

LINGUISTIC KNOWLEDGE, EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION, AND AGENCY: MOVING FORWARD IN WRITING PEDAGOGY WITH A PROGRESSIVE AGENDA

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Language is what it is because of what it does. It has evolved over countless generations across countless communities and continues to evolve as we adapt to a complex and continually evolving world. Language is a social semiotic: it helps us shape and share our understanding, it helps us meet people and negotiate relationships, and it helps us get things done for ourselves and our communities. We do things *with* language and *through* language as we do things *with* writing and *through* writing. This is the heart of writing courses. This is a view of language as fundamentally meaning-making and communicative, a view that values and privileges writers' language backgrounds, identities, and agency.

This Special Issue of *JTW* holds up the central place of language knowledge in the teaching of writing, and in so doing, honors the memory of William Vande Kopple. By “language knowledge,” we mean *linguistically informed knowledge of language*, a knowledge that grows and changes over time. For more than two decades, against the grain of mainstream composition (then and now), Vande Kopple brought a linguistically informed, research-based knowledge of language to writing pedagogy. The writers and editors of this issue share with Vande Kopple the belief that such

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language knowledge as it shapes and is shaped by discourse is of enormous value to both writers and teachers. Our work builds on this belief and, in so doing, furthers Vande Kopple's efforts to develop linguistically valid insights and practices for the purposes of writing and writing instruction.

The writers in this special issue understand that language is not simply a neutral conveyor of content, but intimately involved in the formation of that content. We are writing teachers, entrusted with helping our students do things with language (through writing), and these articles explore myriad ways in which that happens, the kinds of pressures put upon language in various contexts, and the resources in language that help us respond to those pressures effectively. That understanding, as tentative as it may seem at times, can inform and shape our teaching, though we may struggle to find ways to pass it on to the budding and blossoming writers in our care. Collectively, we believe that writing instructors and students benefit from a systematic, empirically grounded understanding of how language works within context.

The true value of Vande Kopple's work is best seen within the context of history. His textbook—*Clear and Coherent Prose: a Functional Approach*—was published in 1989, three years after George Hillocks Jr.'s *Research on Written Communication: New Directions for Teaching* and four years after the first edition of Michael Halliday's *Introduction to Functional Grammar*. Hillocks' *Research on Written Communication* conducted meta-analyses on a wide range of pedagogical approaches, including practices of grammar instruction. It reaffirms the views first espoused by the Braddock report in the '60's, that teaching formal grammar outside the context of writing does not improve writing, and, because it replaces activities that DO improve writing, can be harmful. Hillocks, Jr. is careful to say that the grammar he is describing is largely a school-based grammar, including memorization of the "eight parts of speech," a grammar that linguists "have long before shown...provided an inconsistent and inadequate description of

how language works” (133). He goes on to say, also, that teachers advocating grammar “tend to make no distinction between grammar (a description of how language works) and ‘correctness’ (adherence to accepted conventions of punctuation and usage)”(133). It is not too big a leap to say that too much attention to correctness based on an “inconsistent and inadequate” understanding of language can distract from what progressive educators, Hillocks Jr. included, would call “higher-level processes” like “deciding on intentions and generating and organizing ideas” (226). Halliday’s work, of course, embraces the role grammar plays in the construction of higher purposes: mapping the world, including the interior world of our thoughts, feelings, and senses; interacting with readers and listeners; and constructing texts (58-60). In effect, Vande Kopple draws on Halliday to help solve the problems that Hillocks, Jr. describes, aiming for a more consistent and adequate description of language in use, one in harmony with discourse goals, one capable of narrowing the divide between attention to grammar and attention to the most important goals of writing.

The first sentences in Vande Kopple’s preface to *Clear and Coherent Prose* let us know where his influences lie. “The roots of this text are in linguistics. In assumptions and operating procedures, I align myself most closely with linguists of the functional school. . . . [T]hese linguists have examined language as actually used, trying to relate the functions that people seek to fulfill to the formal means by which they fulfill them” (vii). He makes it clear in the preface that his interest is in helping writers address, through language choice, the rhetorical situations they find themselves in. What could be more important than being able to write clearly and coherently? Even more importantly, what could be more important than recognizing that there are observable resources in the language for accomplishing those goals, resources that—once we recognize them—can help us carry them forward? In Vande Kopple’s work, and certainly in the larger world of functional linguistics, there is no inherent split between the formal and the functional. This is

language knowledge, including grammar, fundamentally tied to higher order concerns.

Vande Kopple's work is broad and deep. He has investigated and clarified aspects of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics and created for writers and writing educators a unique college-level writing text in *Clear and Coherent Prose*. The quintessential scholar-teacher, he has not only investigated the ordering of information in and across sentences (e.g., "Thematic Progressions") and the meta-uses of language in negotiating writer-reader relationships ("Exploratory Discourse on Metadiscourse"; "Refining and Applying"; "Issues in Composition and Rhetoric"; "Importance of Studying Metadiscourse"), but also clarified and re-presented linguistic knowledge for writing teachers and students. Not one to accept writing myths, such as, "Don't use passive voice," he sought to understand the relationship between language choices and genre in his studies of scientific writing and held up such writing as purposeful (not merely passive-laden "bad" literature), its differences reflective of how meaning is made and valued differently across disciplines ("Functions of Grammatical Subjects"; "From the Dynamic Style to the Synoptic"; "Stylistic Analysis of Scientific Texts"). In addition to conducting textual analysis, he developed reader-based experiments to investigate and determine the cognitive validity of SFL's given-new expectation ("Something Old, Something New"). Across all of Vande Kopple's work, one feels guided by a keen scholar and dedicated teacher, someone passionate about the study and teaching of writing, someone dedicated to grounding grammar and writing pedagogy in a systematic understanding of how language works within rhetorical context.

In the spirit of Vande Kopple, the articles in this special edition represent a wide range of linguistically-based writing pedagogies, offering practical guidance for teachers. They extend Vande Kopple's vision of weaving language and discourse knowledge to help writers strengthen their ability to make meaningful and

effective linguistic choices in ways that respect their language backgrounds and identities and promote agency.

The first article in this special edition, Debra Myhill's "Grammar as Choice: Teaching Students the Craft of Writing," links grammar, as the title suggests, to two things it is normally not associated with: choice (and thus agency) and craft. Debra Myhill, much like Vande Kopple, is a language scholar dedicated to bringing systematic, research-based language knowledge into writing pedagogy and practice. She places her own work and the work of her colleagues within the larger grammar conversation that too often conflates grammar with correctness and accuracy, opting instead for the functionally based approaches developed by scholars like Michael Halliday and William Vande Kopple. Her article reports clearly and thoughtfully on an evolving pedagogical research program, worked out over fifteen years, offering very specific classroom exercises as examples. In her program, grammar is linked to actual reading and writing, examples are drawn from authentic texts, and ample space is granted for dialogic discussion. Grammar is linked to discourse and meaningful choice.

In "Encouraging Playful, Productive Curiosity about Language in the Writing Classroom," Whitney Gegg-Harrison invites instructors and students alike to play with language through a series of linguistic puzzles informed by research in linguistics and cognitive science. This article—much in the spirit of Vande Kopple's "Pun and Games"—offers teachers a way to counter the damage caused by years of error-focused grammar instruction. As Vande Kopple learned from his students, they came "to see language primarily as something they can make very noticeable mistakes with, as something that they can get into trouble in public with" ("Puns and Games" 52). In response, Vande Kopple has not only offered a functional alternative, but also strove to alleviate student's fears of grammar and nurture curiosity about language's possibilities. In "Pun and Games," he argues for the use of language games to foster "joy in language among our students" (52). Puzzling over and playing with language, Vande Kopple explains, "can also get students thinking about linguistic abilities and conventions in

deeper ways than our classes sometimes lead them to think” (52-53). Equally committed to using play to teach grammar in the context of writing, Gegg-Harrison presents language games that reveal how people process language, shed insight into the relationship between language structure and thinking, and develop respect for linguistic diversity. Gegg-Harrison’s article demonstrates how purposeful language play leads students to experience, question, and ultimately use the creative and communicative affordances of language in their own writing.

Traditional school grammar has been criticized for valuing form over function, for attending to correctness at the expense of higher order concerns like meaning, coherence and civility. Functional approaches, on the other hand, notably systemic functional linguistics, emphasize function over form, searching for the myriad resources in language that bring higher order goals to fruition. That’s the spirit of Laura Aull’s “Metadiscourse as Civil Discourse: Analyzing Writing as Ethical Sociorhetorical Practice.” Highlighting and drawing on William Vande Kopple’s work on metadiscourse, she focuses on how those elements attune a reader to the organization of a text and nurture an attitudinal openness to the ideas and perspectives of others. Along with Vande Kopple, she recognizes that metadiscourse is fundamental to conveying the writer’s message fairly and ethically and, as Vande Kopple emphasizes, is “important to the success or failure of texts.” “[A]s far as possible,” he goes on to say, metadiscourse discussions should be “supported by empirical research” and should “help us help students to use metadiscourse well in their specific writing tasks” (“Exploratory Discourse on Metadiscourse” 87). Vande Kopple has begun this work; Laura Aull furthers it. Grounded in research in metadiscourse, her article illustrates through case studies the ethical need to attend to language in the teaching of writing, situates instructional attention to metadiscourse within our current crisis of civility, emphasizes the need to incorporate the views of others respectfully, and gives us very practical ways to carry this out in the classroom.

In “Creating Effective Paragraphs: Choosing Appropriate Topics and First Elements Mindfully,” Cornelia Paraskevas reviews and revises Vande Kopple’s “Themes, Thematic Progressions, and Some Implications for Understanding Discourse,” to make it more useful to writing instructors and students. Vande Kopple’s work reviews the varied terminology and descriptions of the first elements of a sentence, situates them in relation to one another, and then develops a framework for analyzing these elements in order to understand or diagnose a paragraph’s thematic progression—or flow.¹ Vande Kopple’s framework affords writers the knowledge to make mindful and effective writing choices. It reflects his belief that “[s]tudents should understand the reasons for using the various kinds of themes...” (327). He recognizes that if a teacher doesn’t understand these processes, it’s easy to do inadvertent harm with decontextualized prescriptive advice, like vary sentence beginnings or avoid the passive: “If they were to select ideational themes capriciously, for example, they could produce a string of clauses that lack a consistent focal point or that have new information before given information for no good reason” (327). Equally committed to educating writers about language, Cornelia Paraskevas amends Vande Kopple’s framework for analyzing first sentence elements across a paragraph, provides well-explained examples of how the first elements of a sentence affect the progression of ideas and readers’ understanding of a paragraph’s meaning and purpose, and ultimately offers writing instructors and their students a powerful process for improving flow.

The penultimate article in this edition demonstrates the relevance of linguistic knowledge to creative writing pedagogy. As Joseph Salvatore argues in “Tools, Not Rules: Rhetorical Grammar as a Meaning-Making Tool in the Creative Writing Workshop,” systematic language knowledge grounds the writer’s ability to create and control fictional worlds, to represent characters’ thoughts and actions, and to move the story forward with narrative that subtly and precisely focuses the reader’s attention. Aligned with Vande Kopple’s use of linguistic knowledge to address high-order goals, Salvatore urges instructors to move beyond

decontextualized, correctness-focused grammar instruction, beyond creative-writing lore, and toward a functional, rhetorical approach that reveals connections between sentence-level choices and story composition. He introduces and uses the *it*-cleft as a representative example of how a reader's understanding of a story begins with how the writer orders elements in a sentence. Drawing on several of his own in-class activities, Salvatore offers the creative writing instructor a series of personally tested in-class activities that move from analysis of *it*-cleft in published pieces through student play with *it*-cleft in their own writing and eventually to exploring other ways in which language choice builds the world of the story.

As Vande Kopple recognized, it is not enough for a student to understand their language choices; they must also be in a mindset to act on those choices. In the final article, "Why Do You Think I'm Asking?": How Misunderstood Requests Impede Student Agency in Writing Conferences," Angie Carter's primary concern is student agency, or how much space a student has to make choices about their own writing. This work shifts our attention from the written text to a critical space for writing development, the writing conference. Drawing on linguistic speech-act and politeness theories and social constructionism, Carter analyzes writing conference interactions, revealing and explaining miscommunications that undermine student agency. As Carter discovers, student agency depends on the extent to which the student and teacher recognize either other's requests as requests, as opposed to orders, and this in turn depends on their respective identities during the writing conference. Through excerpts from case studies and interviews, Carter raises awareness of the complexity of writing conferences. The article concludes with several recommendations for becoming a more mindful communicator and, thus, a more effective educator.

In the Preface to *Clear and Coherent Prose*, Vande Kopple envisions a writing pedagogy that helps students learn how language shapes their message, who they are, and how they relate to their readers: "One of my hopes for this text is that it will make aspects of the

rhetorical situation more concrete and vivid for students” (vii). This vision is furthered by the articles here. As does Vande Kopple, the authors of this memorial edition create space for those who don’t know much about grammar to begin anew and without fear. For teachers and students alike, the language knowledge and activities introduced here offer alternatives to the traditional, correctness-based approaches that have at best misguided writers about language’s purpose and potential and, at worst, stymied writers’ voices and hindered their growth. As this memorial edition illustrates, we’ve made some progress in teaching grammar as something far greater than a set of mistakes. But this is still only a beginning. Our greatest hope is that this work will inspire others to develop a more functional understanding of their English language and others’ languages and then use and build on this knowledge in their own teaching and in their writing.

Notes

¹If you are looking for a thoughtful and clear introduction to Hallidayan linguistics, this is an excellent start.

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