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## New ways of working ‘with grammar in mind’ in School English: Insights from systemic functional grammatics



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### ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a framework designed to explore the linguistic knowledge of primary and secondary English teachers as they used grammar ‘to think with’ (Halliday, 2002). Utilizing Halliday’s distinction between usage (grammar) and theory (‘grammatics’), we draw on findings from a three-year study investigating the impact of systemic functional grammatics on teachers’ linguistic subject knowledge (LSK). The paper begins by reviewing limitations of current studies of grammar and shows how we translated Hallidayan concepts like metafunctions and stratification into a grammatics for narrative. It then explains a framework developed to analyze shifts in teachers’ LSK along three dimensions: approach to narrative, levels of language awareness and assessment stance. Drawing on interviews with 23 teachers before and after implementation of grammatics, we use the framework to describe shifts in LSK of two teachers. The paper concludes by discussing the potential of grammatics for exploring the multidimensional character of English teachers’ LSK.

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### Introduction: the challenge of characterizing teacher knowledge in English

Teacher knowledge about language is a pressing concern in English as a subject but its nature and relevance to teachers’ work are under-theorized, particularly in first language teaching contexts. The problem becomes acute when it comes to grammar, associated as it is with popular media discourses of ‘deficit’ (Myhill, 2005, Myhill, 2009; Myhill & Watson, 2014), preoccupation with ‘verbal hygiene’ (Cameron, 1995, Cameron, 1997) and with moral ‘character’ (Carter, 1990). When it comes to research into linguistic subject knowledge (LSK), one approach focuses on challenges of grammatical terminology (e.g. Cajkler & Hislam, 2010; Sangster, Anderson, & O’Hara, 2012), whilst another calls for broadly conceived language awareness (Carter, 1990; Hancock, 2009; Svalberg, 2007). Within research into the impact of grammar teaching on students’ writing, similar polarization occurs, certainly within studies of teaching of English as a first language. One approach will investigate the impact of formal or traditional models of grammar, often in isolation from writing instruction (e.g. Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, & Schoer, 1963; Hillocks, 1984; Andrews, 2005; Andrews et al., 2006). Another will study functional models of grammar, often embedded within writing instruction (e.g. Myhill, Jones, Lines, & Watson, 2012; Fearn & Farnan, 2007). The traditional story of the blind men and the elephant is apposite for characterizing the problem. One person describes

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the trunk, another the ears, and still another the legs or tusks and each description captures only one part of the whole. The complex identity of the creature as a whole gets lost and descriptions become fragmented. In an analogous way, research into grammar needs to proceed from acceptance of its multifaceted nature and its diverse (sometimes complex) contribution to disciplinary work in school English.

This paper aims to contribute to what Myhill and Watson (2014, p. 41) call “an emerging consensus on a fully theorized conceptualization of grammar in the curriculum”. It presents findings from research in the first year of a larger study into the potential of a meaning-oriented theorization of grammar in English classrooms at four year-levels in Australian schools (Macken-Horarik, Love, & Unsworth, 2011). Before we begin, however, it is important to clarify our reasons for adoption of the term ‘grammatics’ in our project. The word ‘grammar’ comes with professional baggage that is hard to shed and makes re-imagining of its role in English difficult. But even its definition is problematic and this often becomes apparent in curriculum descriptions. For example, in papers guiding development of the Australian curriculum, ‘grammar’ is defined as “the language we use and the description of language as a system” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 5). Conflating the two meanings of grammar has often made it easier to denigrate the language use of students, especially those who speak a non-standard grammatical variety (see Carter, 1990; Cameron, 1995; Myhill, 2005 for relevant discussion of this problem). Halliday (2002) has recommended we avoid this problem, proposing that we distinguish between our theory of grammar and grammar in use.

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? (p. 384)

Halliday’s separation of ‘grammatics’ (as theory) from grammar (as practice) underscores the importance of intellectual inquiry into the study of grammar. From this perspective, grammatics provides “intellectual tools for reflecting systematically on language” (Williams, 2004, p. 263). All grammarians pay special attention to units of meaning and form at the level of sentence and clause. All turn language back ‘on itself’ to describe regularities of form and function in the message structures of language. For this reason, some degree of slippage between language and meta-language is probably inevitable. But a powerful grammatics retains what Halliday (2002) calls a ‘mimetic capacity’ – a capacity to be like the thing it describes. A grammatics oriented to meaning can develop this capacity more fully than one preoccupied with form. Of course, any metalanguage – no matter how close it is to phenomena it describes – is just that, a meta-language.

If grammar is the resource we use whenever we produce (or understand) the wordings of a language, grammatics is the theory we draw on as we reflect on this. In his seminal paper on grammatics, Halliday proposes “the simple proportion grammatics: grammar:: linguistics: language” (Halliday, 2002, p. 386). He gives grammar a privileged role in the study of language, arguing that it is “the part of language where the work is done. Language is powered by grammatical energy, so to speak” (Halliday, 2002, p. 387). The key point for us is that a grammatics is a grammatically informed metalanguage for reflecting on grammar. If it is a well-theorized metalanguage, we can use it to shed light not just on wordings, but on the texts in which these occur (Love, Sandiford, Macken-Horarik and Unsworth, 2014). In fact, if the metalanguage is oriented to meaning, we use it to shed light on visual and multimodal texts too (Macken-Horarik & Unsworth, 2014; Unsworth & Macken-Horarik, 2015). In our project, we stressed the intellectual potential of a functional grammatics in school subject English, arguing that it contributed powerfully to creation of a “dynamic and evolving body of knowledge about language” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p.1).

In contrast to the situation facing Anglophone teachers, it should be noted that functional perspectives on grammatical study are more firmly established in second language teaching contexts (e.g. Farrell & Lim, 2005; Lim, 2007; Moore & Schleppegrell, 2014). But the earlier disappearance of grammar from the curriculum in Anglophone countries like England, the USA, Australia, New Zealand and Canada left subject English without a strongly theorized rationale for its re-introduction in 21st century classrooms (e.g. Carter, 1990; Hudson, 2004; Kolln & Hancock, 2005; Loudon et al., 2005; Gordon, 2005; Meyer, 2008). We assumed that using ‘grammar to think with’ (Halliday, 2002, p. 416) was crucial in a discipline currently lacking a “clear articulation of a rationale for renewed emphasis on grammar” (Myhill & Watson, 2014, p. 45).

The Australian research on which this paper is based was undertaken during implementation of a national curriculum with a renewed focus on grammar. This context gave our study pressing relevance for teachers anxious about ‘gaps’ in their grammatical knowledge. The challenge for us as educational linguists was to develop a grammatics that ‘mapped on’ to their prior understandings of grammar (mostly traditional, prescriptive and decontextualized) but stretched them to engage with new understandings (functional, descriptive and contextualized). In addition, we needed to show how the grammatics could serve the study of texts like narratives and enrich approaches to teaching and assessment. In this task, we assumed the value of a broadly conceived ‘Linguistic Subject Knowledge’ (LSK) as Myhill et al. (2012) refer to this. For these researchers, as for us, LSK involves “identifying significant linguistic features and being able to make connections for writers between a feature and its impact on a text or reader” (Myhill et al., 2012, p. 162). Our grammatics was designed to support principled and rhetorically apposite understandings of grammar in the context of narrative teaching at four year-levels. It built on genre-based literacy pedagogy (e.g. Martin, 2009; Martin & Rose, 2008) and on research into applications of systemic functional grammatics in primary schools by Williams (2004), Williams (2005) and French (2012).

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