

## **Making sense of ‘The Journey’: a case study in segmental pedagogy in senior secondary school subject English.**

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Of all subjects in the school curriculum none other excites the debates and often bitter arguments that does English. Witness the many discussions and changes in government policy in the UK following the deliberations of the Kingman Committee (1988), the Cox National Curriculum Working Group (1989) and later the various versions of the National English Curriculum (1995). In Australia since 1990 we have had a series of Government reports and papers on language and literacy, and more specifically on English as a subject (discussed in detail by Christie 2003) and at the time of writing this abstract, the country is about to adopt its National English Curriculum, already the cause of much debate and professional soul-searching over the last two years. In an earlier paper with Macken-Horarik (Christie and Macken-Horarik 2007) I argued that, historically, English had horizontal knowledge structures, and that it had proliferated many models, each proposed as representing a new and better ‘take’ on the subject, each seeking to transform its nature by producing a ‘new language’, each offering ‘a fresh perspective’, and creating ‘a new set of speakers’ (Bernstein 2000: 162). With the proliferation of the various models (*Basic Skills, Cultural Heritage, Personal Growth, Functional Language Studies, Cultural Analysis, Multiliteracies*), we suggested, has come an increasing visibility, so that the principles that must be mastered to succeed in the subject remain hidden, at times obscure even to the teachers who attempt to teach the subject. Successful students manage to intuit what they must do in order to achieve the necessary ‘gaze’ (Bernstein *ibid*), while others remain baffled.

This paper will examine two texts written by students in Year 12 sitting for the public examination at the High School Certificate level, one of which represents significant success, while the other does not succeed. Both were written as part of a study of various texts, literary and non-literary, all brought together under the over-arching theme of ‘The Journey’, said to be useful in achieving some thematic unity for examination of texts.

The object, using systemic functional linguistic (SFL) theory, and more specifically the SF grammar, will be to investigate the meanings students are required to make and the gazes they must acquire in undertaking the study of ‘The Journey’. Using Maton’s concept of semantic gravity (2009), I shall seek to demonstrate how the successful student cleverly deploys her language to create a text marked by high levels of abstraction, achieving very weak semantic gravity. The less successful student, by contrast, fails to draw on the linguistic system with similar facility, creating a text that is marked by its absence of abstraction and its relatively strong semantic gravity.

How might such an analysis serve to clarify the segmental pedagogy of subject English, and why might it be useful to do this? I shall suggest that the functional grammar is an essential tool for unpacking the nature of the challenge for students in writing texts of the kind required for success at Year 12, rendering it far more visible than much teaching practice allows. I shall go on to argue that, though the various

models of English are normally represented as having different languages, and different perspectives, the truth is that success at the senior levels actually requires a level of performance that takes much from most of the other models in order to achieve success. Hence, it may well be, as Muller (personal comment) suggested to Macken-Horarik and me some time ago, that the notion of horizontal knowledge structure sits uneasily on subject English, and that we need a better formulation with which to propose a knowledge structure for the subject, one which the notion of 'semantic gravity' aims to move us towards. The functional grammar, I shall suggest, can inform educational theory and pedagogical practice, offering a means of unifying an often fractured and confusing subject.

## References

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