At Last

The Meaning in Grammar

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The domain of inquiry by literacy researchers has expanded greatly over the past generation. Literacy researchers now address out-of-school literacies, multimodal texts, literacy across the curriculum and other important issues. Research on literacy development has become even more important in the high stakes assessment environments in today's schools, where students need to learn to control academic language registers in order to demonstrate what they have learned. And as the number of students from language backgrounds other than standard English continues to grow, curriculum developers are struggling to offer teachers ways to enable these students to participate in grade-level literacy tasks. All of these developments suggest that there is an increasing need for understanding the role language itself plays in literacy development. At the same time, functional linguistics approaches have provided new insights and ways of thinking about grammar that offer researchers exciting opportunities for investigating questions about how meaning is construed in texts of different kinds, how teacher educators can provide teachers with productive ways of talking about language, and what teachers can make explicit to students about the form-meaning relationship. Putting these insights to use in research, teacher education, and classroom practice has the potential to enrich understanding of language at all levels and offer new ways of addressing the complex literacy development needs of today's students.

But when it comes to discussion of language, many researchers and teachers still promote the purportedly research-driven notions that grammar is no more than a set of rules for accuracy in language use and that grammar plays no role in writing development. Yet writing instructors regularly engage in activities such as suggesting alternative wording when students' phrasing is awkward, proposing different organizational strategies when students' texts do not flow easily, and recommending that students think about the audience they are addressing and how
their wording choices will be received by that audience. Writers choose both form and content, and it is through the rhetorical and syntactic forms they choose that the content is constructed and evaluated. Teachers are intuitively teaching grammar by focusing students' attention on the language alternatives available to them in the systems of the English language, but few teachers feel competent in explaining or presenting in explicit ways the options and affordances of systems such as conjunction and modality that offer a range of meaning-making options. Researchers can enrich discussion about the teaching of grammar by incorporating insights from functional linguistics that offer comprehensive meaning-based tools for investigating students' language choices in ways that illuminate developmental pathways or offer understanding of the effectiveness of alternative formulations. Functional linguistics approaches to grammar that highlight the meaning-making role of language are demonstrating that a focus on the value and power of different language choices can offer insights about curriculum, pedagogy, and language development. Analyzing language from a functional perspective reveals how different language choices construct more or less powerful texts, helps us see what is valued in students' writing, and helps us explore how language develops over time.

The most elaborated theory of functional grammar comes from systemic functional linguistics (SFL), the work of Michael Halliday and others (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Martin & Rose, 2003; see Eggins, 2004, for an accessible introduction, and Hancock, 2005, for links to traditional approaches). From this perspective, grammar is not a set of rules about what is correct and incorrect. Instead, grammar is a theory about how language makes meaning; how language forms construe meanings of different kinds. Research using SFL has investigated the development of language from early childhood through adolescence (Christie, 2002; Painter, 1999; Williams, 1998), explored what is valued in student writing (Christie, 1999; Macken-Horark, 2006; Rothery & Stenglin, 2000), described the language forms and registers typical of schooling contexts (Derewianka, 1990; Fang, Schleppegrell, & Cox, 2006; Martin, 1993; 2002; Schleppegrell, 2004; Unsworth, 1999; Veel, 1999), assessed the effectiveness of instructional texts in presenting information to students (Unsworth, 1997, 2001), and offered tools for talking about content-area texts in ways that go beyond the usual literacy strategies such as graphic organizers, previewing chapters, and attention to vocabulary (Lukin & Webster, 2005; Schleppegrell, 2006; Schleppegrell, Achugar, & Oteiza, 2004; Williams, 2004, 2005).

All of this work uses the functional grammar of SFL to show how meanings of different kinds are construed in the language choices adopted by students and the writers of instructional texts, and how the way meaning is construed changes as the texts of schooling become increasingly challenging. Research and teacher education can draw on these insights to enhance the knowledge of pre-service
and in-service teachers and foster their ability to put these understandings to use in classroom practice. Close attention to language itself doesn't have to mean a focus on the "etiquette" of formal correctness, but instead can recognize the meaning-making potential of different language choices that contribute to text organization and interpersonal stance as well as meaning in the sense of "content." Functional grammar provides a metalanguage for analyzing language that highlights issues of overall organization and voice and goes beyond structural categories such as noun and verb to show the meanings that follow from different language choices. It offers a set of coherent constructs related to the systems of grammar that writers draw on to make meaning.

The following paragraph, written by a first year college student, provides an illustrative example of how functional grammar can illuminate the issues that researchers and teachers might be concerned with in evaluating such a text:

First year students are not only feel pressure on the midterm but they also feel a lot of pressure register for classes. Because they knew that register get classes for their winter quarter will be pain in college, they had the experience to register for fall. Some students knew what classes they should take next quarter but when their turn to register for classes the class is close. All their schedule is screw up because the time is different, three midterm on the same day, and time conflict with other classes. Some students don't get in any classes that they want, they run around the dorm to ask for help with the classes. Some students have to get the class that they don't need for any reason. They feel very frustrate about getting classes. Some of them want to drop out of college because of that reason. They feel that if they don't get the classes for their major or GE they not go anywhere. For example one of my friend's couldn't get any classes for his winter so he has to get his alternative classes. He didn't like the time that he wanted. I told him that the best thing to do is sit in class and ask the teacher for it. We all know that register for classes are a pain. By the time we are all graduate from college, we should have a lot of experience for getting classes. Everyone that first year in college alway feel a lot of pressure for register classes.

Every reader is no doubt struck by the errors and infelicities in this text, written by a student for whom English is a second language. But we know that understanding writing development means looking at more than just the errors, and that just correcting the errors in verb form and clause structure will not make the paragraph effective. The paragraph is weak not just in its errors, but also in the organizational strategy the writer has adopted and the tone that the text projects. As students attempt new tasks and genres by undertaking new linguistic formulations, they also make new errors as they struggle with the new patterns of language and construction of voice that are needed for authoritative presentation of meaning.

Research using functional grammar focuses on the language systems writers draw on and the alternatives available within those systems, identifying the mean-
ings that the systems construe. A key system for experiential meaning is *transitivity*, the system that constructs the grammar of processes and participants in a text, so that the notions the writer wants to discuss can be construed as process (verb) or participant (noun), and are able to be put into structural configurations of different types. In this text, the notion of *registering* occurs many times, but always in the form *register*, which only occasionally is felicitous. Using the forms *registering* or *registration* as alternatives would enable the writer to name the phenomenon under discussion in nominal form, a form that then could be modified in various ways or put into different configurations as the text evolves. The appropriate prepositions that construe the different circumstantial elements that the process of *registering* can combine with would then also be in focus, as in these alternative formulations:

First year students not only feel pressure from exams, they also feel a lot of pressure *when they register; at registration time; in registering* for classes.

Recognizing these options offers writers alternatives for moving into the subsequent sentence and text and opens up new possibilities for overall text organization.

A functional grammar can also provide deeper understanding about the language choices that make writing "academic" rather than informal. In this passage, the lexical issues are most apparent: "All their schedule is *screw up*"; "register for classes are a *pain*." But having an authoritative voice means more than just selecting lexical items from the appropriate register. Academic writers need to adopt new patterns of wording that are different from those they use in everyday conversation, often by using the grammatical systems they are already familiar with in different ways. For example, one system that functions quite differently in everyday and academic contexts is *conjunction*. Take this sentence from the student's text:

Because they knew that register get classes for their winter quarter will be pain in college, they had the experience to register for fall.

The student is drawing on the grammar of informal spoken registers, and so the meaning here is likely to be misread. Correct reading of the meaning in this sentence depends on giving it a particular intonation pattern, a pattern typical of spoken interaction, with stress on *knew* and *had* (and perhaps an *already* before *had*), and sentence-final intonation at the comma. This sentence is constructed with the logic of informal speech, where *because* clauses can have the intonation of independent clauses, with a following clause illustrating the point in the *because* clause. In contrast, in the written text, the *because* clause will likely be read as the presupposition on which the following clause is based, that since students knew
that winter quarter registration would be difficult, they would have experienced registering in fall. But this would be illogical; knowledge about winter registration does not precede the experience of registering in fall, and this interpretation doubtless does not accord with what the student meant to convey. The meaning here, that the fall experience has shown students what will happen in winter, comes through only if the reader recognizes that the because serves a discourse-organizational function, much as it might in informal oral discourse, rather than serving the typical subordinating conjunction role that it has in written language, where the first clause would be read as the motivation for the second, an interpretation that does not work at all in this case. Understanding how systems of conjunction function in different ways in different registers is a grammatical issue that researchers can address to provide teachers with more information about how to support students’ use of alternative clause structures and formulations.

A further system that is recognized in functional grammar is the information structure of a text, organized in terms of theme/rheme. The theme is the grammatical element that comes first in the clause, serving as the point of departure. Analysis of the themes of this text illustrates that some form of students (First year students . . . they . . . some students . . . they . . . all their schedule . . . Everyone) serves as the point of departure for almost every clause. Reorganizing the text by focusing on the choice of language constituent that begins each sentence would stimulate use of a greater variety of sentence forms and enable the construction of a text that would be more highly valued, as the information would be organized to highlight key points. Registration could serve as theme, making the process of registering, rather than the students, the point of departure, so that the paragraph could then focus on the issues that emerge for students at registration and illustrate these with examples from her experience.

Analyzing how the student has drawn on the systems of transitivity, conjunction, and theme/rheme structuring in this paragraph reveals the options that have been taken up and enables consideration of alternative options and what they might offer. Consideration of such options offers researchers new ways to think about what changes as students’ writing matures, and gives teachers concrete and explicit foci for discussing revision options with students in systematic ways. Research that takes a functional grammar perspective and understands the grammatical systems that are at stake can analyze a text like this with a focus on meaning.

There are many other grammatical systems that challenge students as they develop as writers, including the modality that enables nuanced presentation of meanings about obligation or possibility in modal verbs, adverbs, and other resources (e.g., must, should, could, probably, etc.), and systems of reference that enable a writer to introduce and track grammatical participants through pronouns, synonyms, and nominalizations. Each of these systems is drawn on in particular ways in the different tasks and content areas of schooling. Language development
continues throughout adolescence and adulthood, as readers and writers interact with new kinds of knowledge in texts that are structured in various functional ways to construct disciplinary knowledge. Functional grammar provides tools for recognizing the options the English language offers for presenting and organizing knowledge and assessing how students learn language and learn through language, and for exploring the ways meaning is made in different genres and contexts.

Many of the students in our schools rarely encounter "academic language" outside of school, and students who have no opportunities to use academic language outside of school rarely just pick it up informally. By analyzing how different choices from the grammar are functional for presenting ideas, constructing a stance, and organizing a text, researchers can highlight the ways language makes meaning in different ways and be explicit about the options that are more powerful and more highly valued. A functional grammar approach can also distinguish language choices related to dialect, addressing the concern that dialect differences be respected. Dialects are differences in language use related to who the speaker is, reflecting the linguistic communities in which students have been socialized and the variety of language that they developed as young children. Clearly every student's ways of using language should be valued and developed, and in no way should a focus on grammar be used to belittle the language students bring to school. A focus on grammar that is functional, related to what is being done with language in the various contexts of language use, and offering students a range of options linked to the meanings they construe, can help students expand their linguistic repertoires without losing the language they bring.

But to achieve this, researchers and teacher educators need to inform themselves more deeply about the systems of English grammar and the meanings they enable in different contexts of use. With greater understanding of the functional value of different language choices, researchers can provide more detailed register-specific information to teachers about the language that constructs the disciplines they teach, and develop and assess the effectiveness of approaches that link grammar with meaning for struggling learners. Approaches to language analysis that link form and meaning also have the potential to illuminate developmental pathways, recognizing the ways complex language systems evolve and shedding light on questions such as what language features students are ready to take up, and when, and the rate of development of different language features and systems.

In the multilingual and multicultural classrooms that are the norm today, teachers need new ways of talking about language and meaning with students. We face major challenges in this endeavor, as teacher education has typically not developed teachers' understanding of grammatical systems or provided them with meaningful ways of talking about language. Through a focus on how different choices in language result in different meanings, informed by a functional theory
about how grammar works, teachers can proactively support the expansion of the
resources students have available to them for meaning. Research is needed that
investigates the processes by which pre-service teachers come to understand and
take up functional ways of talking about language and how those new under-
standings affect their classroom practice and students’ writing development.

Academic language development is challenging. But a better understanding
of how the grammar—the systems and resources of the language—provides a
range of options for meaning that respond to different contextual demands can
enable more powerful support of students’ language development. Language is
the most important resource for meaning in the context of schooling. Literacy
research that incorporates a focus on language itself through a functional per-
spective on grammar can recognize the role of language in literacy development
and offer new ways of talking about language that can enrich teaching and learning.

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