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Knowledge through "know how": Systemic functional grammatics and the symbolic reading

MARY MACKEN-HORARIK
School of Education and Community Studies, University of Canberra, Australia

ABSTRACT: This article investigates the potential of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) for exploring students' achievements in writing, thus moving beyond "deficit models" of grammar in school English. It considers the semantic features of successful interpretations of examination narratives, using what I call the "symbolic reading". Halliday has suggested that we need to distinguish between grammar and grammatics, with the grammatics viewed as independent from but sensitive to language in use. In this article, I apply his notion of grammatics to analyze the linguistic basis of students' interpretive achievements. The article investigates three aspects of A-range interpretations of different narratives. These symbolic readings indicate a preference for relational transitivity *of a synoptic kind, an ability to reformulate story significance through elaboration and rhetorical "spans" between material semiosis (in* Theme*) and abstract significance (in* New*). The analysis brings to light what often appears entirely intuitive on the part of successful English students but is nevertheless crucial to their success in examination English. The final section of the article considers some implications of the grammatics for teachers who want to prepare their students to read unfamiliar narratives symbolically.*

KEYWORDS: Systemic functional linguistics, grammar, grammatics, school English, symbolic reading, interpretation, narrative.

INTRODUCTION

Almost all the articles in the first part of this special double issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* point to the need to move beyond what Debra Myhill calls a "deficit model" of grammar teaching (Myhill, 2005, p. 78). This is of particular importance when it comes to writing. But, unfortunately, as Richard Andrews maintains, "no research to date has shown that either the teaching of abstracted grammatical rules or a more diffuse awareness of their existence helps in the improvement or development of writing per se" (Andrews, 2005, p. 74). This is not to say that teachers themselves are not concerned about grammar – their own knowledge as well as that of students.

A few years ago, Jenny Hammond and I undertook some research into teachers' own views of grammar in literacy teaching. We discovered that a high proportion of Sydney teachers (88% of a sample of 126 primary teachers) expressed both a strong commitment to teaching grammar and low confidence in their ability to do it justice. They felt ill equipped to do what they believed they should be doing because of gaps in their own knowledge about language. For example, while 69% of our respondents asserted the usefulness of functional grammar in teaching writing, only 6% felt able to use it in their teaching. There was more than nostalgia to this. Few teachers in our sample indicated a desire to return to "good old days" of parsing and analysis.

However, though they were "agnostic" about which grammar to use (70% thought *either* traditional *or* functional grammar were useful), most teachers agreed that "any grammar is useful as long as it is related to texts". They flagged a new interest in holistic, meaning-based approaches to grammar (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 2001).

But just how do we move beyond "deficit" to explore the grammar of meaning-making (especially in linguistic achievement)? How do we move to a more nuanced awareness of the relationship between knowledge about language and linguistic "know how" in writing? What kinds of knowledge serve teachers and students well in this process? This article presents one view about the kinds of knowledge *about* language that we have access to when we look closely at what students do *with* language when they do it well. In particular, it draws on linguistic analysis in order to highlight the linguistic basis of achievement in interpretive writing.

While there are many grammars available in contemporary classrooms, including "traditional grammar", the theory informing my research is systemic functional linguistics (or SFL, for short). SFL provides powerful tools for analyzing "language in context" and "language in text". It is particularly helpful if we want to bring to light the linguistic patterns that work together (or "conspire") to produce particular fashions of meaning. In this article, I explore the semantic trends in three successful (A-range) interpretations of narrative produced by Year 10 students in English examinations in New South Wales. The interpretations are taken from a corpus collected and analyzed by the author over almost a decade of examinations – from 1986 until 1995. The response texts reveal that although school English has been through intense curriculum changes, examination English has altered little. Teachers continue to like much the same thing when it comes to text interpretation, whatever model of the discipline is currently in vogue.

SYMBOLIC ABSTRACTION

This article focuses on one region of meaning-making in successful responses to narrative – to do with symbolic abstraction. Other aspects of meaning-making in interpretive writing are covered in an earlier article (Macken-Horarik, 2006). Symbolic abstraction is a kind of reading that makes connections between concrete (often recurring) motifs in a text and the abstract thematic preoccupations of its author. In the short stories that I have studied, successful students see motivated connections between experiential details in a narrative such as a spider, an address book or a television switch and their intangible significance. The pathway to this connection is metaphor, a figure of speech in which one thing is described in terms of another. One powerful linguistic means of comparing one thing and another is what Halliday (1994) has called *relational transitivity*. This clause pattern enables us to inter-relate unlike things to one another through wordings such as: "This is that" or "This is like that". As we shall see, this pattern is used to interpret enigmatic events in unseen narratives.

By way of an introductory example, in one of the response tasks I consider in this article, students were asked to explain the relevance (or irrelevance) of a spider in a short story called "The red-back spider". All of the A-range responses I analyzed

construed a link between the discovery of a poisonous spider and a young boy's growing awareness of an Australian woman's prejudice towards his mother and himself (migrant workers). Note the extended comparison in the following response between the situation of the migrants and the spider. Comparative relations are in bold.

> The spider **is like** something foreign and dangerous, just as the migrants are seen as. The description of the spider laying its eggs hidden away **is a comparison** of how the migrants must be. The woman's son is seen as a hindrance, she has to protect him from those who look down on him and accuse him unfairly, **like** when she stands up for him when he is found with the horse. This **is just like** the spider who hides her eggs for protection.

Despite the awkwardness in this student's creation of a parallel between two normally different activities (the woman's protection of her son and the spider's hiding of its eggs), s/he effectively interprets the events of the story by means of the organizing symbol of the spider. This strategy is highly valued in examination English and is typical of a symbolic reading of narrative. It is more than an ability to make "the right reading". In fact, it does not seem to matter whether the spider is linked to the old woman or the migrant family. An open text such as *The Red-Back Spider* leaves large interpretive gaps for the reader to span. What matters in a symbolic reading is access to and control of extended analogy. As will be seen, a "one-off" identification of a figure of speech or a likeness between, say, a spider and another character is not enough; to achieve an "A" grade, a student must sift the *whole* story through the mesh of symbolic analogy.

There are particular areas of SFL that provide fertile ground for analysis of symbolic abstraction: *relational transitivity*, *Elaboration* and spans between *Theme* and *New*. Each of these linguistic tools will be explained following a more general discussion of three response texts and the symbolic abstraction they represent. The point of the excursion here is to show how careful attention to both the meanings *and* wordings of students' written texts yields powerful insights into the kinds of knowledge about language that should be made explicit if teachers are to help all students produce successful interpretations.

METALANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE AWARENESS

One of the interesting things about symbolic reading is that it appears entirely intuitive – an operation performed on an unfamiliar text without a prepared interpretive format. In fact, it is a commonplace that some students just seem to do well in English without knowing what it is they are doing when they do well. Their performances (qua texts) embody a kind of awareness which is not made explicit but which nevertheless marks them as successful members of the discipline. Just how do we bring conscious knowledge about language into relationship with the intuitive awareness successful students seem to display in textual performances? What kind of metalanguage is required here? Both Emile Gombert (1990) and Leo van Lier (1998) argue that we need a working distinction between the practical (implicit) awareness manifested in students' communicative practices and technical (explicit) awareness of the kind demonstrated in linguistic analysis or grammar-based exercises. Van Lier (1998) expresses the value of intuitive, practical meta-consciousness this way:

> Perhaps we should measure (metaconsciousness) by what (students) *can do* with language, the ways in which they can deliberately and skillfully manipulate it. Such measurement is very difficult to do since we are not used to judging metalinguistic and metaconscious knowledge without relying on explicit knowledge of grammatical structures, vocabulary and the like. Yet *conscious control of language is more truly manifested in linguistic performance* than in talking about linguistic performance (pp. 131-132, italics added).

Response tasks such as those that are the focus of this article encourage what could be called a "performative awareness" rather than an analytical knowledge of the kind identified in many current curriculum documents.[1] As students progress up the years of secondary English, most major assessment tasks involve the production of texts about other texts – text interpretation of some kind. In the examination room, this often means responding to a stimulus text (sight-unseen) within a constrained time frame. A detailed linguistic analysis of the stimulus text is not going to be much use to students here. What they need is a metalanguage that enables them to orient themselves semantically to the task, to read the text successfully and which gives them access to a repertoire of rhetorical strategies for interpreting it in writing. In the terms to be developed in this article, they need a semantically useful "grammatics".

GRAMMAR AND GRAMMATICS

There is a special challenge for a knowledge *about* language that is itself made *of* language. In this case, language is both the object of the gaze – the phenomenon we are studying – and the instrument through which we investigate the phenomenon – the meta-phenomenon. Slippages are inevitable in this context, from discussions about "rules" of usage such as agreement between subject and finite verb in English to observations about a person's use or abuse of this in practice. Discussion of *meta*language slides easily into talk about language use (etiquette), so that mentioning the word "grammar" often elicits confessions or complaints about the "poor grammar" displayed in one's own or others' linguistic behaviour. Perhaps this is one reason for the tendency in grammar teaching to focus on mistakes in language use ("deficit" teaching). Michael Halliday (2002) has drawn attention to the problem of this slippage in his discussion of the relationship between linguistics and language:

> The problem seems to arise from something like the following: 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 often quoted formulation. So, leaving aside the moral indignation some people seem to feel, as if linguistics was a form of intellectual incest, there is the real problem involved in drawing the boundary: where does language end and linguistics begin? How does one keep apart the object language from the metalanguage – the phenomenon itself from the theoretical study of that phenomenon? (p. 384).

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[1] The place of explicitness in language education needs further research and discussion. Much is currently made in the New South Wales curriculum about the importance of 'explicit' and 'systematic' teaching of language. My research indicates that we need to reconsider the importance of implicit kinds of knowledge in some English literacy practices.

Following Halliday's lead, in this article I propose the use of the term *grammatics* to refer to tools for analyzing language and *grammar* to refer to language choices inherent in acts of communication. It is important to keep apart the phenomenon (language in use) from the meta-phenomenon (tools of analysis), while recognizing both the difficulty of this analytical separation and the limitations of any tool kit.

The task here is to show how a grammatics can reveal the linguistic basis of achievement in writing. In particular it aims to demonstrate the kind of knowledge that "enables a writer to make effective choices" (see Locke, 2005 and Koln, 1996, for extended discussion of this point). The rhetorical orientation of my analysis focusses on students' achievements in communication, moving away from a grammatics of mistakes or "lack". SFL is a useful theoretical resource here because it permits us to track closely the meanings embodied in written texts. It is a tool kit for exploring language in use, a knowledge closely modelled on "know-how". As Halliday has explained this, SFL remains "permeable" at all points to the phenomenon it is theorizing. SF grammatics "retains a mimetic character: it explains the grammar by mimicking its crucial properties" (Halliday, 2002, p. 397).

In the remaining sections of the article, the word grammatics refers to the metalanguage I have developed to analyze students' interpretive writing. The grammatics attempts to track students' linguistic choices and thus make their achievements more visible and more shareable. The next section provides an overview of the NSW examinations and the narrative contexts of three response texts.

THREE RESPONSE TEXTS AND THEIR NARRATIVE CONTEXTS

Whatever model of the discipline has prevailed in curriculum and in pedagogy over the last several decades in school English, in assessment contexts the open-ended response task remains ubiquitous. This is particularly prevalent in state examinations in English where there are no "set texts" (in Years 7-10 especially). In this article, I focus on texts from a New South Wales examination formerly called the *Year 10 Reference Test in English* and now the *English Literacy* test. This state-wide examination assesses "exit competences" in students at the end of junior secondary English (when most students are about sixteen). Gaining a good *School Certificate* in New South Wales depends, in large measure, on success in this examination. Furthermore, success here is a good predictor of progress in senior English study.

The reading task I focus on here presents students with an unseen stimulus text and a (relatively) open-ended question about the text. The students' response text needs to be an extended piece of writing – an interpretive essay. Narrative is still the most common stimulus text, although the range of text-types and modes is becoming is more varied in recent years. The here is on three responses to different narratives from Reference Test examinations in 1986, 1987 and 1995. In the interests of space, the actual narratives given to students, which take up several pages each, are not included. However, I contextualize the responses generally through a brief overview of each narrative, followed by an exemplary (A-range) response.

"CLICK"

The first narrative, entitled "CLICK", was adapted from an earlier short story by Judith Stamper and was presented to students in the *1986 Reference Test* (Board of Secondary Education, 1987). It is a short story about a young girl, Jenny, who endures unhappy domestic circumstances and largely absent parents by watching television. The story opens with Jenny clicking through the television channels, looking for her favourite soap. It is clear that Jenny is compulsively attached to dramas such as "Secret Loves" and "Doctor's Diary" and is managing to avoid her unhappy domestic reality and her mother's warnings by watching television. Then, one day, Jenny encounters a road accident victim outside her flat. She looks into the dead girl's face and is confronted with the reality of death and unhappy endings:

> The image froze into Jenny's mind. The girl's face was horrible and beautiful at the same time. It seemed more real than anything Jenny had ever seen. Looking at it, Jenny felt as though she was coming out of a long dream. It seemed to cut through the cloud in her mind like lightning.

Jenny returns to "Doctor's Diary" but is no longer comfortable. The pain of her new awareness presses in on her and she realizes that "People never die on *Doctor's Diary*":

> "People never die on Doctor's Diary." At first they were just words that Jenny couldn't stop saying in her head. "People never die on Doctor's Diary." The words made Jenny remember the dead girl's face. "People never die on Doctor's Diary." Then the words started meaning something. CLICK. The television switch sounded through the room like a padlock snapping open.

The examination question presented students with the following question:

> "CLICK. The television switch sounded through the room like a padlock snapping open". Why do you think the story ends this way?

Response Text 1 represents a successful reading and achieved an A+:

> **Response Text 1**
>
> "Click" by Judith Stamper is a very didactic short story, the moral of which the ending of the story and its title conveys to the reader. Click is about a young girl who has run away from reality and its unhappiness and death that it confronted her with. She was unhappy with her family life; she was lonely because her parents and herself lived their lives apart. They had a very distant relationship. Jenny recognised this, but instead of facing it and making what she could out of it; or trying to rectify it, she chose to hide from it. Her hiding place was the fantasy, make-believe world of television.
>
> Jenny only went outside to investigate the accident because there was a television commercial on. When she arrived, the girl was already dead and Jenny, when she look into the dead girl's face, was shocked back into reality. "It seemed more real than anything..." "cut through the cloud in her mind."

> As it hit her, Jenny's reaction was to "switch the channel," to escape; to hide from reality. Jenny realised when she went back inside that the world of television no longer gave her protection from reality. Once she had been jolted back into consciousness the make believe world seemed too fake. This whole experience; the dead girl's face; the shock of reality awake Jenny. The conclusion "Click, the television switch sounded through the room like a padlock snapping open" was symbolic. The padlock was Jenny's mind and its snap was the awakening of reality in that mind; a realisation that it couldn't run away.

Grade A+

A quick glance at this text is enough to reveal the student's attunement to the abstract, symbolic qualities of "CLICK". S/he recognizes the problematic at the heart of the narrative – Jenny's struggle to escape through television the real "world of death and unhappy endings". In a deft move, the television is identified as a token (or outward sign) of the value (or abstract meaning) of attachment to fantasy in the following relational clause: "Her hiding place (token) **was** the fantasy, make-believe world of television (value)". The protagonist's discovery of the road accident victim serves as a major disruption to her habitual way of being. Jenny attempts to return to the habitual world of soaps only to find that her equilibrium is too disturbed. Response Text 1 interprets this inner struggle through the recap of the key events: "As it hit her, Jenny's reaction **was** to 'switch the channel', to escape, to hide from reality". In fact, awareness of metaphor is crucial to the student's interpretation of the final section of the narrrative: "The padlock **was** Jenny's mind and its snap **was** the awakening of reality in that mind; a realisation that it couldn't run away". The symbolic reading is made possible through a relational clause that equates a concrete phenomenon (the snap) with its abstract significance ("the awakening of reality in that mind"). The rhetorical move is summative and synoptic: it re-construes the narrative in the light of the padlock motif, as a sign of Jenny's moment of awakening.

"Friend for a lifetime"

"Friend for a lifetime" comes from the same examination a year later, in 1987 (Board of Secondary Education, 1989). This narrative, by Kelly Stephens, is organized around the memories of an old woman, Lorna, who contemplates times with her lifetime friend, Allison. The narrative begins when Lorna misses the phone because of her enfeeblement and then sits and scans her address book for old names, addresses and phone numbers of old friends. Lorna struggles against the difficulties of her present by reflecting on memories of happier times spent with Allison. Nothing really "happens" in this reflective narrative until Lorna makes a decision to call her friend. The news is sad; Lorna responds with despair to the news that Allison has died. She crosses out her friend's name, deciding, "If Allison could do it so could she." Her death is implied rather than being made explicit.

In order to understand her response to this news, readers need to attend to the oscillation between two "realities" for the protagonist – the pain of her present circumstances and her overwhelming attachment to the past. Both realities are mediated by the metaphor of the address book. This motif recurs throughout and is crucial to readers' interpretation of the "implicature" (additional, unstated meaning) of the final sentence. Students will interpret this adequately only if they have understood the significance of the life-long parallels between Lorna and Allison. This

narrative, like "CLICK", requires a relational reading if students are to fill the gap left by the final sentence.

The task given to students once they had read this text was as follows:

> Every year *The Sydney Morning Herald* has a story competition for young writers. You are one of the judges chosen for *The Sydney Morning Herald* Young Writers Competition. "Friend for a lifetime" by Kelly Stephens is one of the ten stories that have reached the final round of judging. You have been asked to write a detailed comment on the story.

Response Text 2 represents a successful reading of the narrative and the task.

> **Response Text 2**
>
> An excellent story which should definitely be commended. "Friend for a lifetime" deals with the heartbreaks of old age, not only because of the past, but the disappointments of the present, and a poor insight for the future. The first line very successfully describes the main theme of the story, namely, old age, and introduces the subject of the story - old relationships or friendships.
>
> In the first paragraphs, "the woman" is used instead of naming the character. This has the effect of generalizing the topic. It could be any old woman, as they are usually stereotyped by a slow, bent, unlively image. Then the character, Lorna, is introduced by name in the second paragraph. Lorna, like every other old person living alone, lives mostly on memories. She has lived in the same house all her life, as we are later told, which is why she has a memory of an event for every item in the house. This message is brought forward in the story repeatedly.
>
> The telephone and the telephone book are the major links in the story from past to present. They remind Lorna of her past friend, her "friend for a lifetime" – Alison Stoner. This is an excellent method of linking the title to the story. Words such as "blurry", "drifted", "reliving" effectively convey the image that Lorna is mentally moving back and forth in time – over different events of her life. This again reinforces the title.
>
> The two addresses of the friends stand out, and show the comparison between one, Lorna, staying the same, and Alison, giving way to change. When Lorna tries to ring Alison, again the telephone becomes the bridge between past and present. The end is deeply moving. Lorna finds out the "lifetime" friendship has given way to death. So deep was her friendship that she cannot believe Alison has left her. The phone is dropped and Allison's name is crossed out of the phone book, dismissing the "bridge", and Lorna tries to will herself to death, so she can continue the relationship forever.
>
> A thoroughly enjoyable story. Deeply touching and effectively bringing forward the main theme. The theme is definitely universal, and I am sure the majority of our readers would be able to relate to this story in one way or another.
>
> **Grade A+**

As with "CLICK", the response task here seems open-ended. However, it is open only in its invitation, not in its evaluation. In the corpus of responses published and disseminated by the NSW Board of Studies, students who overemphasized the ersatz

role of "literary judge" in their response failed to achieve higher than a "C" or a "D" grade, while those who downplayed the judge role and adopted the role of literary critic attracted "A" or "A+" grades (Board of Secondary Education, 1989). Response Text 2 is a good example of the latter and exemplifies the qualities of a symbolic reading in several respects. Noteworthy is the ability to distill the theme of old age in the opening sentences that summarize authorial preoccupations. Then there is the ability to highlight the symbolic links between concrete motifs such as the telephone and the address book and abstract realms of past and present. Again, the relational clause is the gateway to these connections: "The telephone and the telephone book **are** the major links in the story from past to present". The copular verb "to be" has little meaning of itself but serves to link the subject of the clause ("The telephone and the telephone book") to its complement ("the major links in the story from past to present"). In this response, the student construes the phone as a "bridge" between the past of Lorna's happy memories and the present of her enfeebled reality. This is a crucial link to make in a symbolic reading. Note the student's use of the telephone to interpret the final moments of the narrative: "When Lorna tries to ring Alison, again **the telephone becomes the bridge** between past and present." This symbolic interpretation and the use of this copular construction enables the student to traverse the gap in the final sentence of the story (which implies but does not specify death): "The phone is dropped and Allison's name is crossed out of the phone book, dismissing the 'bridge', and Lorna tries to will herself to death, so she can continue the relationship forever." Once the organizing metaphor is identified, it can then be used to sift and interpret the implicit meaning of the text.

"The red-back spider"

In the 1995 *Reference Test,* students were asked to read and respond to a text called "The red-back spider", based on an earlier story by Australian author, Peter Skrznecki. There is less closure, less heavy didacticism in this text than in the earlier stories. This is partly a result of the viewpoint from which it is written – the first person point of view of a young boy. In this story, the migrant boy and his mother go to work clearing weeds out of the garden of an Australian woman, Mrs Burnett. Mrs Burnett appears to be a racist. She shows no courtesy or welcome to the pair and, in fact, refuses to let the boy play with the toys he has found while sheltering under her house from the hot sun. She also ignores the mother's discovery of a dangerous red-back spider in a tin in the garden. The story tracks the boy's growing awareness of Mrs Burnett's persecutory attitude to her guest workers and his own mother's emotional upset over it. The event sequence embodies the problematic of a young boy's introduction to Australian ethnocentrism.

The examination question asked students to respond to the text in the following task:

> Although the story is called "The red-back spider", it ends with the words, "...I knew it was nothing to do with the spider." What do you think the story is about? How does the writer make it an effective story?

Again, there are different ways of tackling these questions. The task is open-ended enough to warrant either a personalist response – "what *do you think* the story is about" – or a literary interpretation– "what do you think *the story is about"*. Not surprisingly, it is the latter strategy that was (and still is) rewarded. Response Text 3

does not have the obvious finesse of Response Texts 1 and 2, probably because they were selected by the Board for a special booklet for NSW teachers. Response Text 3 is one of approximately 10 A-range texts provided for my personal research by the NSW Board of Studies. It is quite long, so I suggest that readers attend to the middle of the essay, where the student begins to develop a symbolic reading of the story.

Response Text 3

The story is about the way migrants were treated in New South Wales. The boy and his mother were poor and didn't have a very good quality of life. They were unable to live with the boy's father, and his mother had to have more than one job for them to survive.

His mother had to do domestic jobs. She was a servant, and treated very much like one. The story is really about their treatment and is shown in the spider. The employer creates a barrier between herself and the servant. She treats her as though she were not human, but just an animal. The boy is not treated as any other child would be, he is outcasted; just barely tolerated by being allowed to stay. He is made to leave the toys alone, as though just by touching them, he is poisoning them.

The story is about the conditions they are living in. The conditions are poor. They are not even invited to eat inside. They eat outside under the house. Because they are foreign, they are not treated as humans.

The story is also about their feelings. They boy's mother feels sad and angry because of the way she is treated; but mostly because of the way her son is treated. She probably feels angry because of the lack of opportunities he will have, which she can see by the way he is looked down on and the way he is accused when he is found with the toy.

The story is made effective because of the spider. The spider is like a comparison of the boy and his mother. They are treated in the way the spider is; they are seen as if they are poisonous. They are kept outside and the boy is made to put the toy back, like he is poisoning it.

The spider is like something foreign and dangerous, just as the migrants are seen as. The description of the spider laying its eggs hidden away is a comparison of how the migrants must be. The woman's son is seen as a hindrance, she has to protect him from those who look down on him and accuse him unfairly, like when she stands up for him when he is found with the horse. This is just like the spider who hides her eggs for protection. The woman knows that her son cannot grow up the same as other children because he will be treated like an animal; like a poisonous spider.

The spider is killed to symbolise the way that the migrants cannot win. Just as the spider doesn't come running out when the match is lit in the tin, the people are unable to escape the treatment; they just have to take it. They see no way out.

The descriptions make the story effective. The matter-of-fact way in which their lifestyle is described in the first paragraph, without any sign of a want of pity, makes the reader feel for them. The description of the woman speaking to them as if they were "hard of hearing" makes you feel the patronising attitude with which they are regarded. The use of the word "hindrance" and the way the employer speaks to them makes the reader feel for the way they are treated.

> When the boy asks the question, "Was it because it was poisonous, or was there something evil in its nature that it had to hide?", the reader is made to think that the spider only hides for protection, and this is not because of anything wrong with the spider. The spider is the victim. The migrants are also the victims, made to hide away, which also can be shown in sitting under the house and behind purposely closed doors. They are seen as like poisonous spiders, and the innocence of the boy and the feelings of the mother appeal to the reader and make the story very effective.
>
> **A+ 15**

In this third response, as in the two others, accessing and controlling the symbolic potential of English grammar is crucial to a successful reading. But we need to look more closely now at regions of our grammatics that make visible the linguistic basis of this achievement. Here we turn from meanings to wordings.

RELATIONAL TRANSITIVITY, ELABORATION, THEME AND NEW

When students are asked to respond to an unseen narrative in an open-ended way, they typically adopt one of three, basic, semantic strategies at bottom, mid-range and top-range levels of achievement respectively: they speculate on the possible meaning of the narrative; they retell the story and explain its message; or they interpret its abstract significance, synoptically revisiting key events in the light of symbolic motifs (Macken-Horarik, 2006). It will be clear by now that the final semantic strategy is the one preferred by teacher-examiners. One question that requires analysis, however, is how students do aactually operationalize the preferred strategy? It is here that grammatics becomes important.

Relational transitivity

In the above discussion of three response texts, I commented in a general way on the use of symbolic abstraction in each interpretation. One task in text interpretation is to construe "what the text is about". There are two aspects of this ideational reading that are relevant here. The first is what Halliday (1994) calls *experiential meaning* and is realized (or expressed) at clause rank through *transitivity* choices. The system of transitivity construes the world of experience into a manageable set of process types. Each process type provides its own model of a domain of experience. Earlier in the article, I drew attention to *relational transitivity* as an important sub-region within transitivity for considering "what a text is about" for students. It is through the copular constructions of "being" and "having" that we characterize and identify text significance (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, pp. 210-248). A symbolic reading ascribes significance to events or relates one event to another through relational patterns such as: "This **is** that", "This **is about** that", "This **has** the quality of that", "This **is like** that" or some equivalent such as "This **concerns** that" or "This **deals with** that".

There are two types of relational clauses that are possible here. The first – the *Attributive relational clause* - is ideal for describing and classifying the participants and processes of narrative experience. In my response texts, attributive relational clauses often provide an opening synopsis of the narrative's subject matter, as in: "Click **is about** a young girl who has run away from reality and its unhappiness and

death" and "The story **is about** the way migrants were treated in New South Wales." Or the relational clause can be used to comment on the narrative's theme, as in: "Friend for a lifetime **deals with** the heartbreaks of old age."

The second type of relational clause is ideal for equating one area of experience with another. Halliday calls this type an *identifying relational* clause because it serves to identify one thing with another, to assign a value (abstract meaning) to a particular token (concrete form). Unlike attributive relational clauses, these are reversible – either half of the equation can come first. The following two examples from "CLICK" and "Friend for a lifetime" respectively show how intrinsic such processes are to symbolization: "The padlock **was** Jenny's mind and its snap **was** the awakening of reality in that mind" and "The telephone and the telephone book **are** the major links in the story." In these relational clauses, students have access to a wording which enables them to equate one area of experience with another, often identifying concrete details of experience (for example, "the padlock") with their abstract role or meaning (for example, Jenny's mind). It is a crucial resource within a symbolic reading.

However, successful interpretation depends on more than the use of relational transitivity. Unsuccessful responses featured relational clauses such as: "The story **is** good" (attributive relational) or "Her mistress **is** the real spider" (identifying relational). It is not just the presence or absence of relational clauses that is important here; it is the semantic content of the clause (the words which fill the slots either side of the "being" or "having" verb) and the relations each clause enters into with others in the co-text. In short, it is the work done by relational clauses that we need to consider. There appear to be two vital abilities at play here. The first is an ability to read the text holistically – relating one event sequence to another, one character to another, one part of the narrative to another. It is these kinds of relations that matter in symbolic interpretation. The second is an ability to "tune in" to symbolic motifs made salient in the narrative through redundancy of one kind or another. Redundancy often involves repetition and transformation of a motif in the course of the narrative. For example, both the "click" sound and the address book motifs appear at the beginning and the end of their respective texts and both are repeated and transformed in the course of their unfolding narrative. Attunement to patterns of redundancy in the texturing of these motifs gives students access to deeper oppositions and transformations buried in the narrative. It is the awareness of these patterns of meaning that are manifested in students' own wordings – in this case in their synoptic and symbolic use of relational clauses.

Elaboration

Another fruitful area within ideational meaning for exploring relations between one part of a text and another is what Halliday (1994) calls *logical meaning*. Unlike transitivity, which is used to analyze experiential meaning *within* clauses, logical meaning is concerned with semantic relationships *between* clauses. Why should we be interested in this area of grammatics? Primarily because it highlights differences in the way students expand on clause messages, and these give us a window on students' interpretive processes (as far as these can be discerned in their writing). It turns out that the kind of expansion favoured by a student is a predictor of relative success of failure in the genre of text interpretation. A student might expand on a point about a narrative through *extension* – aggregating details about the text, particularly through

use of "and-and-and" links. Another student might expand on interpretation through *enhancement* – rehearsing the events of the story or explaining reasons why a character did something, for example. Another might expand on a point about the text through *elaboration* – further specification or description of a message about the text. It will be clear by now that the third strategy is the preferred one in a symbolic reading because it is the logic by which a reader translates one meaning into another.

Halliday (1994) defines *elaboration* as follows:

> In Elaboration, one clause elaborates on the meaning of another by further specifying or describing it. The secondary clause does not introduce a new element into the picture but rather provides a further characterization of one that is already there, restating it, clarifying it, refining it, or adding a descriptive attribute or comment (p. 225).

Like other types of expansion, elaboration can be realized explicitly or implicitly. Explicit elaboration is indicated through the use of signals such as "in other words", "for example", "to be more precise" or a reduced form of these like "i.e.", "e.g." or "viz". Implicit elaboration is indicated through a succession of messages, often in apposition. Whether it is realized explicitly or implicitly, elaboration is a resource for reformulation of a message. We can supply an equals sign between such messages to bring out this relationship of reformulation. One example from Response Text 3 is: "They are treated in the way the spider is; (=) they are seen as poisonous. (=) They are kept outside and the boy is made to put the toy back, (=) like he is poisoning it". Another from Response Text 1 is: "It seemed more real than anything... (=) "cut through the cloud in her mind."; or, "As it hit her, Jenny's reaction was to "switch the channel," (=) to escape; (=) to hide from reality".

The elaborating logic so typical of the A-range response not only inflects relationships between clauses but also between nominal groups, as in Response Text 1: "This whole experience; (=) the dead girl's face; (=) the shock of reality awake Jenny" or "The padlock was Jenny's mind and its snap was the awakening of reality in that mind (=) a realisation that it couldn't run away". In fact, elaboration can be deployed at word, group and clause rank. Dispersed throughout a text, it allows a student to re-orient the gaze – to construe something one way and then to show that it can be construed in another way. In the examples above, the second message in the series is often more abstract. A capacity for abstract reformulation through elaboration is vital to the symbolic reading.

Theme and New

As it is explored within SFL, *textual* meaning is concerned with clause "as message". There are two simultaneous "message lines" crucial to a consideration of students' packaging of information: one to do with *Theme* + *Rheme* and one to do with *Given* + *New*. As Halliday (in Halliday & Martin, 1993) explicates it: these two lines interact as follows:

> The former presents the information from the speaker's angle: the Theme is "what I am starting out from". The latter presents the information from the listener's angle – still, of course, as constructed for him by the speaker: the New is "what you are to attend to". The two prominent functions, Theme and New, are realized in quite

> distinct ways: the Theme segmentally, by first position in the clause; the New prosodically, by greatest pitch movement in the tone group. Because of the different ways in which the two are constituted, it is possible for both to be mapped on to the same element. But the typical pattern is for the two to contrast, with tension set up between them, so that the clause enacts a dynamic progression from one to the other: from a speaker-Theme, which is also "given" (intelligence already shared by the listener), to a listener-New, which is also "rhematic" (a move away from the speaker's starting point). This pattern obviously provides a powerful resource for constructing and developing an argument (p. 90).

Examination of the two "message lines" in a text gives us a way of interpreting its pattern of argument. Each text exhibits what Halliday calls a "wave-like" pattern of rhythmic peaks of prominence and troughs of non-prominence. These are created through the interaction of *Theme* and *New*. Taken together, they create the distinctive texture of the "A" range rhetoric. I deal with *Theme* first and then *New*.

Theme choices (Method of development)

Theme is the "peg" on which the message is hung and is realized through first position in the clause. While analysis of individual Theme choices discloses only the local context for each clause, examination of the thematic progressions throughout a text reveals a great deal about its overall method of development. Peter Fries has demonstrated that "if the themes of most of the sentences of a paragraph refer to one semantic field (say location, parts of some object, wisdom versus chance, and so on) then that semantic field will be perceived as the method of development of the paragraph" (Fries, 1983: 135). *Theme* is "where the action is" when it comes to discerning the starting point of the clause; the term *Rheme* simply refers to "the rest" of the clause.

There are no first or second person Themes in the "A" range responses. They are all third person Themes which reveal a global orientation to the narrative. Within this orientation, there are two possible points of departure: the "world" of the story (an "experiential" starting point) or the "world" of the text itself (a "semiotic" starting point). "A" range students typically choose either experience (qua text) or "semiosis" as the frame within which they interpret the story. Effectively this means that a symbolic reading either thematizes a character (e.g. "Jenny") and his or her experience or it thematizes the text itself (for example, "The story "CLICK").

Response Text 1 "sandwiches" "experiential" Themes in between "semiotic" Themes. We can discern the method of development in this text through a cursory look at the *Themes* of its first seven sentences (see Table 1):

1.	"Click by Judith Stamper"	semiotic
2.	"CLICK"	semiotic
3.	"She"	experiential
4.	"She"	experiential
5.	"They"	experiential
6.	"Jenny"	experiential
7.	"Her hiding place"	experiential

Table 1. Response Text 1: Themes

It is the consistency of patterning in choices for *Theme* which creates a coherent texture of reply. In the rhetoric of the "A" range, it is the narrative or the experience that the text makes possible that provides the typical starting point for the discussion.

New choices (Point)

The other "message line" which is relevant to the textual dimension is that characterized by *Given* + *New*. These functions do not originate in clause structure but in information structure, which is characterized by intonation rather than by grammatical organization. It can be difficult to demarcate the information structure of written language because we cannot draw on the rich potential of spoken language for mapping "newsworthy" information onto the clause. In other words, we cannot know where the stress would fall in the clause. However, we can use our knowledge of where the stress falls in typical cases of information structure. In the unmarked case, writers construct their sentences so that *New* comes at the end of the clause – where the stress typically falls in within spoken discourse. This means that, unless indicated otherwise, *Given* precedes *New* (thus including the *Theme*) while *New* forms part of the *Rheme* (rest) of the clause. We can thus assume that *New* is the final constituent of the clause.

Highlighting the complementary message lines in our analyses allows us to bring out the pattern of *Themes* and *News* in a text and hence the texture of a student's rhetoric. As Martin has argued, "just as the pattern of Theme selections in a text constitutes its method of development, so the pattern of New selections constitutes its point (Martin in Halliday & Martin, 1993, p. 247). If newsworthy information and point are mutually constitutive, then an examination of the *News* in each text should give us insight into what student writers see as significant in the narrative – what s/he assumes is newsworthy. This turns out to be a productive analytic exercise.

In almost all "A" range responses, the *News* contain the interpretive motif through which the student reads the narrative. Response Text 1 foregrounds Jenny's "flight from reality", while Response Text 2 focuses on either the heartbreaks of old age or the literary craft of the author. Response Text 3 emphasizes the difficulty of the migrant family's circumstances and the prejudice of their employer. Whatever the point of departure, most of the *News* focus on the psycho-symbolic meaning of the narrative. This often takes the form of an abstract nominal group like "reality and its unhappiness and death that it confronted her with" (Response Text 1) or "the heartbreaks of old age" (Response Text 2) or "the barrier between herself and the servant" (Response Text 3). The rhetoric of reply thus instantiates a move from the particulars of the story to its more general psycho-symbolic significance.

This kind of span is not the only one found in these responses. A successful reading must not only interpret the overarching significance of the narrative but also substantiate such claims through telling examples from the text. In cases of exemplification, the News deal with particular narrative events which substantiate the student's interpretation, as in "She was **unhappy with her family life**" or "Jenny only went **outside** to investigate **the accident** because there was **a television commercial on**" (Response Text 1). Nevertheless, where the student does present a

synopsis, *News* are concerned with psychological abstraction or (less often) with literary craft, as in: "Click is **a very didactic short story"** or "The telephone and the telephone book are the major links in the story **from past to present**." The relations between the two messsage-lines of a response can be represented as a span from *Theme* to *New* and thus from writer's starting point (either literary craft or narrative experience) to reader's end point (its psycho-semiotic significance).

Table 2 highlights the spans between the two "message lines" in each clause for Response Text 1. Each sentence is numbered and each clause within this is given in alphabetical order. Both semiotic and experiential are indicated. Choice of process for each clause is displayed in order to illustrate the kind of connection made between each half of the clause. *New* includes the final clause-level constituent, with salience indicated through capital letters. Cases of marked information focus (non-typical stress patterns) are also represented in capital letters in order to highlight their additional significance for the construction of "point".

In sum, whatever the preferred starting point in each clause (experiential or semiotic), the opening gambit is typically an evaluation of the narrative as a whole. In fact, this pattern was invariant across all the A-range texts I have analyzed in this way. It is a key feature of the wording of successful symbolic interpretations and semantically it demonstrates a "global orientation" to the stimulus text. The spans from *Theme* to *New* reveal the movement from material phenomena (text or characters) to abstraction (psycho-symbolic significance). It is important to note the tendency to load the News with nominalized and embedded material. The A-range students rightly assume that what is "newsworthy" in each clause is the abstract evaluative material.

Sent/ Clse	**THEME** (semiotic)	**THEME** (experiential)	(process)	**NEW**
1a.	"Click" by Judith Stamper		(is)	A VERY DIDACTIC SHORT STORY
1b.				THE MORAL OF WHICH
1c.	the ending of the story and its title		(conveys)	TO THE READER.
2.	CLICK		(is)	ABOUT A YOUNG GIRL WHO HAS RUN AWAY FROM REALITY AND ITS UNHAPPINESS AND DEATH THAT IT CONFRONTED HER WITH.
3.		She	(was)	unhappy WITH HER FAMILY LIFE.
4a.		She	(was)	LONELY
4b.		*because* her parents and herself	(lived)	their lives APART.
5.		They	(had)	A VERY DISTANT RELATIONSHIP.
6a.		Jenny	(RECOGNISED)	THIS
6b.		but intead of facing it and making what she could out of it or trying to rectify it, [she]	(CHOSE TO HIDE FROM)	it.
7.		Her hiding place	(was)	THE FANTASY, MAKE-BELIEVE WORLD OF TELEVISION.
8a.		Jenny	(went)	OUTSIDE
			(to investigate)	THE ACCIDENT
8b.		*because* there	(was)	A TELEVISION COMMERCIAL on.
9a.		When she arrived, [the girl]	(was)	already DEAD.
9b.		*and* Jenny, << when she	(look) (was shocked back)	INTO THE DEAD GIRL'S FACE>> INTO REALITY.
10.		IT	(seemed)	MORE REAL [THAN ANYTHING].
11.			"(cut)	THROUGH THE CLOUD [IN HER

				MIND]."
12a.		As it hit her, [Jenny's reaction]	(was to switch)	THE CHANNEL,
12b.			TO ESCAPE	
12c.			To hide from	REALITY.
13a.		Jenny << *when* she	(realised) (went)	BACK INSIDE >>,
13b.		*that* the world of television	no longer (gave)	her PROTECTION FROM REALITY.
14.		Once she had been jolted back into consciousness, [the make-believe world]	(seemed)	TOO FAKE.
15.		This whole experience, the dead girl's face, the shock of reality	(AWAKE)	Jenny.
16.	The conclusion, "Click the television switch sounded through the room like a padlock snapping open"		(was)	SYMBOLIC.
17a.	The padlock		(was)	JENNY'S MIND
17b.	*and* its snap		(was)	THE AWAKENING OF REALITY IN THAT MIND, A REALISATION THAT IT COULDN'T RUN AWAY.

Table 2. Spans between *Theme* and *New* in Response Text 1

THE "FASHIONS OF MEANING" REVEALED IN OUR GRAMMATICS

Few English teachers would be interested in the use of SFL in preparing their students to make a symbolic reading of an unfamiliar narrative. Nevertheless, many would appreciate a fine-grained awareness of its semantic qualities because they have to teach their students to produce it. Besides, it is they who reward responses such as those presented in this article. They know what they like and they continue to like much the same thing when it comes to the interpretive response. What does our grammatics have to teach about this kind of linguistic achievement? What kind of knowledge can we create out of this kind of know-how? When it attends closely to the wordings students use, SFL enables us to see students' "fashions of meaning" more clearly. I focus here only on that domain of meaning I have called symbolic abstraction and on what the A-range interpretations can teach us.

Firstly, accessing and controlling the domain of symbolic abstraction requires that students make a relational reading of any text. They need not only to be able to process the whole text – to decode its wordings from beginning to end; they also need to be able to inter-relate different aspects of the text. In essence, this involves both a dynamic and a synoptic reading. Once the students have finished reading the narrative (processing it dynamically), they need to look back over the text in the light of the question they have been given (construing the significance of its parts, synoptically). In all texts in this range, students use figurative motifs that recur in the story to interpret its deeper meanings. How do they recognize such motifs? They recognize them through redundancy in the narrative – repetition, contrast and transformations of different kinds. I have referred to these deeper meaning relations as *meta-relations* in another article about literary interpretation (Macken-Horarik, 2003). Once they have recognized these relations, students use *relational transitivity* to encode their

awareness of these deeper meanings (meta-relations) in the narrative. They typically use *attributive relational* clauses to describe or classify aspects of the text and *identifying relational* clauses to identify its symbolic meaning. The ability to equate a material motif (for example, the sound of a padlock snapping open) with its abstract significance (for example, "the awakening of reality") is vital here. But it does not occur as a "one-off" feature of the kind one finds in an E-range response ("I think her servant is the real spider"). Rather, it occurs within a holistic interpretation of the text and through the use of extended analogy.

A second semantic feature comes to light when one looks closely at the logic of the response text – the kinds of links made between messages. In this article, I have examined the preference for *elaboration* within the area of logical meaning. Within a symbolic reading, the onus is on the student to translate one meaning into another. Elaboration is ideal for this task because it enables the student to encode one reading of part of a text (often a literal reading) and then to provide an alternative reading (often a metaphoric reading). Reformulation of this kind is typical of A-range interpretations. An ability to read the text as construct is only possible if students have been able to read the text attentively from beginning to end and can "look over" the narrative as a semiotic construct.

Once they can relate one part of the text to another, students can re-construe the significance of earlier sections in the light of the ending (often a "twist" in short stories). Elaboration enables students to encode both their understanding of material particulars of a story and their interpretation of their abstract significance. In fact, elaboration with its movement from left to right, parallels the movement from literal to figurative meaning. Furthermore, because elaboration occurs not just across clauses but also across groups and words, it inflects the process of abstract reformulation at all ranks. Teacher-examiners respond to this fashion of meaning without necessarily understanding the linguistic basis of their appreciation. Analysis of the wordings enabled by *elaboration* makes it easier to see how students could be taught to expand on their interpretations of a text through reformulation of this kind.

A third semantic feature revealed by analysis of *Theme* and *New* has to do with the rhetorical starting-points and the end-points of student texts. We identified two message lines in the symbolic readings. Themes tended to include either a semiotic or an experiential starting point and News tended to focus mostly on psycho-symbolic significance. Thus, the favoured rhetoric of reply spans the movement from material particulars of the stimulus narrative to an abstract evaluation of its significance. Analysis of the unfolding pattern of Theme and New choices gives us a text-wide perspective on students' starting-points and the resting-points of their argument overall. It highlights the kind of coherence achieved in the A-range response and points towards possible classroom work for both teachers and students.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

SFL gives us a picture of the domain of symbolic abstraction and a way of foregrounding the linguistic basis of the A-range achievement, at least when it comes to ideational meaning (I have given no attention to interpersonal meaning in this article). Earlier I argued that open-ended response tasks require that students interpret

and inter-relate seemingly unlike domains of narrativized experience. They typically achieve this through extended analogy – a synoptic use of relational transitivity, translation of narrative significance in elaboration and control of spans from narrative experience to narrative significance. Successful deployment of this cluster of linguistic choices for *relational transitivity, elaboration* and patterns of *Theme* and *New* indicates the presence of what Hasan calls a "formative motif" in the interpretive writing undertaken by students. This is a "cluster of semantic features which are related to each other by a logic that underlies their configurative rapport" (Hasan, 2004: 173). Taken together, the linguistic choices analyzed here are a manifestation of a feeling for symbolization and an ability to recreate this in the response text.

The point of the linguistic excursion in this article is not to justify the teaching of SFL in English classes. The point has been to show the potential of SFL knowledge about language for a better understanding of students' linguistic know-how. Once we know something of what is valued in interpretive genres, we can use our knowledge to make better pedagogic decisions about how to teach these. A useful classroom grammatics should have the following features: it should orient students productively to a writing task, enable them to read a text successfully and then respond to this in writing.

In sum, any grammatics worthy of serious attention in English should provide teachers and students with tools that are "good to think with". Halliday's (2002) final reflection on the ultimate use of his grammatics is relevant here:

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

The tools employed in this article provide cues about what works in students' writing and how we can use this knowledge to improve know-how. The opportunity to produce successful readings should not just be available to those who are "naturally" good at English.

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