

1

AN APPROPRIATE MODEL OF LANGUAGE

Language is at the heart of the learning process. In order to succeed in school, students need to use language for such purposes as explaining, arguing, recounting, and describing across a range of subject areas in a variety of media and modes. Such language does not come naturally to most students and generally requires explicit teaching. This means that teachers themselves need to have a solid understanding of how language operates in academic contexts. Unfortunately, however, this is not always the case. In an attempt to address this, the *Australian Curriculum: English* includes an explicit knowledge about language as a major focus. This chapter will begin to introduce the functional model of language that informs the national curriculum.

Learning objectives

In this chapter, you will:

- begin to become familiar with a functional model of language
- be introduced to the language system as a rich network of resources for making meaning
- understand how the context in which language is used impacts upon the kinds of choices made from the language system
- consider the implications of a functional model for your own understanding of how language works and for your classroom practice.

Key terms and concepts

functional model of language
context of culture
genres
context of situation
register (field, tenor, mode)
the language system

Note: throughout the chapters you will be invited to ‘have a go’ at certain activities. These can be done either by yourself or in pairs/groups.

INTRODUCTION

The *Australian Curriculum: English* places a major emphasis on ‘knowledge about language’, along with an appreciation of literature and expanding repertoires of literacy use. In the Framing Paper that guided the development of the national English curriculum, the following objectives were outlined:

All students need to develop their understanding of how language functions to achieve a range of purposes that are critical to success in school. This includes reading, understanding, and writing texts that describe, narrate, analyse, explain, recount, argue, review, and so on. Such an approach aims to:

- extend students’ language resources in ways that support increasingly complex learning throughout the school years
- help students deal with the language demands of the various curriculum areas
- enable students to move from the interactive spontaneity of oral language towards the denser, more crafted language of the written mode
- help students, in their speaking and writing, to move to and fro between the general and the specific, the abstract and the concrete, and the argument and the evidence
- generally raise students’ awareness of interpersonal issues, such as how to take and support a stand in an argument, how to express considered opinions, how to strengthen or soften statements, how to interact with a variety of audiences, and so on (DEEWR 2008, p. 10).

In Australia, teachers have been using a functional approach to language for the past couple of decades to address the above aspirations. Such an approach is concerned with how language functions to make the kinds of meanings that are important in our daily lives, in school learning, and in the wider community.

A functional model of language draws on the work of Professor Michael Halliday (see, for example, Halliday 2009), one of the leading linguists of modern times. Halliday sees language as a meaning-making system through which we interactively shape and interpret our world and ourselves. His interest is in language as ‘a resource for making meaning’. Based on the work of Halliday, educational linguists such as Martin (1985) and Christie (2005) developed a ‘genre-based approach’ with the goal of making the language demands of the curriculum explicit so that all students have access to the linguistic resources needed for success in school and to the powerful ways of using language in our culture.

In this book, you will be learning about language and how it works from a functional perspective so that you can better support your students to learn language, to learn through language, and to learn about language.

LANGUAGE IN CONTEXT

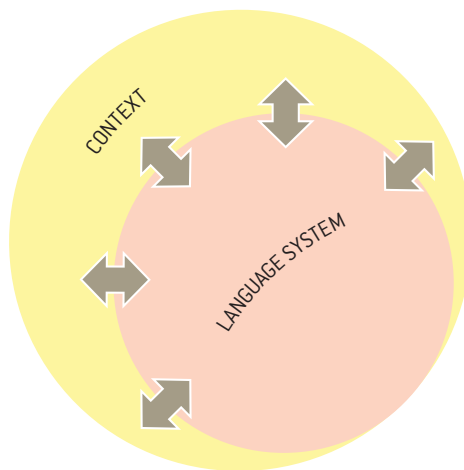
A functional model describes how language varies from context to context. It shows, for example:

- how the language of science differs from the language of literature
- how the language we use when talking to close friends differs from that we use when giving a formal oral presentation
- how spoken language differs from written language.

In Figure 1.1, we can see the relationship between the language system and its context. According to Halliday (1985), the language system can be seen as a complex network of choices that have evolved to serve our needs. The context in which language is used has an influence on the kinds of choices we make from the language system.

In Chapter 2 you will be introduced more fully to the choices available in the language system.

Figure 1.1 The language system in a dynamic relationship with the context



The relationship between the context and the language system is a dynamic one. We might enter a context with certain expectations regarding:

- the purpose of the interaction
- the topic to be discussed
- the nature of the relationship
- the channel of communication.

These factors in the context help us to predict the language choices we might make. As the interaction progresses, however, the context can also change as a result of the language choices being made. In an email exchange, for example, the initial purpose might be to complain

about a faulty piece of equipment bought for the school. In a subsequent phone call, however, the purpose might change to an apology as you find out that in fact the equipment has been installed incorrectly. With the shift in context, the language choices will also change in terms of the purpose (complaint versus apology), the topic (the faulty equipment versus the faulty installation), the relationship (aggrieved versus contrite), and the mode of communication (email versus telephone).

Have a go!

From the above scenario, try to predict the kind of language choices made in the initial email exchange as opposed to the choices made in the telephone conversation. How do they differ?

Similarly, the language system as a whole is in a constant state of flux, impacted by the ways people use language in creative and unusual ways.

REGISTER

According to Halliday, in any particular situation there are three key factors in the context that affect the choices we make from the language system: the field, the tenor, and the mode.

The **field** refers to the content or subject matter. In a school context, our language choices will vary depending on such matters as the curriculum area and the topic being studied. The language choices we make in science, for example, will be quite different from those made in history. The topic of crystallisation will employ quite different language features from the topic of life in ancient Rome.

The **tenor** refers to the roles we take up (student, parent, customer, employee) and our relationships with others in any particular situation. The tenor will be affected by such matters as the status, level of expertise, age, ethnic background, and gender of the participants. Language choices will vary according to such factors as how well people know each other, how frequently they meet, and how they feel about each other. If you are having a conversation with a close friend with whom you meet regularly, the choices will be quite different from a tutorial session with a senior lecturer and a group of students you hardly know.

The **mode** refers to the channel of communication being used: the mode and the medium. Here, we are primarily concerned with the difference between the spoken mode and the written mode and the different roles these play in the learning process. This is an important consideration as students move from the oral language of the home and schoolyard to the increasingly dense and compact language of the written mode in academic contexts. Mode can also refer to visual and multimodal texts presented through a range of media.

field: the subject matter or topic being developed in a particular situation.

tenor: the roles and relationships being enacted in a particular situation.

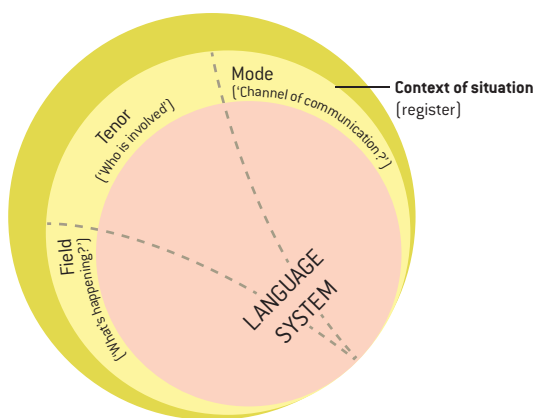
mode: the channel of communication being used in a particular situation [e.g. oral, written, visual].

register: a combination of the field, tenor, and mode in a particular situation.

context of situation: a specific situation within a culture that gives rise to a particular register.

Any combination of these contextual features creates the **register** of a situation (see Figure 1.2). In one situation we might find a couple of old friends (tenor) discussing (oral mode) their holiday plans (field). In another situation, we might imagine a teacher and principal (tenor) corresponding through emails (written mode) about the agenda for the staff meeting (field). As you can imagine, the language choices will differ considerably depending on the register.

Figure 1.2 The register (field, tenor, and mode) of a particular situation



Have a go!

From the text below, see if you can infer the register (the field, the tenor, and the mode). What are some key language features that enabled you to do this?

All students who have been sent to detention this week will meet me here after assembly. There has been an unacceptable increase in the number of students turning up late for class and disobeying school rules. If you break the rules, there will be consequences. And you all know what they are!

Part 2 of this book will introduce you more fully to a range of academic registers.

Being able to identify the register of a situation enables us to predict the kind of language our students will need to use in that situation. If we are planning a particular geography lesson, for example, our students might need support in using language to explain the movement of tectonic plates (field) to an unknown audience (tenor) in the written mode (mode).

GENRE

When we talk about register, we are considering the language choices made in response to a particular situation (the context of situation). At a more global level, we need to consider the relationship between language and the broader **context of culture**. The language system evolves within the context of a certain culture (including beliefs, values, and behaviours) to meet the needs of that culture. Our language choices will therefore be sensitive to the cultural context as well as the context of a particular situation within that culture. When we refer to ‘culture’, we don’t necessarily mean national cultures (e.g. ‘Australian’, ‘Asian’, ‘British’). Rather, we often think about cultures as a collection of discourse communities, subcultures, or social institutions such as sporting groups, theatre aficionados, book clubs, friends, and family. In this sense, we are thinking of the school as part of an educational discourse community.

context of culture:
The broad cultural context within which we use language for purposes such as explaining, recounting, describing, and so on, depending on the discourse community—in our case, the discourse community of schooling.

Think about it

How many discourse communities have you engaged with over the past week or so?

How does your language change as you move between these communities?

In particular, following the work of Martin (Martin & Rose 2008), here we are concerned with the various purposes for which language is used in the culture. In our daily lives we use language to achieve a variety of social purposes: telling friends what we did on the weekend, instructing someone how to follow a recipe, explaining how a computer application works, persuading parents to buy a treat, completing tax forms, and so on. We can refer to these as **genres** (or text types)—goal-oriented social practices that have evolved in our culture to enable us to get things done. If our purpose was to obtain employment, for example, then a relevant genre to use would be a job application. If our purpose was to draw up a legally binding agreement, then an appropriate genre would be a contract. Or if we wanted to tell someone how to use a video camera, we might choose the genre of giving instructions.

genres: the ways in which we achieve our social purposes through language.

So in order to identify the genre of a particular text, we first ask what purpose the text is serving: describing, counselling, lobbying, instructing, recommending, informing, and so on. Rather than seeing genres simply as products or things, we will also be thinking of them as processes. We employ them to *do* things: to persuade someone to our point of view, to satirise, to share experiences, to complain about a service, and so on.

Genres evolve over time through social use. If social purposes change, then genres will modify themselves to accommodate these changes. Outmoded genres do not persist simply because of convention. If they are no longer functional, they will generally adapt or die out.

The study of genre has a long tradition. Some trace its history back to ancient Greece where the original categories of lyric, dramatic, and epic were developed. It was Aristotle who emphasised the role of rhetoric as a way of achieving various social purposes through spoken or written language.

For some time, the most widespread use of the term ‘genre’ has been in association with particular kinds of literature (later extended to include works of art and film). Thus works of literature of a particular style were referred to as genres of one variety or another: the elegy, the sonnet, the ballad, the romance genre, the pastoral genre, the gothic horror genre, the science fiction genre, and so on.

The meaning of the term has been extended these days to include non-literary texts—texts from the community (casual conversation, patient–doctor consultations, shopping lists), from the media (editorials, news bulletins, television documentaries), from the workplace (business reports, office memos, safety warnings), and from educational contexts (book reviews, classroom interaction, lab reports). As you can see, genres can be spoken, written, or multimodal (integrating visual elements with written text).

In this book, the terms ‘genre’ and ‘text type’ will be used interchangeably to refer to ways of achieving a specific social purpose through language within a particular cultural context.

In school contexts, we encounter a range of genres over which students need to gain control in order to succeed in their academic lives (see Table 1.1). In this book, we will be introducing some of the key genres of schooling.

Table 1.1 Examples of genres typically used in school contexts

Purpose	Genre (text type)	Examples
To entertain (Chapter 4)	Stories	Reading a narrative Sharing an Anecdote Innovating on a fable
To tell what happened (Chapter 5)	Recounts	Recounting the results of a science experiment Recounting an historical event Recounting how a maths problem was solved
To provide information about a general class of things (Chapter 6)	Information reports	Types of transport The feline family Rainforests
To explain how things work or why things happen (Chapter 7)	Explanations	How an electric circuit works What causes earthquakes How the Second World War began
To argue (Chapter 8)	Arguments/expositions	Essay developing a particular stance Discussion considering various sides of an issue Formal debate

Purpose	Genre (text type)	Examples
To respond (Chapter 9)	Responses	Responding personally to a text or artform Interpreting a text, artform, or body of work
To conduct an inquiry (Chapter 10)	Inquiry reports (macrogenre)	A science experiment A geography project A technology and design assignment A problem-solving inquiry

As we can see from Table 1.1, virtually all the activities in which students participate involve the use of particular genres. If we are clear about the purposes that students will be expected to achieve in a unit of work, then we can better support them in learning how to use relevant genres.

Have a go!

Just by looking at the opening lines of a text, we can usually infer the genre being used. From the following, see if you can predict the likely genre. (Hint: Think about the likely purpose of the text.) What is it in the language choices that enable you to identify the genre?

- Once there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy.
- The koala is an arboreal herbivorous marsupial native to Australia.
- Do this science experiment to learn about the chemical reaction that makes sherbet so fizzy when you put it in your mouth.
- There are many reasons why new laws should be introduced to make organic farming techniques compulsory for all Australian growers.
- The plants in our school vegetable garden are looking unhealthy.
- On Tuesday 3A went to the animal sanctuary to observe the wildlife.
- Erosion is the result of several factors.

Each genre has a characteristic structure and goes through a number of stages to achieve its purpose. The various stages are generally ordered in a relatively predictable way (see Table 1.2). In a recount of an incident, for example, we typically find a stage at the beginning that lets us know who was involved, when and where it took place, and so on. This is generally followed by a description of the sequence of events. And finally, another stage might conclude the recount—a summarising comment, for example.

Interspersed through these broad *stages*, we might find a number of smaller *phases*. While the stages are relatively stable, the phases provide greater flexibility in terms of, for example, which to include, where to include them, how many to include, and even whether to include them. They allow for greater elaboration and for an element of creativity.

Table 1.2 Oral recount of visit to the dentist

Stages	Phases	
Orientation	<i>Who?</i> <i>When?</i> <i>Why?</i>	Did I tell you that um ... when I went to the dentist last time I had to get this tooth pulled out? It was really badly stuck in and it was dead and it wouldn't come out. And ... it wasn't really dead. It was still alive but it just got bad.
Record of events	<i>Event 1</i>	The dentist put ... um ... heaps ... about ten needles in all round it 'cause it seems that it had heaps of pus in it.
	<i>Event 2</i>	And the dentist put in heaps of cloth. ...
	<i>Event 3</i>	So he got the pliers ... [Mimes pulling out tooth.]
	<i>Comment</i>	And then I didn't even realise that it was out. I said, 'Is it out yet?' and he goes 'It's already out.'
	<i>Event 4</i>	And then what happened was, after a while my ... this gum puffed up really big.
	<i>Evaluation</i>	It felt really funny and numb.
	<i>Event 5</i>	And I bit my tongue 'cause I couldn't feel it!
Summarising comment		I hate going to the dentist.

In identifying the various stages, it is important to ask how each one contributes to achieving the overall purpose of the text. The terms used to describe the stages should be functional, that is, they should give an indication of the job the stage is doing within the text. Terms such as 'beginning', 'middle', and 'end', for example, are not really functional. They tell us about the structure, not about what role that stage is playing. Most genres have a beginning stage, a middle stage, and an ending stage, but they differ in terms of what these stages do. The beginning of an anecdote, for example, might make reference to a particular incident in someone's experience ('I'll never forget the day I ran into old Winston.'), whereas the beginning of a job application might identify the job being applied for ('I am writing in reference to the position of caretaker advertised in last Friday's *Gazette*.').

In analysing texts, students will come across stages that they may not have previously encountered. It is useful at these points to ask them to make up a term for this stage that indicates the function it has in the text.