

Learning about language: the role of metalanguage

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Is meta-language in fact scaffolding that sticks around?

(Martin 2006: 115)

The question of what should be known about language is one that has intrigued educators over the centuries. We can trace this interest back to ancient Greek where the study of grammar was a key feature of the learning how to use language to argue effectively. In more recent times in the United Kingdom, beginning with the Bullock Report into the Teaching of English in 1974 to the Language in the National Curriculum in 1989 to the more recent Primary Literacy Strategy: Grammar for Writing produced in 2000, it has been argued that language plays a central role in teaching and learning. Within the Australian context, it is very heartening to see that one of the three major strands in the newly minted National Australian English Curriculum is 'Language'. There it is argued that "a fundamental responsibility of the English curriculum is to develop students' understanding about how the English language works"

(see www.australiancurriculum.edu.au).

While arguments are made for the central role of language in teaching and learning, we also have at the same time a kind of language dilemma raised by Ruqaiya Hasan in "Ways of saying: ways of meaning":

The ubiquity of language is such that we go about the business of living, making use of it and taking it for granted in much the same way we take it for granted that eyes are for seeing and ears are for listening

(Hasan 1996: 14)

As Hasan suggests it is not so easy to see the marvellous work that language does because of its ubiquity, because we all know it, because we all use it, because it is so naturalised. If we are to see beyond just saying how important language is, we have to have some means for talking about it, for 'de-naturalising' it in order to gain a deeper understanding of its powerful role in teaching and learning. At the heart of the matter, if we want our students confidently reading and writing across the range of genres and registers required by schooling,

then we need to understand *how* language works to make meaning.

In 20 years of working as a teacher educator who is deeply interested in the role of language in teaching and learning, I have become increasingly convinced that the Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) model is the most powerful and effective tool for understanding how language works to make meaning. If teachers and students alike are to understand how language works to make meaning, then it follows that we need to develop a meta-language, a language for talking about language. For me, as a mentor in teacher research projects, as a co-writer of various versions of the Language and Literacy (LL) course and the Teaching ESL Students in Mainstream Classrooms (TESMC) course⁵ which are underpinned by a functional model of language, the critical question is not *whether* we should develop a shared metalanguage between teachers and students but a question of how much metalanguage. In my view, meta-language, as Martin suggests in the opening quote, *is* scaffolding that sticks around. And the richer the metalanguage, the stronger and more enduring the scaffolding we provide for our students.

In this article, I will show some of the ways professional development courses such as LL and TESMC have taken up this question of developing meta-linguistic understandings in educators, who in turn develop the same disposition in their students. The aspects discussed are ones that have proved particularly powerful and that have resonated with teachers and students. I should point out that although it is beyond this relatively short article to provide a fulsome description of the model or do justice to the myriad ways it can shape what we do in the classroom I hope it gives some insight into what might be possible.

Drawing on a functional model—in brief

In both the LL and TESMC courses language is seen as the meaning making system 'par excellence' (Painter 1996) and both, in varying degree, attempt to make explicit the workings of the language system. In the discussion that follows I will outline some of the ways the courses draw on three major components of the SFG model: genre register and language. Of course, it is impossible to do justice to this in such a short space but it will give readers some idea of how the model has shaped teaching about language in a range of

⁵ These courses are professional development courses which have been designed to develop EAL and mainstream teachers' knowledge about language as part of an explicit pedagogy. They have been delivered in Australia, Europe including the UK, Hong Kong and many other parts of Asia.

educational contexts. To make this discussion a little easier I have included a diagrammatic version of this rich and complex model (see Figure 1 below).

‘unclutter’ the curriculum by giving focus and direction to their teaching. It further enables teachers to focus on the salient language features of the focus genre (see Polias p42, this volume).

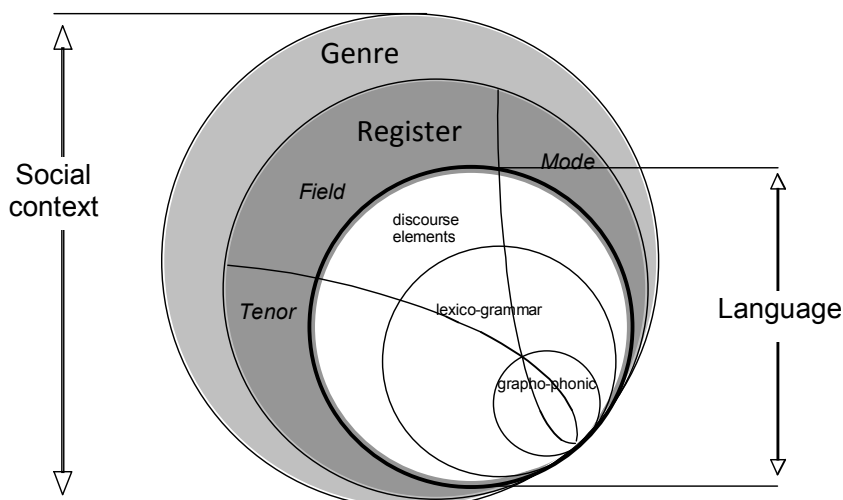


Figure 1 The SFG model: genre register and language

In both courses, we begin by exploring the notion of genre, a term introduced by Martin who argues that within each cultural context (represented in Figure 1 by the outermost layer) there are patterns in the way we make meaning. He further defines genre as ‘staged, goal oriented purposeful social activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture’ (1986: 33). Applied to educational contexts, this has been extremely helpful in identifying the critical educational genres of any given curriculum and the patterned ways these texts work.

The fact that each genre has a particular purpose and that it unfolds in stages has been a very helpful starting point for teaching students about text. As students do schooling, they encounter a range of genres from simple recounts to information reports, explanations and arguments, each with their own purpose and schematic structure. In being explicit about the purpose, we can apprentice our students into the appropriate use of a given genre. In being explicit about how they unfold in their typical stages and phases (see Polias this volume), we are providing a framework for them to order their meanings in a culturally accepted way.

In both the TESMC and the LL courses, we emphasise the importance of focusing on the structure and language features of a single genre in any given teaching learning cycle. By identifying such a ‘focus genre’, we can provide rich scaffolding that will ensure students gain a good measure of control and much deeper understanding of that particular genre. Having a focus genre has also been instrumental in helping teachers

Once teachers have an understanding of what genres are to be taught and their associated structures and language features, it becomes easier to map out the progression of genre throughout schooling. Mapping out the genres in this way enables teachers to see the developmental pathway for students from the early years of schooling, where students are engaging a relatively narrow range of genres, to the upper levels of schooling where students will meet the full array of genres across the subject disciplines.

Moving to register

Moving down a level now (the next strata in Figure 1) to a more immediate context in which a text unfolds, we consider the register. Here, we consider three important aspects of that context: the field (the what of the text, the angle on a particular topic), the tenor (the nature of the interpersonal relationships of the interactants and their roles they take up) and the mode (which is concerned with how written or spoken the text is and also the means of communication).

We spend time in both courses developing understandings of these three register variables. Importantly, we discuss them in terms of the following continua (see Figure 2). Teachers have found this extremely helpful for both themselves and understanding what they expect their students to do and for the students themselves to understand what is expected of them.

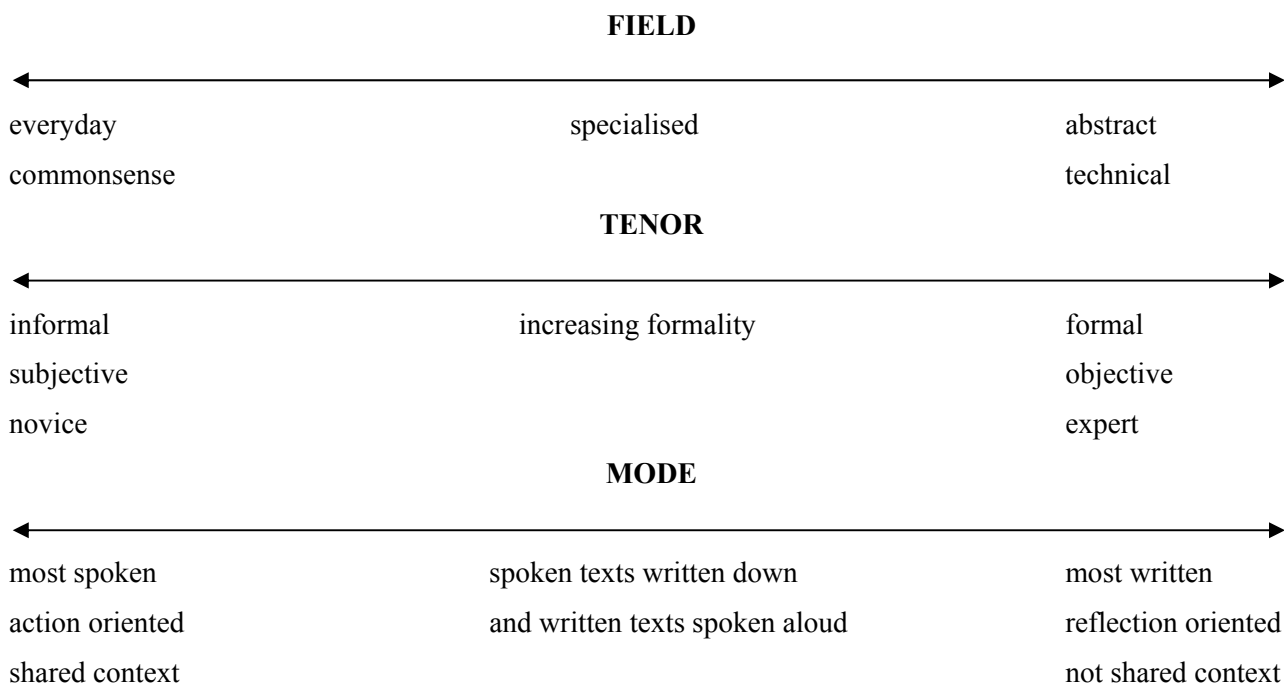


Figure 2 Register Continua

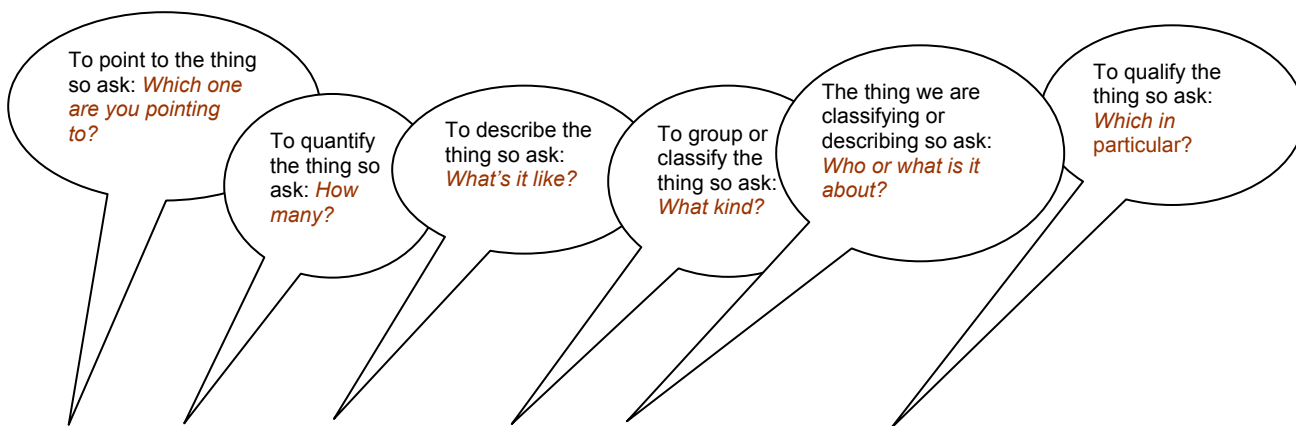
In terms of field, we see shifts from the more everyday, concrete fields, where students can see and touch things and experience their world more directly, to those fields such as History, subject English and Science where abstraction and technicality abound. In terms of tenor, students move from interacting with those they know in more immediate contexts, where they take on a narrow range of roles to contexts that demand more distant, impersonal relationships with unknown others, where academic ‘objectivity’ and disciplinary expertise are highly valued. With mode, we see a shift from contexts where students use language in the here and now in face to face dialogues and where language often accompanies action to those contexts where language reconstructs the action, where reflection takes place, where we have time to plan, organise and edit our written texts.

By exploring each variable in turn, teachers and students are able to get a much more delicate and nuanced insight into the nature of the ‘contextual pressure’ on the texts students are expected to read and write. Teasing out the field, tenor and mode will enable us to see much more clearly the kinds of language choices that will be effective in any given context. In our courses, we continually emphasise this interconnectedness of language and the social context. But this is only part of the picture. The other part lies in understanding the language system itself.

Getting down in to the language system

We now take a further step down the model to the language level (see Figure 1). In understanding the language system itself and its relationship to the context we need to be clear about what we mean by text. A text is ‘any instance of language, in any medium, that makes sense to someone who knows language’ (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 3). Any given text then is a set of choices from the language system, with the language system representing the set of potential choices. In a functional model these choices are intimately connected to the social context in which the text unfolds. If we are then to understand this nexus between the text and the context, we need to understand the resources available in the language system.

Both the TESMC and LL courses build understandings about genre, register and the language system. However, the courses differ in the depth to which they explore the language system. In this next section, I will focus on two major resources that have been taken up (in differing degree) by both courses: the nominal group and nominalisation. These two resources are ones that have been taken up most readily and to great effect by teachers and students.



Those	two	beautiful, old	art deco	buildings	featured in the documentary	are to be demolished
pointer	numeration	describer(s)	classifier(s)	thing	qualifier	

Figure 3 Building a nominal group

Introducing the nominal group

When we considered the register continuum above we saw how we can use it as a way of articulating and making explicit the shifts in register encountered by students as they move through schooling. One of the major barriers to student success in schooling is moving from spoken to written mode. How do they make their texts sound more written like? Why does it sound like they are speaking out the text, even though it is written down. One of the language resources deeply implicated in this shift is the nominal group.

A nominal group is a group of words built up around a key noun as illustrated below with the key noun ‘buildings’:

Those two, beautiful old art deco buildings
featured in the documentary are to be
demolished.

We can see that this nominal group is quite long and contains a lot of information built up in a patterned way around this key noun. Building up information before and after the key noun within the same nominal group is a pattern typically seen in written language. When we speak, we don’t talk like this and in fact we would see that our talk is characterised by shorter nominal groups. Understanding the nominal group and how we can pack in information is one of the keys to showing

students how to move from more spoken to more written modes.

One of the first steps teachers have found useful in understanding the nominal group is to use a set of functional questions to identify the functional components of the nominal group. Working with Figure 3 above we can see that the one essential element of a nominal group is the ‘thing’. While we can have nominal groups consisting of just the ‘thing’, more typically we find one or more of the other elements which we can use to classify, describe, point to and elaborate the ‘thing’.

As illustrated in Figure 3, a set of questions can be used both to identify these various functions and to create the associated functional labels. Using these functional labels is a crucial step in building every students’ metalanguage and this can and should start at an early age. We know, for instance, that in Australia at least some of the functional labels used here have been taken up even by very young students in the first year of schooling.

Teachers across all levels of schooling can use these questions as part of a rich array of activities aimed at building understanding of how the nominal group works. Pictures can be used to identify what ‘thing’ will be classified, described, numerated and pointed to and elaborated on. Words can be placed on cards which can then be manipulated and the resulting nominal groups discussed and explored. Why, for instance, do we place the classifiers next to the thing and before

the describers? Why do we tend to say ‘beautiful, old’ rather than ‘old, beautiful’? Which part of the nominal group is the main verb of the sentence agreeing with?

Once students have some sense of the structure of the nominal group, they can move to identifying patterns in the nominal groups across different genres. They can contrast the patterns they will see in Science texts (much greater use of classifiers) with those or more literary texts (much greater use of describers). They can practice building up nominal groups, sometimes overbuilding to the point of unwieldiness. They can look at how writers play with the nominal group. They can practice how to repackage information contained in two or more clauses into a single clause by expanding the nominal group as part of a deliberate focus on shifting their writing to a more written mode. Teachers and students together can unpack the long nominal groups of highly written texts to more spoken mode where students are more likely to understand the meanings being made.

Turning it into a noun: nominalisation

An equally rich and fertile area for moving students from more spoken to more written mode is developing in students a capacity to understand and use nominalisation. At its simplest, nominalisation is a process whereby meanings that are realised through verbs and adjectives are realised as nouns. We introduce these notions in our courses by looking at simple transformations such as the ones below.

More spoken	More written
She explained to her father why she failed but he didn't accept it	Her explanation for her failure was not accepted by her father.
He was confused and everyone knew it.	His confusion was apparent to everybody.

It is apparent that the versions on the right are somehow more written like. One of the reasons for this is the shift away from a reliance on verbs and adjectives in the originals to a reliance on the nouns ‘explanation’, ‘failure’ and ‘confusion’. You may also notice a change in the number of clauses with the examples on the right consisting of only one

clause in contrast to those on the left. Both these shifts are evident whenever we move from more spoken to more written modes.

Let’s see how one teacher, Susan Marshall¹, supported her English Literature students (at senior secondary school level) to move from a more spoken mode to a more written one with a series of interventions including a focus on nominalisation and the nominal group.

Below is a first draft of an analytical response from one of her students (aged 17 and from a non English speaking background) to the poem *Pieta* by James McAuley (Please note that I have added bold font to some words, the reason for which will become clear later).

Initial response

OK well what have we got to discuss today? It’s pretty obvious that the guy in this poem can’t get over the fact that his baby who was premature died at one day old. Lets face it it would be awful for anyone. You really feel for this new dad because he tries to work out why his son died but can’t find any **answers**. Lots of people die for no **reason** and this can be pretty sad. He asks lots of **questions** to the mother and God and sort of blames both of them in a way. When he says ‘with one hand touched you’ and ‘**wounds** made with the cross’. So James speaks a lot about losing someone special and how it really gets to people and makes them stay grieving.

If we do a quick analysis of this text in terms of register, we can see that clearly this student is at the wrong end of the register continuum. In terms of the field, she has made language choices that reflect a more colloquial, commonsense realisation of the field and a misunderstanding of the appropriate tenor (‘OK well what have we got to discuss today’, ‘the guy in this poem’, ‘it would be awful’, ‘James’). Crucially she is operating in spoken mode and you can almost hear her ‘speaking’ this text.

While the brief register analysis above shows how much work needs to be done in a number of areas, it was clear to Susan that her student was having enormous difficulty engaging with and writing

¹ A full account of Susan’s work with this student can be found in Marshall 2006

about abstract ideas and issues required by such a response. This is reflected in the use of nominalisation in this text (see in bold above). Those that we do see are either very common, everyday nominalisations that even young children would understand ('answers', 'reason', 'questions') or taken from the original text ('wounds').

After some serious and systematic work around nominalisation and the nominal group among other linguistic work, Susan's student built up her ability to operate in a more academic, written register required by this particular educational context and this capacity is clearly evident in the first few lines of her final submission, reproduced below.

Final submission

Loss is a universal human **experience**. James McAuley's *Pieta* explores the devastating **effect** of a premature baby's **death** on a father. The **inability** of the father to accept this **death** and his **need** to assign **blame** are captured in his constant **questioning** of both the child's mother, who at least was able 'with one hand' to 'touch' the baby and God, who has inflicted lasting '**wounds** made with the Cross'. ...

There is a lot to say about this text but two things stand out. The first is that we now see a much greater degree of nominalisation prevalent in this text (indicated in bold), reflecting the degree of abstraction we would expect to see in such a response. We also see clear evidence of the student taking up the potential of the nominal group. See for example 'a universal human experience', James McAuley's *Pieta*, 'the devastating effect of a premature bay's death on a father', 'the inability of the father to accept this death and his need to assign blame', all of which reflect a more written mode.

In summary, we can see that there is an enormous difference between this text and the original, which would have barely achieved even a pass mark. The latter text contributed to Susan's student achieving a high pass in her English Studies exam and a place at university.

What else can be learnt about the language system?

While both the TESMC and LL courses deal with all the above, the LL course goes much more deeply into the language system. In the very early modules

of that course participants are introduced to a fundamental area of the grammar, referred to as transitivity: the *processes*, *participants* and *circumstances* that realise the field of any given text. While these are technical terms they capture nicely what experience is being represented in each clause.: the process that is going on (the doing, thinking, saying or being), who or what is participating in that process (either the person(s) or thing(s) involved in some way) and the circumstances (the when, where, how and why) around that process.

Transitivity is seen as providing a springboard for developing further understandings about the language system. Once students have a basic understanding of these groupings, they are much better placed to move onto other areas of the language system. Areas such as theme (see Polias this volume) and how that can be applied to longer stretches of text through hyper-theme and macro-theme, the system of cohesion and the interpersonal resources such as modality and appraisal are all covered.

The LL course covers a lot of linguistic territory much of it new to teachers. However, it is obvious from the overwhelmingly positive responses we have had to the course that there is a deep thirst out there for such knowledge about language. While in the early days, there was some diffidence about what could and should be known about language, particularly about the take up of the meta-language, over the years there has been a huge shift in both interest and willingness to know about these things and to develop those same understandings in students. It is not unusual to see comments such as the following:

An in depth, thorough, relevant, cross curricular, comprehensive, analytical, star-burstingly good study of grammar, language and learning.

(Language and Literacy Course Lambeth 2004)

It was the most difficult, most rewarding learning experience I have had.

(Language and Literacy Course Brisbane, 2009)

At the risk of sounding contrived, I would like to say that this course has been life changing for me in terms of my pedagogy and curriculum leadership. Thank you!

(Language and Literacy Course Brisbane, 2010)

Where an explicit approach to teaching students about language is used, we have also seen enormous benefits to students, particularly with improvements in their writing. One of the outstanding examples comes from a class of seven year olds who were taught about transitivity, theme, active and passive voice and elaborating 'which' clauses² as part of a focus on sequential explanations on how milk gets from the cow to us. A fuller account of the actual teaching activities is available elsewhere (Polias and Dare, 2006) but here is a student example of before and after a literacy intervention

Before

The farmer milks the cow then the farmer bring the milk to the supermute then the people biy them.

After:

Cows which are to have had a calf befor been milked by automatic suction cups. After the cow has been milk, the milk is stored and pumped into silos.

Now the milk is delivered to the factory to be homogenised and pasteurised to kill chse and bucteryer. The milk is made into skim milk and flavoured milk. Next the truck is washed before it delivers the milk to the deli and the supermarket. Last the supermarket is selling the milk to the people.

Steven

We can see a quite dramatic improvement here with Steven's texts, an improvement that was achieved over just ten weeks of schooling. This improvement was seen across the whole classroom and it is a pattern which I have seen replicated over and over again where teaching about language is done sensitively and systematically within the context of a rich teaching and learning cycle.

² For example, we see two elaborating which clauses (in bold) used by one student in the following sentence 'The raw milk is now pasteurised **which is heating the milk up** and homogenized **which is spreading the cream.**' Note also the use of the passive voice in this short example.

In summary

As Hasan's earlier comment hinted at, de-naturalising the thing that is most naturalised to us is a challenging task. Any serious attempt at getting teachers and students to understand how language works to make meaning needs to be accompanied by a deep and sustained exploration of the language system itself. As has been argued, the SFG model of language provides us with a rich resource to do that.

We have seen above some of the possible ways we can draw on this model to understand how texts work. We have also seen the critical role a metalanguage plays in this exploration, providing as it does the means for talking about and reflecting on the language choices we make in any given text. While inevitably this involves a certain degree of technicality, in my experience, teachers are continually surprised and elated at the ability and willingness of their students to take on that technicality as they would in any other area of learning.

In my view, we are only beginning to understand and recognise the value of having a substantial, coherent and shared metalanguage between teachers and students. Overwhelmingly, my experience over the last twenty years has been that providing both teachers and their students in turn with a rich metalanguage is the most powerful way we have of building our students' capacities to make meanings across an ever expanding range of contexts.

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