Brief overview of ARC Discovery project on grammatics & school English

Project Title:
‘Grammar and praxis: investigating a grammatics for 21st century school English’ (2011-2013)

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Aims and Background to the Project
In a complex communicative environment we need new kinds of knowledge about language, including new grammars. This challenge has been intensified for Australian teachers and students in an era of national curriculum and its greatly expanded demands on their knowledge about language. English teachers are now expected not only to ‘develop students’ understanding about how the English language works’, but to progress this in a ‘coherent and cumulative’ way across the school years until Year 12. They must now promote ‘learning that is portable and applicable to new settings across the school years and beyond’ and assist students to interpret and compose ‘an increasingly broad repertoire of spoken, written and multimodal texts’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009:5). Meeting these demands calls for new kinds of knowledge about language (KAL). And it greatly expands the role of grammar within English. In this newly-conceived knowledge base, ‘Students need to learn about the structures and functions of word-and-sentence-level grammar and text patterns and the connections between them (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009:7). Attention to form, to function and to relations between words, sentences and text-level patterns is now core business for English and greatly enhance the scope of grammatical instruction in English.

But this is not all. School English is increasingly needing to provide students with ways of tackling the digital world of you-tube, social media sites like Facebook as well as analyse semiotic choices in short and long films, the interplay of words and images in picture books and graphic novels – the multimodal world beyond and now within classrooms. These multimodal texts require analytical tools that are apposite for visual, verbal, aural and other systems and strategies for understanding their interplay in meaning making processes. Semiotics is the study of communicative systems in a culture, interpreting the meanings of cultural activities like fashion, cooking, feature films, video games amongst others. In effect, this means that teachers need to develop not only richer knowledge about language (KAL) but knowledge about semiotics (KAS), especially in multimodal communication. Against this dizzying array of textual opportunities, our project is developing a grammatically informed toolkit for exploring meaning making in English.

This large-scale project is funded through the Australian Research Council (DP110104309). It is led and administered through the University of New England (with Mary Macken-Horarik as project leader) and a research team including Kristina Love and Carmel Sandiford at the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne and Len Unsworth at Griffith University in Brisbane.

Before investigating challenges we face in our development of a 21st century toolkit, we need to introduce the term, ‘grammatics’ and our project’s focus on ‘praxis’. Firstly, we turn
to grammatics. Grammar is now central to the national curriculum in English both in its own right (as a dynamic and evolving body of knowledge) and in relation to literary and other texts and to literacy development. But even its definition in *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum: English*, gives grammar a double referent. It refers to “the language we use and the description of language as a system” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009:5). At the outset, therefore, it has a wide purview, including the language people use in myriad contexts of communication and abstract knowledge of language as a system. The polysemy is both felicitous and problematic – grammar is the resource we draw on without necessarily thinking about it and the tools we use to think about it with. Michael Halliday has suggested we acknowledge the important connectedness of language and metalanguage and avoid reification of our thinking about language by adopting two different terms for each — ‘grammar’ for natural language use and ‘grammatics’ for study of language based on grammar. A grammatics is more than a metalanguage; it is a way of thinking about language ‘with grammar in mind’ (Halliday, 2002). As Halliday has often stressed, systemic functional (SF) grammatics is ‘mimetic’ in character: the metalanguage is very like the thing it describes. For example, within the domain of transitivity, the grammar of action is analyzed in terms of Actors, material processes and Goals whilst the grammar of thought is analyzed in terms of Senses, mental processes and Phenomenon. The functional orientation of the grammatics enables the tools to take on (mimic) the character of the phenomena they map. Form, function and meaning are mutually intricated and this makes the grammatics pleasing to use for English teachers (if they are in a position to engage with it). But the distinction between theory and phenomenon is important because it allows us to extend the analogic power of the grammatical metalanguage to other modes of meaning making (semiosis). Images, for example, represent action and reaction processes in related (though different) ways to language such that we can refer to ‘visual transitivity’ (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). Of course, images and multimodal texts are not linguistic and therefore they cannot be analyzed satisfactorily using tools of analysis modelled on language. But the functional orientation of SF grammatics makes it easier to analogize from language to multimodality, whilst recognizing the necessary limits of a logocentric starting point. Our research is extending the scope of grammatics to include not just the study of form and function in wordings but the patterns of meaning these co-create in texts. Beyond this, we are exploiting its analogic potential to analyse meanings in images, blogs, picture books and films. This new communicational environment is generating powerful pressures on any grammatical toolkit developed to support teachers and students in English. It calls for orienting principles that we are representing in terms of a theoretical compass.

The second matter, our focus on praxis, also requires some background. Grammatically-informed knowledge, no matter how powerful, cannot be promulgated by fiat and transmitted to teachers to implement without negotiation. In the first place, despite the confident stance of the national curriculum on grammar, we don’t yet know what kinds of grammatical knowledge teachers need and find useful. Several instructive case studies have been undertaken within systemic functional grammatics but no large-scale research into the needs of teachers and students in diverse classroom settings and year levels has yet emerged with crucial findings on teacher knowledge and uptake as far as grammatics is concerned. We believe that any grammatics worth its salt to English will facilitate and emerge from dialogue with practising teachers. This means that the grammatics needs to engage at every point with the diverse classroom practices and interests of teachers and students at all levels of learning. Questions about how to translate systemic functional grammatics (SFG) into intellectual and pedagogic tools in English are at the heart of our project. But the process of investigating such questions involves shuttling between ‘relations within’ the architecture of SF grammatics and ‘relations to’ teachers and their students. Our commitment to a
grammatics that is adequate to the intellectual and pedagogic demands of school English means that we hope to broker a grammatics that:

• Builds **coherent** knowledge about language (KAL) for school English;
• Contributes to **cumulative** learning about language from primary to late secondary years;
• Enables students to compose **rhetorically effective** texts;
• Generates **portable understandings** about meaning making in different modes of communication.

These curriculum ‘drivers’ are putting pressure on professional development as well as on theoretical re-imagining of English. Coherent models of language, developmental perspectives on progression of learning, rhetorical application of grammatical knowledge and extension of current metalanguages to texts and modes beyond the linguistic cannot be generated in a brainstorming activity over an afternoon of professional development. In terms of practical exigencies, few teachers are in a position to retrain as linguists; they have to develop relevant KAL (and increasingly KAS) on the go, applying tools they have only just begun to understand in classroom pedagogy. What kinds of grammatics can be built in this way - at the interface of theoretical imaginings by educational semioticians and the practical exigencies of fulltime English teaching?

The following figure highlights the theoretical coordinates of our compass: producing a grammatics adequate to language and other semiotic resources, texts of many kinds, disciplinary practices and students’ literacy repertoires. The goals of the national curriculum - coherence, cumulative learning, portability and understandings relevant to composition - are integrated into the picture too.

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**Disciplinary practices in English**

- **Building a coherent knowledge base for school English** – knowing ‘what counts’ when and where
- **Producing texts that work** at text, sentence and word levels of composition & diagnosing where problems lie with this
- **Generating portable understandings** of language - across new contexts & modes
- **Promoting cumulative learning up** the years of school English (K-12)
- **Language as resource for meaning**
- **Texts**
- **Students’ literacy repertoires**
Our project is ambitious in both design and scope. It aims to develop a functional grammatics with teachers working at four different year levels (between Years 4 and 10), asking them to try out the ideas shared in workshops, to see ‘how they fly’ and then report on their efforts at feedback meetings at the end of each term. The data set includes pre- and post-intervention teacher interviews, teacher focus-group discussions, a corpus of student compositions in three key genres and interviews with selected students about the tools drawn on in their writing. In addition, in order to provide benchmark data about teachers’ needs re KAL, we have developed a survey questionnaire for primary and secondary teachers in NSW and Victoria. This will be offered first to participating teachers in early 2013 and then to non-participants in English teaching in mid-late 2013. The project is in its mid-point. As of early 2013, most teachers who began work with us in 2011 are still participating in the project. This three-year span has enabled us to run workshops on grammatics with a different focus each year. In 2011, we did four days of workshops on narrative (with a special focus on interpersonal meaning), four days of workshops on verbal and multimodal persuasion in 2012 and are just embarking on the grammatics of text response in 2013. This (relatively) longitudinal span of time has meant that we can track teachers’ growth of KAL and KAS over three years and provide theoretically powerful and professionally useful knowledge about what kinds of grammatics teachers and students need in the discipline of English at four year levels.

The other advantage of the design is that teachers from primary and secondary school English contexts meet regularly to discuss their work with some aspect of the grammatics and we have developed a rich community of practice in two sites. Activities inviting teachers to create scope and sequence models of learning in the grammatics have been very instructive for understandings about the precise overlap and differences between primary and secondary English disciplinary practices. We are currently working with teachers in regional schools (Tamworth and Armidale in New England) and in outer metropolitan schools (Mt Waverley in Melbourne). The final data collection phase concludes in 2013 with a focus on multimodal narratives and text response and an invitation to participating teachers to give us feedback on the final version of the grammatics toolkit.

For further information about the project, please contact project leader, Mary Macken-Horarik at UNE – mmackenh@une.edu.au. Also see the following papers for details of key ideas informing our project.


References
Commonwealth of Australia, 2009: *The Shape of the Australian Curriculum: English* [National Curriculum Board], ACT, Australia.