

In Brief

Historical Discourse: The Language of Time, Cause and Evaluation (Caroline Coffin. 2006. London: Continuum. 224 pages.)

reviewed by

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This book is of great value to history teachers and curriculum developers, as it provides general insights as well as specific recommendations and resources for organizing a teaching/learning program for literacy in history. It reports on research on the language demands of secondary school history undertaken as part of a large-scale literacy project in Australia in the 1990s. Based on ethnographic and discourse-analytic inquiry and her work as a literacy consultant to history teachers, Coffin demonstrates how the successful analysis and interpretation of history depends on developing control of language, and provides frameworks for addressing the linguistic challenges. Coffin's theoretical framework is systemic functional linguistics (SFL), a theory of language developed by Michael Halliday. SFL links linguistic expression with meaning in ways that enable Coffin to identify how key meanings in history, such as *time*, *cause*, and *judgment* are constructed linguistically. The theory, for example, shows that *cause* is constructed in a range of linguistic resources that includes conjunctions (e.g., *because*, *so*), prepositional phrases (e.g., *due to*), verbs (e.g., *resulted in*, *caused*), and nouns (*reason*, *cause*), and that these resources serve writers in different ways as they construct different kinds of texts. Coffin's work helps teachers recognize the different kinds of texts that students need to be able to write as they progress in learning history, and outlines the language resources that are relevant and functional in constructing such texts. This linking of language and meaning suggests concrete ways that students can be assisted in developing the language resources they need to read and write historical discourse.

In eight chapters, plus a useful glossary of linguistic terms, the book introduces the goals and challenges of school history, describes how the SFL framework informs the analysis, and then examines the purposes, text structures, and different uses of vocabulary and grammar in the genres

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Curriculum Inquiry 38:4 (2008)

Published by Wiley Periodicals, Inc., 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA, and 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK

doi: 10.1111/j.1467-873X.2008.00428.x

through which students encounter historical discourse. Coffin shows how these genres present a pathway into school history as students are expected to move from reading and writing narratives into explanations and arguments that construe time and cause in very different ways, and that call for responding to and evaluating past events in ways that are linguistically challenging. She illustrates these points with examples from student writing and offers teachers and curriculum designers insights into how to help students develop control of this discourse. Coffin's treatment of *time* and *cause* and her analysis of internal and external causal reasoning break new ground by identifying the way the language of the texts students work with changes as they increase in abstraction and infused judgment, and her description of the different stances taken by historians provides a means for teachers to make explicit the perspectives that students need to recognize as critical readers.

Coffin shows that successful students learn how to conceptualize and use time in ways that move beyond personal perception and lived experience. Examples from students' writing illustrate how early autobiographical recounts use linguistic resources that refer to time in personal ways (e.g., *when I was seven, after my sister was born*); and that students need to learn to frame time with setting and segmenting resources (e.g., *in the late 20th century; during the American Revolution*) in order to construct public, rather than personal, temporality and be successful in chronicling across longer stretches of time. Further, they need to learn to dismantle the timeline as an organizing device in order to write explanations and arguments that are conceptually, rather than chronologically, organized, using linguistic resources that enable the scaffolding of such explanations (*first, second, finally, etc.*).

Similarly for the language of cause and evaluation, Coffin offers resources and suggestions about how teachers can help students develop the language they need to successfully present and argue a thesis in history. She argues that ". . . learning to manage the resources of time and cause-and-effect, as well as developing the ability to . . . construct a particular perspective on the past, are not skills that would be easily and naturally acquired in everyday interaction" (p. 167). Her analysis of history textbooks also reveals that students are offered few models of the kind of written argument that high-stakes examinations often call on them to make. The book offers a framework for professional development of history teachers, with clear suggestions for enabling teachers to support students' critical reading as they develop historical understanding. Overall, the volume is an original and welcome contribution to discussions about how to enable all students to participate in the challenging contexts of secondary school history.