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NATURE WRITING — PETER MATTHIESSEN'S THE SNOW LEOPARD

Speaker

Professor Christian Matthiessen



Distinguished Professor, Department of Linguistics
University of International Business and Economics, China



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ZOOM

@ Enquiry: e.nervino@cityu.edu.hk
> Registration: <https://bit.ly/cams20240627a>





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Abstract

In this talk, I will present certain aspects of an ongoing project where I'm analysing and interpreting Peter Matthiessen's work — both his work of fiction and of non-fiction, since these two strands constitute an interesting complementarity, jointly construing and enacting motifs that are central to his world view and value system. More specifically, I will deal with certain aspects of Matthiessen's non-fiction book *The Snow Leopard*, a multi-layered "travel tale", focussing on Matthiessen's often figurative quest for the mysterious elusive snow leopard of the Himalayas.

The Snow Leopard is organized as a chronicle of the expedition led by biological scientist and conservationist George Schaller; the text starts with a Prologue, and is then proceeds as a sequence of daily entries from 28 September to 1 December, the last day of Peter Matthiessen's recount. The global organization of *The Snow Leopard* is thus chronological.

Matthiessen's daily entries typically record stages of the journey, and also descriptive passages evoking the sense of the scenery — prominently mountains, canyons, valleys, rivers and also vegetation and wildlife, and human settlements; and also the impact of humans on fragile habitats and ecosystems, observable already in the early 1970s when the expedition was undertaken. However, a number of daily entries also include expansions dealing with other domains — naturally, historical and regional background information, but also comparisons of cultures and regions around the world and reflections on Matthiessen's personal take on his experiences, reminiscences involving earlier personal experiences, and illuminations of Buddhism, in particular observation based on Zen Buddhism. In this way, Matthiessen construes a journey within different phenomenal realms, both concrete and more abstract ones. *The Snow Leopard* lies at the intersection of a number concerns in Systemic Functional Linguistics as an applicable kind of linguistics:

- it can be interpreted as **verbal art**, at least by extension (cf. Miller, 2021, 2024): while it is (in part) a factual recount of an expedition rather than an imaginary recreation of a journey, it arguably creates a higher-order theme of the kind that is characteristic of literary — and Matthiessen also wrote fiction, both short stories and novels (his last book, *In Paradise*, 2014, was a novel).
- it can also be interpreted in the context of the continuing development of **ecolinguistics** informed by SFL, due to Halliday's (1990) challenge to applied linguists to explore new ways of meaning (see also Martin, 1986; and for a review of Halliday's seminal paper, Law & Matthiessen, 2023) — ones more resonant with the approach we need to take to Gaia (Lovelock, e.g. 1991) if we and our fellow life forms are to survive, and perhaps even to prosper. The celebration of nature is a recurrent motif in Matthiessen's work, both his factual and fictional portraits of our Umwelt — or Umwelten, since he deals with the points of view of people from different parts of the world. We can discern in both his fiction and non-fiction his concern with our human impact on nature — on our destruction of ecosystems and issues of sustainability, on traditional communities leading more sustainable lifestyles pushed to the margins by the industrialized world.
- it can also be interpreted in connection with ecolinguistics as an expression of concerns with the totality of humanity and other creatures — related to Halliday's (1984) notion of **social accountability**, along lines explored also elsewhere by Matthiessen and extending to activism (e.g. P. Matthiessen, 1983, on Leonard Peltier, P. Matthiessen, 2003, on the certain devastation of the Iraqi people, arguing against the allied attack on Iraq — presciently entitled "Lighting the Fuse: Freeing the Iraqi People to Death")
- it can be interpreted as a contribution to the distillation of **deep-time motifs in enlightened human experience** within diverse cultural strands around the world and of cumulative understanding the totality of our phenomenal world through the ages — resonant with Aldous Huxley's (1944) *Perennial Philosophy* but also with studies of a more ethnographic orientation.

Related to this last point: *The Snow Leopard* is also like other discursive contributions where the vivid evocation of our glorious nature is coupled to higher-order semiotic motifs — motifs that can be identified, analyses and interpreted through linguistic and contextual analysis.



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Speaker Bio

Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen is Distinguished Professor, School of Foreign Languages, Hunan University, and Department of Linguistics, University of International Business and Economics, China, and Professor, Department of English Studies, Complutense University. He has degrees in linguistics from Lund University (BA), where he also studied English, Arabic and philosophy, and in linguistics from UCLA (MA, PhD), and has previously held positions at USC/ Information Sciences Institute, Sydney University, Macquarie University, and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

With researchers around the world, he is working on multilingual studies — including description of particular languages, translation studies, comparative and typological studies; health communication, aspects of educational linguistics, language description, registerial cartography, language arts, the language of space, and the development of Systemic Functional Linguistic theory.

Matthiessen has authored and co-authored over 15 books and 170 book chapters and journal articles. The most recent books are Matthiessen (2021), *Systemic Functional Linguistics, Part I*, edited by K. Teruya; Matthiessen, Wang, Ma & Mwinlaaru (2022), *Systemic Functional Insights on Language and Linguistics*. Matthiessen & Teruya (2024), *Systemic Functional Linguistics: a complete guide (Routledge)*, Matthiessen (2023), *System in Systemic Functional Linguistics: a system-based theory of language*. Wang & Ma (2023), *Theorizing and Applying Systemic Functional Linguistics Developments by Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen*, provides an overview of some domains of his work.