Academic Literacies and systemic functional linguistics: How do they relate?

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ABSTRACT

Two approaches to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) research and teaching which have arisen in recent years are systemic functional linguistics (SFL) approaches in Australia and elsewhere (e.g. Hood, 2006; Lee, 2010; Woodward-Kron, 2009) and Academic Literacies approaches in the UK and elsewhere (e.g. Lillis & Scott, 2008; Thesen & Pletzen, 2006; Turner, 2004). Although these approaches both draw from ethnographic and sociocultural traditions, they have tended to focus on different aspects of EAP. SFL as a theory of language has employed linguistic analysis to establish the nature of disciplinary discourses and ways of encouraging students to engage in these discourses; research and pedagogy have concentrated on texts, language in use and the language system. Academic Literacies as a research paradigm has maintained a strong commitment to ethnographic investigation and to critiquing dominant academic and institutional practices; methods have concentrated on identifying practices, student identities, and conflicts that individual language users experience in university writing.

This article reflects on the two approaches by reviewing their two literatures, uncovering key questions that characterise each, and illuminating similarities and difference in epistemology and methodology. The article concludes by recognising the potential of dialogue and collaboration across the SFL and Academic Literacies research and teaching communities to address current imperatives facing EAP.

1. Introduction

There are a wide range of theories, concepts and analytical tools which have been drawn on to research, critique, support and assess the teaching of English for Academic Purposes (for example, composition theory, critical theory and Swalesian concepts of discourse community and genre, to name a few). In this article we focus on two approaches to researching and teaching academic literacy which have been gaining currency over the last decade and which are relevant to both first and second language contexts. One of these is referred to as Academic Literacies[1]. The other is Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Whereas Academic Literacies focuses on practices in context, SFL focuses on texts in context. This difference in focus and, in particular, Academic Literacies' challenge to the textual bias they identify in the researching and teaching of EAP (Lillis & Scott, 2008) has generated debate (e.g. Wingate and Tribble, 2011). This article sets out to move the debate forward. To do this we will unpack what SFL text focused approaches and Academic Literacies practices focused approaches offer and,

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through review and reflection, we will consider the potential of each for contributing to the field of EAP, independently and in collaboration.

1.1. Systemic functional linguistics and Academic Literacies – definitions, differences and alignments

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a theory of language which highlights the relationship between language, text and context. Its scope is wide in that it sets out to explain how humans make meaning through language and other semiotic resources, and to understand the relationship between language and society. As an 'Appliable Linguistics' (Halliday, 2007) it is designed to be a strategic tool and a guide to action, a means of responding to everyday real-life language-related issues in diverse social, professional and academic contexts. Academic learning and teaching is just one of the contexts that it has been applied to.

Academic Literacies as a theoretical research paradigm is more focused in scope, having evolved in response to issues of literacy in an expanded higher education system and the way in which 'student academic writing and the pedagogy in which it is embedded, seems to thwart opportunities for a higher education premised upon inclusion and diversity' (Lillis, 2003, p. 192). In their position paper, Lillis and Scott (2008) state that one of the main goals of Academic Literacies is to problematize the definition and articulation of perceived 'problems' in student writing. In this way, Academic Literacies is positioned as a *critical* field of enquiry. Furthermore, as Lillis and Scott (2008) point out, it has a specific epistemology, that of *literacy as social practice*, and a specific ideological stance, that of *transformation* in which there is an emphasis on addressing inequalities in social relations.

Whereas *literacy practices* are a primary object of study in Academic Literacies, *text* is the primary unit of analysis in SFL. In Academic Literacies, literacy practices are both individual behaviours that participants display in a literacy event and complex and abstract social phenomena which include the larger social and cultural meanings that participants bring to, and deploy, in their participation in a literacy event. In SFL, text refers to units as small as a clause or as large as an entire academic monograph. In either case, texts are amenable to linguistic analysis to different degrees of delicacy (from text level staging/ schema, to discourse semantics, to clause level meaning and function). Crucially, SFL text analysis is not only the analysis of linguistic resources but, in addition, the analysis of their social, cultural and ideological meanings. The theoretical framework and analytical tools are designed to make explicit the relationship between text and context. For this reason, SFL analysis of text is not reducible to the analysis of linguistic form and structure, detached from its context of use.

Lillis and Scott argue that a focus on text and an absence of a focus on practice characterizes much academic writing research and that the (pre) identification of problems in student writing as textual in nature 'leads to pedagogical 'solutions' which are overwhelmingly textual in nature' (Lillis & Scott, 2008, p. 10). In their view, this is problematic. The Academic Literacies lens, in contrast, includes in its scope aspects of academic writing beyond student texts and disciplinary genres and, as a critical field of enquiry, sets out to interrogate and challenge academic norms and conventions as well as institutional policy, particularly in relation to issues of identity and power. Whilst SFL research has the potential (theoretically and analytically) to pursue such dimensions of academic writing, to date, this has not been its primary goal.

Significantly, although Scott and Lillis question research into academic writing which concentrates on texts rather than practices, they imply that text analysis still has a place within an Academic Literacies approach. More importantly, as discussed in greater detail below, it would seem that text, as defined within SFL, resonates with the Academic Literacies view of literacy as fundamentally a social phenomenon. Where there is less resonance, however, is how the different dimensions of writing, context and ideology and their interrelationships are treated analytically within each approach.

1.2. Systemic functional linguistics and Academic Literacies – blurred boundaries?

As with any theory or field of enquiry there is, unsurprisingly, a range of positions taken up by those affiliated to them. Gardner (2012) and Woodward-Kron (2004), for example, whilst located primarily within an SFL tradition, recognize the usefulness of ethnographic approaches in developing descriptions of academic genres and the contexts of student writing. Whilst the use of ethnographic approaches does not entail analytical commitment to the category of practice (as conceptualized within Academic Literacies) such an orientation comes close to an Academic Literacies position in that it gives a different kind of attention to context, seeking a greater understanding of participants' expressed understandings of context, rather than depending on an exclusive focus on a 'text in context' (register) description. Baynham (2000), on the other hand, whilst in many ways aligned to a *literacy as social practice/Academic Literacies* approach makes a strong argument for the place of text. Similarly, Ivanič in her research into social interaction in writing comments that 'these issues need to be addressed in general and also tied specifically to linguistic evidence – linguistics has tools to offer for this analysis which should not be ignored' (Ivanič, 1998, p. 333).

1.3. Aims of article

A major aim of this article is to elucidate the orientations of SFL and Academic Literacies to researching academic writing and to consider the implications of these for the field of EAP. We examine in turn:

- the questions Academic Literacies and SFL commonly ask and a brief overview of the research conducted in response to these questions
- how the theoretical orientation, epistemology and ideology of each approach shapes the research questions and the investigations pursued
- the relevance and significance of the above for pedagogy.

In the final section we briefly consider the kinds of research contexts and issues that may benefit from a coming together of the two approaches.

2. What questions are asked in each approach?

2.1. Questions posed in SFL approaches

2.1.1. How can text based descriptions contribute to our understanding of disciplinary meaning making?
Using the constructs of genre and register, much SFL research has focused on describing and accounting for how language works in academic contexts. In this body of research, genre is used to categorize academic texts according to overarching purposes (such as explaining, reporting or arguing). Register is used to map the relationship between the context and the lexicogrammatical choices. In SFL, three key dimensions of context are seen as shaping and being shaped by language: field (the topic), tenor (the roles and relationships of the interlocutors) and mode (how written or spoken a text is).

Genre and register research has built understanding of different aspects of disciplinary meaning making – in particular sub-disciplines and courses and at particular points in undergraduate or postgraduate study. To date there has been research at undergraduate level on Social Sciences (Wignell, 2007), on Geography (Hewings, 2004), Film Studies (Donohue, 2002), History (Ravelli, 2004), History of Science (North, 2005), Science (Drury, Langrish, & O'Carroll, 2006), Management (Ravelli, 2004) and Education (Woodward-Kron, 2004). At postgraduate level there has been research into postgraduate teacher education (Macken-Horarik, Devereux, Trimingham-Jack, & Wilson, 2006) and applied linguistics (Hood, 2010), amongst others.

In general, the focus of these studies has been on meaning making that typifies professional representations of the discipline (e.g. as represented by textbooks) or on students' meaning making judged to be academically successful (according to disciplinary lecturers' assessment and feedback). Whilst both 'typical' and 'successful' are by no means unproblematic terms they index forms of knowledge, thinking and language use which have institutional power. From a pedagogic perspective they offer a useful basis for interventions and materials development.

2.1.2. How can SFL language analysis combine with sociology of knowledge analysis to contribute to our understanding of disciplinary meaning making?
Recent SFL research into disciplinary meaning making has begun to draw on theories and methods from sociology of knowledge in order to explore what is at stake in (inter)disciplinary knowledge making and the related teaching and learning processes. Christie and Maton (2011), for example, have explored and challenged claims that traditional disciplines with their delimited objects of study and specialized procedures are a form of intellectual straitjacket 'with elite forms of thought and education that exclude the experiences of many groups in society' (Christie & Maton, 2011, p. 3).

2.1.3. How is disciplinary knowledge built multimodally?
Over the last decade SFL has expanded to explore multisemiotic resources in a wide range of learning contexts through 'Systemic Functional multimodal discourse analysis' (O'Halloran, 2004). Jones (2007) has examined multimodal meaning making in science textbooks and computer-based learning materials, and Drury has focused on the use of multimodal online environments for teaching academic writing (Drury, 2004) and report writing in chemical engineering (Drury, Langrish, & O'Carroll, 2006).

2.1.4. How is academic knowledge negotiated and valued?
A major area of interest in SFL academic writing research is the interpersonal dimension of academic discourse, Included in this body of work is Thompson's investigations of the reader writer relationship (Thompson, 2001) and Lee's (2010) study of how students manage to balance respect and authority when writing for lecturers, Coffin's (2010) analysis of the intertextual resources and linguistic strategies of students persuading and arguing, and Coffin and Hewings' (2004) and Hood's (2010) exploration of the (often) implicit nature of evaluative meaning.

2.1.5. What challenges do academic study and writing pose for both first and second language students?
A number of studies have focused on the challenge for both first and second language speakers in developing use of technical, field based taxonomies and in organizing discourse and coherent texts (e.g. Chen & Foley, 2004). Swain (2007), drawing on SFL work on appraisal, has looked at the complexities faced by second language speakers in learning how to construct an effective 'voice' in their writing.

More recently, a new line of work focusing on students' semantic orientations is beginning to develop. This research draws on Hasan's thesis that individuals' everyday interactions and language experiences – how they make meaning – are more (or less) aligned to the meaning making associated with institutionalized knowledge (Donohue & Coffin, 2011).

2.1.6. How can SFL contribute to pedagogic models, interventions and contexts?

The expanding number of SFL descriptions of academic discourse and disciplinary meaning making provide an empirical basis for influencing curriculum design and teaching and learning materials and resources. To date, the main focus for research in this area has been on trialling different ways of supporting students' development of meaning making as valued within the disciplines. The contexts for this research range from one to one consultations (e.g. Moore, 2007; Woodward-Kron, 2007) to academic writing support embedded in degree programs (e.g. Taylor & Drury, 2007). In particular, research has focused on the role of dialogue and the teacher/tutor as expert guide (see Rose, 2007) and the role of reading in supporting writing development (Rose, Rose, Farrington, & Page, 2008).

2.1.7. What role does language play in diagnostic, formative and summative assessment, including content knowledge assessment?

One of the most researched SFL based diagnostic instruments is the tool *Measuring the Academic Skills of University Students* (MASUS) (Bonanno & Jones, 2007). This tool has been designed to make explicit the expectations of academic writing across a range of undergraduate courses (Humphrey, Martin, Dreyfus, & Mahboob, 2010) and to support *assessment-for-learning*.

Another aspect of language and assessment which has been investigated is the linguistic realisation of the complex status relationships between students and markers (Lee, 2009). Marker feedback on student writing has been explored by Woodward-Kron (2004), particularly its use as a way of socializing students into the writing and discursive practices of a discipline. Hewings and Coffin (2006) have also looked at feedback in the context of tutor–student dialogue in electronic conferencing.

2.2. Questions posed in Academic Literacies approaches

2.2.1. What are the writing practices in universities?

Academic Literacies researchers have been concerned with what it means to students to 'do' academic writing in different sites and contexts. There is also an interest in the nature of disciplinarity and the extent to which disciplines are unified and coherent wholes and how far they vary according to institutions, departments and individual tutors. Lillis (2003) has also been interested in how approaches to student academic writing reflect and enact broader goals of higher education, particularly in relation to the agendas of widening participation and diversity.

In the course of investigating the overarching question above, several related questions have come to the fore and have been pursued in a number of studies. Lea and Street (1998), for example, looked into the expectations and interpretations of academic staff and students regarding undergraduate written assignments. Turner (2011) explores further the ways of thinking, acting, valuing and speaking within academic contexts by focusing on contexts where intercultural encounters play out differences in intellectual cultural heritage and thus differences in pedagogic traditions and in the rhetorical norms and values for academic writing and its evaluation.

The impact of technology on academic writing practices has also been investigated (e.g. Lea, 2007; Lea & Jones, 2011). In particular, questions are asked concerning the overlap between the kinds of things students do with texts and technologies in the personal sphere and as part of the university curriculum. The focus here is how issues of student identity and personal affiliation come together to shape the textual interactions of students and their engagement in HE digital literacies. In other words, how blurred are the boundaries between the personal and curricula spheres and does this impact on students' learning in a meaningful way?

2.2.2. To what extent and in which specific ways do prevailing conventions and practices enable and constrain meaning making?

Academic Literacies does not stop at describing writing practices in universities and how these may or may not align with students' own cultural and home practices nor does it stop at tracing the historical roots for the norms and values attaching to academic literacy practices. As an oppositional frame, it moves beyond description and explanation to a critical position, asking questions about the ways in which current practices constrain as well as enable meaning making. In particular, it is concerned with the following related issues:

In what ways do current academic writing practices thwart opportunities for a higher education premised upon inclusion and diversity?
How does a student articulate their identity and voice? Is there space in the academy for non-traditional voices/practices/discourses?
What opportunities exist for drawing a range of theoretical and semiotic resources into academic meaning making?

2.2.3. How can Academic Literacies researchers find ways of drawing on critique to design new writing pedagogies?

As a logical consequence of their critical stance, Academic Literacies researchers have posed the question of how to shift from critique to pedagogic design. This entails: 1) a critical re-examination of what counts as relevant knowledge within and across academic disciplines and 2) collaboration amongst researchers, teachers and student-writers in imagining new possibilities for meaning making. Whilst there is acknowledgement that the task above needs to be a collaborative one, particular emphasis is placed on valuing students' perspectives and contributions (Lillis, 2003, p. 97).

These broad questions and issues have been taken up by Academic Literacies theorists and researchers in a number of papers and studies (e.g. Lea & Street, 2006; Lillis, 2003; Wingate, 2006). Lillis, in particular, is interested in how the Bahktinian concept of dialogue can help to inform a design space. For Lillis, dialogic pedagogic practices involve the making visible of official and unofficial discourse and providing students opportunities for challenging or 'playing' with them.

2.2.4. How useful is tutor feedback? How do students experience feedback?

The area of feedback as a high stakes practice, inextricably linked with power has been highlighted by a number of Academic Literacies studies (e.g. Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001). Numerous questions have been raised and explored in order to better understand why there can be misunderstanding and dissatisfaction on the part of both academics and students and why feedback, particularly in relation to evaluation, can be problematic. Tuck's (2010) recent work raises the following issues:

- What do tutors think they are doing when they do 'marking' or give feedback?
- What relationships between writers and readers are implied? What identities invoked?

2.2.5. General summary

Section 2 has highlighted different orientations in SFL and Academic Literacies with regard to the kinds of issues and questions they set out to investigate. Overall, this brief overview has shown how SFL research into academic writing has focused on building up an understanding of the role of language (and other semiotic modes) in disciplinary meaning making. SFL research has focused on what makes texts successful or unsuccessful in academic contexts. It has also investigated why the kind of meaning making valued by the academy may cause difficulties for learners and has directed considerable energy towards designing and evaluating pedagogic models and strategies which aim to support students' disciplinary writing and learning.

Academic Literacies has mainly focussed on academic literacy practices and issues of identity and power and what these mean primarily for the learner (but also to some extent for their lecturers). It has raised critical questions regarding current practices and has proposed a number of principles for a new pedagogic design frame which has the potential to alter current practice as a means of better acknowledging the identities, and meaning making resources of a diverse student body. It has been less concerned with the qualities of 'successful' texts (seen from a lecturer's perspective) and more concerned with the experience of students as they engage with university meaning making and genres.

3. How does the theoretical orientation and epistemology of each approach shape the nature of the research questions?

In many ways, the differences in the questions posed by SFL and Academic Literacies can be explained with reference to their epistemological roots, theoretical orientations, analytical methods and ideological stances. This section looks more closely at some of the main differences in the phenomena each approach focuses on and their different investigative techniques and procedures.

3.1. Systemic functional linguistics: origins and tenets

SFL is a social theory of language. Unlike formal, structural theories of grammar its focus is on how language is used as a meaning making resource in contexts of situation and culture (see Coffin, Donohue, & North, 2009 for an accessible introduction). Initiated by Halliday in the 1960s, its early influences included the work of Firth, a linguist, and Malinowski, an anthropologist. Both Malinowski and Firth proposed that the environment of language use was a necessary dimension of understanding its meaning and both conceived of language as a form of action, as the enactment of social relationships and social processes.

SFL is underpinned by the following key tenets:

1. Context and the language choices made by speakers/writers are interrelated.
2. Language is a resource for making meaning.
3. Every utterance/text simultaneously makes three types of meaning – ideational, interpersonal and textual.
4. Language can be viewed and investigated as a total system or as a particular text (or somewhere along that continuum).

3.1.1. Text and context

Text in context is the main unit of analysis in SFL research and the primary constructs for looking at the relationship between text and context are register and genre. These bring into play the relationship between texts and the people who are reading and writing them but in contrast with an Academic Literacies framework, the focus is less on the lived experience of individual writers and readers and their perspective on texts. As a linguistic theory, the emphasis is on understanding the potential of the language system and the way in which it is deployed through text to make meaning. The focus is on the detail

of how language works to develop and structure texts and to construe meanings which a) build field, b) create a dialogue between writers and readers and c) form cohesive and coherent texts.

3.1.2. General and individual text patterns

The SFL linguistic lens can pan across sets of texts produced within a discipline (or particular program/year of study/ assignment task) or it can zoom in on specific texts produced by individual writers/students. It has the capacity to use patterns across texts to form generalized descriptions of either text structure (genres) or language choice (register) and to account for these descriptions in relation to features of the context. This has been critiqued for being a normative approach to the writing of individual students.

Gee (1992) has indicated a counter argument to this pointing out that patterns are fundamental to human thinking and action, and that mid-level generalizations are particularly important in that they are not too general and not too specific. Macken-Horarik et al. (2006) take this up in their proposal that for pedagogic purposes there is a need to 'generalize productively' and they show how generalized descriptions can help make sense of particular texts.

Martin (2004) also makes clear the importance of analysing individual texts. With reference to the rise of corpus linguistics, he argues that 'as social discourse analysts we need to guard against studies that submerge unfolding texture in processes of counting and averaging that look for trends across texts rather than contingencies within them'. SFL thus gives value to both general and individual text patterns and meanings.

3.1.3. Etic versus emic perspectives

In SFL analysis, language choices, patterns and meaning are seen as being in a 'cogenetic' relationship with social and cultural contexts. As analysis of this relationship is carried out by a linguistic expert who might be a relative stranger to, for example, 'undergraduate history', the explanation is essentially an outsider 'etic' one. The justification for this is that explanations relating language use and contextual features may not be salient to an insider. This does not mean that insider perspectives (emic accounts) are excluded from an SFL analysis of language use. These are obtained from observation, interviews or comments on texts and may be used to enrich understanding e.g. alignments/misalignments between students' and tutors' perspectives (see Macken-Horarik, et al. 2006; Woodward-Kron, 2007). At the same time, such data is not taken at face value. As in the case of all texts, it too (depending on research purpose and parameters) may be subjected to systematic linguistic analysis. In this sense, the emic account by an insider of their self-understanding may be subjected to etic constructs.

In sum, the epistemological orientation of SFL is to take identifiable, observable phenomena – 'language use/texts in context' – and seek to explain them through the application of a theoretical framework which models language as a functional, meaning making system. There is less focus on the meanings that the writer may have intended or wanted to make and may or may not have achieved or on the meanings that a reader might make which may or may not be closely aligned to those of the text or of the writer/speaker. The reason for this is not because these dimensions are unimportant. However, as a linguistic theory, SFL does not have the theoretical basis or power to access meanings that are not inscribed in text, i.e. that are not empirically available in the form of language data.

3.1.4. SFL and sociological theories

In order to go beyond an exclusively linguistic focus on text, SFL has allied with and drawn on theories and frames from complementary disciplines. One example of a productive interdisciplinary partnership which has had significance for research into academic writing is the collaboration with sociologists, namely Bernstein and Maton, mentioned earlier. This has enabled SFL researchers to draw on theories from the sociology of education and of knowledge (see Martin, 2011 for discussion of these collaborations).

This exotropic openness to other theories (Hasan, 2005) goes some way to countering the critique that SFL does not have the theoretical power to explain language use in relation to difference, power and change (Lillis, 1998, p. 33). Collaboration between SFL work and Maton's Legitimation Code Theory, for example, has raised critical issues concerning knowledge building and how certain ways of building knowledge might need to be challenged (Maton, 2011, p. 81). The basis and rationale for change is, however, centred on judgements concerning the functionality of knowledge building. Whether sociologists of knowledge or linguists are best placed or have the authority or power to influence change remains an open question.

Besides this, SFL pedagogically oriented work does not view inducting students into disciplines as necessarily a normative process which denies students' creative freedom to make meanings of relevance to them. Rather, academic induction/ apprenticeship and disciplinarity can be seen more constructively as a means of (as Maton puts it) 'developing disciplined thought' (Maton, 2011, p. 62) which may come to have considerable professional and personal relevance and power to learners.

3.2. Academic Literacies: origins and tenets

Academic Literacies is a critical field of enquiry which has its epistemological origins in New Literacies (Street, 1984), and Linguistic ethnography (Rampton, 2007) both of which draw to varying degrees on linguistics, social theory, social anthropology and ethnography. In Lillis (2008) the value and role of ethnography in Academic Literacies is discussed in some detail:

in essence, she argues that, depending on the level at which academic writing is construed, ethnography can make a contribution as method, methodology, or in Blommaert's terms 'deep theorizing.' (Blommaert, 2007).

As a theoretical framing (following Blommaert, 2007; Blommaert, Street, & Turner, 2007), ethnography takes the perspective that language is socially and culturally situated. Furthermore, the epistemological and ontological 'architecture' of ethnography (with its antecedents in anthropology) means that it does not recognize any dichotomy between language and culture/text and context (Lillis, 2008). How text/context is made sense of is through the heuristic of emic/etic relations and perspectives. Insider perspectives on, and articulations of, academic writing practices and meanings over a sustained period of time are particularly valued. Ivanič and Lea (2006, p. 7) argue, 'the lived experience of teaching and learning – from both student and tutor perspectives – is central to understanding student writing'. Emic and etic perspectives and the inherent – and (from an ethnographic perspective) productive – tensions in working from both ends of an outsider–insider continuum are made explicit and reflexively valued. As Lillis (2008, p. 372) puts it, the researcher must work at making the strange familiar and the familiar strange.

3.2.1. Emic/etic perspectives on context/text

Ethnographic methodology comprises a number of methods or instruments for achieving emic/etic perspectives on context/text. Indeed it is this use of multiple data sources and multiple methods of analysis – the 'holistic pull', as Lillis (2008, p. 356) puts it – which are a central feature of ethnographic work. One of the most common methods in Academic Literacies is the in-depth semi-structured interview which includes both literacy history and 'talk around text'. Literacy history involves the researcher eliciting autobiographical accounts of language and academic literacy learning so that current practices and perspectives can be understood within the broader sociohistorical context of an individual's life trajectory. In 'talk around text' interviews, the researcher encourages student-writers to make comments and reflect on academic writing in ways not predefined by the researcher and by so doing establishes what is particularly relevant and significant to the students. Lillis (2008) argues for the importance of this kind of 'contextualist' understanding in that it helps to bring together text and context as one phenomenon.

Other ethnographic instruments that are used in Academic Literacies work are documentary data (e.g. institutional and tutor guidelines), students' and tutors' textual data (e.g. written assignments with tutor comments and marks) and observation (participant or non participant) including field notes and visual records (namely photographs). These instruments aim at locating the researcher in writers' specific sociohistorical trajectories and avoiding the data being read through any straightforward theoretical (etic) lens. In combination with interview and documentary and textual data, 'thick participation' (Sarangi, 2007), provides a means for looking at what the institution requires in terms of forms of representation, discourses, epistemological framings and stances and – the main focus – *what this means* for students' identities and their lived experience of HE.

3.2.2. The sequencing of texts: historical and local

The collection of a wide range of data detailing the micro and macro context of a literacy event is what Blommaert sees as the main advantage of ethnography:

> ethnography chops up every object in microscopic parts that are very often extraordinarily relevant for understanding the dynamics of the social value of these practices
> (Blommaert et al., 2007, p. 142).

The focus on the historical development of practices is another key feature in the Academic Literacies take-up of ethnography. This connection of the text with larger patterns provides the epistemological stance that Street argues makes ethnography more than 'just a description of what you see in front of your eyes' (Street in Blommaert et al., 2007, p. 143). And it is these patterns which Blommaert argues gives ethnography a diagnostic function in explaining what might be wrong in a given context.

Aside from situating a text historically, its place in a sequence of other texts is also acknowledged as part of its meaning. For example, in the study of a specific text (e.g. a student essay), the text is viewed as an element in a sequence of practices and processes in a variety of modes and genres. A text may also be viewed from a 'text trajectory' perspective which takes into account its development over time e.g. from draft to final version. In this way the object of study is the dynamic and complex process and context of production surrounding and including the text as opposed to the object of study being an isolated, autonomous text.

So far, we have highlighted how ethnography as epistemology and as a set of procedures is used within Academic Literacies as a means of understanding not so much the linguistic construction of text but more the meanings text construction has for those participating in academic literacy practices (namely students and tutors). This brings us to the question of how Academic Literacies deals with the role of language in constructing meaning – not only in students' academic writing but in what is said about academic writing (in interviews, observations, documents, etc.).

3.2.3. Language and discourse in ethnographic work

The role of language and discourse in ethnographic work and the significance for methodology has long been recognized in the literature. Hammersley (2005), for example, points out how structuralism, poststructuralism, and constructionism have all encouraged a focus on language and discourse that has led to some important departures from previous practice. Most

importantly, it is now common for ethnographers to pay much closer attention to the language people use in the course of what they are doing, and in describing their lives in interviews, as a way of understanding 'how in some sense people ongoingly and discursively construct the social phenomena that characterise the society to which they belong' (Hammersley, 2005, p. 5). This micro focused language analysis is an approach taken by linguistic ethnographers, amongst others. Lillis (2008) argues their approach is highly relevant to Academic Literacies work in that they *tie ethnography down* and *open linguistics up* (Rampton, 2007). This resonates with the aim of bringing into closer alignment text and context. By using the concepts and descriptive language made available in linguistic ethnography to a) examine the discursive resources students employ to construct texts and b) examine the discursive resources students employ to present their perspective on this process, greater understanding of academic practices and what these mean to students may be achieved (particularly in terms of identities and power relations).

One complication to this proposal is that Lillis argues that students' talk around text should not be examined *only* from the perspective of analytical frameworks such as Linguistic ethnography to index specific discourses. She argues that talk around text should also be treated as a performance (enacting a researcher – researched relationship) and more significantly, in order to retain an emic, insider perspective, as straightforwardly transparent, a simple and authentic reflection of a writer's perspective at a particular moment in time. The aim here is to let some texts speak for themselves i.e. for the researcher to see the world using the same terms of reference as the insider participant.

It is not clear form this argument whether Lillis also thinks that students' written text should be treated from these three perspectives or indeed other text-oriented data (which Lillis distinguishes from 'ethnographic data') but it is certainly the case that she sees as problematic the disjunct in much Academic Literacies research where spoken 'talk around' texts is treated as transparent and contextual whereas students' written academic texts are treated analytically and textually as complex configurations of relationships between wordings, meanings, and intentions. A similar situation exists in much SFL research which has an ethnographic orientation – data from interviews is used to enrich functional linguistic analysis of students' written text but is itself rarely subject to analytical scrutiny.

3.3. The text–writer continuum – SFL and Academic Literacies

In essence, and in contrast to SFL, it would seem that it is students' lived experiences of academic writing practices and an exploration of what may be at stake for them that is the phenomena that Academic Literacies researchers seek to explain. In other words, observable empirical data in the form of academic texts in context is not the central focus. This does not mean academic texts including student writing are unimportant but they are not central. On a *text–writer* continuum Academic Literacies is, then, towards the writer end. SFL, on the other hand, is at the text end. Even where SFL researchers' gaze moves beyond the text, the text remains the primary object. Thus, whereas the approach of some Academic Literacies research has been described as text-oriented ethnography, the approach of some SFL researchers could perhaps be described as ethno-graphically informed text analysis.

Interestingly, both SFL and Academic Literacies aim to close the gap between context and text but, as this overview has highlighted, the orientations and starting points are different. In Academic Literacies the perspective on context and text is primarily emic. Thus it is largely what is contextually significant to participants which influences what is regarded as significant in students' texts. In combination with some formalist–textualist (etic) based insights into text construction it is an emic perspective which guides the exploration and understanding of the phenomena under scrutiny i.e. the meaning of academic literacy practices for students. One danger with this approach, as Lillis (2008) acknowledges, is that of reifying writer perspectives as expressed in one moment in time and oversimplifying claims framed in relation to such data, whether these be at the level of the individual (a specific student writer, for example) or a group (e.g. non-traditional students).

In SFL, the perspective on context (or at least the immediate context surrounding an academic text) is etic. Context and text are theorized as being in a dialectical relationship – with each implicated in the construction of the other – and this relationship is explored through the predefined/theorized parameters of register theory. In combination with some ethnographically derived insights into the wider cultural context it is largely an etic perspective which guides the exploration and understanding of the phenomena under scrutiny i.e. written academic texts. The danger with this approach is that of reifying text descriptions as collected from a single institution and department and oversimplifying claims framed in relation to such data, whether these be at the level of the institution (a UK New University, for example) or a discipline (sociology, for instance).

Clearly the different orientations of SFL and Academic Literacies to the study and conceptualisation of academic writing and the different theoretical lenses and epistemological stances taken explain a great deal in terms of the research questions asked and the kinds of research studies undertaken. One further dimension of each approach warrants particular consideration and this is the ideological positioning of each in relation to the teaching and learning of academic writing. This is the focus of the next section.

4. SFL and Academic Literacies: the relevance for EAP

4.1. Academic Literacies – ideological orientation

One of the initial purposes of the Academic Literacies research agenda was to move institutions away from a skills-based, deficit model of student writing and to encourage them to recognize the complexity of writing practices in universities. It has therefore been concerned with wider institutional approaches to, and perspectives on, student writing. In particular, it seeks

institutional acknowledgement that writing should not be seen as a set of generic transferable skills or as something technical, with problems (where they exist) easily fixed. As stated in the introduction, Academic Literacies therefore positions itself as a critical field of enquiry with an agenda for institutional change/transformation. Rather than focusing on how teachers can help students to learn the literacies of the university it focuses more on how students and teachers understand the literacy practices of the university and the issues that arise from the meanings that literacy has for them.

Critical perspectives on academic writing are, of course, not the preserve of Academic Literacies. Over the last 20 years in the combined fields of EAP, ESP and ELT there has been continuous engagement with socio-theoretical perspectives in order to examine the ideological effect of expert academic discourses and the ways in which mastery of these are related to status, authority and the maintenance of socio-political elites. Recently, in a JEAP special issue on critical EAP (CEAP) (Benesch, 2009) these issues were explored extensively. Somewhat surprisingly, however, there was little or no reference to the Academic Literacies literature. It is not clear whether this is because the Academic Literacies literature does not primarily focus on international students following EAP programs (though see Tuner, 2011) or whether the agendas are not sufficiently aligned.

4.2. Systemic functional liniguistics – ideological orientation

Put simply, SFL takes the view that there are certain varieties of meaning – making (such as those relating to disciplinary discourses) which are not equally distributed in society. In response, it aims to support more equal access to these discourses. The strategy is to design pedagogies, curricula and resources grounded in systematic SFL text-in-context analysis.

The use of textual descriptions to develop students' and lecturers' awareness of disciplinary discourses might be described by some as an a/critical apprenticeship model or in Academic Literacies terms, an 'academic socialization' model; that is, one that is concerned with students' uncritical acculturation into disciplinary and subject-based discourses and genres (Lea & Street, 2006). Alternatively, it can be seen as a model which equips students and equally disciplinary lecturers with the resources to see language for what it is i.e. ideologically shaped and constitutive of knowledge and identity. Martin describes SFL based pedagogy as 'democratic literacy pedagogy' (Martin, 2011, p. 35) and labels it 'subversive'.

By raising awareness of powerful discourses (discourses valued by the academy) the goal of SFL pedagogies is to expand students' meaning making resources and so provide the linguistic potential for them (if they choose) to critique from within and renegotiate their position (and in some sense their identity/identities) in society. Equally, by developing disciplinary experts' understanding of the role of language in learning and assessment and in disciplinary knowledge building, again the goal is to enable critique from within.

In other words, whilst critique of existing practice may be the outcome of some research studies, there is no overt agenda to transform current ways of making disciplinary meaning. In general, SFL researchers and practitioners have set out to work as pragmatic protagonists, achieving change by resolving issues rather than as antagonists provoking change through raising issues (which is one way of expressing the Academic Literacies position). However, through their institutional partnerships with disciplinary teachers and/or their location in study skills/language and literacy centres there is ongoing scope for SFL researchers and practitioners to feed into institutional policy and disciplinary change concerning the role of language in learning, teaching, assessment and knowledge making. In our view, as SFL academic writing researchers, any challenge to knowledge making, writing and assessment practices has to be premised on a strong understanding of how knowledge is built, and why and how it is valued in particular ways. Furthermore, insider knowers might be best placed to renovate a discipline (or institution) and we would argue that they might be more successful in such an enterprise were they to have the means to deconstruct and evaluate the discourses they work within.

5. Conclusion: compatibility or incommensurability

It is clear from this article that whilst there is overlap between Academic Literacies and SFL there are also important differences owing to divergence in theoretical orientations, epistemologies, analytical tools and ideological positionings. Arguably, as a result of their divergence, SFL and Academic Literacies in combination draw attention to the various dimensions of academic writing, any or all of which may contribute to problems for students, lecturers or an institution as a whole. It therefore seems constructive to emphasise the strengths that both approaches embody; Academic Literacies: a concern for practices in context, SFL: a concern for texts in context. Each approach is also engaged with social justice and socio-political action, though the means differ. While Academic Literacies emphasizes transformation of the discourses of the academy to better meet the diversity of students' experiences and identities, SFL-informed approaches focus on engagement with the discourses of the academy. Thus, whilst each approach emphasizes the contextualized nature of language and language practices in the academy, this is largely perceived by Academic Literacies proponents as a challenge for students and teachers, whereas it might be argued that for SFL proponents it represents an opportunity as much as a threat (an expansion of meaning making awareness and resources). Interestingly, though coming largely from an Academic Literacies perspective, Turner appears to endorse this view:

> learning in the academic context is to some extent a defamiliarising process…they can learn to speak with a somewhat different voice, because that's what learning's about – extending their range.
> (Turner in Blommaert et al., 2007, p. 144)

It would seem to us that one of the greatest sources of tension and potential incompatibility is the different privileging of writer (Academic Literacies) and text (SFL) reflected in the different balance of emic/etic perspectives present in the research and thinking on both sides. This difference is rooted in the way linguistics and ethnography seek to understand the world and the categories and concepts they use as lenses for analysing and representing their understandings of it. In particular, there seems to be a fundamental difference in the interpretation of text and textual. In some Academic Literacies literature, textual appears to equate with the more technical surface dimension of language and writing. However, if the term 'textual' is opened up to refer to language and text as meaning making resources (the SFL perspective) and if the role of language in complex learning and knowledge building is recognized (as SFL does) then we would argue that textualist approaches need not carry the negative connotations they appear to attract in some Academic Literacies literature. Indeed Street seems to recognize this when he states 'I think an ethnographic account combines a linguistic, and now multimodal, sensitivity so we can understand the levels and processes in ways that just a description of the event wouldn't ever capture' (Street in Blommaert et al., 2007, p. 143).

Although there is much that is shared by the two approaches it is also possible to identify fundamental differences in their respective orientations towards language in academic contexts. The systemic functional theory of language gives SFL analysis an orientation towards what can be generalized about language *use*. Register and genre are both representations of recurrent patterns of language used in particular contexts. It is the recurrence of these patterns across multiple instances of similar contexts the identification of texts. These patterns of language use are not coincidentally similar; they are perceived to be functionally motivated realisations of choices made in context from the language *system*.

Academic literacies are similarly interested in what is generalisable across instances, but the focus is on the language *user* in terms of their *practices*. However, while practices, in the same way as registers and genres, are enacted by socioculturally positioned actors, they appear to lend themselves less to the kind of systematisation which is favoured by systemic linguistics in respect of language. This orientation towards the user in Academic Literacies is further reflected in the favoured method of data collection and interrogation: ethnography.

These orientations towards language use or language user on the one hand, and language system or language practices, on the other, distinguish SFL and Academic Literacies. In essence, Academic Literacies focuses on the socially constructed language-using individual and SFL on the socially constructed language system. The potential for tension between these two approaches is clear as is the potential for their complementarity. We propose that the work of Bernstein, Hasan and Maton on sociology of knowledge referred to earlier contribute ideas by means of which complementarity can be recognized and developed.

In conclusion, it seems to us that there is a danger of oversimplifying and over dichotomizing the relationship between the academic literacies approach and an SFL-informed approach as one of a relationship between practices-oriented and text-oriented approaches to academic writing. This is problematic because Academic Literacies approaches vary in the extent to which they focus on text and because SFL approaches may sometimes be combined with a focus on practices. It seems that what matters most is how text and practices are defined and operationalized within different iterations of Academic Literacies and SFL and in the context of specific research studies. That is, there may be richer or more impoverished conceptualizations in both approaches.

Finally, in terms of future dialogue and potential collaboration across the Academic Literacies and SFL research communities it seems to us that there are several avenues to explore. The following are the questions that we currently see as having the most potential.

- How can we coordinate the thick descriptions of insider emic knower oriented perspectives on academic texts in context/practices with outsider, etic, knowledge oriented perspectives?
- How can we use the different interests and focal points of Academic Literacies and SFL to open up new questions and new avenues for each to explore – either independently or in collaboration?
- What do these two approaches have to offer each other in terms of the following interests/imperatives for the field of EAP and the study of academic writing:
    1. In contemporary multilingual, globalized and technologically advanced educational institutions how can we best support the learning of an increasingly diverse body of students that include both L1 and EAL speakers?
    2. How to foster meaningful critical orientations towards EAP?

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