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## Book review

### Privileging language as social semiotic in higher education

**A Language as Social Semiotic-Based Approach to Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, C. Coffin, J. Donohue. Wiley, San Francisco, CA (2014) 308, ISBN: 978-1-118-92382-5**

Caroline Coffin and Jim Donohue's monograph, *A Language as Social Semiotic-Based Approach to Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* examines the current state of language and the ways in which it functions as medium, content, and context for learning in higher education. Using a systemic-functional linguistic (SFL) framework, this examination occurs within an explicit context where language is "a resource for creating and understanding texts in contexts" (p. 30). They frame their approach as "learning language, learning about language, and learning through language as equally important aspects of the teaching and learning process" (p. 3). The book provides a general overview of the *language as social semiotic* (LASS) approach and more specific course applications of the approach. Building off of the work of a previous *Language Learning* monograph from Christie (2012), as well as the works of Halliday (1978), Hasan (2005), Vygotsky (1978), and others, Coffin and Donohue clearly and concisely establish the problem: "Except in a few areas, language is not the focus of attention; ideas are" (p. 1). As one participant noted, "Most of us take language for granted – it's the transparent medium in which we swim" (p. 255). The authors foreground language and the implications of how it is used and taught in rapidly changing educational environments in an attempt to initiate a conversation and model a response.

The book features seven chapters through which the authors answer three primary research questions. The first question deals with "understanding the different ways professional academics and university students make meaning" (p. 6). The second question seeks to understand "the ways teachers engage with students' meaning making in higher education" (p. 6). Finally, the authors consider whether the knowledge generated from the first two questions "constitute a LASS-based approach for enhancing teaching and learning in higher education" (p. 7). Chapter 1 provides a general overview of language in higher education, including defining and contextualizing the LASS approach. Chapter 2 offers a practical application of the LASS approach, while Chapter 3 delves deeper into the theoretical perspectives. Chapters 4 and 5 offer course-specific cases of the LASS approach. Chapter 6 explores the online and distance education implications of LASS-based teaching and learning. Chapter 7 provides a summary with some practical applications of the approach, as well as a discussion of continued research in this area.

In Chapter 1, Coffin and Donohue introduce concerns about the manner in which language is approached in higher education. The authors claim that a LASS framework provides an approach where "the practical, commonsense knowledge of students' everyday experience meets the uncommonsense knowledge of the world of scholarship" (p. 5). Working from the position that semiotic resources include the visual, musical, gestural, and mathematical, they argue "anything whose meaning can be interpreted constitutes a semiotic system" (p. 6).

The bulk of Chapter 2 introduces concepts and contextualizes them for use in the remaining chapters. Specifically, the authors introduce the ideas of semantic orientation, variation, and mediation. These concepts lay the foundation for understanding the more technical terms introduced in Chapter 3. Chapter 2 concludes with a discussion of some general applications of the SFL framework and, more specifically, the LASS approach. Coffin and Donohue explain, "Language is not an innocent conduit of information: it is an engagement with a context, consisting of subject matter, interpersonal interaction, and textual forms" (p. 37).

In Chapter 3, the authors delve deeper into the linguistic theories upon which the LASS approach is constructed. Intended to be a resource for practitioners (p. 39), this chapter relies heavily on specific, theoretical language beginning with an explanation of the SFL framework. Coffin and Donohue argue that all language use is a choice, one dependent upon a system-instance. This choice is an example of semiotic mediation; the choice individuals make when using a specific piece of language is an attempt to mediate the rhetorical situation. They explain the role of register, composed of three variables:

field, tenor, and mode (pp. 57–58), which establish context for understanding the use of language and this notion provides an “overall architecture of SFL and to provide an overview of its analytical tools” (p. 82).

Chapter 4 details an application of the LASS approach as implemented in a first-year Film Studies course. The chapter explores “how students learn the language of Film Studies, learn Film Studies through language, and learn about Film Studies language” (p. 85), returning to the initial pattern of contextualization established in Chapters 1–3. This chapter uses field, tenor, and mode as a pedagogic tool set for thinking about and analyzing the language used in the course and, specifically, in the assignments and students’ responses. The emphasis in this chapter seems to focus on the aspect of field and mode, more so than tenor. The authors provide evidence that shows improved student performance when literacy/language instruction was integrated into the Film Studies curriculum, versus a control group that predated the incorporation of the LASS approach. The authors note that while student gains may be attributed to the intervention directly, gains may also be attributed to the increased time and effort instructors themselves spent on improving their practices for the course.

Like Chapter 4, Chapter 5 focuses on the application of a LASS approach. However, in the study undertaken for Chapter 5, an entire course was the focus rather than a single genre of assignments. This chapter includes multiple genres of writing, approached individually, which were included in a Health and Social Care (HSC) course. The overall approach of this study was “mediated text analysis” (p. 140), which allowed researchers to explore the “student experience of writing” in the course to understand “students’ explanations of the ways their texts [across genres] were designed” (p. 150).

Chapter 6 moves toward the broader concept of the “macrogenre” (p. 212) of online discussions. The authors argue that online discussions are not any single genre, unlike the assignments discussed in the preceding chapters. Rather discussions constitute a macrogenre, a composite of many smaller elemental genres (as discussed in Chapter 3). To stress the importance of the semiotic perspective, the authors reiterate the significance of orientation and mediation. Here, tenor is privileged because of the various ways students must respond to the various readers, both teacher(s) and students. This system-instance of choice provides teachers with an opportunity to model many different elements of the social semiotic approach, including an emphasis on mode (convention) and field (subject-content). The varying degrees of formality of the macrogenre of online discussions create both challenges and opportunities.

Finally, Chapter 7 takes up the broad implications of LASS-based approaches to teaching and learning. The first few sections of this chapter address implementation in higher education: preparing to establish evidence and need for the approach, and designing curricula. These issues can be viewed as institutional-level concerns. The next sections deal with instructor or course-level concerns. One of the more significant points made in the chapter is that the authors view the ideal proponent(s) of LASS-based approaches as teacher-researchers and that collaboration between teacher-researchers in linguistics and subject areas make for the most productive scenarios (p. 262). The authors stress that the LASS-based approach is “not a discrete or alternative approach that replaces other approaches” (p. 272). The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of issues and potential obstacles of the LASS-based approach.

One criticism of the monograph might be that the methodologies used are weakly organized and presented. Missing here are detailed, highly organized accounts of research methodologies, including detailed sampling procedures. However, that criticism can be easily dismissed because this is not *that* kind of work. While Coffin and Donohue work to provide compelling and ethically sound evidence in limited volume, this is a book meant to begin a conversation about language by drawing attention to language. The evidence serves only that purpose, as opposed to a more traditional empirical study. The ideas presented here are meant to introduce concepts and give examples of “learning language, learning about language, and learning through language” (p. 3). In the authors’ terms, more attention to methodological mode might be useful in establishing a more comprehensive context. Furthermore, this would enable replication (or at least expanded application) of the studies used as evidence (Makel & Plucker, 2014), thereby strengthening this particular approach and the field of semiotics in general.

One of the strengths of this work develops in the way the authors model the work they propose, by slowly and carefully acclimating readers to the field, tenor, and mode of the social semiotic environment. The first two chapters use language that a novice could easily understand, while chapters 3–5 get increasingly more technical. Chapter 6 returns to the same kind of practical language used in Chapter 2, while Chapter 7 delves more deeply into the language of change. The variation in tenor and mode is one of the most compelling strengths of this monograph.

Coffin and Donohue offer numerous insights into the ways that educators in linguistics, or those interested in the role of language in different disciplines, can be more intentional about their conceptualization of course design and pedagogy. From discussions of sentence-level issues to larger genre concerns to even larger ideas about the power struggles inherent in language and making meaning, this work offers ways to think about, discuss, and apply a LASS-based approach in a variety of contexts, not just within a writing or linguistics paradigm. They emphasize the theoretical and practical ways field, tenor, and mode impact the content, context, and medium of writing in any discipline. In general, this book is accessible to novices and brimming with strategies and concepts that are as interesting as they are useful for more experienced educators and researchers.

## References

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