was known to the staff members responsible for the facility, had forgotten to bring their identification card. The card was necessary in order for the loan to be logged with the ALABS computer system. Normally students without cards are not loaned items. But in the case of a known student, the staff member in charge of the system might request some other form of identification. If available this would be retained and the loan would have to be recorded manually (offline). Unfortunately, this particular student did not have any other form of identification at all. The student provided their expensive watch as security against the loss or theft of the item. They renegotiated the Identification Sought stage into an entirely new element- the Value of the retained Item. Such a manoeuvre exceeds the descriptive capacities of SFL.

In contrast, translinguistics provides a dynamic view of text and genre that can be of use in theorising these *atypical* realisations of workpractice genres, as an adoption by users of a non-dominant, resisting *subject position*. At times users may: (i) re-negotiate one type of workpractice into a different form of workpractice, which still has the same overall purpose although realised by different means, or (ii) re-negotiate a workpractice into a completely different form. These new forms may not be organisationally sanctioned. As a consequence, resistant readings of a workpractice and its associated system features run the risk of failure in organisational contexts, in so far as the pragmatic goals of the workpractice may not be achieved. In some contexts, resistant readings may be viewed as an infringement of workplace regulations, best practice agreements or relevant acts of parliament. However, in some circumstances the adoption of a non-dominant (resisting) *subject position* may lead to a successful renegotiation of the workpractice. By adopting a non-dominant subject position, users mobilise discourses, which produce centrifugal forces tending to a dialogic or separationist instance of systems use. Here, an associated information system may be used in an unorthodox way, or effectively bypassed using a manual work-around.

**Code Qualitative Elements Function**

Gq Greeting - phatic initiation

SRq Service Request - request for loan services

ISq Identification Sought - student-ID or equivalent retained

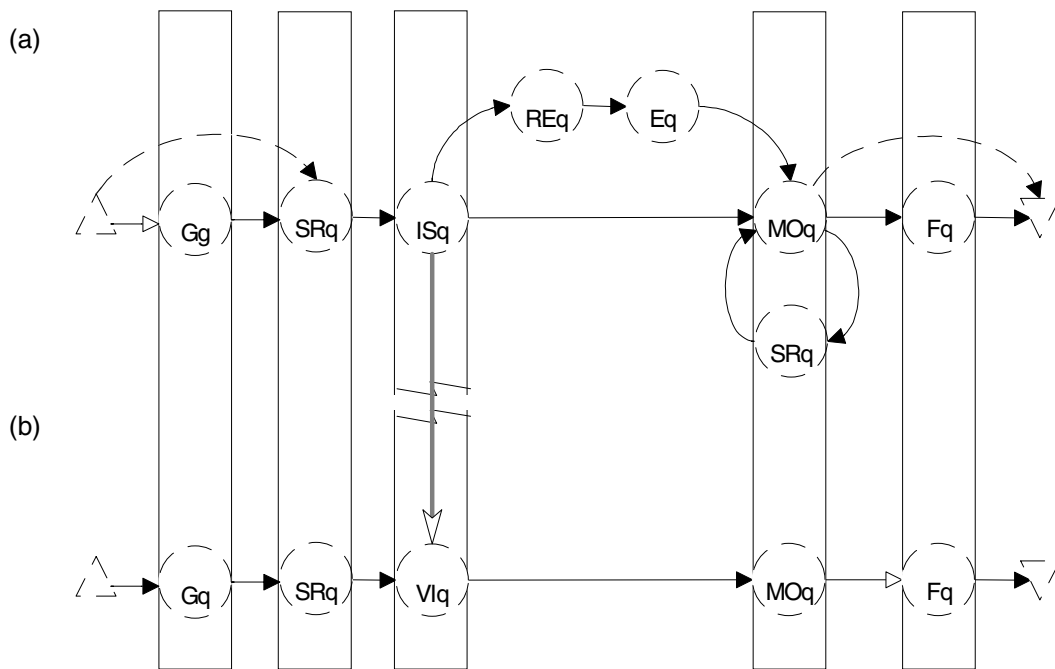
REq Regulations - student regulations

Eq Enrolment - enrolment of student request or

MOq Materials Out - items provided

VIq Value of Retained Item

Fq Finish - phatic conclusion



**Figure 2:** ALABS Student Qualitative Digraph Version 1 (a) and a qualitative sequence showing a negotiated separation between the workpractice and the ALABS Student Loan system feature (b).

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

In order to theorize the relationship between workpractices and systems features in use, we take as a point of departure a view of systems design developed by Goldkuhl (1993). He proposed viewing systems design practices simultaneously from two dialectically opposite thought models he referred to as Integrationist and Separationist. The argument he provides can also be applied to the enactment of workpractices associated with information systems. By using the 'reading tactics' formulated by Derrida (Norris 1982), the *dialectical* relationship between Integrationist and Separationist views proposed by Goldkuhl (1993) is retheorised in Social Semiotic terms as 'negotiation' or a dialogic relationship (Vološinov in Innis ed/ 1992). Despite developing a social semiotic theory of workpractices, Bakhtin's translinguistics purposefully resists efforts at operationalisation. As a consequence, relevant concepts from Systemic Functional Linguistics (Martin 1992) - a semiotic model of language - were selected in order to be able to undertake applied studies in information system use. Although no simple mapping exists between concepts in Bakhtin's Translinguistics and SFL, theoretical affinities have been tentatively established between a number of fundamental concepts in §2.4.1, with the latter enabling workpractice texts to be analysed in detail (Clarke 2000). However, the contribution that Social Semiotics makes to the Systemic Semiotic Workpractice Model is that it provides a dynamic and discursive view of workpractices in organisational and institutional contexts.

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