

# Exploring Language and Meaning in Complex Texts

by Mary J. Schleppegrell

The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy (CCSS) are the product of a nationwide initiative with the goal of ensuring that all students are college and career ready by the end of high school. As part of their description of goals for K–12 instruction and assessment, the CCSS call for increasing the complexity of the texts students read across subject areas (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, Appendix A). This requirement makes working with complex texts a key focus for teachers. Text complexity is often thought of as an issue of vocabulary knowledge, with teachers advised to help students read closely, focusing on particular words and their meanings. But text complexity also arises from sentence grammar and text organization, so teachers need strategies for focusing students' attention on language in ways that go beyond the study of vocabulary. This article illustrates how teachers can work with students to explore complex texts and their meanings to understand and work with the concepts that the text presents while at the same time helping students learn more about language itself. Three strategies are described:

- Identifying actions and actors to explore how authors present *agency*
- Identifying *conjunctions* to explore the relationship between ideas in a sentence
- Tracking the language through which characters and concepts are introduced and developed (known as *chains of reference* or *tracking reference*).

Authors make choices about language as they write, and in some cases their choices bury information that students need in order to recognize *agency*: who or what is acting in the text. Sometimes the ways ideas are linked by *conjunctions* makes it hard for students to understand the relationships being presented. Where information is densely presented, students may find it challenging to follow a *chain of reference*. To address each of these comprehension challenges, students can engage in activities that are designed to focus their attention on the language of a text.

The teaching strategies presented below draw on *systemic functional linguistics (SFL)*, the theory of language developed by Michael Halliday. SFL is currently influencing educational approaches in many parts of the world. (For accessible introductions to SFL, see Droga & Humphrey, 2003; Fang & Schleppegrell, 2008; Martin & Rose, 2003; Schleppegrell, 2004). SFL recognizes that we use language in different ways to do different things in different contexts, and it draws our attention to the variations in language that are found at different instructional levels and in different academic content areas. The SFL focus helps teachers address the complexity of the texts that students read across their years of schooling and in different subject areas.

SFL treats grammar as a resource for meaning-making and not just as a set of rules for being “correct” in language use. From an SFL perspective, we ask *how does this text mean what it does?* and identify the language resources an author has used to present information or create literary effects. In this article, three strategies are applied to two brief texts from the elementary and secondary years to illustrate ways that teachers can engage students in noticing the language the author has chosen and in talking about the meanings in ways that raise students' awareness about how language works in complex texts.

## **Elementary text:**

This passage comes from a story about how children in Iceland help puffling chicks to survive their first hours (McMillan, 1995). It appears in a widely adopted third grade reading and language arts program:

In the darkness of night, the pufflings leave their burrows for the first flight. It's a short, wing-flapping trip from the high cliffs. Most of the birds splash-land safely in the sea below. But some get confused by the village lights—perhaps they think the lights are moonbeams reflecting on the water. Hundreds of the pufflings crash-land in the village every night. Unable to take off from flat ground, they run around and try to hide. Dangers await. Even if the cats and dogs don't get them, the pufflings might get run over by cars or trucks.

Teachers report that this paragraph is difficult for students to understand, and we can see that there are some words—for example, *pufflings*, *burrows*, *village*, *moonbeams*—that may be outside the experience of many children. However, most of the words are not unusual. It is the patterns in which they occur that make this text complex for many young readers, in phrases like *in the darkness of night*; *a short, wing-flapping trip from the high cliffs*; and *dangers await* that put words together in ways not typical of ordinary talk. Learning the meaning of words and phrases, however, is not enough to understand the text. Instead, children need to explore the *grammar*—the ways the author has chosen to present ideas and develop them.

## **Secondary text:**

This passage about the early growth of the cattle industry comes from an eleventh grade history textbook:

**Demand spurs growth** During the 1860s and 1870s, cattle ranching boomed. The destruction of the buffalo and removal of Native Americans to reservations emptied the land for grazing cattle. The open plains offered a rancher limitless pasture that was free for the taking. At the same time, the growing population of eastern cities drove up the demand for beef (Cayton, Perry, Reed, & Winkler, 2000, p. 186).

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The history textbook from which this passage is taken asks students to create a cause-and-effect chart that organizes information about the growth of the cattle industry. To do so, students need to recognize how meanings about causes and effects are presented in this text, and, as we will see, these meanings are challenging to recognize.

The challenges of learning to comprehend and produce complex texts have to be supported again at every new level of schooling, as the text complexity that students encounter increases as they progress through the grades. Although these are only two examples of the many kinds of complex texts that students encounter, the strategies described here for exploring these passages are also relevant for working with other complex texts. In this article, we explore the *agency*, *conjunctions*, and *tracking of reference* in these texts in ways teachers can apply in interaction with their students. The following questions guide this exploration: *Who is doing this action? What is the relationship between the ideas in these sentences? What words does the author use to introduce a character or concept, and how is the character or concept referred to throughout the text?*

### **Who is doing this action?**

Reading comprehension entails understanding who or what is *acting* in a text. To make this determination, the reader must focus on linguistic *agency*—how an author represents the agent of an action. In the elementary years, a challenge comes from text written in the *passive voice*. In the secondary years, a further challenge comes when authors use *nominalizations* that obscure agency.

Teachers can help students identify who or what is *acting* in the pufflings text by exploring who or what is involved in doing the actions stated in action verbs. For example:

Even if the cats and dogs don't get them,  
the pufflings might get run over by cars or trucks.

Notice that the first clause is in *active voice*. The actor is presented in the subject of the clause—the *cats and dogs* involved in the action *get them* (the *pufflings*). In the second clause, the subject is not the actor. The clause uses *passive voice* to present the *cars or trucks* as the actors that *might run over* the pufflings. The purpose of the sentence is to illustrate the *dangers* that *await* the newly-hatched pufflings. To recognize “who is doing what” in these clauses, students need to understand how authors can present agency in different ways. In active voice, the subject of the sentence is the actor or agent of the action, but in passive voice, the subject of the sentence is not the agent of the action, but instead the entity that is acted upon.

The author of the pufflings passage uses passive voice to structure the second clause so the information flows smoothly, putting the reference to *them* and the *pufflings* close together. While recognizing the meanings here may seem straightforward to experienced readers, the forms will not generally be transparent to all students encountering this literary language in elementary grade classrooms. Looking for the subject is not the only way to recognize the *actor*. Passive clauses present the

actor in a *by* phrase, or sometimes don't mention the actor at all. When teachers stop to ask students to explore *who is doing the action* in texts like this, students begin to see how active and passive voice are used at the same time that they are focused on comprehending the meaning of the passage.

When it comes to more advanced reading, such as the secondary history text, the issue for readers in identifying agency is even more complex. The textbook author distills complex concepts into a few words, creating sentences that are densely packed with meaning. For example, take this sentence:

The destruction of the buffalo and removal of Native Americans to reservations emptied the land for grazing cattle.

The textbook sentence represents the actors responsible for the emptying of the land as *The destruction of the buffalo and removal of Native Americans to reservations*, but these are not people or groups of people; they are abstractions. In fact, they are historical processes that are being represented in the language as “things.” From a linguistic perspective, they are *nominalizations*, nouns that distill the meaning of a process into a thing. The process of *destroying* (a verb) is presented as a thing—*destruction* (noun); and the process of *removing* (a verb) is presented as a thing—*removal* (noun). It is then the *destruction* and *removal* that *empty* the land (*cause* the land to be empty). But in using nominalizations, writers leave out information about agency, about *who* destroyed the buffalo and *who* removed the Native Americans.

When writers use nominalizations, they show that they expect the reader to be able to recover the information that has been left out. Typically, writers can assume this because the text has already provided information—for example, about the buffalo and Native Americans—so students can be assumed to be familiar with these events. But, of course, such an assumption is not always warranted, and the complex texts of schooling are packed with nominalizations that condense a lot of information into a single word or phrase. When readers try to recover that information—for example, to tell someone else what it means—we need to expand the nominalizations into clauses with subjects, verbs, and objects. This requires that information be added.

In this case, for example, a teacher encountering the sentence *The destruction of the buffalo and removal of Native Americans to reservations emptied the land for grazing cattle* can stop to highlight the nominalizations *The destruction of the buffalo* and *removal of Native Americans to reservations*. The teacher can ask *What is the author telling us about the buffalo? (They were destroyed)* (note the passive voice; no agency). To help the students understand the historical process being presented here, the teacher can further ask *Who destroyed the buffalo? Why? What was the result?* The same questions can be asked about the nominalization *removal of Native Americans to reservations*, and, in the end, the students can recognize that the land was then empty so cattle could be raised there. The information that is added reveals the knowledge and interpretation that the reader brings to the task, so asking students

to expand nominalized language into the processes buried in them is a good way both to improve their comprehension and assess their knowledge.

Nominalization is a linguistic resource for building knowledge and developing explanations and theories because it enables an author to build from one sentence to another by condensing and distilling concepts—re-presenting the concepts in more abstract ways that enable the author to move on and further develop the ideas. But this example illustrates the limitations of treating text complexity as mainly a vocabulary challenge: it is much more than practicing turning verbs into nouns. While focusing on the challenges of understanding word meaning may seem natural, learning the meaning of the words in isolation is often of little help. For example, to learn the meanings of *destruction* and *removal*, or to learn the rules of word formation that turn *destroy* into *destruction* or *remove* into *removal*, do not help students see how the meanings of these words are tied to understanding the knowledge that has been condensed into these phrases. Nor does that teach how the phrases are related to the meaning of the rest of the sentence and the text as a whole.

### **What is the relationship between the ideas in these sentences?**

Another important area of text meaning relates to the ways authors make logical connections as they develop a text. In the elementary grades, a focus on *conjunctions* can help students explore the logic of a text and the relationships an author presents. In the secondary grades, students' attention can be drawn to the ways authors present logical meanings without conjunctions—an even greater challenge for comprehension.

*Conjunctions* are used in writing in different ways than they are used in speaking. In speech, a smaller set of conjunctions is used with more flexible meanings. Conjunctions link two clauses with some kind of logical relationship, and conjunctions like *although*, *however*, *thus*, and others used in complex texts may be unfamiliar. Students need opportunities to recognize how authors use these conjunctions and how they shape the meanings presented in the two clauses they connect.

For example, in the sentence about the dangers to the pufflings, the author uses the complex conjunction *Even if* to introduce the idea that there are two ways the pufflings can be killed:

Even if the cats and dogs don't get them, the pufflings might get run over by cars or trucks.

By using *even if*, the author implies that cats and dogs are one danger, but also that the pufflings that the cats and dogs don't get are endangered by cars and trucks. This meaning of *even if* is connected with the use of *might*. *Even if* is used to introduce one possibility and the word *might* in the next part of the sentence signals another alternative. Children benefit when their teachers are able to draw attention to the logical connection being made here and help them understand what it means. *Even if* presents a conjunctive meaning of *concession*; it introduces an idea that will be entertained by the author in order that another option can be introduced in relation to the first idea. Concession has an aspect of counter-expectancy, and other concessive conjunctions include *although*, *however*, *nevertheless*, *but* (in some uses), and others. Eventually students need to use concession in their own

writing as they develop arguments and discussions, but the logic of concession is challenging. Coming to understand it in texts like this is the beginning of developing that understanding for productive use. Only through multiple encounters, with explicit discussion about the meanings involved, do learners come to understand the nuanced meanings in these logical connections.

In the history text, the relationships between the events are presented in a different way than in the pufflings text. Recall that the task students are given in reading the history passage is to create a cause and effect chart. But students will search in vain for conjunctions of cause. The paragraph has no *because*, *thus*, *as a result*, or other "causal" signals. Instead, students have to recognize the causal logic in the lexical choices of the author, particularly in the verbs. The causes of the growth of the cattle industry have to be understood from the verbs *spur*, *emptied*, and *drove up*, as the "cause" is infused into the meanings of these verbs. Teachers who are knowledgeable about the range of ways logical relationships can be presented in text can help students recognize these meanings and the relationships they create in the text.

### **What words does the author use to introduce a character or concept, and how is the character or concept referred to throughout the story?**

Another challenge of reading comprehension is making connections across spans of text. Developing readers often fail to recognize that the same concept or character is being referred to when writers and speakers use a range of linguistic resources, including pronouns and synonyms, to develop cohesive *chains of reference*. After introducing a concept or character, the author may continue to refer to the same character or concept using a different language form, creating a chain of reference. Taking time to identify and relate the words and phrases through which these chains are developed helps students gain insight into both the content of what they are reading and how the language resources work.

In the *pufflings* paragraph, the author uses a range of resources to refer to the pufflings. The reference chain is highlighted here:

In the darkness of night, **the pufflings** leave **their** burrows for the first flight. It's a short, wing-flapping trip from the high cliffs. **Most of the birds** splash-land safely in the sea below. But **some** get confused by the village lights – perhaps **they** think the lights are moonbeams reflecting on the water. **Hundreds of the pufflings** crash-land in the village every night. Unable to take off from flat ground, **they** run around and try to hide. Dangers await. Even if the cats and dogs don't get **them**, **the pufflings** might get run over by cars or trucks.

To understand this passage, students have to connect the pronouns and synonyms back to *the pufflings* in the first sentence. For example, the word *some* has to be connected back to what it refers to; in this context, *some* contrasts with *most of the birds*, which itself refers back to *the pufflings*. In the sentence *Unable to take off from flat ground*, *they* run around and try to hide, *they* is also the subject of *unable to take off from*

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*flat ground*. Making these connections is complex, and teachers can help students recognize such reference chains by identifying a key character or concept and tracing its development across a text. By tracking reference and highlighting the chains of reference, students gain insights into how complex texts are constructed and how information develops in a text.

In the history text, students need to recognize the reference chains that develop the notion that *demand* causes (*spurs*) *growth*. These chains of reference are even more demanding to identify, as the word *demand* in the subtitle is not used again until the last sentence: ...*the growing population...drove up the demand for beef*. But in this sentence, *growth* is said to be causing *demand*, seemingly contradicting the subtitle. When we follow the reference chain for *growth*, we need to recognize the notion of growth in *boomed*, *the growing population*, and *drove up*. We can see that the passage is more about *growth* than *demand*, as the chain of reference to *growth* is more extensive than the chain for *demand*: it is *the growing population of the eastern cities that spurs (causes) demand for beef* that in turn causes *growth (boom)* in *cattle ranching*. The notion of *growth* is presented as both effect and cause (the growth in ranching is an effect of the emptying of the land, the growth in population is a cause for the growth in the demand for beef), and the argument is complex. Practice in tracking chains of reference in texts like this gives students strategies for analyzing meaning in other dense texts they encounter, as they learn that each new reference in the chain adds a new dimension to the meaning being developed.

### Summary

This article has described three strategies teachers can use to help students explore the language of complex texts and better understand its meanings. By making these strategies a regular part of discussion of a text, students begin to see how they themselves can explore the meanings of challenging complex texts.

To get at *who* or *what* is involved in actions, teachers can ask students to identify the actors in action processes, or to unpack nominalizations to identify the agency that has not been explicitly presented. Focusing on agency helps students recognize how grammatical strategies (such as use of the passive voice or nominalization) enable authors to leave out the actors, but that wording makes it harder to understand who or what is involved.

To understand how different parts of a sentence are related to each other, teachers can explore the meanings of conjunctions, especially conjunctions like *even if* that are less frequent in everyday talk. In more advanced texts, teachers can help students recognize that the logical relationships of time and cause are often not explicitly presented in conjunctions, but instead are infused into verbs like *preceded* (time) or *led to* (cause), as we saw in the verbs *emptied*, *boomed*, and *drove up*.

To understand how characters and concepts are developed in a text, teachers can work with students to identify each reference to the same concept or character, exploring the ways an author adds information or meaning each time.

It is not necessary to be an expert in grammar to have these conversations with students, as the conversation is not a

labeling exercise that the students get right or wrong, but instead is an exploration of the ways authors use language to present meanings in more or less complex ways. The point is to explore and talk about meaning, and these strategies offer concrete ways to focus attention on meaning that is challenging to comprehend.

### Implications

Teachers who are able to engage learners in explicit discussion about connections between the form and meaning of the texts they read can help learners read for deeper understanding. The three strategies described here can be used by teachers on a regular basis as they engage students in challenging or important text passages. Having these discussions in the context of reading curricular texts helps students see how language works and offers them new ways of exploring meaning on their own as readers. Exploring the complex language of text can contribute to students' learning in three ways: 1) students engage more deeply with knowledge about the content; 2) they learn about the meanings that particular language choices make in the texts they read; and 3) they become more conscious about language itself and gain an attentiveness to language that supports their learning and development.

As the new CCSS bring new expectations for the kinds of texts students will work with across the grades and subject areas, teachers need new ways of working with and talking about form-meaning connections. The challenges of complex texts begin in the early grades and continue to grow across the years of schooling. Understanding these texts calls for attention to language, and this article has illustrated strategies that can make the meanings visible and support teachers in this important linguistic work.

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