

SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS  
AND A THEORY OF LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION

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**Abstract**

Systemic functional linguistic (SFL) theory has never acknowledged a clearcut distinction between theoretical and applied interests. Instead, the theory has tended to develop often in response to applied needs and questions, while in turn the theoretical gains that are made have tended to provoke further questions from applied contexts. The emergence of language in education theory, one of the primary applied interests in SFL theory, reveals how successful has been the dialogue between theoretical questions and applied questions. Two important themes in SFL theory, having significance for the emergence of language in education theory in Australia since the 1960s, have involved models of register and register variation on the one hand, and models of the functional grammar on the other hand. Register theory and the related theory of genre associated with the 'Sydney School' of SFL linguists, have developed considerably, helping to provide models of language for teaching and learning. The descriptions of the grammar, in terms of the metafunctions and in terms of systematic accounts of differences between speech and writing, have significantly enhanced theories of pedagogy and of language in education more generally. Much more work remains to be done in developing accounts of

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the grammar for teaching to the different age groups across the years of schooling.

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## **Introduction**

A familiar distinction is often made between theoretical and applied linguistics, and like most such distinctions, it has its values. It is true that a great deal of linguistic research is devoted to the development of theories about language, where no necessary applied consequences follow. Conversely, not all areas of applied linguistic research and theory are of primary interest to theoretical linguists. Nonetheless, at least in the systemic functional linguistic (SFL) tradition, the distinction between applied and theoretical interests is not clearcut. Any study of the emergence of the SFL theory over the last 50 to 60 years or so demonstrates how much the interests of the theory have been both theoretical and applied, so that in some senses the distinction is not even helpful. Contributions in the theoretical sense have had consequences for developments in applied areas, while applied studies have equally tended to rebound back on theoretical studies. One of the most significant areas of work in which SFL theory has made a major contribution is in educational research and in the development of a theory of language in education. Research in language in education is in fact an applied linguistic area, though I would want to suggest that the SF work done in forging and developing a theory of language in education has itself also contributed to the advancement of the theory in a more general way. In this paper, I propose to offer a review of the emergence of a SF theory of language in education, as that has developed over the last 40 years or so, and as it has emerged particularly in Australia.

## **Early developments**

One of the earliest discussions of a theory of language and its teaching in the SF tradition was offered by Halliday, McIntosh and

Stevens (1964). Basing their discussions on the teaching of English (though they also referred to the teaching of other languages), the writers argued, among other matters, for more imaginative practices in teaching English in schools than had been the case in the recent past. They identified three types of language teaching: 'prescriptive, descriptive and productive' (Halliday, McIntosh & Stevens, 1964, p. 226). The 'prescriptive' practices focused on preferred patterns of expression (e.g. the rule in English that says a verb must agree with its subject, as in *I saw*, not *I seen*.). Judgments about such matters, they pointed out, were social and 'institutional', rather than descriptive, and while they no doubt should be taught as features of standard English, they needed to be tempered with a sense of the importance of teaching and learning in the other two areas. Descriptive language teaching, they argued, takes the native tongue and examines it in much the same sense that a descriptive linguist does, developing a much enhanced awareness of the language, its character and its power. Too little work, Halliday and his colleagues argued, was done in schools in looking closely at the native language, so that many school students acquired such conscious knowledge as they held about language from the experience of learning other languages. This they considered was regrettable, and it did the mother tongue poor service in educational processes. 'Productive' language teaching, according to Halliday and his colleagues, aimed in particular to extend students' resources in using language, and to expand their capacities in making meaning in many ways. Working in the latter sense, they argued, would take students into learning about the varieties of language available, and this in turn opened up issues of register and dialect. It was the 'range and use of different varieties of the native language..... which (was) the focus of productive language teaching' (Halliday, McIntosh & Stevens, 1964, p. 242). The latter observations regarding varieties touched on many of the issues that were to become increasingly important in the SF theory of language in education as it emerged in later years. Indeed, they remain important to this day.

As it happened, one of the earliest discussions Halliday offered of register appeared in the volume on language teaching (Halliday, McIntosh & Strevens, 1964, pp. 87-98). The discussion was developed partly in contrast with the notion of a dialect. While a dialect was a variety dependent on the user, a register was a variety dependent on use. No detailed descriptions of registers were yet available, so Halliday and his colleagues wrote, though it was clear, they suggested, that varieties in use depended on the operation of three variables: 'field of discourse' (or social activity); 'mode of discourse' (the medium or mode of language activity); and 'style of discourse' (which referred to the relationships between participants using language). In the ensuing years, a great deal of further work was to be done on developing descriptions of registers, making major contributions both to the overall SF theory and to theories of language in education. I shall say more about these matters below, though before I do so, I should say a little more of educational developments in the 1960s and 1970s with which Halliday and others were involved.

With hindsight it is clear that the period of the 60's and early 70s was one in which, at least in the AngloAustralian contexts, considerable amounts of funds were made available for educational research and for curriculum development initiatives of many kinds. Halliday succeeded in attracting funds and directed projects (1964-71) devoted to developing better models of language for pedagogic purposes than had been available, as well as enhanced language and literacy curriculum materials. For an account of these developments, see a discussion by Pearce, Thornton and Mackay in Hasan and Martin's festschrift volume for Halliday, (1989, pp. 329-368). Two well known curriculum development initiatives of the projects Halliday directed were *Breakthrough to literacy* (for teaching initial literacy) (Mackay & Schaub, 1970) and *Language in use* (for the secondary school years) (Doughty, Pearce & Thornton, 1971), while a third, devoted to the 'middle years' of schooling, led to *Language and communication 1 and 2* (Forsyth & Woods, 1980). There were in fact many other outcomes. These programs were very innovative in their time, and they were

extensively used in other English-speaking countries including Australia, while translations into other language were also produced. *Breakthrough to literacy* sought to teach literacy in ways that would appeal to young children's strong sense of the meaning-making potential of language, developing an awareness of the handwriting and spelling systems while also focusing on the construction and interpretation of real texts. The middle years studies sought to arouse a curiosity about language and communication through all kinds of practical exercises, exploring reasons for using language, for example, as well as teaching something of the history and development of writing systems. *Language in use* provided a large number of activities which sought to raise consciousness about language, examining among other things variations in use, much in the manner suggested by Halliday and his colleagues in the volume devoted to language teaching and alluded to earlier.

Collectively, the curriculum outcomes of the programs of the 60s and 70s that Halliday had directed all represented a bold and imaginative focus on teaching language *in use* and *for use*. A very strong sense of the social significance of language and its varieties informed all the curriculum materials. They all aimed to teach important knowledge about language, though there were at least two areas in which more remained to be done. The first area I have alluded to: it was the fact that considerably more theoretical work needed to be done on registers and register variations which would, among other things, provide an enhanced theoretical base for further curriculum work. The second area concerned the need for a pedagogic grammar. The curriculum materials referred to, while teaching a great deal of knowledge about language, did not actually address the issue of a grammatical knowledge in any systematic way. Work on articulating a functional account of grammar was certainly in progress, but no comprehensive account as yet existed. As events were to unfold, the work of developing register theory as well as that of describing the functional grammar would emerge in such a way that theory and practice bounced off each other. Theoretical advance would stimulate

educational application; conversely, such application would tend to expose issues that would require renewed theoretical efforts in order to address them.

### **Developments of the 1970s and 1980s**

It was in the 1970s and early 1980s that Halliday was to propose a model of language development in a tripartite sense, as involving learning language, learning through language and learning about language. *Learning language* referred to learning the basic resources of one's first language: mastering the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. *Learning through language* referred to the important activities of learning about one's world through the resource of language; shaping and articulating a sense of relationships as well as an awareness of ways to express experience. *Learning about language* referred to taking language itself as an object of study: learning about (i) its grammatical systems, in terms of its meanings, vocabulary, phonology and writing systems; (ii) its status as an institution, as aspects of community and culture; and (iii) its varieties, in terms of register and dialect variations. The three were to be understood in sequence, so that learning about language should be built upon the learning of language in the other two senses.

The model of language development was adopted for a national Language Development Project (Language Development Project Occasional Paper No. 1, 1979) in Australia. (The model was also explored in some detail in the festschrift volume edited by Hasan & Martin, 1989, referred to above). The model was a useful one for pedagogy in that it offered correctives to at least two contradictory trends in much language education theory and practice, the proponents of which were often in hot debate. Firstly, it stressed the importance of active *learning of language and learning through* it as prerequisites to *learning about language*. This served, on the one hand, to correct the tendency of much established teaching practice of focusing on teaching about language at the expense of children's own awareness and

understanding of language. Secondly, it served, on the other hand, to draw attention to the need for teaching of *knowledge about language*. Curriculum theory in the 60s and 70s in both the UK and Australia had moved towards what might be called various 'process models' of teaching and learning, whose concerns were in particular with facilitation of processes of learning in students, often at the expense of areas of 'content' that might be taught. This trend in curriculum had consequences for all areas of teaching and learning, but nowhere more so than in language education, where it was often argued that students' own 'growth' in language was of primary importance, and the role of the teacher was that of 'facilitator' of the growth. Such a view gave the role of the teacher a much diminished significance, for the purposes both of selection of content to be learned, and of strategies to teach it.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to say much about the trends in curriculum theory of the 60s and 70s in the English-speaking world. The interested reader might consult Stenhouse (1975) on curriculum theory, Britton (1970) on notions of the role of language in personal growth, and Dixon (1967) for a discussion of a growth model of language, and its consequences for pedagogy. Suffice it to note here that in Australia, when the tripartite model of language development was first launched, it was the third element, to do with teaching and learning about language that proved the most controversial.

A collection of papers edited by Maling-Keepes and Keepes (1979) and prepared for a national conference on the Language Development Project (LDP) drew attention to a climate of thinking about the language curriculum that focused on fostering children's own experiences in using language, often at the expense of overt teaching of knowledge about language. Differences of opinion about the role of language and teaching about it emerged among the various speakers, Halliday (Maling-Keepes & Keepes, 1979, pp. 279-286), for instance, insisting on the contribution linguistics could make to education and the values of teaching knowledge about language, as well as arguing for a redefinition of the role of the teacher as more than facilitator. At the

time it was a proposal that was not universally well received. At another national conference organised around the same period as the LDP Conference, Barnes (in Gill & Crocker, 1977, pp. 85-94) specifically queried the values of linguistic knowledge for teaching in school. So preoccupied had many become with a focus on language and its function in personal development and learning that a view had emerged that nurturing growth in language was of greater significance than overt teaching of knowledge about this. It was against a background of resistance to the teaching of knowledge about language that SF theory began to forge a new path in language education theory in the 1980s in Australia.

### **Genre theory and its impact in language education theory**

As I noted above, as early as 1964 Halliday and his colleagues had proposed the importance of a theory of language in which register and register variation had a central role. Their original discussion of register in terms of 'field of discourse', 'mode of discourse' and 'style of discourse' was further developed by Halliday (e.g. see Halliday in Halliday & Hasan, 1985, pp. 29-43). In the later discussion he proposed the register variables of 'field of discourse' (social activity), 'tenor of discourse' (the relationship of participants in the discourse) and 'mode of discourse' (referring to the manner and channel of communication of the discourse). These would become standard terms in the SF theory henceforth. To the discussions that Halliday was offering by the late 1970s to early 1980s he was now also adding a much more fully developed account than had been true in the early 1960s of the relationship of linguistic choices to the register variables. The notion of the *metafunctions* had begun to emerge in Halliday's thinking by the late 1960s, and it was being clearly stated by the end of the decade (e.g. Halliday, 1970). Thus, it was argued, all natural languages have three fundamental metafunctions, or functions that are embraced across all areas of the language and that reflect the fundamental purposes for



which language has evolved. Language has an *experiential metafunction*<sup>1</sup> (to do with the nature of the experiences represented in language), an *interpersonal metafunction* to do with the nature of the relationships realised in language, and a *textual metafunction*, to do with those choices made in language to organise the text as a message. The 'hook up' of register variables and language choices could now be theorised. The experiential metafunction relates most fundamentally to the field of activity; the interpersonal metafunction relates most fundamentally to the tenor of activity; and the textual metafunction relates most fundamentally to the mode of communication of the text.

Halliday's particular achievement was that he could demonstrate how the grammar of a language realised the choices with respect to each of the metafunctions, and how these in turn created the text with its register variables. The claims for the presence of the metafunctions in language, and their significance in understanding how a text is shaped and comes into being, as well as how they realise the register choices of any context of situation, are quite distinctive to SF theory, setting it apart from other linguistic theories in many senses. More than most linguistic theories, SF theory offers quite overtly a social theory and a theory of social action. That is, it involves a theory about the nature of social life, a theory of language as a fundamental semiotic system involved in the shaping of social life, and a theory about the possibilities of social change. Such a theory, so Halliday has always claimed, has much to offer education, psychology and sociology, to name three areas of social theorising.

The discussion of language as a 'social semiotic' by Halliday and Hasan (1985) represented an important step in the development of SF theory, bringing together as it did in succinct fashion their theory about both register and metafunctions, and it was recognised as useful to educational theory. Indeed, the volume in question was one of a series I developed while at Deakin University as part of a Master of Education program taught by distance mode<sup>2</sup>. The collective set of educational monographs represented at the time the most complete statement of SF theory and its relevance for educational theory available.

While the series of Language Education monographs referred to was itself in development, Martin and others were already developing a theory of genre and register which departed in some ways from the formulation offered by Halliday and Hasan. The theory was to have considerable significance for the development of educational theory, and for that reason it merits some discussion here.

Martin, who had taken up a position at the University of Sydney in the 1970s and was therefore working alongside Halliday, had been originally taught SF theory by Gregory, and the latter had always had a somewhat different formulation of register from that of Halliday. Gregory (e.g. Gregory & Carroll, 1978) had proposed that there were four register variables: field, personal tenor of discourse, functional tenor of discourse and mode. Martin had early adopted this formulation himself. The distinction between the two formulations of tenor rested on the view that one must distinguish those features of language that related to the personal relationship and its expression in the text and those that related to the function of the language in the text. About the latter, Gregory and Carroll (1978, p. 53) wrote, 'Is the speaker trying to persuade? To exhort? To discipline?' The latter had much to do with what might be termed the overall rhetorical purpose of the text, and in fact Gregory and Carroll even wrote that the 'the generic structure of text is often defined in terms of functional tenor' (See Benson & Greaves, 1973 for a discussion using Gregory's model of register). In Halliday's formulation of the matter, issues to do with the function of the text in the latter sense were accommodated in his model of mode (e.g. see Halliday in Halliday & Hasan, 1985, p. 26).

It was in working with educational linguists such as Rothery (e.g. Martin & Rothery, 1980, 1981), that Martin eventually came to reconceptualise the model of register. He came in time to propose that while there were indeed three register variables of field, tenor and mode, what had hitherto been thought of as the functional tenor should be removed from the register description altogether. Instead, operating at another plane of experience, he claimed, there was genre (Martin,

1985). Martin invoked Malinowski's original distinction between context of situation (1923) and context of culture (1935), — a distinction which was of course also used by Halliday and Hasan (1985). He argued firstly that any text involved a set of linguistic choices with respect to field, tenor and mode, and that these were a condition of the context of situation, and secondly, that the text was in turn an instance of a particular genre, where the genre choice was a condition of the context of culture. It was educational research which had caused Martin and his colleagues to extend SF theory in this way. A simple example will serve to illustrate the point. Working originally with Rothery on analysis of children's written texts, Martin observed that writers could take the same field of experience (a class visit perhaps), the same tenor relations with their reader (perhaps that of friend to friend), and the same mode (written), yet nonetheless produce different genres. Young writers might, for example, produce a recount whose most marked feature was the temporal unfolding of sequence of events; they might, alternatively, produce an observation genre whose structure does not involve temporal sequence of events but simply description of some events, typically linked in additive rather than temporal fashion; finally, they might even produce a narrative structure, possessed of some sense of temporal sequence but also, unlike the other two genres, involving some problem or complication and some resolution.

The formulation of texts as 'text types' or 'genres' in terms of an interpretation of both context of situation and context of culture led to the emergence of a great quantity of publications of an educational nature, some devoted to descriptions of genres for schooling (e.g. Christie, 1985; Christie et al, 1990a, 1990b, 1992; Feez & Joyce, 1998; de Silva Joyce & Feez, 2000), and others to an account of a genre-based pedagogy (e.g. Feez, 1998; Martin, 1999). Equally it led to the development of various publications of a more theoretical nature, pursuing the implications of an SF theory that recognised both register and genre (e.g. Eggins, 1994; Martin, 1992, pp. 493-587; Eggins & Slade, 1997, pp. 227-271; Christie & Martin, 1997 ). Halliday and Hasan have

never accepted the need for a model that involves both register and genre (see Hasan, 1995) though Halliday (personal communication) has certainly observed that Martin and his colleagues have demonstrated successfully how the distinction can be used for purposes of pedagogy and educational theory more generally.

### **Claims and counter-claims for a genre-based theory of pedagogy**

As I indicated earlier, genre theory emerged in a period of history in which language education theory in the AngloAustralian tradition had become preoccupied with various models of the 'growth' of young learners in language, where the role of the teacher was that of 'facilitator' of learning, and where overt teaching of knowledge about language was generally discouraged. In the late 1970s and 1980s, genre theorists offered what was often seen as a disturbing challenge to the prevailing ideologies of language and language teaching, and nowhere was this more marked than in the teaching of literacy. In particular, genre theory proposed identification of the target genre for reading or writing, and explicit teaching of knowledge about at least some aspects of the language in which such a text was realised. Genre theory challenged a view that had become an orthodoxy in parts of Australia, that children would learn to read and write in situations where they were given general encouragement to read or write, but little systematic tuition. They would, so such a view proposed, prosper best when left to follow their own intuitions and interests in ways largely undirected by their teachers. The ideology involved was sometimes justified in terms of an alleged 'natural theory of learning' whereby it was suggested that children learned their oral language 'naturally' in essentially untutored ways: hence, it was said, literacy should be learned by the same 'natural' means. Such a view, said the genre theorists, was unsatisfactory for at least two reasons. In the first place, the 'natural learning theory' was itself a false one, since it failed to pay proper

attention to the ways in which young children learn their first language and the considerable role their mentors play in assisting the process. Gray (1987) wrote an important paper debunking the so-called 'natural learning theory'. The second reason advanced by the genre theorists for rejecting the 'natural learning' theory was that it was based on a very naive understanding of the nature of written as opposed to spoken language. The two modes are in fact grammatically different, and the natural theory simply never acknowledges this. Furthermore, children are never exposed to the models of written language to the same extent that they are exposed to the models of oral language and for that reason as well they will need to learn literacy in different ways. The learning of literacy requires overt instruction in order to do justice to its character, and it has been in developing accounts of written language (e.g. Halliday, 1985) and their pedagogical implications (e.g. Hammond, 1990; Derewianka, 1995) that SF theory has made a major contribution. I shall return to this matter below.

One of the criticisms made of genre theory, apart from those based on a 'natural learning theory', has been the claim that in its concern to describe the various genres necessary for school learning it has produced accounts of these and then taught them in largely 'formulaic' ways. The implication is that, contrary to what *should* be the goals of an education in developing individuals with habits of independence, students are equipped to be no more than upholders of the 'status quo', using the genres of power, but not capable of acting with independence in forging new genres and thus new ways of making meaning. Genre theory then, in this reading of the matter, has no radical agenda, despite the claims of genre theorists that it does (see Martin, 1999 for some account of the claims of the theory as a radical agenda). On the contrary, genre theory, it is said, offers a very conservative educational experience for students, failing to do justice to the needs of students to be encouraged and assisted to become independent in their learning (See Lee, 1996).

The criticism to do with the alleged conservatism of genre theory is a false one in my view. The genres found in any context of culture are

there because they represent established ways of making meaning, and any educational program that fails to teach the genres needed for successful participation in school learning, as well as much subsequent life, is simply irresponsible. The fact that it is argued the genres should be explicitly taught does not in any way deny the importance of learning to critique and, where necessary, challenge those genres. In fact, genre theorists would argue that it is precisely because students develop a careful sense of the ways genres are constructed and of the purposes that they serve, that they can both manipulate and use the genres to their own ends, where this will on occasion involve critique. The genres of any culture are in any case in some senses prototypical, and like most prototypes, once mastered, they can be played with, amended and altered to serve particular goals.

About the various debates to do with genre pedagogy in Australia Halliday (1996) has suggested that it is unwise to offer a literacy pedagogy that ignores the need for informed participation in its uses. To some extent, perhaps, the debate about the claims of explicit teaching of genres may never go away. In my view that is because there always will be an appropriate tension in educational endeavours between teaching for a knowledge of what is the case, and teaching for a recognition of new possibilities. It is that tension that offers a challenge to any intelligent teacher who will, hopefully, seek to bring this to the consciousness of students as they grow older.

To return to a theme touched on in the opening pages of this paper, the development of genre theory and related theory of register had been stimulated as we have seen by educational research, though it had in turn had a profound impact on the further development of SF theory, at least as that came to be associated with the so-called 'Sydney School' of SF theorists. I want now to turn to the issue of functional descriptions of speech and writing and their implications for pedagogy. Here again, the requirements of pedagogy have tended to stimulate major theoretical research in SFL theory.

## **Speech and writing and pedagogy**

Much earlier in this discussion, when outlining educational developments in the 1960s, I noted that important work needed to be done on describing both register and the grammar. Above, I have indicated some of the developments in the advance of register theory with its associated embracing of genre theory, at least among the 'Sydney School' of linguists and applied linguists. But developments in advancing the descriptions of the grammar have also been considerable. The first work of any substance by Halliday on the grammatical differences between speech and writing appeared in 1985, and it is notable that the volume concerned, called *Spoken and Written Language*, was actually written as one of the series of educational monographs I alluded to earlier. It was I who commissioned Halliday to produce such a monograph, since at that time, teaching at the Master's level in particular, I saw an urgent need for a model of the grammatical differences between speech and writing of a kind that would serve the interests of an educational theory and help to guide pedagogical practices. For Halliday, while it was certainly produced as part of the educational series, the volume was also a very important milestone in pursuing the theoretical description of the functional grammar which had found its most complete expression in his *Introduction to Functional Grammar*; published in 1985. The latter, incidentally, appeared in a revised version in 1994 while a further revised version, written with Matthiessen is now in press.

As Halliday very elegantly explained the matter, written language has a very different grammatical organisation from that of speech, reflecting the very different functions for which the two modes have emerged in the human species. Where speech is 'dynamic', reflecting its role as a mode of action, writing is 'synoptic', reflecting its role as a mode for reflection on action. Among the important matters that Halliday pursued in his account of the grammatical differences between speech and writing, he introduced the notion of 'grammatical metaphor'. This was a term which referred to the ways in which the grammatical features

of writing were changed 'metaphorically' in the process of becoming writing. Grammatical metaphor has several forms of expression and space will not permit a detailed discussion. Suffice it to note here that one of the most common of these, very important for pedagogy, lies in the ways in which the actions of life, typically expressed in verbal groups, find re-expression in the nominal groups of writing. A made up example will illustrate the point. Consider the two clauses: *The soldiers invaded the town and then destroyed all the buildings*. The meanings here might well be expressed thus: *The soldiers' invasion of the town led to/was followed by the destruction of all the buildings*. In the latter case, the two clauses of the original are reduced to one, while the conjunctive relation between the two clauses expressed in *and then* is reexpressed in the verbal group *led to* or *was followed by* (either would be acceptable). Finally, the verbs *invaded* and *destroyed* are re-expressed as nouns, forming parts of two nominal groups, *the soldiers' invasion of the town* and *the destruction of all the buildings*. Thus are the actions of life, expressed in verbal groups, often turned into the phenomena and the abstractions of writing, expressed in nominal groups.

Of course, adults are all capable of expressing both formulations of the meanings involved in our made up clauses here in both speech and writing. However, so Halliday argued, and as subsequent research (e.g. Derewianka, 1995; Christie, 2002) has indicated, the second formulation, involving as it does greater lexical density than the former, tends to be the preferred formulation in writing. Furthermore, as the research also clearly demonstrates (e.g. Derewianka, 1995; Aidman, 1999), the development of capacity to produce formulations like the second kind with its use of grammatical metaphor is a development of late childhood to adolescence. This is an extremely important finding for pedagogy (see Christie, 2002), revealing something of the developmental stages that students will pass through in order to achieve control of literacy, and also suggesting something of the tasks for teaching literacy. Contrary to what have sometimes been rather simplistic formulations of the matter, literacy is not uniquely mastered



in the first years of schooling, when children learn a great deal of the spelling, handwriting and punctuation systems, as well as some of the rudiments of the grammar of writing. Instead, as we now understand much better than even a few years ago, complete control of the written mode is a development of adolescence and of secondary education.

The work has been important in using the functional grammar for understanding the developmental stages through which children go in order to learn literacy. However, at the time of writing this paper, more work requires to be done, as we still lack sufficient descriptions of children's writing. We need for example, more longitudinal descriptions of the kind for example that Derewianka did in the case of her own son, and Aidman did in the case of her daughter, where, in the latter instance, the study involved a bilingual child and her literate development in both English and Russian. We also need studies which will address the literate development of children in different social classes. Probably inevitably, to this point such studies as we have by Derewianka and Aidman have involved the children of professional middleclass families. We also need large scale studies of whole populations of students as they move up the years of primary and secondary school, the better to trace the impact of different school regimes and teaching styles on children's literacy.

### **Teaching knowledge about language, including grammar**

There is another sense in which a functional grammar is important for pedagogy, apart from its values in describing the differences between speech and writing, and in providing guidance in tracing developmental changes in control of literacy. I refer here to its significance in providing a model of knowledge of language for teaching the young. Earlier I referred to Halliday's tripartite model of language development, adopted for a national Language Development Project in Australia - in the late 1970s and 1980s. I noted that the third element of the model involved learning about language, and that in Australia in the 1980s this aspect of the model met considerable

opposition. Genre theorists, once they began to offer models of genres for teaching purposes, were in fact offering procedures for teaching knowledge about language, and as I noted above, many critics of genre theory rejected this on the grounds that it interfered with the 'natural' and/or independent processes by which children should be left to grow into an understanding of language in largely untutored ways.

What were some of the ways in which genre theorists advocated teaching knowledge about language? They sought to describe the various genres for writing, including for example narratives, recounts, procedures reports and explanations, to name only a few. In describing these, the theorists sought both to identify and name the elements of schematic structure of each genre, and to identify at least some of the features of the grammar in which these elements were realised. Many textbooks and curriculum materials were produced in Australia to promote an understanding of these, and I shall mention here only one or two. Derewianka (1990) produced a very readable introduction to genre theory for primary teachers, and she moved between using traditional class labels for some grammatical items such as 'verbs' and using functional labels such as 'participant' or 'reference'.

Together with colleagues, I was involved in the development of a series of genre-based books for the primary school, already cited above under the general title *Language a Resource for Meaning* (LARM) (Christie et al, 1990a, 1990b, 1992). I want to say a little about the writing of these, for what it reveals of the issues we sought to address in teaching knowledge about language. Each set of books produced in this curriculum package involved four student books and a teachers' manual. The students' books took a given genre (procedure, report or explanation) and taught it each time with respect to a different field of knowledge, and with respect to an intended different age group. The books were intended, roughly, to follow the school years 3-6, though no particular years were specified on the grounds that the books could be used with different age groups (they were in fact even used in adult literacy programs, we afterwards discovered). One example of a genre used will suffice, namely explanations. These were introduced in four

books with respect to explanations of life cycles, natural disasters (such as cyclones), electricity and astronomy.

A particular set of principles determined the construction of each student book: the target genre was introduced in terms of the purposes for which such a genre would be used; a subsequent example or examples were provided and these were deconstructed to teach their various elements or stages, and the functions of these; students were then encouraged to practise research and writing of their own genre, often in a group situation, though ultimately individually. Ultimately, students were asked to take a related though different field of knowledge from that used to introduce the target genre, research that and then write their own instances of the genres. Importantly, before students moved to the last stage, they were introduced to a section in the student book called 'Looking closely at meaning'. Here they were required to look closely at some aspect of the grammatical choices in which the meanings of the text were realised. In the case of explanations of life cycles, for example, they were taught a little about theme choices and thematic progression. By contrast, the fourth book, devoted to natural disasters, and intended for older students, introduced notions of grammatical metaphor, though this term was not used. Instead, notions of abstractions were very simply introduced.

It was in writing the sections devoted to 'Thinking about meaning' that the team faced many of the biggest challenges. What aspects of knowledge of grammar should be taught? And which aspects should be taught to which age groups? Above all, how might the knowledge of grammar be introduced for a community of teachers as well as students, who, we already knew, had very little understanding of grammar in the traditional sense, let alone in the functional sense?

Over time, because of the influence of many books and curriculum materials such as the LARM books, certain terms did achieve some currency among teachers in Australian schools. However, for the most part I think it is true to say that most Australian teachers, while often enthusiastic about genres and the names given to them and their elements of structure, were largely reticent to teach grammar, either

traditional or functional. There were of course many honourable exceptions, including teachers who undertook coursework in SF grammar, while in certain Australian states such as Queensland (under the influence of the curriculum officers, John Carr and Lenore Ferguson) and South Australia (under the influence of the curriculum officers, John Polias and Brian Dare) language curriculum documents were well developed, and widely taken up by teachers in the 1980s and 1990s.

Overall, despite undoubted achievements in some parts of Australia, by the mid to late 1990s, while genres were still talked of in many places, grammar was generally not well taught in either the traditional or the functional sense, and many teachers, when challenged, acknowledged considerable discomfort in trying to teach about grammar. In this sense, the SF genre theorists had been only partly successful in spreading a knowledge of grammar in a manner that might cause teachers to take it up. There were of course, many reasons for the lack of success, and I can indicate these only briefly. In the state of New South Wales, for example, very bitter battles occurred over whether the preferred model of grammar should be traditional or functional, and ultimately the functional model was rejected, because it was either seen as too technically demanding, or because it was thought to achieve no more than did traditional grammar. Elsewhere, and certainly in many teacher education institutions, an older view prevailed that much teaching of knowledge about language, including grammar, was unnecessary.

By the close of the 20th century, while SF models of grammar were not in wide use in Australian schools, it had also become clear that there was growing official disquiet over the lack of any adequate teaching of grammar in the schools. At its best this development has caused some Australian states such as Victoria, to introduce language studies at the upper secondary levels, and the signs are that teachers are growing in confidence in teaching such studies. Yet the pattern is at best uneven and it is also clear that many discredited practices for teaching English grammar have begun to reappear in Australian schools. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that since many teachers

feel unconfident to teach grammar themselves, they are easily persuaded to use some of the reasonably inferior school textbooks that have appeared for teaching about language.

To be sure, many of us have continued to work on developing pedagogically suitable accounts of English grammar, and the work will certainly continue. Williams (1998, 2000) has demonstrated how a functional grammar can be used even by the early childhood teacher in guiding young children's learning. Derewianka (1998) has produced a grammar companion for primary teachers, and this is now used in a number of teacher education institutions. Others of us (e.g. Christie & Soosai, 2000, 2001) have developed textbooks for the junior secondary school, where we have deliberately sought to build up a knowledge of grammar in terms of the 'constituent structure' of English, a term taken from Halliday's own account of English. My own recent research in Melbourne, on which the two textbooks were based, has revealed a considerable ignorance about grammar, even in the community of trained teachers of English. Much more work remains to be done, as I have elsewhere recently argued (in press). In particular, we need a much enhanced understanding of those aspects of grammatical knowledge that can most usefully be introduced to students at different stages, as well as a considerably better developed sense of the best pedagogies for teaching such knowledge. And when we have researched these things, then we can also produce some of the much needed source materials for students to use in learning language generally, where these will certainly include in the future extensive use of such things as CDROM's.

## **Conclusion**

The above matters noted, let me conclude by observing that a great deal has been accomplished in the space of a few years in developing a theory of language in education drawing on SFL theory. I have drawn attention to two themes in particular which have had important consequences for the development of the theory. They are

the theory of register and genre on the one hand, and the metafunctional theory of the grammar on the other. The former gives us a principled way to identify different text types or genres and to explain their significance to young learners. The latter gives us a principled way to explain and teach the manner in which grammatical choices realise the text types, while it also provides a rich understanding of the grammatical features of speech and writing. The fact that more work remains to be done in developing pedagogic accounts of the grammar for the use of students indicates that we have reached a new milestone in the unfolding and development of the theory. The challenge is, as always, considerable, but the intellectual resources to do the work are certainly available.

In bringing this paper to a close, I must acknowledge that the view I have offered of developments in SFL theory over the last forty years has been at best partial. I have not for example, discussed Halliday's own considerable interest in a language-based theory of cognition and of learning (Halliday, 1993; Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999). I have also not discussed Painter's very important work on early language development (e.g. Painter, 1985, 1999) though, like Halliday's work on learning, this does in fact make an important contribution to theories of language in education and of pedagogy. Finally, I have not discussed the work of Martin (e.g. 1997) and his colleagues on appraisal and the extensive resources in language used for attitudinal expression. Such work, like other work I have discussed here, grew out of some educational research, though equally, appraisal theory has been subsequently extended into SFL theory overall. To do justice to all these matters would require another paper.

What I have sought to develop is some account of the SFL theory as it has emerged and had consequence in particular for the emergence of a theory of language in education in Australia. Out of the collective effort of developing register and genre descriptions and increasingly powerful descriptions of the functional grammar, we have commenced the 21st century with a great deal accomplished and a great deal yet to

do. The basis for development of improved models of grammar for teaching to students in school is available, and the research in determining what should be taught at what ages across the years of schooling has begun. As has always been true in the SF tradition, the work will be undertaken in partnership between theoretical and applied linguistics, for the dialogue between the two has been the source of much of the productiveness of the SFL tradition.

### Notes

- 1 Strictly, Halliday recognises an ideational metafunction, which in turn consists of both the experiential and the logical metafunctions. While the experiential metafunction involves those resources in language that represent experience, the logical metafunction involves the forms of logical connectedness built up connecting experiential meanings in several ways. The relations of parataxis and hypotaxis found in grammar thus realise logical meanings. The logical metafunction is of course important to SF theory, though like many other writers - including Halliday himself at times - I shall confine my discussions to the experiential metafunction.
- 2 Other volumes in the series included the following, and were later published by Oxford University Press (1989): Frances Christie, *Language education*; Clare Painter, *Learning the mother tongue*; M.A.K Halliday, *Spoken and written language*; Ruqaiya Hasan, *Linguistics, language and verbal art*; J.R. Martin, *Factual writing: Exploring and challenging social reality*; David Butt, *Talking and thinking: The patterns of behaviour*; Gunther Kress, *Linguistic processes in sociocultural practice*; Cate Poynton, *Language and gender: Making the difference*; Michael J. Christie, *Aboriginal perspectives on experience and learning: The role of language in aboriginal education*.

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