

The discipline of English Literature from the perspective of SFL register

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The paper first traces the history and elaboration of the tertiary discipline English Literature through the 19th and 20th centuries to the present day, with special focus on the axiology, the values, given to the discipline and with a brief account of literary criticism and literary theory. It then refers to the work on registerial cartography in systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and explores the register of the contemporary discipline in first-order field of activity and second-order field of experience, with examples from the language of webpages and exam papers of Australian universities. It continues with a brief overview of the author's own work using SFL in the study of *the poetic* and *the narrative* in English poetry and prose fiction of different historical periods and concludes with a caveat on the central disciplinary process, that of interpretation.

Keywords: English literature, disciplinary register, systemic functional linguistics, tertiary English, literary criticism, literary theory, registerial cartography, description of poetry, narrative temporality, interpretation

1. Introduction: English Literature as a discipline?

In an on-line article, under the title “Defining a discipline,” Edward Willatt (2010) “puts forward some rough thoughts” on this matter of definition:

I would argue that there is a great difference between two conceptions of how a discipline is defined:

- i. a discipline is defined by its method
- ii. a discipline is defined by its subject matter or object(s) of study.

One enduring feature of the so-called discipline of “English Literature” is that both its method and its object of study have been – and often are again – hotly

contested. Thus Armin Krishnan, having identified six characteristics of a discipline, comments:

Not all disciplines have all of the aforementioned six characteristics. For example [he refers to a much-cited text on literary theory, Eagleton 1983] English Literature has the problem that it lacks both a unifying theoretical paradigm or method and a definable stable object of research, but it still passes as an academic discipline. (2009: 10)

Further, this “contesting” of method and object of study can differ in different contexts of presentation. In this paper I am focused on English Literature as it has been conceived of and taught at the tertiary level, that is, within universities. The pedagogic practices at the secondary level require a different account, as recognized in a recent publication on the teaching of literature in Australian schools.

In schools, literary studies is embedded in subjects – most commonly “English” – that originated in, and take part in, a completely different set of institutional commitments and struggles. School subjects are specialized “social systems” which do not reproduce the ideological and professional dynamics of the disciplinary field but convert them into a dynamics of the scholastic field. It goes without saying that school subjects are social systems competing “for power, prestige, recognition and reward within the secondary or high school situation”. What constitutes “literary value” inside these social systems is therefore quite different from what constitutes it in other literary cultures, fields or social systems.

(Dolin et al. 2017: 6)

2. Origins and the value of literature at the tertiary level

English Studies, the study of English Language and Literature, entered the universities comparatively recently, from, say, the 1860s on, though Underwood (2013: 81) points out that English study had “flourished” for more “provincial, colonial or middle-class” audiences since the late 1820s. The academic reception varied in different English-speaking nations. In the United States, English was one of many new areas of study being established in new universities; in Britain, on the other hand, the entrenched dominance of the Classics, Classical Greek and Latin, led to some resistance to English in the long established universities, especially to a discipline of English Literature: individual chairs in English Literature were not established at Oxford and Cambridge universities until 1904 and 1911 respectively (McMurty 1985). The classical subjects were considered important disciplinary studies for the British elite for reasons of subject-matter and methodology: their subject-matter was hard – you had to learn the two languages – and that

learning led you to classical literature, which was highly valued both as art and as civil instruction. In various ways, those introducing English to tertiary institutions tried to situate the new subject within the established disciplinary values of the classical tradition: that literary texts are highly valued cultural objects which can be accessed only with difficulty.

Such an anxiety – to embed the values of classical studies in the new study of English – led, understandably, to an historical orientation, with an emphasis on diachronic English (and wider Germanic) language studies underwriting any study of literature. For example, here are the titles of two early lectures, given in one week in 1857 at King's College, London: “The Origin and Structure of the English Language, Illustrated by Our Literature, from the Earliest Times to the Invention of Printing” and “The Principles of Composition from the Appearance of Sir Philip Sidney's ‘Defence of Poetry’ to the Establishment of the *Edinburgh Review*” (McMurty 1985: 47). The first topic left off about 1500; the latter topic covered the late 1500s to the early 1800s.

This understanding, of literary history as central to giving value to the study of English literature, has been persistent, as evidenced in the title of Underwood's book, *Why literary periods mattered, historical contrast and the prestige of English studies* (2013). However, Underwood distinguishes the periodization of literary history (as in “English Romanticism”, “Elizabethan Drama” and so on) from the causal focus of the discipline of history itself (Martin 2003). Underwood writes of “the authority of historical discontinuity” (2013: 14) and its relevance to a burgeoning nineteenth century middle class, as opposed to the social continuity of a traditional aristocracy. For example, “[d]isorienting visions of a remote past became paradigmatic instances of literary imagination because they illustrated, better than any other subject could, that literary prestige was distinct from the traditional sources of social prestige” (2013: 28). Dividing English Literature departments by period, for curriculum structure or for the appointment of new staff to fill period gaps, remained dominant until very recently but, as Underwood's title implies (the past tense “mattered”), this is no longer necessarily the case.

Classical literature was valued; for English texts to be regarded as literature in the university, they too would have to be valued. By what criteria? In the mid-nineteenth century, the Englishman Matthew Arnold attempts “to find in great poetry a supreme moral and spiritual influence as well as an ideal aesthetic form...” (Poetry Foundation). In one letter to a friend, he wrote, “Homer *animates* – Shakespeare *animates*... what men want is something to *animate and ennoble* them” (Lowry 1853[1932]: 146). Arnold's high moral seriousness is sometimes parodied by later critics, but this is in part a contemporary reaction to its echoes in the Leavisite criticism of the mid-1930s in Britain. The latter approach was associated with the work of F.R. and Q.D. Leavis at Cambridge,

and in Australia persisted into the 1960s. While emphasizing the importance of personal response, Leavisite criticism re-presented the “moral mission” of English Literature “within narratives about class mobility and personal transformation...” (Dale 2012:188). (Leavisite assumptions persisted – and persist – in secondary pedagogy in English; for example, in a 1999 article, Anneliese Kramer-Dahl describes the “educational disadvantage” of this approach for matriculation students in Singapore.) Leigh Dale, in her study of the development of English Literature in Australian universities, illustrates the Leavisite influence by comparing two examination papers from Melbourne University: that, pre-Leavis, of 1928, which places more emphasis on literary history and asks students to “describe”, “compare”, “contrast” the writing of various authors, and that, post-Leavis, of 1956, in which students “are asked to comment upon ‘fine excess’, ‘dramatic intensity’, ‘sustained beauty’, ‘the poetic vision of life’, ‘concentrated tragic power’ and ‘the essence of Shakespeare.’” On the latter, Dale comments, “[e]ducated differently, I struggle to understand the meaning of the key terms in this examination, which seem to reference emotion rather than critical interpretation or scholarship...” (2012:195–198).

The next section describes the proliferation of criteria for evaluating literary texts.

3. Scholarship / literary criticism / literary theory

During the nineteenth century, the principal impetus in English studies was towards establishing the pre-printing texts in Old and Middle English, that is, on textual scholarship to provide the subject-matter for literary study. In the twentieth century, scholarship on post-printing texts continued with comparable work on historical context and textual editing. This literary scholarship is especially the concern of postgraduate and post-doctoral work. However, for students and professors alike, central to most accounts of twentieth century literary studies is the methodology of “literary criticism”.

The first duty of literary study at any level of education is to be literate and to read. But read what? A guide to tertiary study adds:

As well as reading primary literary texts, studying for a degree in literature entails reading and assessing works of “literary criticism”. This is one of the major differences between degree level literary studies and lower level studies, which typically demand only limited attention to the secondary literature that has been written about works of imaginative literature. As a student of literature you will, of course, be involved in the production of “literary criticism” yourself, and ... this necessitates a close engagement with the literary text on your part. But it often also

involves a further interaction between you and previous critics who have thought and written about that text. As such, it is useful to think of literary criticism as in part a collective enterprise. No literary critic is a lone pioneer,... rather literary critics, including degree students, work within a *field of study*¹ involving the contributions of many.
(Goring et al. 2001: 63; authors' italics)

Michael Halliday has pointed out that, in academia, the study of an object typically becomes the study of the studies of that object; his example was psychology as the study of the psyche becoming psychology as the study of psychology (spoken communication). Thus the discipline evolves itself. The above description of literary criticism implies that the subject matter of the discipline English Literature comes to include the works of literary criticism as well as the literary works written about in that criticism.

It is useful to compare the terms literary criticism and literary theory. "Criticism" comes from the Greek *krinein* to judge. The noun *kritikos*, meaning "judge of literature", has been used from the 4th century BCE. In modern academic use, "to criticise" can mean to evaluate or it can just mean to analyse, that is, the meaning of qualitative judgment is not essential (Goring et al. 2001: 63–64). But the method of the evaluation or of the analysis will be determined by the literary theory assumed – whether acknowledged or not. "Theory" comes from the Greek *theoria*, which signified a view or perspective of the Greek stage (Brewton). These different perspectives, these theories of literary criticism, expand the understanding of "value" in the discipline, both in historical and contemporary significance.²

Particularly from the 1970s on, the explicit reference to "theory" in tertiary literary study blossomed exponentially. In terms of different perspectives, Vince Brewton, at the University of Alabama, USA, (under "Literary Theory") lists and describes:

Traditional literary criticism
Formalism and new criticism
Marxism and critical theory
Structuralism and poststructuralism

1. The terms "field of study" and "academic discipline" are variously understood and inter-related. For example, see <https://www.bebr.ufl.edu/networks/website-article/what-academic-field-using-co-citation-networks-map-scientific-literature>. As used from Section 4 in this paper, the word "field" realizes a technical meaning in systemic functional linguistics.

2. Both "theory" and "perspective" can be translated in broader terms as the ideology of interpretation. In academic talk, "theory" is used for explicit recognition of that ideology, a usage which can efface the theoretical understanding in other cultural contexts. For example, replace "perspectives" by "theories" in the following book title: *Aboriginal perspectives on experience and learning: the role of language in Aboriginal education* (Christie 1985).

New historicism and cultural materialism
 Ethnic studies and postcolonial criticism
 Gender studies and queer theory
 Cultural studies

(Brewton n.d.)

Similarly, in *Studying English Literature, a practical guide*, a book designed for students just beginning university study of English in the United Kingdom, Tory Young, gives (under “Schools of criticism: a very brief outline”):

Feminism and gender studies
 Marxism and materialism
 New historicism
 Psychoanalysis
 Race, ethnic and postcolonial theories
 Reader-response theory
 Structuralism, deconstruction and poststructuralism

(Young 2008: 28–32)

Many general (e.g. Ayers 2008) and specific (e.g. Wisker 2007) textbooks describe these different theories/schools. Taking such perspectives into English Literature – expanding the *field of study* (the term used by Goring et al.) – considerably enlarged the possible area of the discipline, but also made its disciplinary perimeter more permeable. As theory (perspective) underwrote criticism (analysis and evaluation) which was the academic response to reading a text, to the extent that lecturing and examining focused explicitly on theory, the study of texts could become the means to explicating theory rather than the end of literary study: in other words, English Literature could morph into something else, such as Cultural Studies.

To illustrate the effect of literary theory on literary criticism, here are extracts from an on-line guide by an American academic, Celena Kusch (2009). Kusch is trying to help students negotiate the change from secondary to tertiary studies of English Literature as they encounter the expanded discipline (Kusch’s underlining and bold):

The main difference between high school and college-level literary studies is interpretation.

In high school you build the foundational skills needed to understand the world around you, thus basic literary studies often focus on understanding texts – identifying characters, mapping the plot, defining terms, and generally knowing what happened. ...

As scholars, who study literature, it is our job **to interpret the meaning and patterns within texts to learn more about language, culture, history, society, power, art and ourselves**. The literary scholar must read closely and analyze the details of the text in order to reassemble those details in a coherent argument about the

meaning of the overall text. Literary scholars write arguments to convince others to interpret texts as they do.

Kusch illustrates this change from understanding to interpretation with examples from the much studied 1925 novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*:

In high school we learn *The Great Gatsby* is “about” the way the green light symbolizes Gatsby’s dream of repeating the past with Daisy, or it is “about” recognizing the themes of the American dream or the Jazz Age. High School often asks school students to identify or locate what is already within the text itself.

However,

In college ... you would be responsible for interpreting **what it means and why it is important** that Tom Buchanan talks about white supremacist texts over dinner, why an African American witness identifies the car that strikes Myrtle Wilson, why the narrator claims this is really a story about the West, and how all of those details connect together to explain the significance of *The Great Gatsby*.

In her example of interpretation, it is clear that Kusch is bringing students’ attention to the perspective of a particular literary theory/school of criticism: “Ethnic studies and postcolonial criticism” in Brewton (n.d.), “Race, ethnic and postcolonial theories” in Young (2008). (See also Kusch 2016.)

4. The disciplinary register of English: first-order field of activity

(As noted in endnote 1, from Section 4, the word “field” is used to realize a specific technical meaning in systemic functional linguistics, that of one of the three parameters of the context of situation; Halliday 1978.)

It is possible now to identify some of the process meanings which have been understood to realize the methodology of English Literature. They include: *read, understand, describe, analyse, evaluate, criticise, interpret*. The last, *interpret*, has been seen as the practical culmination. As Donald Marshall notes, “outside literary study,” an interpreter, one who interprets, translates from one language to another; in a musical or dramatic performance the performer “interprets” the musical composition or play, and so on. “Despite variations, we find here a basic structure. An interpreter is someone who helps another understand the meaning of something...” (Recall Kusch’s comment: “Literary scholars write arguments to convince others to interpret texts as they do.”) Marshall continues:

In Latin, the word *interpretes* refers to a negotiator, mediator or messenger, as well as an expounder or explainer. The name for reflection on interpretation,

hermeneutics, comes from a Greek word meaning variously to translate, to put into words, or to explain. (1992: 1)

Argument from etymology can be dangerous, but the practices of English Literature having emerged from the nineteenth century context of classical studies, words from the classical languages still permeate the vernacular study. I add *explain* to the list of process meanings at the beginning of this section.

At this point it is appropriate to turn to the work on “registerial cartography”, a project which Christian Matthiessen, and colleagues, have been working on for some time. *Register* is used for a functional variety of language, language in a context of use; *cartography* is used for “mapping out registerial variation falling within the range intermediate between the two poles of the cline of instantiation – between the system (potential) pole and the text (instance) pole” (Matthiessen 2015a: 1). Matthiessen begins with the field of activity, “what’s going on” in a context, described as the “social-semiotic process”. At the most general differentiation of social-semiotic process, eight primary types are identified: expounding, reporting, recreating, sharing, doing, enabling, recommending and exploring. Matthiessen notes that “these low-delicacy distinctions are very important ...; for example, they give us insight into the registerial profiles of different secondary school subjects and different university disciplines...” In his account, the descriptions are progressively extended in delicacy “up to the point where it is possible to make contact with the extensive body of accounts of ‘genres’ documented by [others]” (2015a: 6–7), especially with the categories of the genre model of Martin and Rose (2008).

Matthiessen gives two “brief examples” of working with register maps, one relevant here: under Educational Linguistics for the subject English, in primary and secondary education, students move through *recreating* and *sharing* (writing their own stories, both imaginative and personal) to writing about other texts, first through initial *sharing* (personal response), then to *exploring*, which includes the process of “arguing” (2015a: 9). The genres of “recounts” and “narratives” correlate with the early processes of *recreating* and *sharing*; for the later (secondary) years of English, *exploring* correlates with genres of “reviews”, “character analyses” and “thematic interpretations”. (2015a: 39–40).

I return to the words for process meanings listed at the beginning of this section: *read*, *understand*, *describe*, *analyse*, *evaluate*, *criticise*, *interpret* and *explain*. At the tertiary level, *exploring* is still relevant as the general socio-semiotic process encompassing *read*, *understand*, *describe*, *criticise*, *evaluate*, *analyse* and *interpret*, but the tertiary exploration of textual instances, that is of literary texts, renegotiates the process of *interpreting*. This was plain in the example by Kusch (2009),

already quoted, which distinguished the “understanding of texts” in secondary studies from the “interpreting of texts” in tertiary studies.

Matthiessen’s prototypical social-semiotic process of *expounding* includes the sub-process of *explaining*, which correlates with Martin and Rose’s more delicate genre of “explaining” (Matthiessen 2015a:9). This genre is apparently seen, at primary and secondary levels, as relevant to more “objective” disciplines (such as those of science) but not to English (Humphrey et al. 2012). However, as already intimated in Marshall’s gloss on the word *hermeneutics*, *explaining* is relevant to advanced tertiary study of English, and to the profession of English Literature more generally. Here is Marshall again, on the profession:

Academics who share their interpretations with other academics through publication or presentation at professional meetings find themselves in a context quite different from that of the classroom. The profession takes the form of an ongoing conversation or debate over what to interpret and how, and a professional must become aware of the current state of this conversation and of what will be seen by other professionals as a contribution to it. As students advance in literary study, they join more fully in this conversation. (1992:164)

This ongoing interaction obviously involves *arguing* (a sub-process of *exploring*), but it also involves *explaining*: the meta-activity of reflecting on *expounding* one’s process of *interpreting* (itself a sub-process of *exploring*). It is clear that the word *interpreting* is used to realize two different socio-semiotic processes: that of *exploring* the literary text, and that of *expounding* the perspective from which that text is explored.

5. The disciplinary register of English: second-order field of experience

5.1 Subject-matter

To explore the what, as well as the how, of English Literature at the tertiary level, I turned to the on-line descriptions of English as displayed by Australian universities. As fairly representative of what I found, here is the blurb for “English” (so-called) from ANU, the highly respected Australian National University, which is located in Canberra:

We live in an information-rich and hyper-connected age. Studying English at ANU will focus your attention on a diversity of print and audio-visual texts, deepening your understanding of literary history and transforming how you think about reading.

You will learn to read closely, carefully and critically, engaging as you do so with major literary forms and genres as well as with literary theory and criticism. You will become more proficient in public speaking, written presentation and creative collaboration, while improving your capacity for critical inquiry, creative interpretation, argument and written expression. You will also understand better how literature has transformed and adapted as it has moved from print forms to film, television and social media (such as Facebook, You Tube and Twitter) and have the opportunity to explore how the digital humanities provide extraordinarily powerful tools to help us analyse and understand literary texts.

Works studied in English courses span the late sixteenth-century to the present day and include theatre, film, and television as well as print texts. Staff in English have expertise – reflected in publications of international impact – in the areas of literature and literary history, critical theory, creative writing, drama and theatre history, film and television studies. Together our courses cover the development of national literatures such as those of Australia and the US, as well as the major fields of British and Irish literature. You will study how literature shapes and is shaped by a history of ideas that have developed out of, and moved between, various national contexts.

(Study English at ANU 2017)

We see the discipline of English – here simply named – now includes texts of different modalities: print, audio-visual, film, television, social media. The discipline spreads synchronically in context, including texts, described as national literatures, from different English-speaking countries. At the same time, the discipline spreads diachronically in context, describing literature as transforming, adapting, shaping and being shaped by developments in technology and in theoretical perspectives, the history of ideas. The concern with periodicity persists: the study of literature from the time of Shakespeare, the sixteenth-century, to the present.

Yet essentially the methodology already described is brought to these different matters: students will deepen their understanding of literary history; they will transform how they think about reading; they will improve their capacity for “critical inquiry, creative interpretation, argument”. (I omit the references to writing and public speaking, which would be the concern of a different paper.) Note, as already discussed, how the subject matter now includes texts of “literary theory and criticism” as well as literary texts, with staff who specifically have expertise in “critical theory”.

5.2 Realization

A trawl through the subjects of recent exam papers in senior undergraduate English Literature at the University of Sydney³ shows primarily a mixture of period and thematic focus: twentieth Century Literature – Modernism; Victorian Literature; Shakespeare; Literature of Travel and Discovery; From the Metaphysical to Milton; Myths, Legends and Heroes; Imagining Camelot; Transpacific American Literature 1838–99. (Australian Literature, within the English Department, is separately offered).

Here is a question on Shakespeare (2011 exam):

Select TWO of the following passages and write a single detailed *analysis*, linking the two passages in any way that you consider appropriate. ...

Whilst you should not feel limited to answering these questions directly, you may want to consider some ... of the following in your *analysis*:

- In what ways does the passage *illuminate* some of the key ideas in the unit: scepticism; engagements with the natural world; meta-theatre?
- In what ways does the passage *present* us with the possibilities and limitations of theatrical representation?
- What *use does* the passage *make* of the resources of verse and prose composition?
- Do the uses of figurative language, especially metaphor and simile, *contribute to your understanding* of the passage, and of its relationship to the rest of the play?

I have italicised words realizing the processes of the disciplinary register of English Literature, its methodology; at the same time the student could bring a dizzying range of perspectives (“linking the two passages in any way that you consider appropriate”) to their “analysis”.

In contrast, a question from the “Twentieth Century Literature – Modernism” paper (2011) focuses closely on one text; note how the italicised processes are exemplary of the movement through reading/understanding/criticism described by introductory guides:

Describe, discuss and evaluate the emerging female presence in *Ash-Wednesday, 1930*. To what extent and, how, poetically, does she embody the main theme(s) of the poem?

3. All past exam papers were retrieved from the on-line resources of Fisher Library at The University of Sydney.

In both quoted questions, above, consider also the circumstantial meanings. The dominant circumstantial meaning is that of manner, particularly the sub-category of Quality (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 318–319). It is variously realized as phrase (“in what ways”), and interrogative (“how”), and as nominal paraphrase (“what use does the passage make...”, that is, “how does the passage use...”). The second question, on T.S. Eliot’s poem, *Ash-Wednesday*, 1930, also includes the sub-category of Manner: Degree: “to what extent” (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 320).

Overall, in the Sydney University English Literature exams, the processes identified and the circumstances of manner are ubiquitous, even when differently realized in the lexicogrammar. For example, from “Victorian Literature” (2011):

Discuss Dickens’s representation of the child and childhood in *Great Expectations*. Include a *discussion* of the effect of Dickens’s choice of narrative perspective on his representation of the child.

The first sentence asks for manner: quality: *how does Dickens represent the child ...?* The nominalizations in the second sentence (*discussion, effect, choice, representation*) assume this, embedding a further question to be answered within the first answer: *what narrative perspective does Dickens choose?* This complex answer then enables the student to consider the third question, which again asks for manner: quality. *How does Dickens’s choice affect his representation of the child?*⁴ I suspect that not all students successfully unpack these circumstantial demands.

6. Systemic functional linguistics and English literature

6.1 Linguistic description and literary interpretation

In an early paper (1964), in which he discusses the language of Yeats’ poem, *Leda and the Swan*, Michael Halliday (Halliday 2002: 19) writes:

Linguistics is not and will never be the whole of literary analysis, and only the literary analyst – not the linguist – can determine the place of linguistics in literary studies. But if a text is to be described at all, then it should be described properly; and this means by the theories and methods developed in linguistics, the subject whose task is precisely to show how language works. (Halliday 2002: 19)

Halliday uses the word *describe*; as already noted, Dale, when comparing examination papers from Melbourne University, observed that instructions like *describe*

4. The terms perspective and theory again – in effect, the question asks: how does Dickens theorise the characterization of the child?

or *compare* were used in the 1928 paper. So *describe* has been a basic activity in traditional literary criticism, and yet, as Halliday implies, the very means of coherent and consistent description, as developed in linguistics, has not often been deployed. Though Halliday's quote well pre-dates the turn to literary theory in English Departments in the nineteen seventies on, it also implies that it is not the role of linguists to tell literary critics how to evaluate/criticize/make judgments on literary texts; as already described, the possible perspectives/theories from which texts may be evaluated are legion. At the same time, the SFL model of language as social semiotic, that meanings are always meanings in a social context (Halliday 1978), reminds the literary analyst that the processes of production and interpretation are always socially located, that in literary criticism the perspectives of analysis and evaluation are always part of the literary activity.

6.2 Using SFL to study the "poetic" and the "narrative"

In my study of the language of English literature, using SFL, I have focused on two areas of study, poetry and prose fiction. I would rather describe this as the study of the poetic and of narrative: the language of a novel may be judged, in whole or part, "poetic" (for example, the language of *Burial Rites*, by the Australian Hannah Kent) or a poem can be classified as a narrative poem (for example, Coleridge's *The rime of the ancient mariner*). In a 2009 publication, Matthiessen includes such study within "[a]rtistic linguistics ... the study of verbal art... which is concerned with the *recreating* sector (that is, the prototypical social-semiotic process of *recreating*) but he adds:

poetry is a special case. Since poetry can be characterized "from below" in terms of patterns on the expression plane of language, it is not tied to any one sector. There are different types of poetry: narrative and epic poetry belong to the recreating sector, as do ballads and verse dramas; but lyric poetry, elegies and hymns belong to the 'sharing' sector... (Matthiessen 2009: 33)

Clearly, as poetry is characterized more by its choice of language in the text than by the social-semiotic process of its context, the description of that language, as Halliday prescribes, should be an essential first step in any literary criticism.

In general terms, to discuss "the poetic" I describe the choice of language in the text, to discuss the "narrative" I describe the textual sequence.

First, the poetic. Roman Jakobson (1960) effectively initiated linguistic poetics (sometimes later "literary stylistics") for students of English literature with his *dictum* on the poetic function: that it projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination (for example, the equivalence of

rhyming words or alliterating sounds).⁵ The axis of selection is Saussure's axis of choice, the paradigmatic or systemic axis. Jakobson overstated the case – repetition may or may not be present – but I agree that describing the poetic is a concern with the choice of language. Here SFL offers the analyst an arsenal of descriptive categories: the five dimensions of “The architecture of language,” as outlined by Halliday and Matthiessen in Chapter 1 of the third and fourth editions of *An introduction to functional grammar* (2004 & 2014).

1. structure
2. system
3. stratification
4. instantiation
5. metafunction

A complete description of the language of a text will describe its choices from each of these dimensions. In practice, the analyst may decide that one dimension or another is particularly relevant to the study of a particular text. For example, in my analysis of two poems, published in the journal *English in Australia*, I paid close attention to the choices of phonological structure in one poem but close attention to the choices of graphological structure, and their disruptive relation to the metafunctional choices, in the other (Huisman 2016). That paper includes my rank scale for the units of graphological structure. An earlier book-length account describes the historical development of graphic expression in English poetry, and the various meanings given to that expression (Huisman 1998, 2000).

My second focus has been on the language of narrative texts (in different media, as in Huisman et al. 2005). In some SFL work, the word *narrative* has been used as the name of a genre defined by a particular structure (as by Martin & Rose 2008; this terminology is particularly employed in pre-tertiary education, Humphrey et al. 2012). However, registerial cartography allows a more panoramic approach: as a sub-process of the proto-typical “recreating”, “narrating” can be understood at a less delicate level. This understanding is more compatible with narrative theory generally (that is, outside SFL), in which “narrative” is used to refer to texts whose sequential ordering is construed as a temporal meaning

5. Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) was a founding member of the Moscow Linguistic Circle (1915) and one of the founding members of the Prague Linguistic Circle (1926); by 1943 he was in the United States of America and one of the founding members of the Linguistic Circle of New York. He published copiously. A collection of eleven essays intended to serve as an introduction to his work in poetics, and which Jakobson himself selected shortly before he died, was published in English under the title, *Verbal art, verbal sign, verbal time* (1985). In the tradition of Prague School Poetics, Ruqaiya Hasan employed the term “verbal art” in her studies of literary texts using the categories of systemic functional linguistics (as in Hasan 1985).

(Abbott 2002). Thus, the poetic and the narrative have complementary literary potential: the poetic, characterized as choice, is understood paradigmatically, while the narrative, characterized as sequence, is understood syntagmatically.

Here my contribution has been to develop a new perspective in narrative/ literary theory, drawing together Halliday’s modelling of transitivity (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004, 2014) with the work of J. T. Fraser in modelling different temporalities (2007).⁶ Table 1 gives my reading of Fraser’s model of the evolution of temporalities.

Table 1. J. T. Fraser’s model of the evolution of temporalities

	nested integrative levels of nature	hierarchy of temporalities	canonical forms of causation	World
5.	human “minding”	sociotemporal	collective intentionality/ historical causation	social world/society
		nootemporal	individual long-term intentionality	mental world of individual human
4.	living matter (<i>organic being</i>)	biotemporal	short-term intentionality	physical world of living organism
3.	matter (<i>material being</i>)	eotemporal	deterministic lawfulness	inorganic physical world
2.	particles + mass (<i>stochastic being</i>)	prototemporal	probabilistic lawfulness	wave-particle world
1.	photons no mass (<i>becoming</i>)	atemporal	none – chaos	electro-magnetic radiation

6. The following is taken from the web pages of the International Society for the Study of Time (ISST), at <http://www.studyoftime.org>; it is followed by an extensive list of Fraser’s “time-related” publications (for an informal account of J. T. Fraser and his work, see Wikipedia):

Founder of the international society for the study of time (1966), J. T. Fraser is the author of *Of time, passion, and knowledge* (1975, 1990), *Time as conflict* (1978), *The genesis and evolution of time* (1982), *Time the familiar stranger* (1987, 1988), *Time. conflict, and human values* (1999) and *Time and time again* (2007). He is also editor of *The voices of time* (1968, 1981) and of the ten volumes of *The study of time* series (1972–2000) and founding editor of *KronoScope – Journal for the study of time*. Dr. Fraser has taught courses and conducted seminars in the study of time at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Mount Holyoke College. University of Maryland and Fordham University. Acknowledged to be the world’s foremost authority on the interdisciplinary, integrated study of time, he is the author of many articles in professional periodicals and has lectured extensively on different aspects of the study of time.

The comparability of Halliday and Fraser's work is most fully described in my article, "The origins of language and narrative temporalities" (Huisman 2013). As displayed shadowed in Table 1 above, worlds 1, 2 and 3 are worlds recognized in contemporary physics but not understood at the time of human language development. In contrast, worlds of the natural levels 4 and 5 are those understood in human experience on this earth so that the prototypical ideational meanings of language evolved to construe those worlds of experience (Halliday & Matthiessen 1999). Thus, in transitivity, Material Processes construe the world of doing, the physical world; Mental Processes construe the world of sensing, of consciousness of the individual; Relational Processes construe the world of being, of abstract relations in the social world of identities and attributes (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004:172; 2014:170).

This juxtaposition, of Halliday and Fraser's models, has enabled me to study and compare different realizations of temporal sequence in English literary narratives of different historical periods. The temporal texture is characterized by the pattern of weaving together the sequential ordering associated with each world, sometimes with the dominance of one order or another (Huisman 2013:68); the so-called "classic realist novel" of the nineteenth century has the most "balanced" weaving of the three worlds of traditional human experience, social (equative order of sociotemporality), mental (associative order of nootemporality) and physical (chronological order of biotemporality). Most recently, I have studied the sociotemporal dominance of ordering sequence (equative: like and unlike events) in a narrative poem in the pre-tenth century language of Old English (Huisman 2017). Further, recognizing the worlds of modern physics unknown when human language evolved (worlds 1, 2 and 3) but taken up by authors in the twentieth century, this approach has enabled me to study the sequential ordering in so-called modern and postmodern prose fiction (Huisman 2015).

7. Conclusion: English Literature as an evolving discipline

A register is a configuration of meanings. It is realized in lexicogrammatical choices. The socio-semiotic processes which centrally constitute the first-order field of activity realized in the register of English Literature must therefore be explained by lexical verbs, words such as *evaluate*, *criticize*, *interpret*. But – in the other "direction" of stratification – it cannot be assumed that those words are always construed with the same meanings. In the instance of construal (of a particular text), to be, for example, a literary interpretation, *interpret* must be construed within the institutional/cultural context of English Literature (an

obligation not always recognized by the profession). This paper has described the continuing process of constituting that institution on the contextual level of the cline of instantiation, that is, in the relation of the institutional resource and the instance of situation in “giving value” to and “making sense” of English.

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