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Towards a metalanguage adequate to linguistic achievement in post-structuralism and English: Reflections on voicing in the writing of secondary students

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Abstract

This paper considers the development of voicing in the writing of secondary English students influenced by post-structuralist approaches to literature. It investigates students' growing capacity not only to voice their own responses to literature but also to relate these to a range of theoretical discourses. Drawing on systemic functional linguistics, we explore the development of voicing in students' writing in three key assessment tasks in a Queensland Literature Extension course. We argue that students' growing capacities to handle the demands of reflexiveness in this course are manifested in their expanding repertoire of choices related to control of stance, orientation to reading, type of address and orders of voicing. By the end of their course in literary theory, students are producing texts that integrate personal and impersonal forms of voicing, exploiting the potential of projection for embedding and for complex iterations of voice and stancing their proposals in authoritative and independent ways. Drawing on extracts from representative student work from this course, we characterize these developments in voicing as a movement towards greater polyphony (or multivoicedness). Our analysis of the expanded repertoire of choices for voicing in students' texts provides evidence of the power of a well-structured introduction to post-structuralism in senior school English.
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1. Introduction: Issues of voicing, post-structuralism and metalanguage

Too little of our knowledge about language is based on careful attention to the language actually used by speakers and writers as they draw, often unconsciously, on its remarkable potential. The incorporation of a comedic voice in a conversation, the unexpected idiom in an anecdote, the sustained pursuit of a question in literary interpretation – all such 'uses' of language deserve careful study. But how do we account systematically for out-of-the-ordinary developments in secondary English students' writing – for their uptake of intellectual as well as linguistic potential? This paper considers the development of voicing in the writing of students influenced by post-structuralist approaches to literature. It investigates their growing capacity not only to voice their own responses to literature but also to relate these to a range of theoretical discourses. In particular, it looks closely at strategies of voicing adopted by Year 12 (17–18 years old) students across three key tasks in a year-long Extension (Literature) course in Queensland, Australia. Like students' dialogue with different theoretical voices within literary theory, our paper too emerged out of a dialogue.

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It is the product of an ongoing exchange between a poststructuralist theorist (Morgan) and an educational linguist (Macken-Horarik) as we undertook research into the linguistic basis of achievement in post-structuralist English. It builds on an earlier paper that explored the structure of the course and students' responses to this (Macken-Horarik & Morgan, 2008).

The course departs from more traditional literature courses in senior English in that it focusses on contexts and conditions, theories and practices of reading, rather than 'the text itself'. It is, in fact, a course and a curriculum context profoundly influenced by post-structuralism. This theoretical orientation has bought the course and the intellectual enterprise of post-structuralism itself under attack in Australia, as it has elsewhere in the world. Media critiques in conservative Australian newspapers have claimed that theory is 'bad for English' and confusing for students (see for example, Donnelly, 2007; Slattery, 2005). These relate to critiques that have emerged from the academy itself which dismiss theory as fashionable 'post-modern', post-structuralist' or 'critical literacy[1] nonsense' (Abbs, 2003; Bloom, 1987; Turner, 2007). Such revisionist theorists argue that the core business of teachers is simply to help their students develop a deep enjoyment in literature and an abiding, discriminating interest in appreciating its aesthetic and ethical qualities.[2] By contrast, the Queensland course that has provided the data for our paper engages openly with such contestations over meaning and value and the students' writing therefore brings a range of theorists and critics into dialogue.

Because voicing is such a dynamic and protean resource for dialogue, we need to slow the object of study if we are to explore its properties systematically. This does not have to mean killing the 'live bird of talk', stuffing it and then setting about identifying and labelling its properties. But it does mean attending closely to the behaviour of the phenomena, tracking these carefully and describing the habits of the different species of bird in different environments – something akin to the study of finches in different habitats over a sustained period of time, perhaps. For educational linguists, the first task is indeed one of recognition: attending to the moves and voices writers take up at the edges of their current capacity, working in new interpretive contexts. New environments call forth new species – whether biological or semiotic. They also call for new, or at least adapted, tools of analysis. This paper aims to investigate the value of such tools for observing and recording aspects of voicing and for tracking changes in this in challenging (curriculum) environments.

Voicing is central to writing in English – whenever we produce dialogue between characters, cite an author's views or debate the merits of different theoretical positions. It takes many forms, as we shall show in a later section of the paper. But in this course so grounded in post-structuralist perspectives on reading, we observed what we thought was an expanded repertoire of voicing as students moved from performed readings into theorized readings and finally into the problematized readings of the penultimate task of the course. We were keen to understand the linguistic basis of these developments.

The hypothesis tested in this paper is that the structure and intellectual challenge of this Queensland course enables students to take up a sophisticated form of 'multi-voicedness' or polyphony. The expanded range of voicing options we observed in students' texts, we think, were a consequence of their careful introduction not only to plural readings but also to the theories that helped them understand these. Our hunch is that voicing is a site where students' intellectual engagement with post-structuralism becomes visible and the benefits of this engagement demonstrable.

Our analysis of voicing owes most to systemic functional linguistics (hereafter SFL). SFL has several affordances which make it an apposite toolkit for exploring voicing in this paper. It is a metalanguage for exploring language as a resource for making meaning. While it attends closely to linguistic form it interprets this in functional ways. It relates texts to contexts in principled ways, drawing on Halliday's theorization of a motivated relationship between language choices and the contexts in which these are made (Halliday & Hasan, 1985). Perhaps its most powerful affordance, however, lies in the mutually informing levels of organization it construes between whole-textual, sentence and word levels of choice (Macken-Horarik, Love, & Unsworth, 2011). Finally, for our purposes, it is a grammatical metalanguage sensitive to matters of development and change in language – what Michael Halliday calls 'semogenesis' (Halliday, 2004). Such intellectual commitments to meaning, context, text and semogenesis make it an apt metalanguage for

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[1] In Australia, the terms are often used interchangeably, as slurs, by media commentators and politicians. In this paper, 'post-structuralism' refers to a theorized understanding of different reading practices applied to texts.

[2] For a sustained argument concerning a poststructuralist understanding of the aesthetic and its role in the critical literacy classroom, see Misson and Morgan (2006).