

Navigational metalanguages for new territory in English: The potential of grammatics

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ABSTRACT: This paper takes up the sea-faring metaphor at the centre of this special edition and asks what kinds of navigational tools (metalanguages) are necessary to steer English through the digital seas of contemporary communication. Much of this territory is yet to be mapped and the disciplinary “boat” is buffeted by contrary winds such as pressures for improved outcomes on the basics and development of 21st-century digital skills. The role of grammar as a navigational aid is complicated by these competing pressures. Alongside developing metalanguages to explore digital literacy practices in Web2, in multimodal texts like picture books, websites and social networking sites, teachers are being asked simultaneously to prepare students for national testing regimes which assess children’s abilities to identify the correct verb, to underline the pronouns and to punctuate sentences in language convention tests. What kinds of grammar will enable us to manage such seemingly incongruous purposes? How do we make use of tools to improve students’ writing without succumbing to reductionist models of language? What kinds of “stretch” do available grammars need if they are to prove useful as tools in this environment?

In this paper, I draw on a range of students’ verbal, visual and multimodal texts to investigate the issues facing adaptations of grammatically informed metalanguages in English. I attempt to show how such metalanguages will need to accommodate and account for verbal texts produced by students for assessment and multimodal texts produced by young learners in less formal, even play, situations. Basing my account on Halliday’s notion of “grammatics”, I argue that any navigational toolkit needs to make space for both convention and innovation, but that this process requires careful thinking, dialogue across different grammars and substantive research into semiosis in school English.

KEYWORDS: Grammatics, systemic functional grammar, multimodal texts, metalinguistic understanding.

INTRODUCTION: BINARIES, GAPS AND CROSS-WINDS

English is a discipline without a singular identity and its heterogeneity leaves it particularly vulnerable to populist media attack and to a fragmented sense of its own identity. The early years of this new century have produced a range of (often competing) discourses about what is “core business” in the discipline. Current media accounts are reductive (focussed on deficit) and binaristic (focussed on either-or oppositions). For example, in accounts of early years instruction, teachers are viewed as lacking a “good enough” knowledge of language to teach decoding (phonics versus whole language). In accounts of later years, the controversy shifts to a focus on

teachers' knowledge of texts (Shakespeare versus *The Simpsons*). In the senior years, the problem shifts again to the role of theory in knowledge generation (traditional literary criticism versus post-structuralist literary theory). Clearly, the question of teachers' knowledge about language and their capacity to use this effectively in teaching reading and writing is an enduring issue. But what might happen if we moved to an approach to language and to other semiotic resources that was predicated on an inclusive ("both/and") rather than a reductive ("either/or") starting point? What might we achieve through a dialogue across grammars of English as a way of assisting teachers to navigate the challenging seas of contemporary digital communication?

A coherent and inclusive metalanguage is made more difficult in what appears to be a schizophrenic political climate. In Australia, the newly elected Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, announced very early in his bid for the top job that he would inaugurate an "education revolution" with broadband internet access "rolled out" across all states. In a celebratory account of the first two years of this ambitious program, the website of the current Education minister, Julia Gillard, attests: "The Rudd Government has already invested \$2.2 billion in a Digital Education Revolution to ensure Australian students are learning with the tools of the 21st Century" (DEEWR, 2009). This clarion call implies that the government is ahead of teachers in this ambitious agenda. In fact, talk of "revolution" makes many smile. Most English teachers already work with expanded notions of text and new literacies – from Baz Luhrman's *Romeo and Juliet* to SMS texting, to CD covers and video gaming. Certainly, a multiliteracies curriculum is evident in most curriculum documents, even if the grammars necessary for working with this are yet to be developed.

This revolutionary climate has not (yet) affected talk of a grammatical metalanguage for managing multiliteracies. In some contexts, it is as though there was nothing new to say about grammar. Since 2008, the National Assessment Program in Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) has tested all Australian children in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 on their ability to identify parts of speech in particular sentences, to correctly spell words in a sentence, to put quotation marks where they belong in direct speech, and so on. Many educators are warning about the reductive impact of such testing on curriculum innovation and the tendency to "teach to the test", especially in contexts where students' outcomes are poor (Mills, 2008; Freebody, 2007). Still others are concerned that this approach to grammatical knowledge will reduce the possibilities for a rich, functional and intellectually challenging approach to teaching knowledge about language (Harper & Rennie, 2009, Macken-Horarik, 2009). The tendency for many teachers to focus their professional gaze and classroom energies on a narrowed sense of test accountability in this climate is understandable – especially if they are worried anyway about their ability to prepare students for tests about language.

Teachers' knowledge about language is an issue for the profession. There is increasing research evidence that many teachers, especially those entering the profession, are anxious about gaps in their knowledge about language. Recent reports into the language competencies of new teachers have confirmed that there is a basis for such concerns, especially in politically fraught areas like phonics and grammar (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005; Loudon *et al.*, 2005). They confirm earlier findings by the author based on a survey of 128 NSW teachers, the vast majority of whom claimed they lacked necessary knowledge about language needed to do the

things they believed important in literacy teaching (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 2001). Other studies, conducted on a similar cohort in the United Kingdom, for example, agree. A notable survey of English grammar and its relationship to school English claims that “we still have far too few teachers of English with an adequate grounding in the linguistics of English” (Hudson & Walmsley, 2005, p. 613). One very recent study of pre-service teachers in Australia has revealed that beginning teachers’ knowledge about language is “fragmented” and “lacks depth” (Harper & Rennie, 2009). Harper and Rennie argue that teachers need to develop a “deep knowledge” about language if they are to “build conversations about how meanings are constructed by particular grammar and word choices, in particular contexts and for particular audiences” (Harper & Rennie, 2009, p. 32). What kinds of grammar will enable both new and experienced teachers to talk to their students about language and other semiotic resources in such a way as to improve knowledge of how they work and to develop a shared sense of the potential of grammar for improving writing?

The context of such a dialogue is a complex one. English is not a stable field with shared understandings about how language and other resources work. In fact, theorists of grammar, such as Gunther Kress, have been reflecting on the kinds of knowledge needed for an “era of instability” for several years now:

The frames around (secure) knowledge have disappeared; it is now acceptable for seemingly serious people to talk about “intelligent design” and to insist that it be taught in schools. Textbooks present core curricular knowledge in image rather than in writing; as with glaciers, the frames around stable means of representing are softening, melting, disappearing. Cultural diversity produces profound challenges to canonical forms of all kinds (Kress, 2006, p. 27).

Kress acknowledges the need not just to engage with cultural and semiotic diversity but to make it tractable. Canonical (read traditional) understandings about language are no longer self-explanatory, even if they are taken for granted in national testing regimes. New navigational tools are necessary, as Kress, himself acknowledges. Such tools will need to take “soundings” – searching for “depth” beneath the literacy practices our students employ adroitly, but often without critical attention and enough opportunities for higher order learning (Kimber & Wyatt-Smith, 2008). They will also need to give teachers ways of seeing and building on the emergent potentials in students’ half-formed texts, their insouciant advances, the flawed approximations that, with the right kind of attention, perhaps the right kind of grammar, will produce a more fulsome textual products. In short, both innovation and convention require adequate treatment in any grammatically informed metalanguage.

How might this work in practice? Students need to learn to control essayist literacy – produce a well-structured argument or a compelling description or narrative. But they also need to relate the more traditional literacy skills (and the grammatical resources necessary to generate successful texts) to a wider set of semiotic resources for participating in and analysing blogging, on-line forums and hypertext narratives. What kinds of knowledge do teachers need if they are to support a well-resourced engagement by students in multiliteracies – to meet their accountability as well as their innovative responsibilities?

DEALING WITH DIFFERENCE – SOCIAL AND SEMIOTIC

The model of language unproblematically assumed in national testing is no guide when it comes to digital communication. In fact, traditional grammar itself offers little help to teachers who want to improve (rather than just correct) students' work in more traditional, literate communication. The jury is still out about the usefulness of knowledge of traditional grammar (parts of speech, for example) to improving students' written compositions (Andrews *et al.*, 2006). But the question of what kinds of metalanguage teachers need is brought into high relief in multiliteracies English. Do we attempt to develop a comprehensive grammar for the array of texts and ways of working with these or separate metalanguages, sensitive to the distinctive meanings potentials and affordances of different modes? For example, one key area of communication that requires a trans-modal metalanguage is voicing. Voicing has to do with the projection of speech. When learning to write, children learn about this first in terms of conventions for quoting or reporting speech in stories. But this is only a beginning. Any account of voicing should be extended to explore speech representation in graphic novels, dialogue in film and even the structure of guild conversations in computer games like *World of Warcraft*. Developing such a metalanguage is an ambitious research endeavor, still in its infancy.

Managing semiotic difference is a key challenge for any grammar – something which social semioticians have been keen to point out (Kress, 2003, Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). As Kress argues:

Linguistic theory cannot provide a full account of what literacy does or is; language alone cannot give us access to the meaning of the multimodally constituted message; language and literacy have to be seen as partial bearers of meaning only. The co-presence of other modes raises the question of their function: are they merely replicating what language does, are they ancillary, marginal, or do they play a full role, and if they do, is the same role as that of writing or a different role? (Kress, 2003, p. 35).

The logocentric bias of multimodal grammars requires attention. Two responses present themselves immediately. One is to develop distinctive vocabularies for talking about different modes – one for language, another for the visual and still another for the multimodal text. In this way we preserve the distinctiveness of each mode but proliferate the analytical vocabulary when we talk about each mode. But then we have no unifying terminology by which to inter-relate meaning in one mode with meaning in another. This reduces possibilities for investigating differences within a common terminology, something many English teachers find important, as I will show in the later discussion of focalization in English.

Another response is to develop trans-modal grammars that span these – a common terminology based on semantic analogies between one choice and another. These may or may not begin with the linguistic. To take the example of voicing again, speech can be directly projected via the human voice; it can also be quoted or reported and inserted into a narrative via a range of strategies – lip sync in film dialogue or speech bubbles in a cartoon. The projecting mechanism – the source of speech – is there in all cases but differently embodied or realised in each mode or medium. This is not to mention anything of the range of ways that, even within the one mode, say a written

essay, the voices of others can be inserted into a text (Macken-Horarik & Morgan, 2008). Voicing is only one of several semantically kin areas of communication needing consideration within a broader semiotic metalanguage. The work of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) is one major example of a linguistically oriented grammar being applied productively to analysis of images. Their visual grammar has become absorbed into the expanding vocabulary of school English and students talk freely of vectors, shot-types, modality and perspective in analysis of pictures, movie stills and graphics.

Because my interest is in developing an inclusive metalanguage – one supporting talk across different modes of communication – I focus on the analogic potential of systemic functional grammar. In this way, I accept the limitations of a logocentric starting point but exploit the “as if” possibilities of this for non-linguistic choices. If we use Hallidayan linguistics to represent the action of a participant in a verbal text, this is like (in some important respects) the representation of a participant in a picture. The realizations in verbiage and image of “who does what to whom in what contexts?” will always differ. However, there will always be some kind of representation of participants, processes and circumstances. A similar analogic principle works with other domains of meaning making, like focalization – the construal of point of view (who sees?) in visual, verbal and multimodal narratives as I will show.

There are dangers with a transmodal grammar, not least because it tends to “flatten out” distinctive forms of representation, to make particularities of meaning-making less visible in our analysis. Whatever strategy we adopt – a metalanguage oriented towards commonality or towards difference – we need a grammar for multiliteracies that is “flexible and open-ended. It should be seen as a tool kit for working on semiotic activities, not a formalism to be applied to them” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 24).

RESOLVING THE PROBLEM OF GRAMMAR WITH A NEW TERM

It may be that we need a new term for our navigational metalanguage. For many people, even the term “grammar” is problematic. Michael Halliday has recognized this and proposed a new term, “grammatics”, to resolve the slippage between the two meanings of grammar. For him, the problem emerges because the same word refers both to language use and the study of language use. As he describes this problem:

All systematic knowledge takes the form of “language about” some phenomenon; but whereas the natural sciences are language about nature, and the social sciences are language about society, linguistics is language about language – “language turned back on itself” in Firth’s oft-quoted formulation....How does one keep apart the object language from the metalanguage – the phenomenon itself from the theoretical study of that phenomenon? (Halliday, 2002, p. 384).

Why complicate what is surely complicated enough? Why not just use the term “grammar” and begin to expand people’s understanding of its possible range of applications? Well, the slippage between the two meanings of grammar is part of the problem. When a media commentator complains about terrible grammar of 21st-century students or office workers, s/he is not referring to their knowledge about

language but to their actual use of language. When an Education Minister complains about the grammar of pre-service teachers, s/he may be referring to their language use or to the knowledge about language (in one case whether they could define a syllable). The slippage between language use and metalanguage in the term “grammar” can mean that we never distinguish what we are talking about. And the history of grammar teaching is full of the history of denigration of the perfectly functional uses of language by groups of people whose social location was the problem. As someone famously said, “English is the story of a dialect with an army and a navy”. This is one of the challenges of using a term like grammar, which has been such a source of difficulty for many groups using a dialect other than standard English. It goes to the heart of the challenge of developing a metalanguage for recognizing not just semiotic but social difference. Socio-cultural difficulties such as these underlie Halliday’s original invention of the term, “grammatics”. In more recent years, he has realised more profoundly how useful the term “grammatics” is as a metalanguage for thinking about grammar:

When I first used the term “grammatics”, I was concerned simply to escape from the ambiguity where “grammar” meant the phenomenon itself – a particular stratum in language – and the study of that phenomenon; I was simply setting up a proportion such that grammatics is to grammar as linguistics is to language. But over the years since then I have found it useful to have “grammatics” available as a term for a specific view of grammatical theory, whereby it is not just a theory about grammar but also a way of using grammar to think with (Halliday, 2002, p. 416).

In my attempts to develop new ways of thinking about language and multimodality, I use grammatics as way of theorizing with grammar in mind, or to borrow the formulation of the New London group, “as a tool kit for working on semiotic activities”. Our grammatics can serve whether we are studying relatively simple choices in a verbal text such as learning to represent another’s speech and thought or more complex choices such as abstract representations of point of view in theoretical discourses. The point is to develop tools that will help us to help our students negotiate the fascinating and turbulent seas of contemporary semiosis. One key feature of systemic functional grammatics that makes it apt for this task – at least as a starting point – is that it puts meaning at the centre of semiotic work. This orientation enables it to span both traditional and new literacies in English and offers fruitful opportunities for good classroom conversations – interesting journeys through the new territory that English must now negotiate.

In the next section, I consider some verbal, visual and multimodal texts related to the same topic area and consider how grammatics can be used to facilitate trans-modal conversations. It introduces some texts in which one common region of meaning making (for example, focalization) is explored in verbal, visual and digital communication.

GRAMMATICS FOR MULTIMODALITY: FOCALIZATION IN THREE TEXTS

The first two texts were produced by two, year-5 students at different times. Text 1 is an extract from a fairy story called, *The dragon’s tooth and* produced after a

significant induction into narrative in a Sydney primary school. The teacher who introduced students in this year to fairytale narratives encouraged the children to innovate on the possibilities of the traditional tales they had read. In this extract from her longer narrative, the child author, Nicole, has her female heroine discover she has been turned into a witch. The verbs that generate either speech or thought are highlighted in bold and the spelling has been left as in the original.

One day she was walking through the woods smelling wild flowers and **listening** to the animals and birds, when suddenly a witch jumped out in front of her and **screamed** "Aha!" The witch pull(ed) our a tube containing some green liquid out of her pocket and drank it, then instantly turned into a beautiful lady looking just like the princess.

The witch dropped a piece of paper and the princess picked it up, it **read**:

The Cure

The princess Agather must kill a dragon and pull out its tooth to regain her beauty (without help or weapons).

Agather **wondered** what it meant by "regain her beauty". Presently she came across a shining clear lake. She couldn't help going over to the lake and just letting her hands glide through the water. As she leant over to pick up a lily, Agather **looked at** her reflection she **saw** the face of a witch. She frantically ran around weeping and **imagining** herself as an old spinster!

As can be seen, control of verbs of focalization (which take the reader inside the mind and feelings of the central character) is only one aspect of this patterned movement between action and subjective reaction by the protagonist. Concurrent with the play of interior and exterior worlds, the voices of another are also rendered, in this case, through the letter addressed to Agather and announcing the terms of her quest. In this related semantic domain, it is speech (not thought) that must be rendered. Voicing is the domain for representing speech and focalization for thought. And, even in year 5, this student is able to bring the external voice of the witch (through quotation) into relationship with her own "wondering" (focalization). In narratives, we reflect not only on what happens but on what others say. Both voicing and focalization are crucial to evaluation and, as William Labov was the first to remind us, to the success of a narrative (at least in Western societies).

Figure 1 is a visual image produced by a child in the same grade as Nicole, albeit at a different time. Dimitri was asked to create a storyboard version of Nicole's narrative, rendering the events in words and pictures. If we consider one "still" from his larger composition (about 2 pages of mini-stills), we can see how differently focalization is realised in his multimodal narrative. Dimitri communicates Agather's evaluation of her transformation visually. Focalization is rendered by means of her eyes, which are wide with horror as she gazes into the pool. But, in this text, the viewer looks at rather than with Agather. This semiotic strategy focalizes her experience in such a way that we contemplate at a distance the character's horror at her transformation. The effect is both vivid and economical (and even comical). Dimitri's choices do different kinds of work from Nicole's. While the source of evaluation is interior in the fairytale – managed through verbs of thinking, feeling and perception, it is more exteriorized in the storyboard as we contemplate the reaction of the character in

oblique view (see Painter & Martin, in press, for discussion of multimodal focalization).



Figure 1. Storyboard still

How is focalization managed in animations and other digital narratives that work without language? My next text is taken from an animation produced by a student of the visual arts – also in response to Nicole's fairytale. It is not possible to reproduce the whole of Ria's animation, which shows a pink bunny transforming into a black witch against a muted purple/brown washed background. Figure 2 shows six stills from this animation.

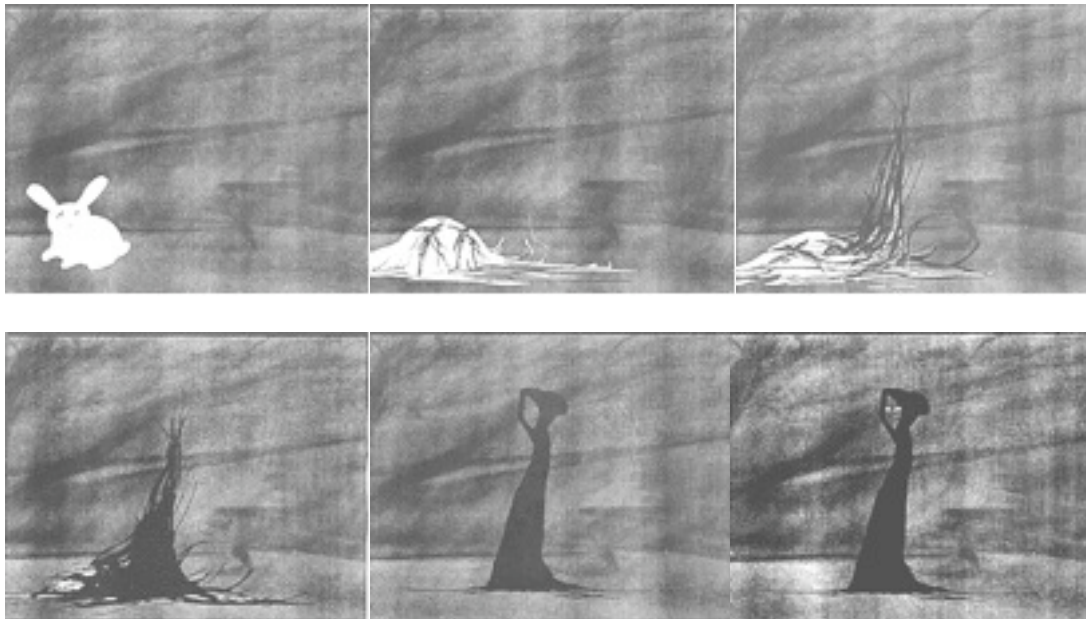


Figure 2. Six stills from a computer animation

How is visual focalization managed in this sequence? Clearly the use of tools from the Photoshop paintbox and their affordances influence what Ria has done in the animation. The rabbit was created using a large paintbrush so that he appears soft and fluffy, whilst the witch was outlined with a thin paintbrush to give her clean, sharp lines. The contrast between the two characters is realised as much via colour as by changes in the shape of the central figures. The rabbit, in baby pink (in the original) with a soft fluffy texture, is starkly distinguished from the black witch with her smooth lines and sharp angles. But other choices are perhaps more relevant to the change in viewpoint over time. The use of a medium-long shot allows Ria to reveal the nature of the transformation from rabbit to witch with its suggestion of a shift in identity – from innocence to knowing wickedness, perhaps. But these decisions put the viewer at a further remove from the witch in Dimitri's storyboard cartoon. From the point of view of focalization, we are further away from Ria's witch than we are from Dimitri's. The only clue we have to the internal evaluation of Ria's witch is her sly wink to the viewer in the closing sequence (though this is difficult to bring out in the stills).

In sum, if we have a unitary category such as focalization (and voicing too, though this is less relevant to the two visual texts I introduce here), we are able to move between modes and to compare and contrast the choices which composers make to generate point of view for viewers and, within a narrative text, for characters. We can use the analogic potential of the grammatics to explore both differences (for example, in strategy and realization in particular texts) and commonalities (for example, the broad area of focalization or voicing). A transmodal grammatics should enable analysts and producers of multimodal texts to move across modes, using a semantically kin metalanguage. This gives all those party to the conversation a metalanguage that makes continuity possible across difference.

But continuity should also work within literate communication too, enabling teachers and students to develop shared understandings about how language works and how it can be made to work better. I turn now to the issue raised early in the paper about the needs of teachers for ways of reflecting on their students' writing.

A GRAMMATICS FOR POTENTIAL: ASSESSING AND LIFTING ACHIEVEMENT IN LITERATE COMMUNICATION

As the national tests have reminded us, traditional grammar is most often used to correct students' writing. It is a deficit model. With a functional grammatics, we can begin to see texts less in terms of their correct use of conventions and more in terms of their interesting innovations. In order to push our grammatics in this direction, it is meaning rather than form that should preoccupy teachers in the first instance. In a grammatics oriented to potential, we look at students' texts for what they are trying to do. Like multimodal texts, literate texts are full of emergent potential, some of which works well, some of which needs development. How do we know what kinds of development we are looking for in this context? Well, in English, it is development that takes students into disciplinary expertise. In short, there are two potentials to consider here – that of English as a discipline and that of the students as this is manifested in their writing. Continuities should be created between one potential and another. Furthermore, our metalanguages should assist us to move between the

instantial and the systemic (Halliday, 2002). In this enterprise, Halliday's notion of metafunctions gives us different "ways in" to the meaning choices made by students.

Halliday argues that all texts and all choices within a text make three major kinds of meanings. The most familiar kind of meaning is the *ideational* (what a text is "about"). Ideational meaning includes both the experiential "content" of a text and the logical connections made between messages about experience). In its ideational aspect, a text construes or represents the world around and inside us. The *interpersonal* metafunction focuses our attention on the relationships assumed in an act of communication (how a text positions me). Here we consider things like the evaluative meanings explored in the last section (speech roles adopted and allocated to listeners, focalization, perhaps even the stance adopted in and through a whole text). Finally, we consider *textual* meanings, to do with the way a text coheres internally into a particular whole and connects with its context (how the text is organized). "Finally" is the wrong word here. All texts and all utterances make each kind of meaning simultaneously. I cannot speak without saying something about something, without taking up a stance in relation to my listeners and without making decisions about what to put first, make thematic and what to put last, make news.

Let's look at two pieces of writing and use the grammatics to explore the meanings made by students from the point of view of metafunctions. Both narratives were composed by students involved in the Scaffolding Literacy program (Axford *et al.*, 2009). In an orientation, a writer needs to introduce a reader to the world created in the text – show him or her around, and establish enough of what we need to know about the world of the characters so that what happens to them later makes sense. The first text, *Lady Elliot Island*, was written by Michael, a boy who attended the Schools and Community Centre at the University of Canberra for help with literacy difficulties. He based this description on a chapter from Roald Dahl's *Boy*, the chapter about a visit to the dentist.

Flying into Lady Elliot Island, the southern most coral cay of the Great Barrier Reef, I could see the island itself and all the way to the edge of the reef. The island was oval shaped and on the eastern side the lagoon could clearly be seen. Varying shades of sparkling blue water encompassed the island. The beach consisted of numerous shapes and sizes of broken down dead coral (some as big as footballs). As I walked around the island I could feel my feet sinking into sun-bleached coral sand. Broken pieces of sharp uneven coral kept stabbing me in the feet and it was a relief to encounter the rare patches of soft sand. The vast expanses of rough coral beaches did not stop me exploring the whole island and I soon discovered the lighthouse situated on the south western side. Although the lighthouse itself wasn't that impressive, it marked the start of Second Reef. This was a superb snorkelling spot and when the tide was right you could ride the current all the way to the Coral Gardens and vice versa.

The water was crystal clear with vast forests of coral stretching as far as the eye could see with huge schools of fish and the occasional turtle feeding on the coral and the scarce shark darting here and there feeding on the fish. But the best thing by far was the manta rays. The manta rays were black and white and at least two meters across and two and a half meters long with large gills and gaping mouths. They would stare sinisterly at you with their beady black eyes as they glided past you in their never ending quest for krill.

Experientially, this text works well. Michael has created three physical planes of experience for the reader so that we move from up high (the view from the plane), to round about (the view from the vantage point of the beach) and from beneath the waves. Through this vivid description we can literally see the world on each plane as we move down. Once we are down at the beach, note the delicacy of choices in the nominal groups about coral: “Numerous shapes and sizes of broken-down dead coral (some as big as footballs)”, “sun-bleached coral sand”, “broken pieces of sharp uneven coral”. The physicality of the experience is rendered through detailed nominal or noun groups like this and through vivid adjectives, as in the description of the manta rays with their “large gills” and “gaping mouths”, “their beady black eyes” and their “never ending quest for krill”. Still in the experiential world, Michael uses very strong verbs to capture their movements precisely. Here we find “glided” rather than “swam”, “stare sinisterly” rather than “look” and “darting and feeding” – all very evocative verbs.

Through the interpersonal lens, we consider issues like point of view, evaluation and how the text positions us to see, feel, judge and appreciate what happens – how the text acts on us as readers. In Michael’s text, not only is the physical point of view carefully staged – moving down from high above to below the ocean – but the psychological point of view is beautifully managed. The whole experience is focalized through the viewpoint of a young man, a writer communicating awe and aesthetic delight in Lady Elliot Island.

The textual lens focuses our gaze on texture – how the text is patterned. Michael’s writing is tightly organized, with a unity that can only be there because of the carefully orchestrated dance between features of the island and the experiencing “I” of the observer/writer. The text hangs together and the syntax is well controlled. In sum, Michael’s text works to create a plausible experiential world for its readers, refracted through the point of view – aesthetic appreciation – of a first-time visitor to Lady Elliot Island and it is communicated through tightly woven literate semiosis.

Let’s now look at a piece of writing produced by a young boy, Kelvin, after 6 month’s exposure to the Accelerated Literacy Program (a variant of Scaffolding Literacy) in Western Australia (Gray, 2007) (Figure 3). What can we see here of development in Kelvin’s writing? This text also moves between inner and outer experience and we participate experientially in the atmosphere of this suspenseful orientation. There is enough information in the circumstances to know when things are going on – “One night” and also something of where – “in the deep darkness”, “against the moonlight” but it is an evocative not a precise “where”. We need greater explicitness about the circumstances of the characters in order to build mentally the possible world in which they live in order to make better sense of the text. The characters also need greater explicitness if we are to understand what is going on for them. Kelvin refers to “all the kids” but which kids? There is a reference to Seamon walking “against the window” but where is the window – in the house? It is hard to know which “he” is being referred to at times. It helps to know something about the genre the student is approximating. In a mystery narrative the reader needs to make some sense of things even if there is a big enigma at the centre of the experience. In this text, there is not (yet) enough clarity about the details of this possible world to be understood.

Interpersonally, the text is more powerful. The writer's choice of words positions the reader to feel suspense, mystery, fear and a sense of urgency – achieved through the dialogue and through the perceiving verbs – “looked” and “saw”, and so on. However, Kelvin could do some more work on physical point of view in this text so the reader can see things clearly. In movie terms there are too many “jump cuts” and the focalization is compromised as a result.

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One night in the darkness a boy name Seamon was looking for all the kids. When suddenly a group of voice was whispering in the shadow he walke againt the win listening for the kids crying he "yelled were are you? Help, help?" a voice scram in the deep darkness and looked still in the dark he could see a flickering light againt the moonlight ne looked like a men smoking and moving it up and down as he walke through the woods. You cant find them here!! side a strange voice againt the moon light in the back of him still smoking as he talk. "I will gave you a map" whispered him.

Figure 3. Kelvin's writing

Textually, Kelvin is on the way to coherent literate semiosis. Sentences are varied and related to one another. But sometimes it is hard to see the connections between them – where one sentence ends and another begins. Some are non-finite sentences, needing a main clause to make the sense. Work on cohesive devices such as reference would help – keeping separate track of the main character and the ghost or mystery voice.

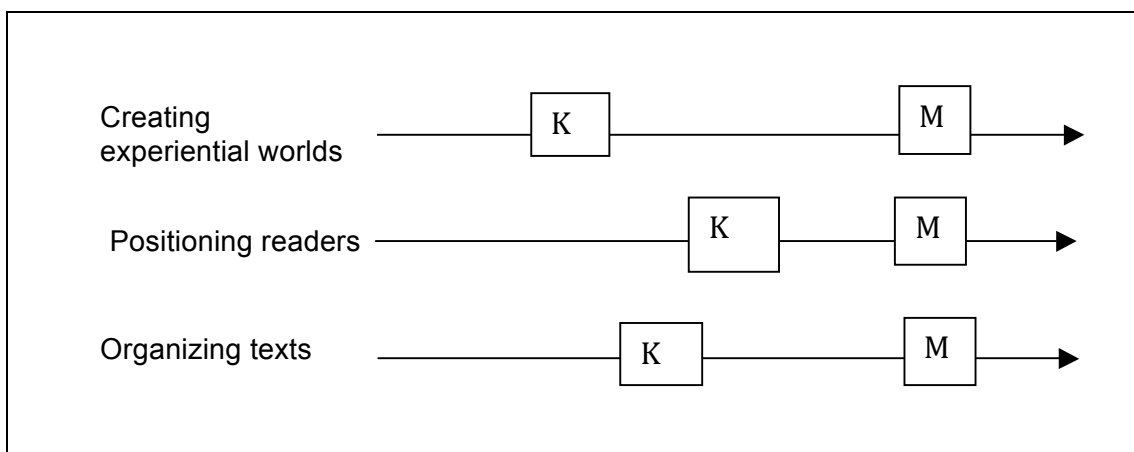


Figure 4. Capturing and leading development using metafunctions

Figure 4 provides a metafunctionally diverse perspective on the two texts: what is achieved and what needs development. The key feature of Halliday's grammatics is that it gives us ways of capturing development in a constructive and forward-looking way. With access to linguistically principled but meaning-oriented lenses on wordings, we can celebrate what has been achieved in students' work (what is emerging) and intervene to push the work in productive directions (disciplinary development).

SOME INTERIM CONCLUSIONS

This paper has opened up some of the issues facing any metalanguage developed to equip teachers and their students to negotiate the difficult shoals of a "back to basics" political agenda and the call for a 21st-century toolkit. It has laid out some of the dilemmas facing any navigational toolkit honed for use in this often confusing and certainly contradictory environment. English teachers need tools for understanding what is going on in students' writing, for example, but also constructive ways of leading development so that their students are able to do more meaningful work as a result of their interventions and their conversations. They need usable tools that enable them to understand what is going on in their students' writing and for moving forward – ways that operate out of potential rather than deficit models of language and of their students' work. Both conventions and innovation are important in this agenda, especially given the ascendancy of high-stakes testing. Creating continuities between and paths into the territory of success in English will be made easier if teachers and students have access to good quality tools (grammatics) for managing conversations with students about their writing and meaningful tools for helping them to improve it.

The other aspect, within the digital world, is equally pressing. Here, the grammatics must give us some purchase on a vast and increasingly diverse range of texts and textual practices. These same teachers and students need access to a toolkit for engaging with these, one continuous with but also differentiated from their literate grammatics. We cannot underestimate the extraordinary difficulty of this new environment with its pressures for improvements in "the basics" for all students and for a 21st-century knowledge base for English.

My interest in systemic functional grammatics – the limits and the affordances – is one contribution to the conversation we need to have about the challenges of the digital sea in which English now floats. Our map of this textual New Holland is incomplete. The journey is taking the profession into a swirling mist of uncertainties in poorly charted territory and contrary winds. But it is clear that the time for a finessed and comprehensive analytical tool kit necessary to explore these changes has come and requires systematic attention. This is the "stretch" necessary if we are to encompass the heterogeneity of contemporary school English – the indistinct forms of the new territory, the contrary winds and the sturdy boat that carries us through it.

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