

# 1 Building Historical Knowledge through Language: A Systemic Functional Linguistic Perspective

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## 1.1 History

What is history? The answer to this question has been discussed by numerous historians, philosophers, and history educators. Nokes (2022) states that history is not ‘what happened’ but is rather a study of the past. Munslow (2006) defines history as ‘a form of literature producing knowledge as much by its aesthetic or narrative structure as by any other criteria’, and he argues that the historical narrative itself is not the past, but only a version of history, written for a particular purpose at a particular time and place. This distinction between ‘the past’ and ‘the study of the past’ is also reflected in the discussion by Southgate (2001, 2013), who defines history as ‘a manifestation of memory’ and ‘a way of ordering, recording and retaining that past’. What is emphasised in these ‘definitions’ of ‘history’ is not simply what happened, but rather the historiography of the past – that is, how we study it and interpret it. Seen in these terms history does not unveil an objective ‘truth’ of the past; rather, historians present the past based on ‘their own decisions about significance, interpretations, inclusions and omissions, and even speculations’ (Nokes, 2022, p. 92). As Munslow emphasises,

While it may be possible to demonstrate a strong, even a probable correspondence between a single statement about the past and a single piece of evidence, sufficient to generate a factual statement, to then translate this inductive ‘truth’ to a whole historical interpretative narrative, so as to recover the past as it actually was, is a flawed practice. (2006, ch. 9)

If history is not about unveiling ‘truth’, then what is it that makes the study of history important? In her discussion, ‘Why bother with history?’, Southgate (2013) suggests that because of the values transmitted by history ‘memories of the past that make up history constitute an absolutely crucial part of what we presently are’ (p. 40). The values we learn from history shape our identities as individuals and as members of a community and a nation. It is also important to

recognise that values involved are determined by time and place, and always influenced by ideology. As Southgate argues, through writing history, historians have the power to ‘for better or worse, manipulate the past (our memories and forgettings)’ (p. 50).

Historians’ recognition of the ever-changing nature of historical interpretations of the past resonates with Bernstein’s (e.g. 1999, 2000) discussion about the organisation of knowledge in the humanities. He notes that the knowledge structure of the humanities, including history, has a horizontal structure; a structure of this kind develops by bringing in new theories and perspectives (Bernstein, 1999, p. 162). In this respect knowledge structure in the humanities contrasts with hierarchical knowledge structure, such as that found in science; this alternative structure develops in relation to ‘coherent, explicit and systematic’ principles (p. 159) for generating ever more general understandings of an ever wider range of phenomena. From this perspective, developing new understandings and interpretations in the humanities is necessarily subject to sociocultural influences (e.g. Marxism, feminism, post-colonialism, etc.). History in turn plays an important role in shaping our society through its emerging interpretations.

The study and interpretation of history relies on the use of language (Munslow, 2006; Southgate, 2001). Halliday’s (e.g. 1975, 1978) conception of language as a meaning-making resource has strong affinities with how historians see the writing of history. Munslow (2006) explains that history as knowledge is not ‘discovered’, but it is produced through language – as a text. According to Southgate (2001), understanding historical description as ‘autonomous, independent of anything external to itself’ means that history writing relies on the ‘internal coherence’ of meaning, replacing a quest for ‘truth’ as an overriding historical objective (p. 78). The understanding of the inherent relationship between the study of history and language has made a strong impact on emerging understandings of history education.

## 1.2 History and Education

History is regularly recognised as an important subject area in schooling. Downey and Long (2016) describe history as ‘the only discipline and school subject primarily concerned about how societies change’. Similarly, Davies (2017) argues that knowledge of the past is necessary for students to understand their place in time. In addition, Nokes (2022) emphasises the role of history in preparing young people for their civic engagement. With respect to history education, scholars argue that to be historically knowledgeable, one needs to be historically literate; the goal of history education is often seen as the teaching of ‘historical literacy’ (Downey & Long, 2016; Nokes, 2022; Perfetti, Britt & Georgi, 1995; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, 2012). Nokes (2022) defines

historical literacies as the strategies and skills that historians use to construct meaning from texts and other sources. Downey and Long (2016) suggests that the goal of historical literacy is to enable students to read history texts critically, to write thoughtfully, and to engage in meaningful discussions about the past. With respect to how to teach historical literacy, emphasis has been put on cultivating historical thinking and reasoning and the awareness of unique language used in the discipline.

Nokes (2022) suggests that teaching historical literacy involves developing students' ability to 'engage in historical processes', that is, 'to not simply possess knowledge but to know how to build it' (p. 92). Perfetti et al. (1995) also stress the importance of reasoning in historical literacy. To develop this ability, Nokes (2022) argues that students should be taught by following the way in which historians construct evidence and reasoning, including reading primary sources and authentic materials, constructing evidence, and independently developing new interpretations and reconstructions of the past. The emphasis on students' 'independent' interpretations, to a great extent, reflects the idea of the 'knower' in the humanities (Maton, 2014). Building on Bernstein's conceptualisation of knowledge structure, Maton (2014) suggests that in a horizontal knowledge structure there is a hierarchical knower structure, with respect to which the knower's disposition plays an essential role in shaping the discipline. Nokes' suggestion for developing students' independent perspectives in historical literacy aligns with the goal of cultivating the thinking of a 'knower' of history. As he states, 'although historians are expected to construct interpretations that are new to the world, students' independently constructed interpretations might be new only to them or their classmates' (2022, p. 92).

History educators have also become increasingly aware of the relationship between history subject area and language (Downey & Long, 2016; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). This involves appreciation of the distinctive use of language in reading and writing. Wineburg (2005) states that history is a powerful form of literacy that has the potential to teach about text in ways that no other areas of the school curriculum can offer (p. 662). Downey and Long (2016) argue that to be historically literate, students must become fluent in the academic language of history, which is not the same as 'the language of the home or of the playground', or 'the language of mathematicians or scientists or poets, as each of us constructs meaning with words in different ways' (p. 10). Shanahan and Shanahan's (2008) study reveals distinctive ways in which experts from different disciplines read and comprehend disciplinary texts. They argue that each discipline possesses 'specialized genre, vocabulary, traditions of communication, and standards of quality and precision, and each requires specific kinds of reading and writing to an extent greater than has been recognized by teachers or teacher preparation programs' (Shanahan, Shanahan,

& Misischia, 2011, p. 395). Their findings raise the awareness of language use in history. But from the perspective of functional linguistics, this raises important questions as far as language is concerned – that is, *what* exactly constitutes historical literacy? In other words, how are meanings made in the history texts? And *how* can students be provided with teaching that supports these uses of language? To answer these questions, it is necessary to look closely at how language is used in historical literacy and reveal how meaning-making resources construct historical knowledge and values.

### 1.3 Understanding History: SFL Initiatives

The volume offered here resonates strongly with the understandings both in historiography regarding the nature of language in shaping the historical ‘reality’ and in history education regarding historical literacy with its unique ways of using language. The chapters collected here explore the role played by history in shaping culture from a linguistic perspective, drawing specifically on a theory known as Systemic Functional Linguistics. This theory (hereafter SFL) tries to understand how we use language as a resource to build and maintain sociocultural contexts. From this linguistic perspective, this volume approaches the disciplinary knowledge of history with respect to its distinctive choices of language features. The notion of ‘choice’ is based on the understanding that among all the potential ways of making meaning, we choose one over another for a particular purpose. This perspective enables us to develop conscious understandings of how we use language choices to build historical ‘facts’ (i.e. what we know) and develop feelings and attitudes about these ‘facts’, both as individuals and as members of a community (i.e. who we are). SFL has had a long tradition of studying the disciplinary language of history, in both educational and political contexts. By way of introduction, we now provide a brief sketch of the decades of work developed in this tradition.

This body of SFL work on history began with a genre-based literacy programmes of the so-called Sydney School; for a consolidating overview, see Rose and Martin (2012). The action research documented in this work began in the early 1980s with a focus on writing in primary school. Its mission involved broadening the range of writing undertaken by students and renovating the way writing was taught. By the late 1980s this project was extended to encompass writing in secondary school, beginning with physical geography (Wignell, Martin & Eggins, 1989) and history (Eggins, Wignell & Martin, 1993). This initiative was further extended as part of the ‘Write it Right’ (WIR) project, 1991–1995 (Veel, 2006); this Disadvantaged School Program (DSP) intervention focused on the relationship between secondary school and workplace literacy (Christie & Martin, 1997). Accordingly, it explored reading and writing in secondary school subjects from the perspective of genre and in

addition investigated the different kinds of knowledge these genres construed – in history, math, science, visual arts, English, and geography.<sup>1</sup> Coffin (1996, 2006) documents the work on secondary school history developed in this project and her own ensuing research (Coffin 1997, 2000, 2003).

Martin and Rose (2008) draw on this work as part of their survey of major genre families. They present an overview of history genres as a table (their Table 3.7 is reproduced as Table 1.1 below), beginning at the top with the personal recount genre speakers master at home before school in order to share experience with close friends and kin. This genre can play a significant role in history discourse foregrounding what is known as ‘oral history’. The table then moves down to genres which are organised around setting in time (rather than sequence in time). This brings autobiographical and biographical recounts into the picture as longer phases of experience are recounted. One step further and

Table 1.1 *An overview of history genres*

GENRE [staging]	INFORMAL DESCRIPTION	HURDLES
personal recount [Orientation^Record]	agnate to story genres; what happened to me	<i>sequence in time ...</i>
autobiographical recount [Orientation^Record]	the story of my life [oral history]	<i>... to setting in time</i>
biographical recount [Orientation^Record]	the story of someone else's life	
historical recount [Background^Record]	establishing the timeline of 'grand narrative'	<i>temporal connections &amp; concrete participants ...</i>
historical account [Background^Account]	naturalising linearisation of 'grand narrative'	<i>... to causal connections &amp; abstract participants ...</i>
factorial explanation [Outcome ^ Factors]	complexifying notion of what leads on to what	<i>... to complex causal relations ...</i>
consequential explanation [Input ^ Consequences]	complexifying notion of what follows on from what	
exposition – one sided; promote [Thesis^Arguments]	problematic interpretation that needs justifying	<i>... to complex rhetorical relations</i>
challenge – one sided; rebut [Position^Rebuttal]	problematic interpretation that needs demolishing	<i>one sided argument ...</i>
discussion – multi-sided; adjudicate [Issue^Sides^Resolution]	more than one interpretation considered	<i>... to multi-sided adjudication</i>

<sup>1</sup> Reports and materials from the ‘Write it Right’ project can be accessed via <https://educationalsemiotics.wordpress.com/secondary-school/>.

the experience of single participants is generalised to those of groups of participants in historical recounts. Moving down the table these chronicling genres make room for genres which explain historical phenomena. These genres feature a shift from temporal to causal connections. Among these, historical accounts unfold chronologically, but with prominence given to causal links between events. With factorial and consequential explanations, on the other hand, the matching relation between what happened and how the text unfolds breaks down – as multiple factors leading to some events are canvassed or, conversely, multiple consequences of an event are reviewed. Moving down again, these explanatory genres give way to argumentative ones which deal with interpretations of the past that are presented as in some sense contentious and in need of being argued for. In expositions arguments are marshalled in favour of a thesis; in challenges arguments are marshalled against a position; and in discussions two or more viewpoints are entertained before an issue is resolved.

Organised in this way, Table 1.1 arranges genres according to the challenges they pose for secondary school students, as they move from their comfort zone in spoken modes through the increasing demands of the uncommon-sense written discourses of history. Some of the challenges they face along the way are specified in the spiral curriculum pathway presented in Figure 1.1 (reproduced from Martin & Rose, 2008, Figure 3.9). This pathway flags the moves from sequencing events ('and then' relations) to moving between phases of

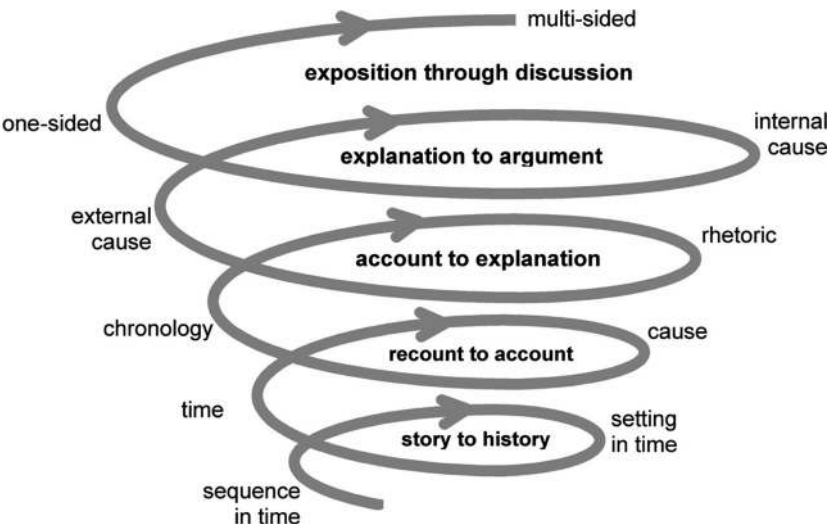


Figure 1.1 Suggested pathway for apprenticeship into history genres

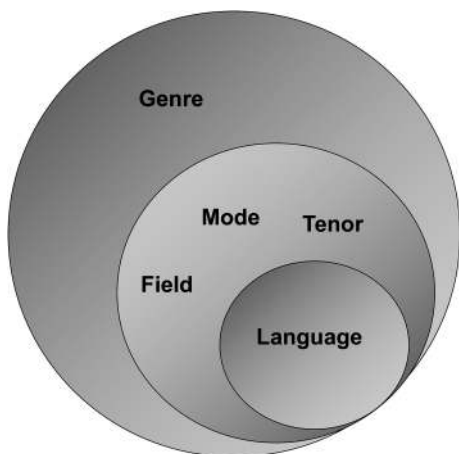


Figure 1.2 Language, register (field, mode, and tenor), and genre

activity ('in 1914, by 1918' type relations), from texts foregrounding temporal connection to those foregrounding causal ones, from texts unfolding chronologically to those organised rhetorically, from texts making causal connections between events in the world to those reasoning between phases of argumentation and from those dealing with one side of an argument to those managing more than one side. For a more detailed presentation of these linguistic hurdles, see Coffin (2006) and Martin and Rose (2008).

In the SFL model of language and social context informing this research, genre is treated as a higher level of abstraction which is realised through the register variables field, tenor, and mode. An outline of this model is presented in Figure 1.2. Therein field deals with what is going on or talked about, mode deals with the role language is playing in relation to other modalities of communication or activity, and tenor deals with social relations of power and solidarity. Moving into secondary school meant focusing more carefully on field, in order to explore the different types of knowledge characterising different subject areas; for history this research very quickly implicated mode.

The reason for this additional focus on mode is first documented in Martin (1989), where a distinction is drawn between technicality and abstraction as far as the creation of uncommon-sense knowledge is concerned. What Martin (1989) draws attention to is preponderance of technical terms in science disciplines (e.g. biology, physics, chemistry, physical geography) when compared to the humanities (e.g. history, English, creative arts). In a humanities subject like history, on the other hand, it is likely to be the abstractness of the language rather than unfamiliar terms that challenges students. The mode of



history discourse, in other words, is very far removed from that of the day-to-day conversation students are familiar with, even though there are relatively fewer technical terms they have to learn. In SFL, the semiotic engine for this abstract discourse is referred to as grammatical metaphor, a concept introduced in Halliday (1984a), elaborated in Halliday (1985, 1998) and Halliday and Martin (1993), and further developed in Simon-Vandenberghe, Taverniers, and Ravelli (2003) and Taverniers (2017).

Examples (1) to (4) exemplify the challenge of abstract historical discourse of this kind. In example (1) two activities (i.e. the Normans conquering England and the Normans building castles) are realised as nominal groups (i.e. *their conquest by the Normans* and *the castle construction*, respectively). This kind of realisation involves nominalisation, with activity realised by nouns (*conquest* and *construction*) rather than verbs (*conquer* and *construct*).

- (1) England became aware of these structures in the early eleventh century, with their **conquest** by the Normans, who brought the castle **construction** with them.

In the spoken language students are more familiar with, these activities could have been realised by clauses, as in (2) – *when they were conquered by the Normans* and *who knew how to build castles*. The construal of these two activities in (1) is considered metaphorical, since something going on is presented as if it was a thing; their construal in (2) is considered congruent, because the semantics matches the grammar (i.e. something going on is realised as a clause).

- (2) England became aware of these structures in the early eleventh century, when they were conquered by the Normans, who knew how to build castles.

Example (2) is adjusted slightly in example (3) to bring a cause-and-effect relation into the picture. It now explains why the English became aware of castles in the eleventh century.

- (3) England became aware of these structures in the early eleventh century **because** they were conquered by the Normans who knew how to build castles.

In (4) the degree of abstraction is pushed a step further by realising the causal connection between activities inside a clause. There two nominalisations (*the Norman conquest* and *English awareness of these structures in the early eleventh century*) are connected verbally (*resulted in*). Explaining cause inside a clause is a characteristic feature of abstract humanities discourse, including history.

- (4) The Norman conquest **resulted in** English awareness of these structures in the early eleventh century.



As examples such as these make clear, learning to read and write history is not just a matter of learning new genres. The abstract modes of construing the past these genres depend on have to be mastered too (Martin, 2013). For discussion of some of the implications of this for teaching and learning history genres and the abstract language they may involve, see the WIR materials at <https://educational-semiotics.wordpress.com/2012/11/19/write-it-right-history/>. Mode shifts are discussed in relation to the concept of semantic waves and what is referred to as temporality in Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) (Matruglio, Maton & Martin, 2013). Dialogue between SFL and LCT (developed in Christie & Martin, 2007; Christie & Maton, 2011; Martin, Maton & Matruglio, 2010; Maton, Martin & Doran, 2021) ultimately led to the reconsideration of the concept of context independency presented in Martin and Matruglio (2013). Work on history discourse, in other words, pushed SFL modelling of context through new frontiers.

Alongside implicating mode, analysis of history discourse soon brought the register tenor variable into the picture – since recognising and aligning with or criticising the values used to interpret history are also crucial aspects of the mastery of history genres. WIR research into the discourse of creative arts, English, and the media was in fact the cradle for the development of the well-known appraisal framework for analysing evaluation (Martin & White, 2005). Part of this work involved the recognition of media voices – with what were called reporter, correspondent, and commentator voices distinguished in terms of the way they draw on distinctive appraisal resources (Iedema, Feez & White, 1994; Martin & White, 2005; White, 1998). Coffin (2006) adapted this work for history discourse, recognising recorder voice (no explicit judgement or appreciation), interpreter voice (restricted explicit judgement and appreciation), and adjudicator voice (unrestricted explicit judgement and appreciation). In general terms the more ‘objective’ recorder voice is associated with recording genres, the less ‘objective’ interpreter voice is associated with explaining genres and the more ‘subjective’ adjudicator voice is associated with arguing genres.

Compare (5) through (7) below. In (5) there is no explicit evaluation. We have an objective description of the function of the bailey in castle defence. In (6), on the other hand, we have an evaluation of the capacity of attackers as they cross a moat at the bottom of castle walls (*vulnerable*). Then in (7) we have a moral judgement of attackers who might choose to hurl dead bodies over a castle wall to infect defenders (*quite cruel*).

- (5) recorder voice  
That's where you would retreat to if the bailey had been taken . . .
- (6) interpreter voice  
All these things slow you down, and while you're slowed down, you're **vulnerable** and you can be picked off.

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- (7) adjudicator voice  
 Some of the attackers were **quite cruel**.

As explored in Martin et al. (2010), evaluation is the resource history discourse draws on to align readers in communities of shared values. And having the values a teacher or examiner expects is critical for success in secondary to tertiary history education. So alongside knowing what happened and explaining why it happened the way it did, history students have to interpret what happened in the ‘right’ way. For important developments of this work on evaluation in history discourse, see Myskow (2016, 2017, 2018a, 2018b). In the same article, Martin and colleagues point out that there is more technicality in history than was attended to in earlier publications. In addition to the technical partitioning of history as eras (the First World War, the Depression, the Second World War, the Cold War, etc.), there are the ‘-isms’ that play a key role in modern history discourse and which tend to be implicitly charged with value (e.g. marxism as bad, nationalism as good). It is this charging that enables terms like *democracy* and *communism* to be opposed to one another, when from an ideational perspective democracy is about how government assumes power (via elections) and communism is about who owns the means of production (the state). Ideationally speaking the oppositions would be democracy vs autocracy and capitalism vs communism. But in many texts it is the positively and negatively charged values which come to the fore (Martin, 2013).

Abstraction and evaluation have an important role to play in history texts which don’t rely on chronology as their basic structuring principle – including the explaining and arguing genres reviewed above, and also descriptive reports such as (8) below. In texts of this kind, organisational scaffolding is provided by introductory and summative remarks, functioning in SFL terms as higher level Themes and News (Martin & Rose, 2007). In (8), for example, a higher-level Theme (a Hyper-theme) introduces readers to what the report will be about and a higher-level New (a Hyper-new) highlights the significance of its content. In history the higher-level periodicity typically features both abstraction (*design, attacks, success* below) and evaluation (*prominent, effective, success* below), while the filling in the rhetorical sandwich is both more concrete and more objective. Macnaught et al. (2013) outline a Sydney School approach to highlighting waves of texture of this kind for students (see also Humphrey (2017) on teaching academic literacy and Christie & Derewianka (2008) on the development of academic literacy in primary and secondary school).