The use of grammatical metaphor in student research dairies
学習者研究ノートに見る文法メタファー

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Summary
In this article I consider how Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) can help us understand learner texts, specifically, research diaries written by students, where students represent their understanding of an issue that they have been researching. After briefly explaining how the ‘experiential meta-function’ in SFG lets us look at texts in terms of ‘processes’, ‘participants’ and ‘circumstances’, I report on particular insights that an SFG analysis of three student research diaries provides. I also look at the use of ‘grammatical metaphor’ by students in the same research diaries and discuss possible connections between grammatical metaphor and critical thinking.

Text
A few years ago I looked at the ‘image stories’ that students created about their English learning histories. These were stories where the students each took a central image or metaphor such as ‘my English learning is playing football’ or ‘my English learning is a bird hatching and taking to flight’ and wrote their English histories as an extended metaphorical narrative. The students really enjoyed writing these stories and sharing them in class with each other. It was as if the creative moment of the metaphor helped them re-configure and look back with satisfaction at the many years they had spent learning English. So, for ‘Metaphors we learn by’, I initially thought that it would be interesting to explore how students see, perhaps through some kind of similar imaginative story-telling, the development of their knowledge of different social, legal, political or global issues that they research through English in different classes that I teach.

However, as the spring semester unfolded, I decided it might be better to look more closely at the way students write what I call ‘research diaries’. These are weekly logs, a page or so long—similar in form to learning diaries (Barfield, 1993; Cotterall, 1995; Dam, 1995; Usuki, 1995) or action logs (Murphey, 1992), but focused on the development of knowledge of a particular social, legal, political or global issue, rather than on English learning itself. In making a research diary entry, students write about what they know about a particular issue, what they don’t know but want to know, their changing position on the issue, and about further questions that they wish to explore. In the end, I decided to look at the final research diary entries of three students from a 5-week cycle of research into Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). ‘Keiko’ (a nom de plume) looked at issues of child labour to do with GAP’s global supply chain; ‘Shu’ investigated the employment practices of Japanese companies for people with disabilities, while ‘Mei’ researched environmental issues connected with different types of tourism in developing countries.
We had been talking in class about taking a critical view—that is, of looking at the specific positions, actions and roles of different actors to do with CSR issues, and contradictions that arise, but it still puzzled me as to how ‘we’ (both teacher and student) can gauge criticality in the way that we talk and write about such problems. What might, I wondered, a systemic functional grammar (SFG) analysis of student research diaries reveal? This seemed a promising direction to follow, particularly as Halliday proposes the notion of ‘grammatical metaphor’ to be part of the way texts can be used to represent different ideological assumptions about the world.

I explain grammatical metaphor in greater detail further below, but before we get to that, I should mention a little about the way that SFG lets us interpret texts in terms of what’s called the experiential meta-function. As the name suggests, the experiential meta-function of texts organizes our experience and understanding of the world. In an SFG analysis, the experiential meta-function is analysed in terms of processes, participants and circumstances. Processes typically involve the verbal group of a clause, participants nominal groups, and circumstances adverbial groups and/or prepositional phrases. Basically, these three components can enable us to look at the clauses in a text and consistently explore from one clause to another: ‘Who does what to whom, under what circumstances?’

In such an experiential analysis, the key component is the process. SFG proposes six fundamental processes types, as shown in the table below. (For reasons of space, I will just introduce these categories without explaining more.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Different types of process</th>
<th>Core meaning of the process (What the text represents participants as …)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Material</td>
<td>… ‘doing’; ‘happening’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental</td>
<td>… ‘sensing’ (‘perceiving’; ‘thinking’; ‘feeling’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>… ‘being’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal</td>
<td>… ‘saying’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural</td>
<td>… ‘behaving’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential</td>
<td>… ‘existing’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When I looked at the three research diaries written by three students and analysed the way each student used experiential meaning to represent their understanding of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), it was quite striking how each student construed their understanding of the world in different ways:

- Keiko tended to choose mental processes and to focus on relational processes in her representation of CSR. She gave primacy to her own subjective thoughts and feelings about CSR. She also considered GAP customers in terms of their mental, rather than material, processes. Keiko described and evaluated GAP’s website rather than GAP’s specific corporate material activities. In sum, Keiko’s representation was largely about her cognitive and affective perception of CSR, and the way different participants related to each other.
- Shu tended to highlight material processes; he also situated different participants relationally, as well as described and evaluated (un)employment. Shu saw companies as actors in material processes, but disabled people were seen in relational terms only. (Un)employment was also seen by Shu as an existential process. In contrast to Keiko, Shu’s representation was more grounded
in material processes, but did not represent the agency of disabled people in dealing with the issues of employment.

- Mei tended to choose material, mental and relational processes, almost in equal measure. She represented companies, tourists and tourism as all engaged in material processes. She focused on environmental consequences of such materials processes, as well the benefits. Mei also saw different associated concepts in relational terms and had a strong ‘I’ position for the mental processes that she included. Unlike both Keiko and Shu, Mei constructed a more evenly ‘critical’ view of the world where she attributed different types of process to different participants.

Reading their research diaries like this, I felt that SFG was starting to give me some rather useful insights into how each student saw the world. I could imagine, for example, going back to Shu and asking him whether he had considered any specific actions that people with disabilities take to get employment, for example. Similarly I might ask Keiko to try to identify other actors in GAP’s global supply chain and consider different things that they do and say about the use of child labour, to see whether the actions and words of different actors matched or contradicted each other.

Overall, it seemed to me that at this stage of the analysis that Mei had created the most critical representation of a CSR issue, but what became more interesting was the use of grammatical metaphor by two of the students, Shu and Mei. (Keiko didn’t use grammatical metaphor at all.) Butt et al. (2000: 73-75) use the following example of grammatical metaphor to show how a process meaning (consuming) has been changed into a participant (consumption): ‘Excessive consumption of alcohol is a major cause of road accidents.’ According to Butt et al., if we re-word the example to recover ‘consuming’ as a process, we might come up with something like the following:

1. People who drink too much alcohol and drive often.
2. If you drink too much when you drive your car, you are likely to …
3. Motor vehicle drivers often have accidents because they have …

The normal process (for example, ‘People who drink too much alcohol and drive often cause road accidents’) is called congruent. The congruent version is seen as being a representation that is “closer to the state of affairs in the external world” (Thompson, 1996: 164). Conversely, the metaphorical wording (‘Excessive consumption of alcohol is…’) is seen as incongruent with material reality in some way. In other words, the nominalized version (consumption of alcohol) creates a different meaning from the congruent version. What is that different meaning? When processes become participants, they become ‘thingie-fied’, and this (grammatical) change detaches the process from the here-and-now. One effect is that the nominalized process becomes generalized. It also becomes “non-negotiable” (Thompson, 1996: 172) as an authoritative representation of the way the world is. So, an event is changed into a noun, and this grammatical transformation allows the author “opportunities to point out, count, describe, classify and specify further and further” (Butt et al., 2000: 75)—to theorise their interpretation of the world.

It is perhaps helpful at this point to look at some examples of grammatical metaphor from the student research diaries. Shu (researching employment practices for the disabled) used, for example:

- Employment rate of the disabled are lower than that of ordinary people around the world.
- Corporates [= corporations] need to improve their employment rates of the disabled, like Sony and Sony Group.

Mei (looking at the environmental effects of different types of tourism) produced:

- Tourism will develop under the international relationship, but it causes damages in the visiting areas.
- However, the benefits from the tour are used as reinvestment on the environment or people
The sustainability is the key point.
In discussing the student research diaries and these examples of grammatical metaphor with people at the forum, I suggested that the use of grammatical metaphor seemed to be connected to a critical theorisation of a particular CSR issue. It seemed as if the use of grammatical metaphor by Shu and Mei in some way showed them as starting to build their own critical interpretations of a particular CSR case in terms of multiple participants, different types of experiential process, and varying elements of circumstantial detail. They had, in other words, put together complicated views of CSR, and this in some way connected to the use of grammatical metaphor in their theory building.

Conversely, Keiko had put together a largely relational picture of the processes involved in GAP’s use of child labour. Her interpretation was more or less ‘descriptive’ and related back to herself rather than looking out from herself at the interplay of different types of processes and participants around the use of child labour in GAP’s global supply chain. This could be a possible explanation as to why Keiko did not use grammatical metaphor (assuming that the use of grammatical metaphor does in fact point to critical theorisation of the world).

At the Learner Development SIG forum we talked of how, as teachers, we often encourage our students to ‘think critically’, but we are nevertheless vague as to what we exactly mean. When we read our students’ learning diaries, research diaries and reflections and look for evidence of ‘critical thinking’, what are the criteria that we use to judge that? SFG analysis offers one way by which we can sensitize ourselves to how students represent their ‘critical’ understanding of the world around them.

References