Rethinking SOCIAL DISTANCE as a system: foundations and descriptions

Repensando a DISTÂNCIA SOCIAL como sistema: fundamentos e descrições

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ABSTRACT: This article develops a framework within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to model how language choices vary according to interpersonal familiarity, or SOCIAL DISTANCE. Its objectives are to propose a revised description for social distance and to outline a socio-semiotic model of relationship development. Methodologically, the study is based on five steps: (1) a critical review of previous SFL descriptions of SOCIAL DISTANCE; (2) an external review integrating insights from anthropology and social psychology; (3) a "metatranslation" of these insights into SFL's descriptive formalisms; (4) the proposal of a new systemic description evaluated against explicit adequacy criteria; and (5) analytical testing through qualitative analysis of authentic texts. The study first evaluates three SFL accounts — by Poynton (1989 [1985]), Martin (1992), and Hasan (2020) — identifying key limitations, such as metafunctional inconsistency and a reliance on pre-interactional factors that compromise analytical testability from textual evidence alone. To address these issues, a new framework is proposed. Drawing on Hall's (1966) proxemics, it presents a scalar system with four options: [intimate/personal/consultative/public]. This is supported by psychological principles of interpersonal needs and interdependence. The article details how these contextual options are realized through linguistic patterns, adapting Poynton's and Martin's principles of Proliferation (the scope of available meanings) and Contraction (the degree of explicitness). Additionally, it addresses Accommodation (semiotic convergence/divergence), experientialization (the metaphorical construal of relationships as experiences), the role of (im)politeness, and contextual syndrome associations as key realizational mechanisms. The utility of the proposed framework is illustrated through an analysis of a small Brazilian Portuguese corpus. The article's second major contribution is a socio-semiotic model of relationship development, viewing it as a form of *interpersonal semogenesis*. It outlines five idealized stages — acquaintance, buildup, consolidation, deterioration, and ending — which are driven by three overarching socio-semiotic processes: *getting closer*, *becoming one*, and *behaving as a team*. This perspective integrates tenor with field to account for how relationships evolve through recurring socio-semiotic patterns.

KEYWORDS: Systemic Functional Linguistics. Social distance. Tenor. Relationship development.

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RESUMO: Ancorado na Linguística Sistêmico-Funcional (LSF), este artigo desenvolve um modelo de como escolhas linguísticas são ajustadas segundo a familiaridade entre os interactantes, fenômeno conhecido como DISTÂNCIA SOCIAL. Há dois objetivos principais: primeiro, propor uma descrição revisada da DISTÂNCIA SOCIAL que aprimore sua coerência teórica e aplicabilidade analítica; segundo, esboçar uma perspectiva sociossemiótica sobre processos de desenvolvimento relacional. O estudo começa com uma avaliação de três propostas da LSF para a DISTÂNCIA SOCIAL — as de Poynton (1989 [1985]), Martin (1992) e Hasan (2020). Embora reconheça suas contribuições, identificam-se limitações importantes com base em critérios de adequação, incluindo problemas de consistência metafuncional — variáveis do campo invadem o terreno das relações — e uma dependência de fatores pré-interacionais como frequência e variedade de contatos prévios, comprometendo a testabilidade analítica das descrições a partir apenas de evidências textuais. Para enfrentar essas limitações, desenvolve-se um novo modelo, fundamentado em uma síntese interdisciplinar de contribuições da antropologia e da psicologia social. A partir da proxêmica de Hall (1966), o artigo propõe um sistema escalar de DISTÂNCIA SOCIAL com quatro opções principais: [íntima/pessoal/consultiva/pública]. Essa descrição é sustentada por princípios psicológicos sobre necessidades interpessoais e interdependência. O artigo detalha como essas opções se realizam por meio de padrões linguísticos, adaptando os princípios de Poynton e Martin de Proliferação (escopo de significados disponíveis) e Contração (grau de explicitação). Além disso, aborda a acomodação (convergência/divergência semiótica), a experiencialização (construção de relações como experiências), o papel da (im)polidez e associações com síndromes contextuais como mecanismos-chave de realização. A utilidade da descrição é ilustrada com uma análise de um texto autêntico em português brasileiro. A segunda contribuição do artigo é um modelo sociossemiótico de desenvolvimento relacional, concebido como uma forma de *semogênese interpessoal*. O modelo descreve cinco estágios idealizados — *aproximação*, *base*, *consolidação*, *deterioração* e *encerramento* — impulsionados por três processos sociossemióticos centrais: *aproximar-se*, *tornar-se um só* e *agir como uma equipe*. Essa perspectiva integra as relações e o campo para descrever como relacionamentos evoluem por meio de padrões sociossemióticos recorrentes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Linguística Sistêmico-Funcional. Distância social. Relações interactanciais. Desenvolvimento relacional.

1 Introduction

Language choices vary according to interpersonal familiarity. Conversations with friends differ markedly from those with strangers or colleagues: there are systematic variations in language use tied to the relationship of intimacy. This study seeks to model this interface between language and social relationships, working

within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Matthiessen; Teruya, 2024).

More specifically, this article presents findings from a research project aimed at developing a new description of **tenor**, the contextual parameter that encompasses the roles and relationships interlocutors enact through semiotic means (Hasan, 2020; Farhat, 2025). Our focus is therefore on contextual systems at the intersection of the interpersonal metafunction and the contextual stratum: tenor is *interpersonal context*, describing roles and relationships as systems realized ("expressed") by linguistic choices.

In contrast with *ad hoc* contextual descriptions, contextual systems provide a framework for analyzing contexts at different levels of generality, making them particularly useful for the explicit comparison of different types of context, such as those characterizing different registers or genres. For instance, systemic descriptions of context offer a principled way to distinguish (con)texts that might otherwise be described impressionistically as "formal" or "informal"—see e.g. Irvine (1979) for the complexities involved in these emic labels.

This article explores the system of SOCIAL DISTANCE. Also referred to as CONTACT (Poynton, 1989 [1985]; Martin, 1992) and PERSONAL INTERACTIVE BIOGRAPHY (Hasan, 2020), SOCIAL DISTANCE describes how interpersonally "close" or "distant" interlocutors are (or present themselves as being).

This article's first aim is to propose a revised description of SOCIAL DISTANCE that meets key evaluation criteria—formal adequacy, internal coherence, systemic and realizational detail, explicitness, and testability—which previous descriptions, despite their contributions, do not fully meet. To this end, we first introduce the main tenets of SFL and the methodological steps we followed; then, we examine three influential SFL accounts of SOCIAL DISTANCE—those of Poynton (1989 [1985]), Martin (1992), and Hasan (1978, 2014, 2020). We then assess these models and identify their limitations. With these considerations in mind, drawing on insights from anthropology, semiotics,

and psychology, we develop a new framework for describing SOCIAL DISTANCE, which we present formally in paradigmatic and realizational terms.

The second aim of this article is to outline a systemic functional perspective on relationship development, based on an idealized model of five stages inspired by Levinger's (1980) account: acquaintance, buildup, consolidation, deterioration, and ending. These processes are described in terms of overarching socio-semiotic patterns—*getting closer*, *becoming one*, and *behaving as a team*—materialized through field, tenor, and linguistic choices that shape interpersonal semogenesis. This proposal integrates elements from both field and tenor to account for an important aspect of previous perspectives on social distance modeling: relationship development is closely tied to *personal interactive biography*. "Close" interactants have usually interacted many times before and in different kinds of situations (thus, in different roles and activities), which justifies an approach that considers both tenor and field.

The article concludes by suggesting future directions for the systemic functional investigation of social distance and relationship development.

1.1 Systemic Functional Linguistics and the description of context

SFL is grounded in the view that the systemic (i.e. paradigmatic) organization of language is motivated by functional factors—both semantic (including much of what is traditionally considered "pragmatics") and contextual (i.e., situational elements that condition language choices). This has led scholars such as Hasan (2014, 2020) to argue that SFL should also offer systemic descriptions of context itself—understood as the culturally shaped variables that underlie language variation across register and genre patterns (and which therefore may be used to classify these patterns).

SFL is also organized around **three metafunctions**—broad functional dimensions that underpin the organization of linguistic systems. These metafunctions are (Halliday; Matthiessen, 2006, 2014):

- the **ideational metafunction**, concerned with construing experience (i.e., representing the world);

- the **interpersonal metafunction**, concerned with enacting social relationships (i.e., interaction and negotiation between participants);

- the **textual metafunction**, concerned with organizing discourse into coherent, meaningful wholes.

Each metafunction is linked to a contextual parameter: **field** (the nature of the social activity) is realized by the ideational metafunction; **tenor** (the roles and relationships between interactants) is realized by the interpersonal metafunction; and **mode** (the role language plays in the situation, including channel and medium) is realized by the textual metafunction.

For example, in the tenor system of STATUS ROLE, selecting [epistemic; inferior] (i.e., adopting a position of "knowing less") may be realized by [demand; information] (i.e., a question) in the semantic system of SPEECH FUNCTIONS, typically realized as [indicative: interrogative] in the grammatical system of MOOD, which in English may be structurally realized by a Finite^Subject ordering ("*Are you* here?").

Understanding these concepts is crucial for the present study, which investigates how contextual variables—specifically, those related to **tenor**—are organized and realized in language. Given that tenor is enacted through the interpersonal metafunction, and that this metafunction is itself realized through patterned choices in mood, modality, and evaluative language, a systemic description of SOCIAL DISTANCE must account for how these linguistic resources encode interpersonal proximity or distance. Crucially, this demands not only a meaning-oriented account of language in use but also a systemic description of the context in which these meanings are negotiated.

2. Methodological steps

The study that led to the results presented here was organized into five steps:

Internal review: a detailed review of previous systemic functional descriptions of SOCIAL DISTANCE, focusing on Hasan (1978, 2020), Poynton (1989 [1985]), and Martin (1992). This meant deconstructing their assumptions: How is "distance" understood? Which subsystems are mobilized? What types of evidence support their paradigmatic distinctions? See Section 3.

External review: integrating insights from adjacent disciplines — notably anthropology and social psychology — to enrich the conceptual basis for a new system. Drawing on proxemics (Hall, 1966), work on interpersonal drives (Argyle, 1994; Baumeister; Leary, 1995), and work on interdependence (Berscheid et al., 1989; Agnew et al., 1998), we aimed to identify motivating principles underlying variations in interpersonal proximity. This enabled a reconceptualization of the foundations of SOCIAL DISTANCE. See Section 4[1].

Metatranslation: the review stages culminate in a synthesis of core descriptive elements that can be integrated into a new SFL account of SOCIAL DISTANCE. To do this, we worked with the notion metatranslation (Matthiessen et al., 2017): reinterpreting concepts formulated in external metalanguages in terms of the principles, formalisms, and modeling conventions of SFL. For example, Hall's spatial zones were reinterpreted as features in a system network, with [relation] as the entry condition. This step ensures theoretical consistency and prepares the ground for further modeling.

Descriptive evaluation: based on the metatranslation, we proposed a revised systemic description of SOCIAL DISTANCE through a system network and realizational principles. The description was also evaluated against a set of descriptive adequacy criteria, explicitly designed for evaluating systemic functional descriptions of context:

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[1] While several of these works are seminal and foundational (e.g., Hall, 1966; Argyle, 1994), their inclusion is not due to oversight of more recent literature, but rather to their enduring influence and conceptual clarity. Wherever relevant, these classic contributions are interpreted in light of more recent findings (e.g., Sorokowska et al., 2017).

1. **Formal adequacy**: a formally adequate system must correctly employ all obligatory descriptive techniques of SFL. For example, an explicit entry condition is required for every system.

2. **Internal coherence**: the description must be free of contradictions and redundancies. Ensuring this requires reviewing system options and their interrelationships, generating selection expressions, and identifying potential inconsistencies. Two sub-criteria apply:

    (a) **Metafunctional/stratal consistency**: categories must align with their symbolic abstraction level and metafunction. For tenor, this means all categories should be contextual *and* interpersonal. Since SFL posits that language systems are structured in parallel functional streams, choices *within* a single metafunction (e.g., within tenor) are expected to show strong probabilistic correlations. In contrast, choices *across* different metafunctions (e.g., between tenor and field) are theorized to be only weakly related (see Matthiessen, 2006). Introducing field-related elements into a tenor system, therefore, may compromise the description's internal coherence and predictive capacity.

    (b) **Entry condition consistency**: categories should match the unit serving as their entry condition. For tenor, this involves distinguishing between roles (performed by individuals) and relations (arising between interactants).

3. **Detailing**: the system must allow precise categorization through:

    (a) **Systemic delicacy**: greater delicacy enhances analytical usefulness by preventing overly broad categorizations.

    (b) **Realization detailing**: to enable analysis, context must be explicitly linked to patterns of semiotic realization.

4. **Descriptive explicitness and analytic testability**: opaque categories hinder accurate testing and application in text analysis. To ensure clarity, the trinocular perspective (Halliday, 2009) should be applied:

   (a) **From below**: how the system is realized (intra- or inter-stratally).

   (b) **From above**: how the system may realize options at higher strata (or, in the case of context, how it may be related to extralinguistic phenomena).

   (c) **From roundabout**: how categories within the same stratum are interrelated.

Our description of SOCIAL DISTANCE thus aims to be formally adequate, internally coherent, detailed, explicit, and testable. While the system may not *fully* meet these criteria, making them explicit helps to illuminate the specific aspects where it may be ameliorated.

Analytical testing: the proposed description was tested through qualitative analysis of a small corpus of 15 texts in Brazilian Portuguese. The corpus is comprised of "threads" from X (formerly known as Twitter), since such a platform is particularly productive in terms of interpersonal variation. The data were analyzed using established descriptions from SFL (Halliday; Matthiessen, 2014; Martin, 1992; Martin; White, 2005; Figueredo, 2011), alongside the new SOCIAL DISTANCE description itself. This enabled us to test the empirical sensitivity of the model: that is, whether the system captures meaningful distinctions that are recoverable from text. Where necessary, findings from this stage could inform revisions to the model, thus ensuring that it is not only theoretically robust but also empirically grounded and analytically useful. See Section 6 for a sample analysis.

## 3. Background: systemic functional descriptions of SOCIAL DISTANCE

This section briefly reviews previous descriptions of "social distance" as tenor systems: Hasan's (2020), Poynton's (1989 [1985]), and Martin's (1992).

3.1 Hasan

SFL has long recognized social distance as a semiotically relevant cultural variable. Hasan (1978, p. 231-232), for instance, defines it as the degree of familiarity between interactants, shaped by the frequency and range of their prior interactions. According to Hasan, social distance exists on a continuum, with minimum and maximum endpoints: the former applies to interactants who engage regularly across diverse contexts, fostering intimacy, while the latter characterizes those with little or no prior interaction, limiting mutual recognition to specific roles (e.g., "coworker"). Hasan (2020) refines these ideas, emphasizing key aspects: (1) social distance is culturally established *prior to* interaction; (2) it is determined by the *quantity and variety* of previous interactions; (3) it exists on a *continuum*; (4) knowing someone "well" involves witnessing them in *various roles* (and, therefore, relationships) *across different fields*.

Unlike STATUS, which reflects broader societal structures (e.g., gender, class, institutional positions), Hasan sees SOCIAL DISTANCE as inherently *personal*, shaped by unique interactive "biographies", a shared inter*personal* past. It is also inherently reciprocal: if A is close to B, B is equally close to A, unlike hierarchical relationships (e.g., teacher-student, doctor-patient). Crucially, Hasan highlights that both *frequency* and *range* of prior interactions shape social distance. For example, coworkers who frequently dine together outside work reduce social distance beyond what mere workplace interaction allows. This dual influence enables Hasan (2020) to formalize four levels of social distance, as shown in Figure 1 and Table 1.

Figure 1 – Hasan's (2020) description of SOCIAL DISTANCE.

PERSONAL INTERACTIVE
BIOGRAPHY (SOCIAL DISTANCE) → ─minimal
─near-mininal
─near-maximal
─maximal
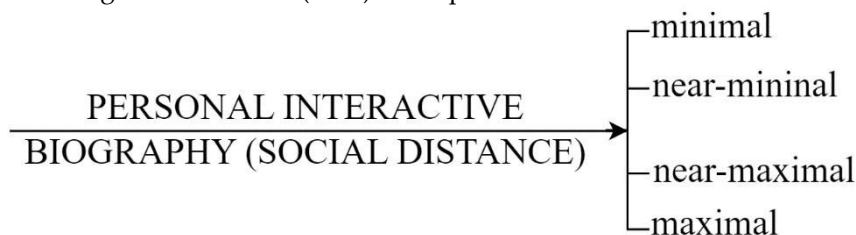
Source: adapted from Hasan (2020, p. 282).

Table 1 – Hasan's SOCIAL DISTANCE: frequency and range of contact.

	frequent	**infrequent**
varied	*minimal*	*near-maximal*
not varied	*near-minimal*	*maximal*

Source: adapted from Hasan (2020, p. 285).

Underlying this categorization, there seems to be an assumption: frequency appears to weigh more than variety in determining closeness—cf. the difference between "near-minimal" (not varied; frequent) and "near-maximal" (varied; frequent). However, this prioritization remains unexplained. It seems to us that, while formalizing scalar categories in this way enhances analytical precision, it also risks oversimplifying fluid socio-semiotic realities: for instance, in practice, such a rigid categorization may overlook the fact that interactants may subtly adjust their social distance throughout an interaction.

Furthermore, Hasan's model lacks a truly intermediate category. It could be suggested, for instance, that interactions may fall into a "lukewarm" zone, neither completely intimate nor totally impersonal. We see this as indicating the need for a more flexible description of social distance.

3.2 Poynton

In her pioneering work on tenor, Poynton (1989 [1985]) systemizes four factors for describing CONTACT:

- **Frequency of contact**: [seldom] to [daily].

- **Extent**: duration of the [relationship] or individual communicative [episodes] ([brief] or [extended]).

- **Role diversity**: [uniplex] (single role, e.g., student-teacher) vs. [multiplex] (multiple roles, e.g., friends who are also coworkers).

- **Activity focus**: [task-oriented] vs. [people-oriented].

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Figure 2 – Poynton's (1989 [1985]) system of CONTACT.
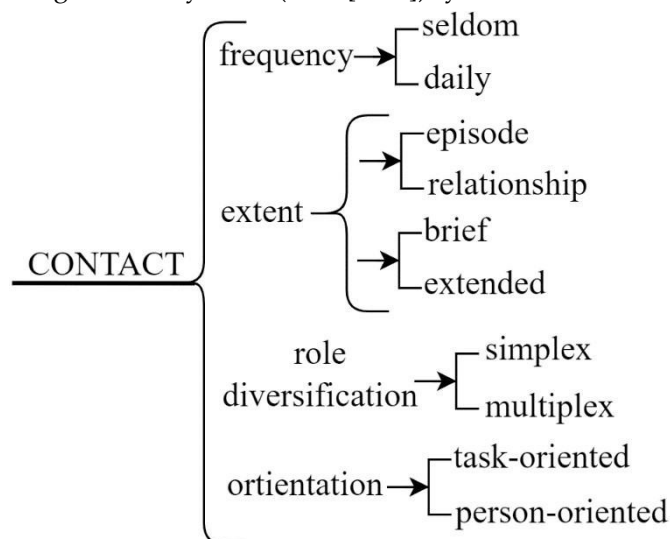
Source: Poynton (1989 [1985], p. 77).

Poynton's system thus generates 32 (2^5) possible combinations. While such a greater level of detail may aid analysis, its empirical validity remains debatable: it is unclear, for instance, how can a text analyst extract all the background information necessary to "calculate" the degree of contact from the text.

Poynton's key contribution, however, lies in the realization principles of Proliferation and Contraction, discussed in the next section.

3.3 Martin

Martin (1992) builds on Poynton but systemizes CONTACT differently. Instead of describing it as being "calculated" from a set of subsystems, he first distinguishes between [involved] and [uninvolved] contact—aligning roughly with Hall's (1966) "intimate"/"personal" vs. "social-consultative"/"public" distances (see Section 4.1). He then refines [involved] contact through two simultaneous criteria:

- Social activity: [family], [work], or [recreation].
- Frequency: [regular] or [occasional].

Table 2 shows examples of the six resulting combinations (of course, these are relatively arbitrary examples; for instance, contact between aunts and nieces may be regular):

Table 2 – Examples of Martin's [involved] CONTACT categories.

	family	work	recreation
regular	*father/child*	*lecturer/tutor*	*fixture partner*
occasional	*aunt/niece*	*writer/editor*	*fixture opponents*

Source: Martin (1992, p. 530).

Martin also classifies uninvolved contact as [one-off] (between strangers) or [phatic] (socially distant yet recurring), with subtypes [neighbors] and [goods & services] interactions.

We see an important issue here: systemic oppositions such as [neighbors/goods & services] and [family/work/recreation] refer not to the relationship between the interactants themselves, but to the social activity which may seem to motivate the relationship. In other words, they are more directly accounted for by the field parameter than by tenor. This "intrusion" will be addressed by our revised system and, more importantly, by our description of relationship development processes.

Figure 3 – Martin's CONTACT system.
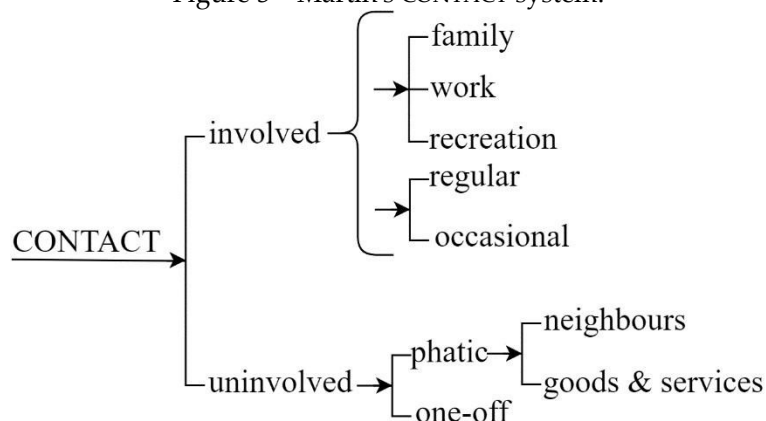
Source: Martin (1992, p. 531).

Finally, one of Martin's (1992) key contributions is his reinterpretation of Poynton's realization principles, which he describes as follows:

- **Proliferation**:

> the degree of contact determines the predictability of meanings at risk— the less contact the fewer the choices available and conversely, the more contact, the more options available to be taken up […] Proliferation is easier to illustrate at the level of discourse semantics, where choice of subject matter for example expands considerably the better more people get to know each other (p. 531-532).

- **Contraction**:

> less contact means that the realisation of the meanings selected has to be more explicit, whereas more contact means that more can be left unsaid. Contraction is easiest to illustrate from phonology, where various reduction processes make the casual conversation of intimate friends and family almost unintelligible to outsiders (p. 531-532).

Despite their foundational contributions, all three models exhibit certain conceptual and analytical frailties when evaluated against the criteria of descriptive adequacy, as we discuss in the next section.

3.4 Issues in previous descriptions

Considering the descriptive adequacy criteria presented in Section 2, we identify the following issues in Hasan's, Poynton's, and Martin's descriptions.

First, from a **descriptive** point of view, proposing activity (i.e., field-related) elements within a tenor system can be seen as a conceptual intrusion of one parameter into another, potentially generating inconsistencies in the "division of labor" among the parameters: field describes activities, while tenor describes roles and relationships. In Hasan's system, this problem arises when we must consider "the range of previous interaction" to determine the degree of social distance—this range is, precisely, a field-related construct.

In Poynton's descriptions, the issue lies in the inclusion of the orientation of activities—whether they are directed toward [tasks] or [people]—as relevant to contact. In Martin's case, the problem is most apparent in the inclusion of contrasts such as [family], [work], or [recreation], which clearly refer to different fields (or "spheres", in Hasan's [1999] terms). These accounts, therefore, do not conform to criterion 2a ("metafunctional consistency").

Second, from a **methodological and analytical** perspective, an even deeper issue emerges: in the analysis of concrete instances—particularly when focusing on the semiotic realization of social distance—it is often difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct elements of past interactions (e.g., frequency, range, orientation) from the instantiated wording alone. This challenge arises largely due to what Hasan (2013) terms the *realizational dialectic*: while context may activate language patterns, it may also be construed by language (or "enacted", in the case of the interpersonal metafunction). For example, when an affective vocative (e.g., "my dear") is used, it may be analyzed either as the result of an activation of [minimal] social distance or, conversely, as an (attempted) construal of that feature.

How, then, can the analyst assert with certainty that a particular use of intimate language stems from the fact that the interactants have previously met frequently across diverse social practices? This issue can, of course, be mitigated through ethnographic research—but such an approach is often impractical, especially when quantitative results are desired.

A similar critique applies to Martin's and Poynton's frameworks: although the variables they propose are of global relevance, one must question whether they are too rigid in associating specific configurations of social distance—crucially a realizationally dialectical phenomenon—with predetermined sets of features, which may prove sterile in relation to actual textual dynamics. In sum, we find that these previous descriptions fail to meet criterion 4: their analytical testability is significantly hindered by certain features.

Our revised system thus aims to address these issues while preserving valuable insights from prior models.

4. Toward a revised system: proxemics, interpersonal needs, and interdependence

The first step toward a new description of SOCIAL DISTANCE as a tenor system is to establish foundational concepts that clarify what is meant by terms like "social distance" and "intimacy". While linguistic and semiotic perspectives are essential, anthropology and social psychology have provided more systematic treatments of these phenomena. This section presents an interdisciplinary foundation by drawing on contributions from anthropology (e.g., Hall, 1966) and social psychology (e.g., Argyle, 1994; Regan, 2011).

4.1 Hall's (1966) proxemics

Matthiessen (2009) suggests that the description of SOCIAL DISTANCE may be informed by Hall's (1966) study on proxemics, which examines the cultural and semiotic use of space. Hall's work explores how physical and biological distance realize social (and consequently, semiotic) distance (see Lam, 2016). His core premise is that humans, like many animals, experience "spheres" of space that, although invisible, are perceptible through senses like temperature and smell. These spheres serve both protective and interactive functions, regulating interpersonal engagement. Hall delineates four general spatial distances, each with a "close" and a "far" phase:

- **Intimate distance** (0–45 cm):

  - Close phase (0–15 cm): direct physical contact, sharing of body heat, and involuntary vocalizations. "Negative" distance (penetration) may occur in affectionate or confrontational interactions.

  - Far phase (15–45 cm): physical contact is still possible but more avoidable. Whispered communication is common, and in contexts like elevators, people employ strategies to mitigate discomfort (e.g., avoiding eye contact).

- **Personal distance** (50–120 cm):

  - Close phase (50–80 cm): touch is possible but clearly intentional. Detailed facial and bodily features remain visible.

  - Far phase (80–120 cm): characterized by the limit of hand reach. Bodily warmth is less perceptible, and vocal levels become moderate.

- **Social-consultative distance** (1.2–3.5 m):

  - Close phase (1.2–2.1 m): common in impersonal business interactions. Personal details are less visible.

  - Far phase (2.1–3.5 m): the full body is visible at a glance. Conventionalized behavior becomes more prominent, and speech is louder.

- **Public distance** (3.5+ m):

  - Close phase (3.5–7.5 m): Enables strategic withdrawal if necessary. Language becomes more formal and planned.

  - Far phase (7.5+ m): Shared environmental perception diminishes, requiring exaggerated speech articulation.

While Hall's study is based on mid-20th-century U.S. culture, its fundamental insights are broadly applicable across cultures, with the material and semiotic realization of each distance varying culturally—see e.g. Sorowaska et al. (2017).

By metatranslating Hall's model into a systemic description (see Figure 4), a suggestion originally made by Matthiessen (2009), we can conceptualize SOCIAL DISTANCE as a gradient system with "relation" as its entry condition. Increased systemic delicacy can be introduced via a simultaneous subsystem specifying each distance phase ([close] or [far]), though the four primary categories generally seem to suffice for analysis.

Figure 4 – Hall's model interpreted as a system network.
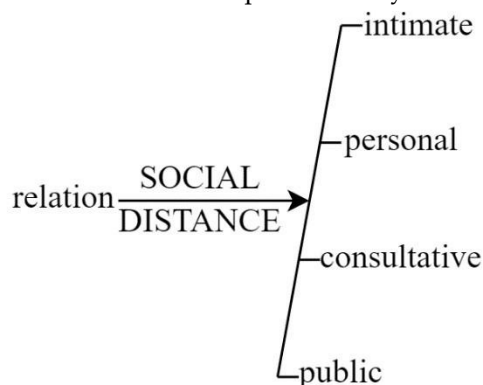
Source: created by the authors.

One might question whether a scalar SOCIAL DISTANCE system with four options merely replicates Hasan's model. However, key differences emerge. First, its empirical basis: Hall's model derives from controlled yet concrete observations of real-world interactions, considering biological, physical, and semiotic experiences. Second, its multisemiotic nature: distance is realized through multiple modalities (e.g., physical distance, smell, heat, vocalizations), reinforcing its empirical grounding beyond monomodal linguistic approaches. Finally, its focus on the present: unlike systems that measure social distance based on pre-interactional factors (e.g., Hasan, Poynton, Martin), Hall's framework prioritizes distance as realized in a specific interaction. This

accounts for cases where intimacy arises between strangers or where public distance exists between former close friends.

By incorporating Hall's insights, our revised description of social distance thus aims to be both descriptively robust and analytically useful, avoiding limitations we see in previous descriptions.

4.2 Driving forces: positive and negative needs

A complementary way of conceptualizing social distance, intimacy, and involvement is by considering the underlying "needs" that motivate interpersonal relationships. Psychological research extensively discusses such needs or drives. Based on reviews by Argyle (1994), Baumeister and Leary (1995), Keltner, Gruenfeld, and Anderson (2003), and Jackson-Dwyer (2013), we propose that these needs can be understood as manifestations of two fundamental interpersonal drives:

1. On the one hand, human beings are guided by **positive needs**, which foster interpersonal bonding and a sense of belonging to communities. This drive promotes the establishment of *inter*dependent networks, with the family as the prototypical example. In terms of SOCIAL DISTANCE, intimate distance (whether long-term or situational) may be seen as a product of these positive interpersonal needs.

2. On the other hand, humans are also influenced by **negative needs**, which encourage autonomy and disengagement. In contrast to the interdependence generated by positive needs, negative needs reflect a drive for *in*dependence. In terms of SOCIAL DISTANCE, negative needs highlight that approaching someone may not always signify intimacy; it can also indicate intimidation.

These necessities operate simultaneously: we bond and let go, experience both interdependence and independence. One might argue that a third need arises from the interplay between the two: the **need to create a sense of individuality**. An individual's social positioning—belonging to certain groups while maintaining distinct personal

characteristics—balances interdependence and independence, shaping both social and personal identity.

While speculative, it is reasonable to suggest that these interpersonal needs emerged through human evolution and are therefore innate. However, their cultural expressions vary. For instance, Markus and Kitayama (1991, p. 224) note that while many Asian cultures emphasize individuality through interpersonal connectedness and interdependence, Western cultures, such as that of the U.S., often prioritize autonomy. These cultural differences influence tenor patterns. For instance, in some cultures, older siblings may be expected to take responsibility for younger ones, including decision-making and mediation of conflicts—in terms of tenor, this means taking up a [superior] STATUS ROLE more often. Conversely, in cultures like the United States, siblings may be encouraged to relate as equals, with less emphasis on age-based authority (cf. Cicirelli, 1994; Nuckolls, 1993)—i.e., a [symmetrical] STATUS ROLE is expected.

The possibly innate nature of these fundamental interpersonal drives also has implications for the relationship between language and intersubjectivity. From birth, children exhibit a disposition toward intersubjectivity, as seen in the "protoconversations" analyzed by Trevarthen (1979). Infants seem to inherently distinguish between people and non-people. In fact, language itself may have evolved largely due to interpersonal needs, both in its phylogenesis (Dunbar, 1996) and ontogenesis (Painter, 2003).

4.3 Interdependence

A third foundation for a holistic conceptualization of SOCIAL DISTANCE is understanding each of its degrees as proportional to the levels of interdependence between interactants, aligning with positive needs—the need to belong. The overarching principle is: **intimacy is proportional to interdependence**. Reinterpreting

Berscheid et al. (1989) and Agnew et al. (1998) in systemic functional terms, relational interdependence can be analyzed from three complementary perspectives:

- **Cognitive interdependence:** long-term intimacy is often accompanied by an experiential consolidation of the relationship—each individual's "self" becomes part of an overarching "us". This is reflected in stable relationship categories such as "best friends", "couple", or "fiancés". In systemic functional terms, this corresponds to *experiential* interdependence.

- **Behavioral interdependence:** intimacy typically involves coordinated engagement in shared activities and a division of labor. The intersection of field and tenor is evident in such coordination. From a systemic functional perspective, this represents *field* interdependence.

- **Affective interdependence:** intimacy involves emotional openness and vulnerability to another's emotional state. As intimacy increases, individual emotional boundaries become more integrated, fostering a shared affective experience. In systemic functional terms, the socio-semiotic effects of affective interdependence align with the tenor system of EMOTIONAL CHARGE and with the general importance of shared values in bonding processes (Knight, 2010).

Interdependence, however, extends beyond direct interpersonal relationships. It also arises from belonging to larger social groups, which can be described through additional tenor systems (e.g., the ATTRIBUTE systems proposed by Hasan [2020]). The general principle of **homophily** (McPherson et al., 2001) further supports this idea: the more similar interactants' social identities, the easier it is to reduce social distance. Thus, social distance may not be as uniquely personal as Hasan (2020) suggests; it can clearly reflect societal structures.

These considerations allow us to position SOCIAL DISTANCE trinocularly: "from above" (underlying motivations, material distance), "from below" (realization patterns) and "from roundabout" (in relation to other contextual systems):

Figure 5 – SOCIAL DISTANCE from a trinocular perspective.
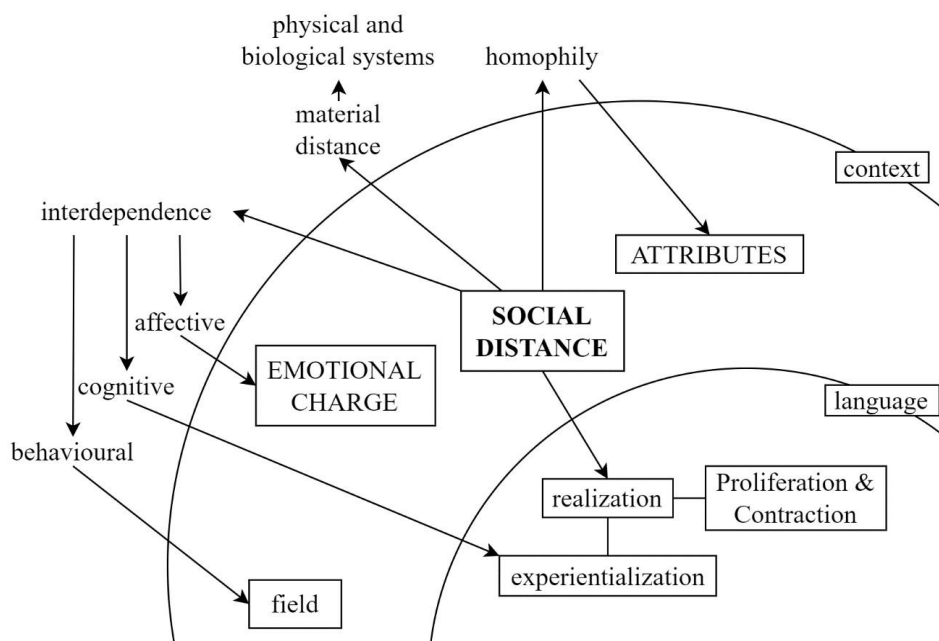
Source: created by the authors.

Rectangles represent elements directly within the descriptive scope of SFL, particularly concerning experientialization (see Section 5.2.2).

5. A new system

This section presents our description of SOCIAL DISTANCE as a tenor system, including its options, intersystemic associations, and realization patterns. As previously discussed, our description aims to follow the criteria of descriptive adequacy explained in Section 2: it should be formally adequate, internally coherent, systemically and realizationally detailed, explicit, and testable.

5.1 Systemic description

As anticipated in Section 4.1, we describe SOCIAL DISTANCE as a scalar system with the following options: **[intimate/personal/consultative/public]**, with Hall's (1966) model as its main inspiration. The main arguments in favor of this "simple" system are as follows:

- **Metafunctional and stratal consistency:** the system is free of potentially "intrusive" field variables. Each option refers to a possible interpersonal distance, and the system explicitly describes a reciprocal *relational* context; thus, its entry condition is [relation].

- **Analytical adequacy:** the system avoids grounding SOCIAL DISTANCE on pre-established variables and instead focuses on its realization as a dynamic, truly socio-*semiotic* phenomenon. While the quantity and variety of prior interactions are relevant (see Section 7.3), SOCIAL DISTANCE can be realized in ways that directly contradict such variables. By increasing the semiotic sensitivity of the system, we enhance its explanatory power: analyzing SOCIAL DISTANCE in systemic functional terms thus primarily means analyzing a specific text (or set of texts) in search of realization patterns of its options.

In addition to outlining options, systemic description must also address probabilistic associations with other simultaneous options (i.e., its "from roundabout" description). Based on the principle that such correlations *tend* to be intrametafunctional (or intraparametric in context) (Matthiessen, 2006), we focus on the following tenor systems (in part inspired by Hasan's [2020] description):

- ATTRIBUTES: following the principle of homophily, similarity in social identities facilitates reducing social distance over time.

- EMOTIONAL CHARGE: unmarked [intimate] social distance is emotionally "positive" (e.g., associated with love and friendship). However, "negative intimacy" (e.g., *intimidation*) is also possible, where increased contact paradoxically results in distancing. Materially, both forms may involve physical interpenetration, as seen in both aggression and sexual behavior.

- STATUS: the ability to reduce social distance is unequally distributed and depends on an interactant's social position. Higher-status individuals (e.g., those privileged by attributes such as race, gender, class, or age) may more

easily reduce social distance. Depending on the recipient's status and reaction, such moves may be perceived as either bonding or intrusive (e.g., assault).

- SPEECH ROLES: Hasan (2020) highlights a correlation between social distance and the textual role of [addressee]. If the addressee is [absent: category] (e.g., the recipients of an open letter), there is maximal social distance by default. However, our model allows for [intimate] social distance with an absent addressee (e.g., marketing or political discourse that enacts intimacy with a "virtual" audience).

5.2 Realization

To comply with criterion 3b, our description must also make explicit how SOCIAL DISTANCE is realized by linguistic choices. This integration across strata provides practical criteria for *recognizing* different options, thus also enhancing its usefulness and testability. The following sections are based on Poynton's and Martin's foundational contributions and on our own analytical research (Farhat, 2024, 2025).

5.2.1 Proliferation, Contraction, and Accommodation

Building on Poynton's and Martin's work, we adapt the principles of Proliferation and Contraction:

- **Proliferation:** the variability and sensitivity of experiences and values that can be realized is inversely proportional to the degree of SOCIAL DISTANCE. The more [intimate] the relationship, the more varied and sensitive the experiences and values that can be realized. This particularly affects the realization of attitude; more intimate relationships allow for more explicitly attitudinal realizations. As distance increases, a pattern of attitudinal institutionalization may emerge, where evaluations shift from personal and emotional assessments (affect) to those based on institutionalized norms, such as ethical judgments or aesthetic appreciations.

For instance, [intimate] partners might shift fluidly between subjects like relationships, politics, bodily issues, or childhood memories in a single conversation (see Section 6 for examples). In contrast, a conversation between a patient and a doctor ([consultative] SOCIAL DISTANCE) may remain narrowly focused on medical concerns.

- **Contraction:** the explicitness of meaning is proportional to the degree of SOCIAL DISTANCE. The more public a context is, the more explicit the values and experiences will be. Conversely, greater intimacy allows for less explicit meanings because of the shared background between interactants. In sum, by fostering field interdependence, more [intimate] SOCIAL DISTANCE allows for implicit meanings.

A concrete example from X: *nevermind. i think im gonna talk about <u>that thing i mentioned</u> last night*. Here, *that thing I mentioned* refers to a shared interpersonal background and therefore need not be made explicit; it is contracted, thereby realizing a reduced SOCIAL DISTANCE. Contraction is also one of the principles at work in determining the form of a vocative, as shown in the progression: *Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday → Michael Halliday → Michael → Mike*.

Additionally, drawing on work from Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles; Ogay, 2007), we propose the following principle, which accounts for the semiotization of homophily and is particularly useful for conceptualizing SOCIAL DISTANCE in more dynamic terms:

- **Accommodation**: the reduction of perceived differences in the meanings and lexicogrammatical forms used by interactants realizes a reduction in SOCIAL DISTANCE. In other words, semiotic approximation is proportional to social approximation, while semiotic distancing is proportional to social distancing.

For instance, a teacher using slang or phrases associated with "the youth" when speaking with their (young) students may be attempting to *reduce* SOCIAL DISTANCE; in

contrast, students who insist on using "their" own language in opposition to the teacher's may be trying to *increase* SOCIAL DISTANCE.

5.2.2 Experientialization

This refers to the metaphorical use of experiential resources to construe tenor elements as if they were experiences—it is a case of *context-semantic* metaphor (Farhat, 2025). This can occur through strategies such as nominal forms that categorize relationships ("We are *friends*") or distances ("We are *close*"), including vocatives ("Hey *folks*!", "Dear *university students*"); verbs expressing relationship processes ("I *distanced* myself from you"); possessive determiners ("*My* friend", "*Our* mother"). Similar phenomena were identified by Thomas (1985) in her pioneering work on language and power.

In a more complex manner, SOCIAL DISTANCE may also be experientialized by structures signaling a shared past between participants. This may serve to locate the current text within an ongoing dynamic of a relationship. This can be achieved with mental processes like "remember" or deictics that point to a shared past, such as "Remember *that* story I told you...?".

5.2.3 Politeness and impoliteness

Although more clearly linked to tenor variables describing "cooperation" and "conflict", politeness is traditionally seen as being proportional to SOCIAL DISTANCE (Brown; Levinson, 1987). Realizations seen as "polite" (e.g., a command realized by an interrogative clause—an "interpersonal metaphor"; see Halliday; Matthiessen, 2014, Section 10.4) are therefore associated with more public and consultative distances, while personal and intimate distances may allow for a lack of explicit politeness or even impoliteness. See Section 6 for concrete examples, including "mock impoliteness" (Leech, 2014).

5.2.4 Contextual syndrome associations

Finally, in some cases, SOCIAL DISTANCE may be realized by "capturing" patterns of realization typically associated with field (i.e., the nature of the social activity and its subject matter). This co-patterning can be explained through the concept of *contextual syndrome* (Hasan, 2020): a constellation of contextual features that characterize and distinguish a particular subpotential. By realizing a feature associated with a given syndrome, a speaker may invoke the broader set of contextual values linked to that syndrome. In the case of SOCIAL DISTANCE, two key manifestations of this are (1) ideational metaphors and (2) sociolexical gradation.

Ideational metaphors, in which processes are realized as if they were things (e.g., *grow → growth*; Halliday; Matthiessen, 2014, Section 10.5), are strongly associated with the development of specialized scientific language (Halliday; Martin, 1993). However, in its pursuit of "objectivity", the contextual syndrome of specialized language is also tied to the realization of [public] SOCIAL DISTANCE. Thus, the use of ideational metaphors can serve as an indirect strategy for signaling SOCIAL DISTANCE: by invoking the contextual syndrome of specialized scientific discourse, ideational metaphor construes (field) *specialization*, which are, in turn, associated with (tenor) *distancing*.

Similarly, sociolexical gradation—the selection of lexical items that are experiential "synonyms" but differ in their realizational alignment with contextual variables—can also indirectly signal SOCIAL DISTANCE through field. Lexical choices can be organized into sets such as *mess – problem – crisis*, or *check out – look at – inspect*, where the first item is more "everyday" and the last more "specialized". Choosing a specialized term (e.g., *crisis*) instead of a more general, everyday expression (e.g., *mess*) may thus realize a specialized field and, in doing so, invoke the public SOCIAL DISTANCE characteristic of that field's contextual syndrome. In sum, the same general principle is at work: realizing specialization may signal distancing.

Due to space limitations, we refer the reader to the more detailed analyses presented in Farhat (2024, 2025).

6. Sample analysis

This section offers a brief analysis of an authentic text to illustrate how the proposed description of SOCIAL DISTANCE can be used as an analytical tool. The text, a sequence of tweets in Brazilian Portuguese (our native language) was selected from the corpus compiled in Farhat (2025). This corpus was specifically constructed to be relatively homogeneous in field and mode, while remaining heterogeneous in tenor, thereby allowing the analysis to focus on the different realizations of SOCIAL DISTANCE. To achieve this, all collected tweet sequences address the same topic—the 95th Academy Awards ceremony in 2023—thus stabilizing field; and originate from the same platform, thus stabilizing mode. The goal here is not to offer an exhaustive account of the interaction, but rather to exemplify how key realizational patterns can be used to analyze the concrete realization of SOCIAL DISTANCE. The sequence is as follows:

Table 3 – A sequence of tweets.

Original	Translation
Lead tweet: meu deus que felicidade acompanhar esse oscar, com meu marido, pizza e vinho	my god what a joy to follow this oscar, with my husband, pizza and wine
Reply 1 (R1): todos sabemos o quanto batalhou por isso / merecedor!!!	we all know how much you fought for this / so deserving!!!
Reply 2 (R2): gatilho	trigger
Reply 3 (R3): aviso de gatilho, cade?	trigger warning, where is it?
Reply 4 (R4): cadê a empatia	where's the empathy
Reply 5 (R5): Cala a boca, vadia	Shut up, bitch
Reply 6 (R6): Amg muito feliz pelo seu momento mas eu queria que tivesse acontecendo comigo	Friend I'm so happy for your moment but I wanted it to be happening to me

Source: Farhat (2025).

Globally, the interaction realizes a very close SOCIAL DISTANCE, oscillating between [personal] and [intimate]. This is signaled by a range of linguistic choices that align with the realizational patterns discussed in Section 5.2.

The lead tweet establishes a personal, celebratory context. The use of an exclamative clause (*what a joy…*) and an interjection (*my god*) realizes a highly affective stance. Proliferation is evident, as the producer shares a highly personal experience — a subject typically reserved for more intimate relationships. Furthermore, the experientialization of the producer's relationship with their husband (*with my husband*) and the condensed nature of the phrasing (*what a joy* instead of, e.g., *I am feeling so happy for…)* suggest Contraction, indicating a context where a high degree of shared understanding is assumed.

The replies build on this foundation of closeness, primarily through strategies of Contraction, Proliferation, and (im)politeness.

R1 (*we all know how much you fought for this / so deserving!!!*) exemplifies Contraction by explicitly presuming shared knowledge among the interactants ("we all know"), possibly due to their "personal interactive biography". As "outsiders", we simply have no idea of how much the user "fought for this". This therefore reinforces a sense of shared experiences and therefore of [intimate] SOCIAL DISTANCE.

R2 and R3 employ jocular irony. By labeling the lead tweet a *gatilho* ("trigger"), the producers of these replies playfully frame the original producer's happiness as a source of mock envy or suffering. This type of teasing is characteristic of [intimate] relationships, where participants can violate politeness norms for affiliative purposes (Eggins; Slade, 1997). The interactants are close enough that a "complaint" can be understood as a sign of solidarity rather than a genuine attack.

This dynamic is most evident in R5, *Cala a boca, vadia* ("Shut up, bitch"). This is a clear instance of what Leech (2014) terms "mock impoliteness". The utterance is, on the surface, highly "face-threatening". However, within an established [intimate] context, such an act is reinterpreted as a marker of solidarity. The very fact that the

producer of R5 can use such language without causing genuine offense signals an extremely close social distance, where politeness conventions are flouted to reinforce the bond. It is a realization of intimacy through the strategic violation of norms that govern more distant relationships.

Finally, R6 demonstrates closeness through more conventional means. The vocative *Amg* (a form of *amigo*, "friend") is a direct (and contracted) experientialization of the relationship. The expression of shared positive feelings (*so happy for your moment*) seems to accommodate the celebratory, positive emotional tone of the base; however, it is followed by a self-deprecating, humorous complaint (*but I wanted it to be happening to me*) further signaling an [intimate] or [personal] distance where emotional honesty and vulnerability are appropriate—i.e., they can "proliferate" freely.

In summary, this analysis offers a brief—but, we hope, clear—example of how SOCIAL DISTANCE is instantly realized by a text. The producer of the initial post enacts an [intimate] context through affective and contracted language, and the respondents, in turn, ratify and reinforce this closeness through various strategies, including the presumption of shared knowledge (R1), jocular teasing (R2, R3), and mock impoliteness (R5). The analysis underscores that SOCIAL DISTANCE is not merely a static contextual variable, which can be "calculated" with reference to a shared "biography", but a dynamic, co-constructed achievement—not only *activating* a range of linguistic choices, but also *enacted* through them.

7. A socio-semiotic perspective on relationship development processes

Our description should not disregard the existence of an "interactive personal biography" as a semiotically relevant phenomenon, even if it is not central to describing SOCIAL DISTANCE as a system.

SFL literature addresses socio-semiotic processes on three timescales: phylogenesis (language evolution), ontogenesis (individual development), and logogenesis (meaning unfolding) (Halliday; Matthiessen, 2006). While relationship

development is probably closest to ontogenesis, SFL ontogenetic research has focused on individual language development (Halliday, 1975, 2004; Painter, 2003). This study, however, explores relationship development as a distinct, interpersonal socio-semiotic process, which concerns how language and context facilitate connections between at least two interactants over varying time spans (from seconds to decades).

This section thus outlines a systemic functional perspective on relationship development. Relationships evolve through complementary and sometimes opposing interpersonal processes, which depend on recurring socio-semiotic patterns. Two fundamental questions arise:

1. What are the **general processes** of relationship development?

2. How can these processes be characterized in **socio-semiotic terms**?

    More specifically:

- What **tenor** configurations characterize each process?

- How can **field and mode** contribute?

- How are these configurations **semiotically realized**?

Drawing on social psychology (Regan, 2011; Jackson-Dwyer, 2013) and interpersonal communication studies (Knapp et al., 2014), we aim to enrich the multidisciplinary study of relationship development through a socio-semiotic perspective. The following sections propose three interrelated socio-semiotic processes underpinning relationship development, all oriented toward establishing, maintaining, or dissolving interdependence: *getting closer*, *becoming one*, and *behaving as a team*.

7.1 Getting closer

To be intimately linked with someone is to feel immaterial "closeness". Thus, in systemic functional terms, a core aspect of relationship development involves fluctuating SOCIAL DISTANCE—moving toward intimacy or publicness. This dynamic

process can be categorized into five stages (adapted from Levinger, 1980, with a processual rather than sequential approach):

- **ACQUAINTANCE:** initiating contact (e.g., from [public] to [consultative]).

- **BUILDUP:** creating intimacy (e.g., from [consultative] to [personal] to [intimate]).

- **CONTINUATION:** maintaining social distance (typically [personal] or [intimate]).

- **DETERIORATION:** decreasing intimacy (e.g., from [intimate] to [personal] to [consultative]).

- **ENDING:** terminating contact (e.g., from [consultative] to [public]).

Since SOCIAL DISTANCE has a material basis (proxemics), physical proximity is often a key factor in transitioning from unfamiliarity to intimacy (see e.g. Segal, 1974). These processes also reflect interpersonal needs: acquaintance, buildup, and continuation stem from the need to belong, whereas deterioration and ending arise from the need for independence. Consequently, the former are typically associated with [euphoric] EMOTIONAL CHARGE, while the latter evoke [dysphoric] states.

Emotional interdependence, a defining aspect of intimacy, may depend on the semiotic codification of emotions. Relationship decline may stem from one member's indifference to the other's emotional state, which depends on semiotically (not) encoding interpersonal feelings.

Furthermore, it must also be recognized that, since relationships may evolve non-linearly, sequences such as A→E (immediate termination) or complex patterns (e.g., A→B→C→C→D→C→B→C→D→E) are also possible, illustrating the dynamic nature of interpersonal bonds.

7.2 Becoming one

Beyond closeness, intimacy entails a sense of unity—an *experiential interdependence* where individuals integrate their self-perceptions with their relational counterpart. Knapp et al. (2014) term this process "integration".

Homophily underpins this process: similarity facilitates the desire to become "one". In tenor terms, acquaintance (A) involves an initial assessment of shared ATTRIBUTES: "How similar are we?" This evaluation and subsequent progression (A→B) hinge on **self-disclosure**, a fundamental semiotic process in relationship development (Altman; Taylor, 1973; Carpenter; Greene, 2016). Self-disclosure operates along two dimensions, clearly related to Proliferation:

- **Depth:** The degree of intimacy and emotional detail.

- **Breadth:** The variety of disclosed information.

From a systemic functional perspective, self-disclosure may be seen as a type of socio-semiotic activity, particularly associated with [sharing] fields (Matthiessen, 2015). As the depth and breadth of interaction increase, so do Proliferation and Contraction, reinforcing interdependence. In strongly intimate relationships—typically built upon a foundation of shared social attributes—individuals integrate their personal perspectives, experientializing a "we" identity (e.g., "a couple", "friends"). Conversely, relationship deterioration shifts the focus toward difference. This suggests that metaphorical (experiential) realizations of SOCIAL DISTANCE are not merely alternative expressions, but integral to the process of relationship development.

In romantic contexts, **publicizing intimacy** (Knapp et al., 2014) is crucial, requiring ideational construal of the relationship—a mode-dependent process: the relationship is made *public*, i.e. it is communicated through public channels (e.g., publishing a "couple photo" on Instagram). Furthermore, **relational stylization** may emerge, where partners develop unique linguistic patterns, such as new lexical items or redefined meanings. As "ways of doing and saying are also ways of being" (Hasan, 2020, p. 319), relational stylization underscores intimacy as a form of semogenesis: "being close" means "being one" which means "speaking similarly". This is supported by studies such as Ireland et al. (2011), who found that higher "language style matching" (LSM) in speed dates tripled the likelihood of mutual romantic interest, and

greater LSM instant messages predicted sustained relationships after three months. Similarly, Brinberg and Nam's (2021) analysis of over one million text messages exchanged by 41 new couples revealed an exponential increase in "linguistic alignment" during relationship formation—evidence that partners *converge* linguistically as their intimacy deepens.
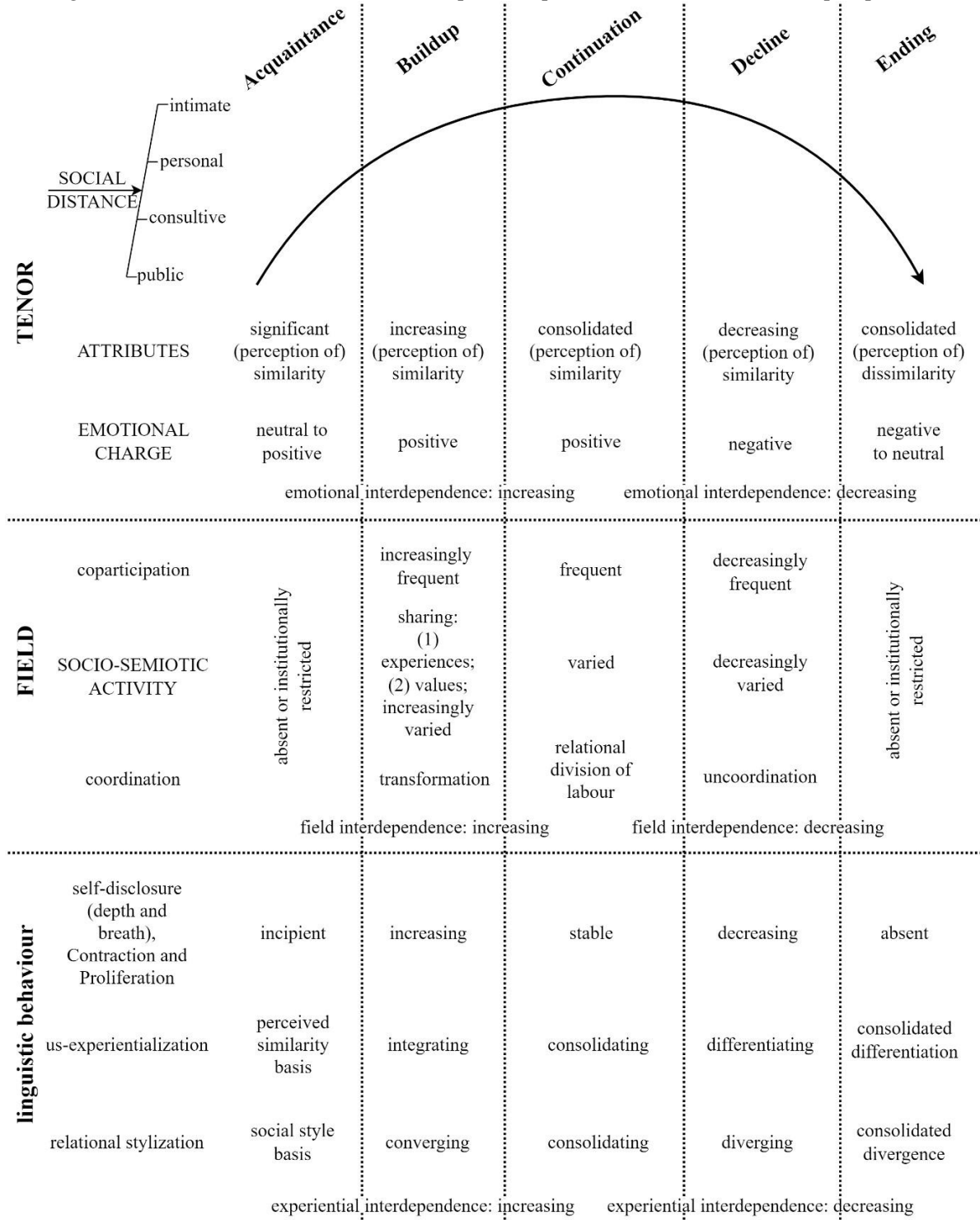
7.3 Behaving as a team

Intimacy also manifests as behavioral interdependence: coordinated action. Hasan (1978) emphasized the importance of interaction quantity and variety in defining closeness. Here, we extend this principle to broader relationship development processes. *Field interdependence* develops through three correlated parameters:

- **Frequency of joint participation:** intimate relationships involve increasing shared activities; declining relationships feature reduced coparticipation.

- **Diversity of socio-semiotic activity:** closer relationships often span multiple social practices, which can be described with reference to systems such as SOCIO-SEMIOTIC ACTIVITY (Matthiessen, 2015).

- **Coordination:** inspired by Thibaut and Kelley (1959), this refers to relational transformation—interactants adjust their behaviors to support interdependence (e.g., division of labor in relationships). Deterioration reverses it.

Figure 6 summarizes how contextual and linguistic variables interact across relationship development processes. While these patterns provide a general, idealized guide, actual relationships exhibit significant variability.

Figure 6 – The ABCD model of relationship development from a socio-semiotic perspective.

TENOR — SOCIAL DISTANCE: intimate / personal / consultive / public

	Acquaintance	Buildup	Continuation	Decline	Ending
ATTRIBUTES	significant (perception of) similarity	increasing (perception of) similarity	consolidated (perception of) similarity	decreasing (perception of) similarity	consolidated (perception of) dissimilarity
EMOTIONAL CHARGE	neutral to positive	positive	positive	negative	negative to neutral

emotional interdependence: increasing   emotional interdependence: decreasing

FIELD

	Acquaintance	Buildup	Continuation	Decline	Ending
coparticipation	absent or institutionally restricted	increasingly frequent	frequent	decreasingly frequent	absent or institutionally restricted
SOCIO-SEMIOTIC ACTIVITY		sharing: (1) experiences; (2) values; increasingly varied	varied	decreasingly varied	
coordination		transformation	relational division of labour	uncoordination	

field interdependence: increasing   field interdependence: decreasing

linguistic behaviour

	Acquaintance	Buildup	Continuation	Decline	Ending
self-disclosure (depth and breath), Contraction and Proliferation	incipient	increasing	stable	decreasing	absent
us-experientialization	perceived similarity basis	integrating	consolidating	differentiating	consolidated differentiation
relational stylization	social style basis	converging	consolidating	diverging	consolidated divergence

experiential interdependence: increasing   experiential interdependence: decreasing

Source: created by the authors.

8 Next steps

This article has sought to advance the systemic functional description of SOCIAL DISTANCE, building on the foundational work of Poynton (1989 [1985]), Martin (1992),

and Hasan (1978, 2014, 2020). After examining anthropological, semiotic, and psychological perspectives, we proposed a new systemic account of social distance and outlined a socio-semiotic perspective on relationship development. While the present study has focused primarily on establishing the groundwork for this revised framework, we recognize its current limitations and the necessary directions for future research.

A priority must be to move beyond the primarily descriptive scope of this article toward a more robust analytical approach. Although the model was tested through a qualitative analysis of a small corpus, broader empirical validation is essential. Future research should apply the framework to a larger and more varied corpus, incorporating both extensive quantitative and intensive qualitative analyses to test the descriptive power and analytical limits of the proposed systems. This will be crucial to substantiate the claims made here with the kind of robust empirical data that a study of this nature requires. Furthermore, the model of relationship development processes proposed in this study remains exploratory and primarily based on secondary data. Advancing it will require longitudinal research that traces interpersonal semogenesis over time—ideally through collaboration between linguists and psychologists.

Ultimately, the contributions offered in this article represent only a step toward a more integrated and empirically grounded systemic functional understanding of social distance. Our aim has been to build on insights from prior descriptions, offering a revised perspective that we hope addresses certain conceptual and analytical gaps. We remain indebted to the foundational work of scholars such as Hasan, Poynton, and Martin, and we fully expect—and welcome—critiques, refinements, and expansions of the framework proposed here. It is through continued dialogue, rigorous testing, and collective inquiry that its descriptive power and analytical utility can truly be assessed and enhanced.

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