Building a metalanguage for interpreting multimodal literature: Insights from systemic functional semiotics in two case study classrooms

Mary Macken-Horarik, Learning Sciences Institute Australia, Australian Catholic University

Abstract: English is an already crowded curriculum and the incursion of multimodal literature puts it under increased pressure. How do teachers and students learn to understand and deploy tools of analysis that shed light on verbiage and images without becoming entangled in a complex and crowded analytical language? Is it possible to develop a metalanguage that relates meanings made in one mode to those in another – to enrich literary interpretation without overwhelming students’ appreciation of literary texts? An adequate response to this question calls for an epistemological stance and metalanguage that accepts polysemy (multiple meanings); that reads choices as motivated by higher order concerns; and that is relational in its approach to analysis. This paper explores the potential of systemic functional semiotics (SFS) for addressing such requirements. Drawing on data collected in the final year of an Australian Research Council project (DP110104309), it considers three principles of SFS informing the metalanguages used by two secondary teachers in their work with students on literary picture books and fiction films. Halliday’s principle of metafunctions (three major kinds of meaning) enabled the teachers to explore different meaning frames in interpreting images and language; the principle of system (contrasting options for meaning in a given semiotic environment) allowed them to open up the idea of choice for students in analysing texts; and the principle of stratification made relations between meaning, function and form easier to unpack in classroom discourse. The affordances of such intellectual tools in SFS are observed in students’ oral and written responses to literary picture books and in teachers’ accounts of what they taught and what they learned from their classroom interventions. The paper interleaves reflections on each aspect of SFS with interview accounts of how the metalanguage was used to enhance literary interpretation of selected students. The final section of the paper highlights implications of this case study work and possibilities for future research into the relationship between metalanguage and processes of metasemiosis in literary interpretation. It turns on the question of whether the analogic power of concepts like metafunctions, system and stratification gives students portals to literary meaning that enrich (without crowding) interpretive work on multimodal texts.

Introduction
Young people’s pleasure in multimodal narratives is well known. Whether in storybook conversations between caregivers and children, in social media fragments with their cryptic response codes (WTF or lol or I), imitative responses in fan fiction or extended commentaries in panel discussions like First Tuesday Book Club or The Movie Show on Australian television, text response is ubiquitous. But demands for more specialised ‘literary’ responses
to texts call for particular kinds of interpretive attention and for metalanguages attuned to the interplay of pictures and words (and other semiotic choices) in multimodal literature. Understanding the comic force of parallel narratives in picture books like *Rosie’s Walk* (Hutchins, 1968), gender reversals in *Piggybook* (Browne 1986/1996) and (later) the combined action of image, verbiage and layout in graphic novels like *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1980) calls for metalanguages adequate to their complex workings and tractable for those who deploy them.

In semiotically fertile enterprises like this, English asks much of young learners. And it seems they are ‘up for it’ too, especially if their teachers are. Exploration of the riches of multimodal literature is an exciting aspect of disciplinary practices. But there is a challenge in this plenitude too. While the texts (and modes through which they communicate) are expanding, the task of integration – of higher-order interpretation – remains pressing. Literary study is at the disciplinary heart of subject English. And study of multimodal literature, even at secondary level, has become a prominent aspect of this endeavour. But if we take seriously the fact that literary texts selected for study now include a diverse array of picture books, graphic novels, e-literature and film narratives, we need to offer students a working vocabulary for exploring particular choices in each mode and the contribution of each mode to the workings of the whole text. In other words, both exploration and integration are central to multimodality. A key problematic here, one that the Australian curriculum has not resolved, is the matter of conceptual overload. The review of the curriculum conducted in recent years was predicated in part on the claim that it is ‘content’ heavy, conceptually incoherent and has ‘too many areas to cover’ in a deep way throughout schooling (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014). But whether we accept criticism of the curriculum as overly crowded or not (many teachers did not), there is a problem with terminologies, different methodologies, and different criteria of relevance grew up for each: linguistics for language, art history for pictures – and for children’s drawings mostly Piaget-inspired developmental psychology ... This made it difficult to compare the two, to investigate, for instance, whether a text and its illustration, or a photo and its caption derive from the same underlying construction of the reality that is being represented. (van Leeuwen, 2000, p. 276)

The question van Leeuwen and colleagues have investigated is whether we can develop common principles, common semiotic functions and even a common terminology for multimodal analysis. Research informed by systemic functional semiotics has pursued this line of inquiry in analysis of images (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), artworks (O’Toole (1994) and even film narratives (Bateman, 2013). The excursions have been promising and have influenced curriculum development in Australia (ACARA, 2012). However, the implications for a coherent approach to literary interpretation need careful consideration. If students are asked to compare meanings made in photo and caption, text and illustration and perhaps music and montage in film narration, they require unifying abstractions to bring their analyses together. In short, if students are to engage with multimodal literature in a focussed and uncluttered way, they need access to a shared metalanguage that enables them to move from consideration of one mode (e.g. colour palette or visual framing) to another (e.g. tone or verbal framing) and to ‘climb’ from analyses of semiotic choices in different modes to higher orders of interpretation. These shifts are made along two dimensions. For example, visual point of view can be compared to that linguistic point of view in a picture book. This is analysis on a horizontal dimension – of intermodality (Painter, Martin & Unsworth, 2013). Analysis of their higher order significance occurs on a vertical dimension, exploring questions about what the interplay means more abstractly. Both metasemiotic ‘moves’ are crucial to interpretation of multimodal literature and depend on a model of meaning making that accounts for both dimensions.

The Australian curriculum for English (AC:E) is ambitious in its remit when it comes to multimodality. Its content descriptions for secondary English build on those for earlier years in ways that bear closer scrutiny. In Year 7, for example, students are expected to ‘compare the ways that language and images are used to create character’ (ACELT1621)¹ In Year 8, they ‘explore and explain the ways authors combine different modes and media in creating texts and the impact of these choices on the viewer/listener’ (ACELY1735). Then in Year 9, they ‘analyse and explain the use of symbols, icons and myth in still and moving images and how these augment meaning’ (ACELA1510). The underscoring of a principle of augmentation is deliberate because
we still know so little about how readers draw on and integrate meaning cues in different modes to interpret texts (see Unsworth, 2014 and Unsworth & Chan, 2009 for discussion). And, if research into the horizontal (interplay) dimension of multimodality is pressing, the vertical one is urgent. A ‘meta’ perspective is necessary if students are not only to analyse language and image in still and moving images but synthesise their understandings in explanatory accounts. As Len Unsworth argues about the Australian curriculum:

In grades 6–10, the content descriptions require a ‘meta’ perspective of the students, assuming the role of text analyst (Freebody & Luke, 1990), explicating the semiotic bases of the ‘constructedness’ of the multimodal texts. What is not at all clear is what kinds of explanations are expected of students in these content descriptions for grades 6–10. (Unsworth, 2014, p. 28)

Getting ‘meta’ to texts is something many students find difficult. In the face of an open question about a narrative (e.g. What do you think the story is about? or ‘Why do you think the story ends this way?), they are at a loss. They wonder about what is required and what kind of response will be acceptable (Macken-Horarik, 2009). In supporting work on such tasks, teachers need access not only to a metalanguage for exploring different choices with students (verbal, visual, typographic, etc), but to principles for orchestrating analyses into written responses. The matter of conceptual overload is important, especially if students are asked to comment on visual as well as verbal choices and explain how they contribute to a work’s themes. Is it possible to develop a metalanguage that deepens interpretation without crowding, and perhaps overwhelming, students’ appreciation of texts? As I explain below, this requires a metalanguage that is relevant to texts (and their elements) and to processes of meaning making (or metasemiosis).

This paper outlines three principles of metasemiosis that emerged as crucial to a metalanguage adequate to school English in recent research (e.g. Macken-Horarik & Unsworth, 2014; Macken-Horarik, Sandiford, Love & Unsworth, 2015). The data on which the current paper is based was collected during the final year of a larger study that investigated the character of grammatical knowledge necessary for English teachers and their students in work on narrative (2011), argument (2012) and text response (2013).² In this paper, I focus particularly on text response as this was taught by teachers following workshops based on principles of systemic functional grammar (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) and a framework developed by Painter, Martin and Unsworth (2013) to explore image and verbiage in literary picture books. We drew on this to introduce workshop participants to tools for analysing texts like The Lost Thing (Tan), The Tunnel (Browne), The Violin Man (Thompson) and Not Now Bernard (McKee). Guiding principles in systemic functional semiotics (hereafter SFS) like metafunctions, system and stratification can inform analysis of linguistic choices in verbal narratives and visual choices in multimodal narratives. Our project exploited analogies between visual and verbal choices in common areas (e.g. dialogue, point of view, emotion) to ‘uncrowd’ the semantic space of analysis. In this way, tools of SFS were used to help students ‘travel’ across modes, investigating commonalities and differences in these. And, as will be seen, they were used to help students integrate insights through unifying abstractions such as focalisation, social distance, ambience.

Importantly, our dialogue with the profession was two-way. As professionals with responsibility for implementing a new curriculum, project participants had to see evidence of a strong interface between workshop resources and the AC:E. Fortunately, the metalanguage of the AC:E is based on the functional model associated with SFS (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Martin, 1992 & 2009; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). This made the negotiation of principles and tools of SFS much easier for project participants and enabled researchers to think productively about those aspects of SFS needing adaptation in light of curriculum demands and teacher needs.

This paper includes extracts from interviews with two case study teachers and their students and some of students’ written responses to questions about literary picture books. Along with 31 other teachers, the focus teachers Annette and Tom³ attended workshops on text response and adapted tools presented in each session for units of work planned for the following term. As researchers, we did not ask teachers to trial our schemes of work but to ‘infuse’ the ideas and resources into the work they had to do anyway, albeit with a focus on multimodal narratives. The aim was to help teachers improve their students’ understanding of visual and verbal modes and to enable them to write more effective response texts. Because we working with Years 4, 6, 8 and 10, we introduced teachers to a range of response genres, including review, thematic interpretation and critical response.

The two teachers have been selected for special
focus in this paper. Annette’s work is interesting because it demonstrates both challenges and pleasures of multimodal analysis in the hands of Year 7 students who were new to this way of working with picture books, graphic novels and feature films. It highlights the possibilities of a principled approach to literature – one that shifts students from ‘the what’ of labelling to ‘the how’ of analysis and then to ‘the why’ of interpretation. Annette drew on the principle of stratification to help her students ‘climb’ from relatively low level work labelling choices to description of their function and finally (ambitiously) to interpretation of their purpose or effect.

Tom’s work is interesting for somewhat different reasons. Tom agreed to focus on visual analysis of picture books like The Lost Thing in a context of intense achievement pressures on his Year 10 students. His students were working within a strongly paced curriculum and a rigorous assessment regime. And the curriculum pacing did not leave him much time to engage in exploratory work on images or other features of multimodal literature. Tom’s challenge was to adapt tools to prepare his students for questions about images in the Year 12 examination. In their responses to interview questions, each teacher ‘recontextualised’ the metalanguage of SFS (Bernstein, 2000) in distinctive ways. At the same time, they deployed it to assist students to ‘read’ verbal and visual features of narrative (horizontal dimension) and tackle higher order literary interpretation (vertical dimension). The latter, after all, is the special province of subject English, especially in the secondary years.

In the following sections of this paper, I introduce principles underpinning the ‘meta’ view of meaning making (metasemiosis), followed by illustrative data from teachers and students. My aim is to bring key attributes of the meta’ perspective emerging in this data into greater visibility and to contribute to future discussions of what interpretation of multimodal literature involves. The paper begins with an assertion about the ‘how’ of interpretation, dealing with increased levels of abstraction. And when we build a metalinguistic toolkit for exploring texts that make meaning through abstraction. And when we build a metalinguistic toolkit for exploring texts that make meaning through abstraction and when the language used is abstract and when they lack connection to actual classroom texts. Any metalinguage needs to have the capacity to engage, rather than inhibit, dialogue about dimensions of multimodality between teachers and learners and amongst diverse learners. Such a metalinguage needs to be invitational, generative and be able to be used flexibly in different contexts. (Cloonan, 2011, p. 37)

Metasemiosis and literary interpretation

Students read and respond to texts throughout their long apprenticeship in school English. Text responses can be oral (talk about texts just read), written (book reviews, interpretive essays) or multimodal (visual representations of some aspect of a narrative along with written rationale). They can be informal (reading circles), guided (reciprocal teaching) or formal (examination essays). They can be private (journalling), skills-based (comprehension tasks), literary critical (essays again) or post-structuralist (theorised interpretations or critical interventions). But however heterogeneous, text response is always metasemiotic, at least to some degree. The prefix meta comes from the Greek and means ‘above, beyond or about’; it is often added to to the name of a subject, designating another subject that analyses the original one at a more abstract, higher level. Hence metaphysics is the study of physics, meta-cognition the study of cognition and metalinguage is a language for describing language. And the word semiosis comes from Greek to refer to any activity, conduct, or process that involves signs. Metasemiosis is reflection on meaning making; it is ‘meta’ to processes of meaning making and, to that extent, is always more or less abstract. Metalinguage is a crucial aspect of this knowledge (though not its totality). Of course, such a bald assertion takes us no further than any generalisation. Subject English might be heterogeneous but it rewards certain forms of interpretation in its specialised practices (especially formal assessment). When we research the forms of metasemiosis that English values, we are necessarily somewhere on the vertical dimension, dealing with increased levels of abstraction. And when we build a metalinguistic toolkit for exploring texts that make meaning through abstraction. And when we build a metalinguistic toolkit for exploring texts that make meaning through abstraction...
(at least) three features: it will accept polysemy; it will read semiotic choices as motivated and it will be relational in approach to analysis.

But these proposals are too abstract. An example is needed. A student reads a literary picture book like Shaun Tan’s *The Lost Thing* (2000). She explores each page – crowded with allusions, carefully framed, typographically unique. She reads the verbal narrative on each page and finishes the book, puzzling over its enigmas (polysemy). She turns back to look again through the text and wonders about the lost thing – the creature at the centre of the narrative, imaged as salient in red throughout. She imagines that the young man who collects bottle tops might also be lost (choices are motivated)? What does it mean to be ‘a lost thing’ and why is it hard to find again the creatures that have touched us earlier in life? The student processes meanings made in each mode and possible meanings of the interplay. When she turns to another to talk about the text, she will use a metalanguage to refer to choices, arrangements and patterns of meaning (relational analysis).

But her teacher needs ways of scaffolding the talk (and later writing) to ensure it moves in the direction of a specialised metasemiosis (which is valued in school English). Let me elaborate now on each feature of metasemiosis and principles in SFS that help us understand it, followed by discussion of its uptake by project participants.

**Polysemy and Halliday’s theory of metafunctions**

An aesthetic perspective on semiosis assumes that texts are ‘made’ and made in particular ways that are open to interpretation. It is an assumption that literary texts especially are polysemic – multiple in meaning. The term ‘aesthetic’ has an old-world air, reminiscent of cultural practices of elite groups with enough money and time to reflect at length upon lyric poetry or Shakespearean drama. In fact, it has contemporary relevance for all English teachers. It is the subject of recent calls by Ray Misson and Wendy Morgan (2006) for an engaged dialogue between critical literacy and the aesthetic. They call for attention to emotional, sensory and affective responses to texts and to the material particulars in texts that elicit these:

The aesthetic makes a strong claim for the importance of the material and of knowledge gained through engagement with material reality. However, there is also a persistent strain in the aesthetic that relates it to the numinous, to things immaterial and immanent. (Misson & Morgan, 2006, pp. 27–28)

An aesthetic perspective attends to details such as recurring visual motifs and patterns in the background of a book like *The Lost Thing*, the grain of narrator’s (Tim Minchin’s) voice in the film based on the book (Tann and Ruhemann, 2010) or perhaps alternating viewpoints on the lost thing in the film’s montage. But it is also alive to the numinous, the symbolic force of such particulars in the work as a whole. This is relevant to interpretation generally. Some assume that only canonical texts are polysemic. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is a text that lends itself to a variety of interpretations, none of which fully exhausts its potential meanings. However, as linguists like Carter (2004) argue, polysemy is a feature of almost all processes of meaning making. For example, humour depends utterly on the play of meaning whether in stand up comedy or in off-the-cuff jibes or metaphors in ordinary conversation. Acceptance of the multiple facets of meaning in texts is a necessary starting point in metasemiotic work.

But how do we operationalise the notion of polysemy in school English? Does it need to remain inef-fable or can we provide more systematic ‘ways in’ to its exploration for students? One portal to this is the principle of metafunctions. Halliday (1978) has argued that all ranking clauses (and indeed texts) make three major kinds of meaning – they about something (ideational); they interact with others in a particular way (interpersonal); and they ‘hang together’ more or less cohesively (textual). In the functional grammar that that emerged from this crucial insight, Halliday has shown how clauses encode in microcosm the meaning features that texts display macroscopically (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Metafunctions is a powerful principle that not only provides a differentiated account of polysemy, but is also echoed in the organisation of the Language strand of the AC:E: Expressing and developing ideas (ideational meaning); Language for Interaction (interpersonal meanings); and Text structure and organisation (textual meaning). But its reach has extended further in work on images and more recently on multimodal texts (e.g. Humphrey, Droga & Feez, 2012; Callow, 2013). In fact, the principle of metafunctions provides a portable intellectual tool for analysing multimodal texts and the metalanguage employed by Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) is a striking feature of the visual metalinguage of AC:E.

In project workshops, we adapted this principle using a metaphor of ‘lenses on meaning’ in clauses (the micro view) and in texts (macro view). (Macken-Horarak, et al., 2015; Love, Sandiford, Macken-Horarak [2015]).
In this way, we highlighted ways in which polysemy becomes visible through different optics. For example, when we ‘put on’ an ideational lens in analysing a narrative, we focus on who is involved and what happens to the characters. It is what we highlight when someone asks ‘what is the story about?’ An interpersonal lens, however, brings evaluative meanings into view, the way a text ‘addresses’ us, makes us feel, see and judge. A textual lens throws different choices into relief – texture, organisation, rhythm and framing. While all texts make each kind of meaning simultaneously, some give greater emphasis to one over another. For instance, like other forms of persuasion, advertising works ‘the interpersonal’ angle, while scientific writing emphasises experiential or ‘content’ meaning. Some say that poetry freshens perspectives on experience because of its textual patterning. Roman Jacobson (1971) claimed that some genres and modes make some functions ‘dominant’, pressing them upon our attention.

Acceptance of polysemy was a necessary feature of our work on text response. The principle of metafunctions enabled us to be precise about which types of meaning we were exploring in narratives. Although workshops introduced teachers to three lenses on meaning, we emphasised interpersonal meaning. Understanding how texts position us to see, feel and judge in particular ways is crucial in English and often left out of the picture in many classrooms.

Table 1 displays questions related to literary craft that are relevant to an interpersonal lens on meaning.

Table 1. Relating the interpersonal lens to relevant aspects of narrative craft

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpersonal lens</th>
<th>Interfacing with narrative craft</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Narration</strong></td>
<td>Who tells the story – a narrator or a character? Is this ‘person’ internal/external to events in the story? Is the narration in first or third person (perhaps even in second person)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focalisation</strong></td>
<td>Who sees? How are you being positioned in relation to characters in terms of interaction with them? Consider naming choices, endearments in verbiage and social distance, relative power, involvement in images.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation or appraisal</strong></td>
<td>What attitudes are expressed? Affect: How are characters’ feelings of un/happiness, in/security and dis/satisfaction portrayed? Do you empathise with them or feel distanced? Judgement: How are personal traits (capacity, normality, tenacity) of characters portrayed? How are evaluations of truth or moral or ethical issues conveyed? Do these ‘invited’ judgements align or distance you from characters? Appreciation: How is atmosphere or ambience conveyed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Graduation</strong></td>
<td>Does the text amplify evaluation – via exclamatives, intensifiers or repetition in language; in strong colours and contrasts in the images? Where does this occur? Why here?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Timothy’s post-intervention response was longer and more confident. It is too long to present in full but Figure 2 presents his answers to the first two questions about the new prompt text, *The Tunnel* (Browne). The first question posed an open question – ‘What is the story about?’ The second asked students to explain why they thought an image of a young girl gazing out and ‘haloed’ by tunnel-shaped blackness was shown as it was. Figure 2 displays his responses to these questions.

When I interviewed Timothy about his second response, I began with a question about what he had been doing in class and he provided an interesting insight into the value of a metasemiotic approach for enriching interpretation:

**Interviewer:** So what have you’ve been doing in class that you found interesting? What sort of ideas about the images have you been taking up?

**Timothy:** Lots of analysing like pages and stuff, seeing stuff that isn’t there unless you take a deeper look at it.
There is a telling wisdom in Timothy’s observation. Learning to see stuff ‘that isn’t there unless you take a deeper look at it’ is one way of thinking about polysemy. Annette commented on the impact on Timothy’s work as follows:

I think it’s given him more tools, more places to start – so more inroads. Whereas before he would look and say, ‘I don’t know what you want me to look at’, now with the labelling techniques, I don’t have to prompt him. I sometimes push a little bit more and say ‘You’ve got a zillion words you can use now. Pick one and see if you can find something that applies to it’. So it gives him a little bit of confidence to go ‘Well the background has got a pattern on it’, and so on.

If we turn to the interview with our second case study teacher, Tom, we get a different approach to meaning. In the context of harried curriculum pacing, Tom decided to orient his Year 10 students to metafunctions as ‘thinking hats’ and to focus on their intellectual potential:

I just started off getting them to look at a whole different variety of images. We looked at how those images were built or constructed and what effect they were having. And then we started looking at examples of images with text, looking for links between those things. We did work on focalisation and interactive meanings. But it was more about trying to get them to think about ‘the why’, I guess. So when we were looking at The Lost Thing we looked at frames in context. I asked, ‘What do you notice about it? Why do you think it’s like that?’ Clearly, the images are so important to this text. You’ve got the obvious layout of the textbook and the different size frames all the way through, like a scrapbook. So, we sort of looked at the effect of these choices and tried to think about what was happening in the story compared with what was being shown in the images.

In follow up interviews with two of Tom’s students, it became clear that they were aware of the need to think more deeply about images:

Interviewer: Okay, in reading texts like The Tunnel and The Lost Thing, do these tools, if you like, help you work out what’s going on?

Helen: Well, they kind of make you think about it more. If you gave this to a child they would look at it and read it and not really get everything that the illustrator or author was trying to get at. Like reading this helps you to go more in depth into like how or why something is placed in that exact place and not just think ‘Oh, it’s there because it’s there’.

The notion of metafunctions proved intellectually satisfying to students like Helen and gave the class a handle on polysemy in texts like The Lost Thing.

Representing choices in systems of meaning
Within a social semiotic approach to texts, the form-meaning connection is crucial. As Kress argues, ‘the relation between signifier and signified is always motivated, that is, that the shape of the signifier, its “form”, materially or abstractly considered, is chosen because of its aptness for expressing that which is to be signified’ (Kress, 2003: 42). If the signified is an abstraction (a meaning), the signifier is a material realisation of this (a form of some kind). Within interpersonal meaning, for example, the system of Mood (in the environment of the clause) distinguishes between statements, questions and commands. While all indicative clauses select for Subject and Finite verb, a clause in declarative mood puts the Subject in front of the Finite verb, whilst the Interrogative puts Finite verb first, thus enabling us to distinguish the interactive difference between a clause like ‘I am teaching literature’ and ‘Are you teaching literature?’ For native speakers of English, the distinction in form and meaning is taken for granted. For speakers of English as an additional language, it has to be learned. And of course, this is only the barest beginning when it comes to interpersonal meaning systems in English. But having a paradigmatic model like the system network gives teachers a powerful ‘way in’ to choice in language teaching. They can show students not only what options are available in a given grammatical environment but how these are ‘realised’ in particular selections and their sequencing. In this way, they can move in a motivated way between forms and meanings in analyses of messages and larger texts of which messages are part.

Like metafunctions, the principle of system is portable and has been crucial to the mapping of new modes in which SFS has been employed. Van Leeuwen has discussed the central role of systems in this process:

System networks can include both binary and simultaneous choices. But the idea of a taxonomically organised paradigm of choices distinguished from each other in terms of single crucial functional semantic features remains fundamental in system networks and hence in the organisation of semiotic modes that are based on this principle. (van Leeuwen, 2009, p. 74)

Although visual choices are different in realisation from those of language, and require a horizontal gaze, they have certain features in common, at higher levels of abstraction (along a vertical dimension). Within image analysis, visual options for meaning are analogous to verbal ones in that they ‘share crucial semantic features’. Focalisation, for example, is a system that
engages viewers through gaze in images and through sourcing of perceptions in language. Visually, it can be realised in a direct gaze (previously Contact) or in an oblique gaze (Observe). If a depicted participant is positioned to look directly at a viewer, s/he makes contact with us. But if there is no direct gaze, the participant is positioned as an object of contemplation, something we observe. In a related system within interpersonal meaning, Social Distance aligns us with represented participants (close up), at a (respectable) social distance (mid shot) or at an impersonal distance (long shot).

Figure 3 presents three systems for interactive meanings in images presented in workshops, based on work by Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) and Painter et al. (2013).

Understanding the distinctive either/or nature of options for meaning and their typical realisations in form was crucial to teachers’ classroom work and to the ease of analysis in the early stages of students’ analysis of images. Most teachers like Annette and Tom began with visual systems that seemed to be easily ‘embodied’ – ones that students could apprehend relatively easily.

Looking closely at systems: Case study insights
Both Annette and Tom produced PowerPoints containing a wealth of images and analysed these in class activities. Like others, they tended to concentrate on systems of Focalisation, Social Distance, Power and Ambience within the interpersonal metafunction. Following class analysis using PowerPoints, students worked on individual pages from picture books. In our interviews, we asked Tom’s students to tell us about what they had learned. Our goal was to see whether new knowledge (and the associated metalanguage) persisted in their approach to images. In the following extract from the interview with Lee and Helen, it is clear that students understood the difference between Contact and Observe and saw the distinction as meaningful:

Interviewer: What do you understand about interactive meanings?
Helen: So, in focalisation, Contact is where they’re looking directly at you. You can tell because their eyes and face are directly towards you and Observe is … they’re looking off in a different direction but you can still see what they’re looking at.

Interviewer: Okay, all right. And why might an illustrator use Contact or Observe?
Helen: Well, I guess Contact would be to kind of to grab your attention or to show the characters’ direct feelings and stuff so you can see their facial expression, and then their eyes kind of like tell you more. When you can see someone’s eyes you feel more connected with them.

Many teachers introduced their students to the system of Ambience, which is a resource for creation of ‘feeling’ in images. As Painter, et al. argue, ‘probably the most instant bonding effect created by a picture book is that established by its choices in the use of colour’ (Painter, et al., 2013, p. 35). Tom’s students analysed sub-systems within Ambience of Vibrancy, Warmth and Familiarity focussing on choices in The Lost Thing and The Tunnel. Their work with the sub-systems gave them a purchase on contrasts in colour that underpinned contrasts between the charm of the protagonist’s encounter with the lost thing and bureaucratic dullness of the world in which it found itself.
Their post-intervention responses. Figure 5 presents Cody’s answer to question 2 (a) about the girl in The Tunnel and indicates not only his assimilation of the metalanguage but the ability to deploy it in visual analysis:

Interestingly, Annette felt Cody had not really achieved all he could have in this response. As she put it, ‘He hasn’t really taken that extra step and said something like ‘That’s there because …’. Whilst Cody’s use of technical labels was impressive, she wanted him to explain more carefully the effect of the interactive meanings – the why beneath the ‘what’. Even so, having access to portable systems for exploring interaction gave her students easier access to scene analysis in the film Hugo in later lessons:

I found it really interesting to add those interactive understandings to what we already did with camera shots and angles and apply them from still images to moving images. I got some images off the Internet from the film The Lost Thing and the text The Lost Thing and we talked about camera position because quite a lot of the

The network in Figure 4 was presented by a project teacher at the Australian Systemic Functional Association conference in 2013. I gratefully acknowledge its contribution to this paper.

A knowledge of choices as motivated found its way into students’ discourse. When asked to elaborate on her response to the question on the image of the young girl (explored in Timothy’s work in Figure 2), Helen drew on her knowledge of Ambience to do so:

*Helen: The black background is in contrast to the vibrant red of her jacket, and it kind of gives you a border of her face. And your eyes are automatically drawn into her face which emphasises her feelings of worry and how she was really scared of what was going to happen next.*

This is an example of awareness of choices as ‘motivated’ in Kress’s (2003) lexicon. Helen demonstrates awareness of semiotic forms (black background and vibrant red) and describes their significance (feelings of worry) at this point in the text.

In Annette’s class, it was the boys who took to visual analysis most enthusiastically and this was evident in their post-intervention responses. Figure 5 presents Cody’s answer to question 2 (a) about the girl in The Tunnel and indicates not only his assimilation of the metalanguage but the ability to deploy it in visual analysis:

Interestingly, Annette felt Cody had not really achieved all he could have in this response. As she put it, ‘He hasn’t really taken that extra step and said something like ‘That’s there because …’. Whilst Cody’s use of technical labels was impressive, she wanted him to explain more carefully the effect of the interactive meanings – the why beneath the ‘what’. Even so, having access to portable systems for exploring interaction gave her students easier access to scene analysis in the film Hugo in later lessons:

I found it really interesting to add those interactive understandings to what we already did with camera shots and angles and apply them from still images to moving images. I got some images off the Internet from the film The Lost Thing and the text The Lost Thing and we talked about camera position because quite a lot of the
film is the ‘over the shoulder’ stuff, so we talked about the difference when the camera was a part of the person to when it was just observing from a distance. I asked them to think about whether that does make a difference and that kind of thing. So having that knowledge of interaction choices and being able to apply them I found really helpful.

It was easier to move from analysis of still to moving images once Annette had established key systems of Social Distance, Focalisation and Power in work on picture books. It gave her a toolkit for moving across modes whilst staying within a unified semantic field (point of view).

Metasemiosis is relational and stratification makes this analysis possible

A third feature of specialised metasemiosis is that it is relational: it involves stepping ‘up’ from identification of visual or verbal forms to description of their purpose or effect on a page to interpretation of their contribution to the unfolding meaning of the text as a whole. It is a crucial aspect of the vertical dimension of literary interpretation. Furthermore, analysis works differently at different levels (strata) of description and this has consequences for metalevel language employed by analysts and for pedagogy (most important for English). In linguistic analysis, for example, students need to (be able to) recognise and label units that carry meaning. Whether these are verbs, verb groups, clauses or clause complexes (Halliday’s term for what we call ‘sentences’ in written language), each unit of analysis has a distinctive grammatical structure. Grammatical awareness of ‘verbness’ is important, along with what affects the form of a verb (e.g. ‘being’ verbs change if the subject is in first or second person – ‘I am’, ‘You are’). This is something all grammars of English teach and is a necessary landing place within a relational approach to linguistic analysis.

Even so, knowledge of how grammatical units work is necessary but by no means sufficient, especially in tasks of interpretation. On a higher ‘landing place’ as it were, students need to describe the semantic function of a phrase, clause or clause complex – the role forms play in wordings. For example, verbs encode different processes in experience such as sensing, doing, saying, being or having and play different roles in interaction. For instance, within the system of mood, the Finite verb combines with the subject to produce the mood of a clause whilst other parts of the verb communicate meanings to do with modality, aspect or secondary tense.

Once students can identify a unit of analysis (e.g. a verb or verb group) and describe its function (e.g. sensing, doing, relating), they are in a strong position to interpret the effect of combined or contrasting verb choices (e.g. metaphoric uses of verbal processes to suggest attitude, as in Anthony Browne’s Piggybook (1986/1996) or alternations between action and reflection phases of a narrative). In a semiotically informed metalanguage, the focus of our interpretive work shifts as we move from one landing place to another. We can ignore the role of grammatical choices in interpretation of course. Much of what occurs in school English is not attentive to grammar. But if we are to incorporate knowledge of grammar and discourse semantics into interpretation of literature, there is no way we can either do all we need to with the limited apparatus of traditional grammar nor skip away from knowledge of grammatical form into the heady territory of patterns of meaning. A stratified model of semiotic resources allows us to bring out the relationship between forms, functions and patterns of meaning.

Halliday proposes that language is stratified, with semantic systems (‘meanings’) being realised by lexicogrammar (an inclusive reference to the ‘wordings’ of a language) and the two ‘content’ strata being realised by the expression stratum of phonology/graphology (what Halliday 1978: 21 sometimes called ‘sounding’ of language). The notion of ‘realisation’ enables us to step upwards in a plausible way from forms to functions to semiotic patterns in texts. This principle is relevant both to visual and verbal semiotic resources and so could be leveraged to support students’ interpretive work on multimodal literary texts and to help them shift gears from more material (formal) observations about images (point of view or colour for example) to more symbolic (abstract) readings of their significance.

In our workshops with teachers, we applied this principle to our work on texts, referring to each level as a distinctive ‘landing place’ in analysis of texts.

Figure 6 illustrates the concept of stratification as applied to identification of forms (landing place 1), to description of the function of forms (landing place 2) and to the interpretation of semiotic patterns across texts (landing place 3). Examples drawn from our case study classrooms are used to illustrate how analysis and the relevant metalanguage shifts as we move from one level (landing place) to another in interpreting texts.
multimodal texts was clearly realised in the verb choices of students, which provided vital evidence of metasemiotic development. It was clearly in evidence in Tom’s Year 10 class and a striking feature of two of those students we interviewed following his work with them.

Climbing into symbolic meaning: Case study insights

As with Annette’s student, Timothy, in Tom’s Year 10 class too, it was apparently weaker students who demonstrated the most telling development in their capacity for literary interpretation. Our workshops on the linguistic character of text response had introduced participating teachers to what we called ‘symbolic’ verbs which we related to the task of literary interpretation. Once a student has begun to use verbs like ‘shows’, ‘represents’, ‘showcases’, ‘symbolises’, ‘depicts’ or even ‘realises’, it is possible to argue that they are beginning to undertake crucial tasks of semiotic interpretation that are the special province of English. A symbolic verb enables us to demonstrate understanding of the significance of semiotic choices.

Lee’s answer to a question about an image on one of the last pages of *The Tunnel* is emblematic of movement ‘upwards’ in this direction. In one of the final questions on the post-intervention task, students were asked to comment on the ‘over the shoulder’ image of a boy looking at his sister after they have survived the ordeal of the tunnel and returned home together. Figure 7 presents Lee’s response to the question: Why do you think the final image is shown as it is?

While Lee had identified choices in the pre-intervention response, her later work reveals a gear shift – a capacity to describe the role of the yellow lighting (Ambience), the proximity of the siblings (Social Distance) and to interpret the significance of this representation. She uses an increased range of symbolic verbs (‘gives’, ‘shows’ and ‘symbolises’) to relate forms to meaning, thus demonstrating a capacity to move

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Figure 7. Lee’s written response to a question about a final image in *The Tunnel*
from identification of formal choices to description of their function and from there to interpretation of their significance. Tellingly, her gaze has widened in her comparison of the newly acquired intimacy of the siblings, compared to earlier visual representations of their distance from one another.

The wider purview of her semiotic gaze was strikingly in evidence in one of the final moments of the interview with her and Helen. This moment in the exchange demonstrates the capacity of students who have been invited into and engaged by a multimodal metalanguage for interpretation. One can feel the excitement of this insight into the symbolic reversal experienced by the two characters in the *The Tunnel* which emerges in ‘the between’ of a three-way dialogue between Helen, Lee and the interviewer:

**Lee:** There was just one thing I noticed. I guess it just symbolises when the brother went into the tunnel –

**Interviewer:** Yes –

**Lee:** The next time we see him as a stone in this dark, magical forest I guess which is what you normally see in fairytale books, right. It just kind of makes me feel like the brother and the sister somehow are – - how do you say it? No, they kind of get the feel of what the other’s world is like, like how the brother is so energetic and adventurous and like how the girl would not normally do that … But this time she went into the tunnel on her own into this adventure and the boy, who doesn’t have anything to do with fantasy stuff, with fairytales, fantasy, monsters and witches has to enter the girl’s world in this dark magical forest turned into stone.

**Interviewer:** That is so clever, Lee. You are so clever.

**Helen:** I think also it shows that they were able to experience emotions that the other one would face in like the same situation because he’s running – normally he seems so brave and everything to his sister but when he’s frozen in stone, you can see on his face that he’s really actually scared looking back. He’s running really fast and he’s frozen in that position and in the tunnel, Rose is actually being the brave one and going in to get her brother.

**Interviewer:** It’s like a role reversal. It’s wonderful.

Both Helen and Lee have grown in awareness of the contribution of images and the way these unfold and change in the course of a text to the symbolic meaning of the whole. They have inter-related image and verbiage (in a horizontal move) but interpreted their abstract significance (in a vertical move). And this is achieved not solo in this interview but as a collaboration between students themselves as they explore metasemiosis and an attuned interviewer. Overall, a stratified model of semiosis has enabled them to shift gears – moving from close attention to particulars of gaze, colour and action and then to climb from this evidence base into reflection on the author/artist’s intentions that have shaped these choices. The purview achieved by Lee and Helen at the end of this process is nothing less than the whole text and the psychosymbolic implications of its overall patterning.

**Interim Conclusions**

What are the implications of this brief foray into the attributes of a specialised metasemiosis? I turn my attention first to the horizontal dimension of the task – exploration of the relation between images and language for example. If students are to engage with multimodal literature in a focussed and uncluttered way, they need access to a shared metalanguage that enables them to move from consideration of one mode (e.g. colour palette or visual framing) to another (e.g. tone or verbal framing). Tools of analysis need to be able to ‘travel’ – both between modes of communication employed within a text and between texts. It is a risky enterprise because it tends to flatten differences between modes, assuming that meanings made in one mode can also be made (albeit differently) in another Unsworth & Chan, 2009). But it is a crucial one even so, especially if students are to move in a semiotically informed way between modes. Given the need for tools of analysis that transcended and made sense of variety, we found the framework developed by Painter, Martin and Unsworth (2013) to explore image and verbiage in literary picture books useful. In analysing dialogue, for example, participants found it helpful to explore different ways in which speakers and their words are represented. They could look at ‘saying verbs’ and quotation marks in short stories, speech bubbles in graphic novels or lip sync in films. Moving to analysis of different modes in the one text, some (like Tom) compared reports of events in a story with visual representations of the same events in moving images. Others explored ironic differences between verbal and visual interaction in picture books like *Not Now Bernard* (McKee, 1980/2004). A portable metalanguage enabled participants to move between different forms of realisation in each mode (saying verbs, speech bubbles, lip sync) and to explore redundancies and differences between these because of their common semantic domain (speech in this case). It enabled exploration (along the horizontal dimension of multimodal interpretation).

But it also enabled integration. Although verbal and
visual media are different at lower levels of description (i.e. in their forms of realisation), students were able to find commonalities at higher levels of interpretation (‘landing place 3 in Figure 6). At this abstract level, they could thus identify what van Leeuwen (2000) calls ‘common semiotic functions’ to provide coherence to their readings. Working at this meta-level enabled them to yoke powerful observations about visual and verbal choices to insightful commentaries on their literary significance. Their explanations highlighted the contribution of visual and verbal choices to higher order meanings of narrative (the vertical dimension of multimodal interpretation). Systemic functional theorist, Jim Martin, argues that an understanding of key resources such as genre and discourse semantics is central to improving literacy achievement in English (Martin, 1992, 2009). Certainly, it is clear from case study interviews that students enjoyed exploiting the analogic power of their systemic functional metalanguage both to explore different modes and integrate insights about their workings into higher levels of interpretation.

The Australian curriculum appears to offer teachers and students a space of unlimited variety, with fertile opportunities for study of multimodal literary texts. But understanding how readers draw on and integrate meaning cues from different modes to interpret texts is an under-theorised aspect of English. This is the vertical dimension of metasemiosis in focus and the question: Is it possible to develop a meta-semiotic toolkit that deepens interpretation without crowding, and perhaps overwhelming, students’ appreciation of literary texts?

When I interviewed Annette about her work with Year 7, she emphasised how the SF metalanguage had helped her integrate her work on different modes:

Earlier, we sort of segregated work on the visual from work on other modes. Film had its own distinct language and advertising had its own distinct language and so on. But if we consider interaction across the board, we can see how texts position us whatever the mode. With my class, we talk now about the camera lens and the power of the person and gaze and all that kind of stuff. So I’ve found it much easier to integrate all of that in my work on texts.

This paper cannot hope to resolve issues of multimodal literary interpretation, only to pose questions about the dimensions of metasemiosis relevant to subject English. It has attempted to relate principles of a powerful metasemiotic toolkit like SFS that help to make this enterprise more do-able. Early evidence in the texts and talk of teachers and students gives us hope that the profession is more than ready to invest in this intellectual enterprise and to turn it into a practical portable toolkit for disciplinary work in secondary school classrooms.

Notes
1 The acronyms in brackets following content descriptions refer to content strands and associated numbers for each aspect. ACELT refers to literature; ACELA refers to language; and ACELY refers to literacy.
2 The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Australian Research Council in funding a Discovery grant (DP110104309) that enabled M. Macken-Horarik, K. Love, L. Unsworth & C. Sandiford) to undertake this research.
3 I gratefully acknowledge the contribution of the teachers and their students to emerging insights into the character of a metalanguage relevant to multimodal interpretation. All have a pseudonym to protect their identities and that of their school.
4 Relevant interview extracts are highlighted in bold to direct attention to key points.

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**Mary Macken-Horarik** works as a Senior Research fellow in the Learning Sciences Institute at the Australian Catholic University. She has a special interest in systemic functional semiotics and its potential applications to creative and interpretive tasks in school English. In a current project, she is investigating metasemiotic development in students’ interpretations of narratives.