Abstract: Textuality is ‘core business’ in school English but its nature is increasingly problematic, especially within a multiliteracies context. Understanding how texts work puts pressure on our metalanguages, making them strange. In this paper, I explore this issue through a seafaring metaphor, picturing English as a ship we are steering through uncertain waters where films, posters and video games jostle Shakespeare’s plays and contemporary novels, all demanding analysis. What kinds of tools will serve our navigational needs as we journey across a sea of change? What instruments will bring stability in troubling cross currents? Teachers need access to a metalanguage adequate to four coordinates of the new territory: diversities, hierarchies, innovation and convention. Not any metalanguage will do here. In order to work productively with the tensions introduced by these different parameters, we need a protean mind. The protean mind is alive to changes of form and also to continuities within these. It is sensitive to the realities of institutions and the possibilities of new semiosis. In this paper I consider the impact of multiliteracies on three senior assessment tasks. I consider what kinds of metalanguage will be needed if we are to deal productively with the demands of such tasks and what they imply about the pressures of diversities, hierarchies, innovation and convention. I argue that any metalanguage we develop will only ‘hold’ through these pressures if we can make our navigational tools adequate to the realities and complexities of multiliteracies.

1. Introduction
Subject English can be compared to a boat on unfamiliar seas at this moment in its history, with the waters of an expanded field of textuality lapping at the gunwales. While many teachers are excited about the possibilities of the expedition, they also worry about drowning under the load of new compliance requirements, pressures for value-added work on ‘the basics’, A to E reporting and an increasingly crowded curriculum. It is not just the problem of a boat in unknown waters; the territory of multiliteracies is only partially mapped in spite of the efforts of many teachers to explore the grammar of audio, visual, gestural and other modes. At this stage, just like the cartographer’s map of ‘Australia’ in the seventeenth-century expeditions, our map of this textual ‘New Holland’ is incomplete. The journey is taking us into a swirling mist of uncertainties, in poorly charted territory, and choppy seas. The old certainties, if we had them, are gone, leaving many longing for times when the boat would make the journey along well charted seas between Kindergarten to Year 12 with the destinations of our passengers (students) relatively predictable. For many in the profession, the journey is more uncertain and our navigational tools increasingly inadequate.

The term, ‘multiliteracies’ has become a shorthand for the semiotic changes in this communication landscape – an acknowledgement of the range of verbal, visual and multimodal texts available for study in English and the many ways of engaging with these. For many teachers,
the textual aspect of multiliteracies has become an accepted part of English teaching. In many classrooms I have visited in Canberra and NSW, for example, teachers will introduce a unit on Shakespeare with Baz Luhrman’s Romeo and Juliet, do internet research on the Globe Theatre, invite classroom comparisons of filmic and print versions of the play and make forays into The Simpsons for popular culture references to the play. Not only have the kinds of text we expect to encounter in classrooms proliferated; new ways of reading these are available and legitimated in current discourses of literacy teaching. Reading is commonly understood as a ‘social practice’ that integrates several sub-processes and resources: code breaking, meaning making, pragmatic use and text analysis. The ‘four resources’ model is now part of teachers’ literacy teaching repertoire (Freebody & Luke 1990, Luke & Freebody 1999). For many, the ‘multiplier effect’ as it is carried in the term ‘multiliteracies’ appears no longer controversial, though it is primarily associated with the embrace of the visual in the program announced by the New London group:

The notion of Multiliteracies supplements traditional literacy pedagogy by addressing these two related aspects of textual multiplicity. What we might term ‘mere literacy’ remains centred on language only, and usually on a singular national form of language at that, being conceived as a stable system based on rules such as mastering sound-letter correspondence ... A pedagogy of Multiliteracies, by contrast, focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone. These differ according to culture and context, and have specific cognitive, cultural and social effects. In some cultural contexts – in an Aboriginal community or in a multimedia environment, for instance – the visual mode of representation may be much more powerful and closely related to language than ‘mere literacy’ would ever be able to allow. (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5)

The socio-cultural aspect of multiliteracies is more difficult to tackle. As one of the New London group has argued, ‘Cultural diversity produces profound challenges to canonical forms of all kinds’ (Kress 2006, p. 27). In this diverse environment, many students speak a first language other than English and find school literacy practices arcane and difficult to master. The multiliteracies agenda puts social and linguistic difference firmly at the centre of our landscape. The challenge, as Kress articulates it, is to engage with the ‘radical instability’ of the social and communicational landscape, to track the changes and to make them tractable in some way. Kress also exploits a sea faring analogy when he acknowledges the need for ‘navigational aids’ for steering a course through seas of change.

And here is the dilemma for English and for multiliteracies: it is not all change. Much of what our students encounter in communication, they do not encounter for the first time. All meaning making (semiosis) is patterned in predictable as well as unpredictable ways. Even in digital communication, messages are spelled out in ways traceable to conventional ways of spelling. Coherence is still important in hypertext literature – though it is a new form of coherence, based on the affordances of the medium and of the unique, though patterned, way of using language. The sense we make of any text depends on shared conventions of linguistic communication (knowledge of the system and how it works in ‘this particular genre’ or this particular mode). But the pleasure of semiosis depends, at least in part, on a departure from systemic norms, playful adaptation of the code for new purposes. Thus both convention and innovation need to be built into the picture, even in a multiliteracies environment. Along the horizontal (semiotic) dimension of the landscape, any tools of analysis we develop should accommodate what Halliday (1994) calls the ‘instance’ (the specifics of particular texts) and the ‘system’ (the pattern of choices underlying predictable uses of language). Our metalanguage must enable us to move between the specifics of particular texts, where innovation occurs first, and the more general patterns of language, which make communication possible.

Bisecting the horizontal (semiotic) dimension of this challenge, there is the vertical (social) dimension, where political realities intervene. While the curriculum currently offers interesting new possibilities for study, the ‘reality principle’ is currently carried by assessment. Here we encounter institutional practices which sort and select students for different levels of success and failure in the discipline. In this arena, examinations and examination results are taken very seriously. And, here too, our metalanguage needs to be accountable. Our talk about texts and our analytical tools should leverage students’ success in examinations as well as offering opportunities for alternative forms of representation. Along the social dimension (the ‘pointy end’ of multiliteracies), there are institutional hierarchies winnowing the diversities of ‘the new’, making some literacy practices salient, more valuable than others. It is just as important to take
account of the stratifying practices of school English as it is of the emergent practices in our students’ textual lifeworlds.

Engaging with the demands of both instance and system, possibilities and stratification, puts our professional vocabularies under pressure. It requires a metalanguage that is adequate to the complexity and makes it navigable for students. This is essential if our multiliteracies English is not going to ‘short change’ students, especially those who depend on schooling to optimise their life chances. For this student group, getting access to a useful metalanguage for exploring the different dimensions of multiliteracies is vital.

How do we handle the tensions generated by these different pressures in our current social and semiotic environment? What kind of metalanguage will be ‘good enough’? This brings me to the third term in the title of my paper: the protean mind. The word, ‘protean’, comes to us from Greek mythology. Proteus was a prophetic Old Man of the Sea who would often transform himself into new forms to escape capture by powerful others. According to Homer’s *Odyssey*, Menelaus’s ship was becalmed as he journeyed home from the Trojan war. Menelaus learned from Proteus’s daughter that if he could capture and hold on to her father, he would reveal information needed to restore order in his family and thus propitiate the gods. When Proteus emerged from the sea one night to sleep among his colony of seals, Menelaus was able to hold him through several changes of form – from lion through snake, leopard, pig water and even tree. Grasped by a more powerful force through his changes of form, Proteus agreed to reveal his special knowledge about Menelaus’s situation so he could journey on to right these wrongs.

Proteus is an important archetype for English at the present time because he both changes and holds his identity. He embodies continuity and change. English teachers and teacher educators need protean minds – a curiosity about the discipline as it morphs through different models and variants at the current time and a willingness to pursue the commonalities through these changes, revealing perhaps a deeper unity. The capacity to make choices about what is needed to enhance the teaching of a new concept, to make learning meaningful for our students often goes by the name of eclecticism. This is a contentious term, often connoting an unprincipled and a-theoretical laziness. I prefer to use the term, the ‘protean mind’ for the teacherly disposition to explore different forms of semiosis in new ways. It is this disposition that should guide the development of a metalanguage for multiliteracies English.

Figure 1 represents the four coordinates of the ‘map’ relevant to this environment with relevant examples of each aspect and relevant tools, to be explored later.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Convention (e.g. predictable patterns in successful texts)</th>
<th>Innovation (e.g. new forms of semiosis)</th>
<th>Diversities (e.g. multimodality)</th>
<th>Hierarchies (e.g. current assessment)</th>
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**Figure 1: Four coordinates of the multiliteracies territory in English**

**Multiliteracies in senior English assessment**

How are these four points outlined in Figure 1 – the specifics of particular choices in texts, the general patterns available in the system, institutional hierarchies and textual diversities – impacting literacy practices in senior English? I turn now to Year 12 assessment tasks from three jurisdictions (ACT, NSW and Queensland) and consider three vital aspects of the multiliteracies agenda: multiple texts and how to accommodate them in one response, visual responses to verbal texts and theorising different readings of the one text.

**An ACT assessment task**

ACT schools currently work within a relatively de-regulated system of school-based assessment. Each assessment task is designed independently by schools and ‘checked and balanced’ by moderation and Board of Studies requirements. Tertiary level units of study include an essay, an oral presentation and a creative response. The following creative response task was given to a Year 12 class in one Canberra college:

In *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King*, Sophocles explores various themes such as leadership and reverence for and obedience to the gods. Choose a theme and create a collage using quotations, images and symbols to visually represent the chosen theme.

**Rationale:** You must also present a rationale that is a reflection on the preparation of this assignment. You
The texts on offer were a visual feast for the eye. In the stimulus booklet, for example, students could elect to respond to a nineteenth-century painting of *The Conciliation*, by Benjamin Duterrau, a twentieth-century photograph by Geoff Parr commenting on this, a poem by Miroslav Holub, a fractal image, and a map, to name only some. The ‘prescribed texts’ included poetry, plays, novels and films. On top of this, students included their own texts (Board of Studies 2001, p.8). The amount of choice appears overwhelming. On what principle do students relate these texts? This task invites students to inter-relate the four texts in terms of their ‘techniques’ and then to show how the various techniques of the ‘composers’ have shaped their understanding of the ‘consequences of change’. Students’ interpretive gaze needs to range, to create thematic links between apparently disparate texts. In another paper, I refer to this as the ‘dispersed gaze’ (Macken-Horarik, in press). Like Menelaus, they have to pursue the hope of an underlying unity beneath the diverse textual forms.

Figure 3 represents the relationship between the unifying abstraction and the multiple texts across which this needs to be applied. The texts are examples only.

The dispersed gaze

Figure 3: Multiliteracies in NSW: Components of one HSC task

A NSW assessment task

The multiliteracies influence can also be felt in NSW, albeit in a different way. In the current Higher School Certificate (HSC) examination, students read rather than compose visual and multimodal texts. In 2001, students were presented with an image of a pond corrugated by ripples and asked the following question:

‘As stones thrown into ponds make ripples .... all changes have CONSEQUENCES’

‘How has your understanding of the consequences of change been shaped by the techniques used by various composers? In your answer, you should refer to your prescribed text, one text from the stimulus booklet, *Changing*, and other related texts of your own choosing.’

The Board of Studies’ published comments on students’ responses following the 2001 HSC were telling. Examiners noted that successful students produced ‘a synthesised response’, a strong line of argument about change and the ability to ‘sustain a thesis’ throughout the answer, with judicious reference to various texts, demonstrating an ability to ‘integrate’ material on various texts (Board of Studies, 2002, p. 8). Here in these remarks, we can discern the hierarchy at work in the diversities of examination English. The
multiliteracies agenda may have influenced the ‘offer’ side of the examination paper (the plenitude of texts to read) but the ‘response’ is the business side — where control of literate textuality is assessed. Attending closely to the semiotic particulars of texts is a waste of time in this context (and a lost opportunity to explore their distinctive meanings, in my view). Providing a meta-view of thematic commonalities across texts (unities, rather than diversities) is what matters.

A Queensland task
Like the ACT, Queensland operates without an external examination of English in Year 12. It has been adventurous in its embrace of multiliteracies but here, we need to widen our definition. In the Literature Extension course now taught in over 50 Queensland high schools, we see a shift from the study of multiple texts (NSW) and the production of visual responses (ACT) to a focus on reading as practice. The syllabus articulates this vision as follows: ‘By using different approaches to reading texts, students extend their conceptualisation of the central question, that whatever literature is, it is dependent on how, when, where, by whom and for what purposes it is read’ (Queensland Studies Authority, 2004, p.1). In this interesting course, students are introduced to post-structuralist understandings about textuality — how texts can generate different legitimate readings and how these are theorised. In this context, the ‘multi’ points to diverse ways of reading texts. It is a demanding and exciting course and stretches students into areas most often covered in literary theory at university.1

In the first task for 2006, students in one school were asked to generate two readings of a Hitchcock film like The Man who Knew Too Much and then to produce a defence of each reading:

Your task is to make two readings of a Hitchcock film. One reading is to arise from your author-centred understandings of the film and the other from your reader-centred reading of the same film. Each reading is to be accompanied by a separate defence, explicating the strategies you used in constructing it.

This is a challenging task by any measure but it can be explored in metalinguistic terms using systemic functional notions of register. The term is used both in the Queensland syllabus and in the assessment criteria of this task. The field of inquiry can be glossed as ‘literary theory’, albeit within a historicised perspective. For example, within an author-centred reading, students engage with English critics like Leavis, with Barthes on the ‘death of the author’ and with Foucault on the ‘author as commodity’. Reader-centred approaches are similarly historicised, involving phenomenology, psychoanalysis and existentialism. The tenor of discourse varies somewhat depending on the nature of the task (whether reading or defence). But there is an underlying unity: all four mini-essays are addressed to an ‘expert other’ — teacher as representative of the discourse community students are entering. Predictably, the mode of response matches this complexity, inviting both a literate and a theorised coherence. The student has to write a well-formed essay (literate coherence) and relate different theories of reading to their own reading practices (theorised coherence). Whoever said post-structuralism has resulted in a ‘dumbing down’ of school English? (Macken-Horarik and Morgan, in press). Figure 4 represents the components of this task.

Figure 4: Components of a Queensland Literature Extension assessment task

What do the three senior assessment tasks reveal of the challenge of multiliteracies? The ‘diversities’ challenge is clear in the proliferation of texts students must interpret and inter-relate but the ‘hierarchies’ issue dominates. Students must relate stimulus texts to higher order frameworks like ‘the consequences of change’ (in NSW); they must produce theoretical rationales for visual responses (in the ACT); and they must generate theorised defences of multiple readings (in Queensland). What kinds of metalanguage will do?

Features of a metalanguage for navigating contemporary English
How can we fashion our navigational tools so that they are adequate to the parameters of this complex environment? The navigability issue cannot be avoided in a social context where many are calling for greater
consistency and coherence in subject English. Such matters will top the agenda in upcoming discussions of the national curriculum. What kinds of knowledge and metalanguage will prove useful here? In the final sections of this paper, I return to the four coordinates of the territory outlined in Figure 1 and point to tools that will enable us to deal productively with multiliteracies. The tools I make reference to in my discussion are in bold below:

(1) Diversities, (e.g. transitivity in multimodal texts)
(2) Hierarchies, (e.g. voicing in text interpretation)
(3) Innovation, (genre awareness and play)
(4) Convention, (elaborating experience).

It is important to acknowledge that my insights are shaped by the metalanguage that has most influenced me – systemic functional semiotics (SFS). SFS is a contextual grammar which offers teachers tools for relating textual choices to meanings and to contexts. In my view it is a useful metalanguage for doing the new work of English.

(1) Diversities
Literacy practices in our students’ everyday worlds are generative – full of diverse and subversive ways of meaning. Any metalanguage we use in talk about digital literacies in text messaging, My Space and YouTube needs to take account of semiotic practices that are at odds with ‘the right way to speak and write’ but full of desire, play, humour and subversion. It is no accident that the most popular form of news for many young Australians is The Chaser’s War on Everything and that mockumentaries such as Chris Lilley’s Summer Heights High provide so many Australians with an idiolect for casual conversation. There is no place here for the strictures of traditional grammar (for right and wrong). Such diversities require a new kind of metalanguage.

Let’s consider two playful examples. Text 1 is taken from a narrative written by a Year 5 student, Nicole, in which the heroine of the story confronts a dragon:

Agather walked in bravely, looking around cautiously, when she came to a halt. There in front of her was some stairs and below that – low and behold was the dragon!!! She grabbed a stick for protection. The dragon turned its gigantic head, breathing fire, the princess held the stick out for protection and closed her eyes. When she opened them again she realised the top of the branch had caught alight.

Text 1: The complication from a longer narrative by Nicole

Dimitri’s representation of the ‘same characters’ in Figure 5 offers us a different view.

Figure 5: Dimitri’s representation of the meeting between Agather and the dragon

How do we capture in our metalanguage the connections and differences between these two representations – Nicole’s careful sequencing of the events leading to the crisis and the sheer physical power of Dimitri’s dragon? A principled discussion of differences requires a common parameter against which differences can be articulated. This is the basis of any multimodal grammar (see Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996, for one prominent example). In the case of these two texts, we need tools for articulating commonalities and for capturing specificities. An important caveat here is that visual grammars based on verbal semiosis can obscure as well as enlighten. Any metalanguage has affordances as well as limits. If we pursue the affordances, one obvious starting point is how each text exploits the resource of transitivity.

Transitivity is a way of accounting, colloquially speaking, for ‘who does what to whom under what circumstances’. One key issue is how participants and processes are represented. Nicole represents Agather and her actions in a sequence of material processes, realised in the verbs: ‘walking in’, ‘looking around’, ‘grabbing a stick’, ‘holding it out’, closing her eyes,
and so on. These are represented differently in images. Visual transitivity works chiefly by means of vectors, oblique lines of force within and between represented participants. Note the visual salience of the dragon’s hot red breath – a vector connecting him downward to Agather and engaged by her timorous upward-facing torch. The two texts are in a dialogue. Dimitri’s drawing was produced in response to Nicole’s narrative.2 Our talk about these texts calls for a meaning-oriented metalanguage which includes categories that span the texts (e.g. representation) and categories that are specific to each text (e.g. visual and verbal transitivity). Any metalanguage used in talk about textual diversities should enable us to attend closely to specifics and to range across texts using common terminology.

(2) Hierarchies

When it comes to examinations, of course, only some forms of semiosis are acceptable. In this domain, the ‘eyes of the state’ are more watchful, the surveillance of multiliteracies more strenuous. My research into the open question in English revealed a double-handedness at the heart of English – a discipline that must include and stratify all. Over a period of 15 years, persistent analyses of students’ responses to narrative in Year 10 revealed that teacher-examiners regularly reward some linguistic choices and penalise others (see Macken-Horarik, 1996 and 2006). A knowledge of grammar can help us see more clearly what English does value and could be recruited more productively into a metalanguage for hierarchies in assessment.

If we consider one aspect of textual interpretation, to do with voicing, for example, we can see how stratification winnows choice, elevating some texts to an ‘A’ and relegating others to lower ranges of achievement. Voicing is a resource for relating a message to the thinking or speaking of others. It is often called ‘attribution’ in non-linguistic contexts. When we voice a message, we project it as direct or indirect speech or thought. Direct speech involves quotation of the exact words of a speaker and is typically indicated in writing via speech marks. Indirect speech reports the words of another without laying claim to the exact words. It is used to convey the gist of what was said. Someone’s thoughts can be quoted (e.g. ‘I’ll go’ she decided) or reported (e.g. ‘She decided to go’). Along with these personal forms of projection, there are impersonal forms that drop the projecting source (e.g. ‘it is said’, ‘it is believed’) or generalise the source (e.g. ‘Foucault asserted’ or ‘English critics claimed’). Learning to use all forms of voicing is important in English – in producing dialogue between characters, citing an author’s views or debating the merits of different theoretical positions. But a study of voicing styles adopted by students at different levels of achievement in their writing is also instructive.

We know that a student who writes, ‘I think’ or ‘I feel’ too often when interpreting a literary text is likely to get a low mark in an exam. While there is nothing wrong with the expression of a personal view per se, it tends to occur in responses that ‘split off’ from the text (to be interpreted), and to emanate from a local rather than a global orientation to texts. The personalist reading is not highly valued by examiners, especially if it is the only type of voicing used by a candidate. Somewhat more successful is the student who focuses on voices within a text (characters, narrator). But this is limited too. Focussing primarily on how a character reacts to things (e.g. who writes, ‘The character thinks/feels’) occurs in readings which are mimetic, unable to ‘lift out’ of textual experience, to evaluate techniques of characterisation, for example. At the top of the hierarchy (in NSW at least) is the student who writes, ‘The text shows/demonstrates/ reveals etc’. This pattern of voicing demonstrates a meta-awareness of, or a ‘global orientation to text’. It is the way the text ‘speaks’ that is salient here, moving beyond identification with how characters see and feel into awareness of how the text positions its ideal readers to see and feel (see Macken-Horarik, 2006 for discussion).

This global orientation is not the apex of achievement however. At a further remove (higher up the hierarchy, perhaps) are post-structuralist patterns of voicing, evident in the following examples (taken from a Queensland corpus): ‘Reader response theory conceives readers ‘not as passive recipients’ but as …’ Or, in another example: ‘According to English Criticism, a reader is concerned with …’ Here the text is positioned by the reading(s) made of it, the source of the reading is theoretical (not personal in the first instance) and the voicing reflects this positioning.

It is important that our analyses and our metalanguage do not fall into the trap of privileging particular choices just because examiners do. But we can make use of our knowledge of strategies like voicing to improve our students’ chances.

(3) Innovation

English is a site for innovation in its current curriculum
offerings. In the NSW Extension 2 course, for example, students have the opportunity to develop and present ‘an extended composition which demonstrates depth, insight, originality and skills in independent investigation’ and then to reflect on and document their own process of composition’ (Board of Studies, 1999:86). The possibilities are endless. What might a metalanguage offer students at this end of the process of schooling? How might it encourage processes of innovation?

One role for a metalanguage lies in the area of genre play. Students often need assistance if they are to explore possibilities for ‘using and manipulating generic forms’ (Board of Studies, 1999, p. 88) whether this is detective, utopian (or dystopian fiction) or even traditional tales. It is this latter generic territory that I want to explore briefly, drawing on the work of one Year 12 student called Conor.³

Conor entitled his major work ‘Unprintable’ and the title is an acknowledgement of the contentious nature of his theme – the nature of profanity. His text is indeed a site of innovation in which he draws on and subverts a number of genres, including children’s stories, dystopian fiction, dictionary definitions, stories from Genesis, from Elizabethan trials and from science fiction. The quotation that fronts the long work comes from Billy Connolly: ‘To swear is bad manners. To swear well is an art’. In fact, subversion begins in the Prelude to his major work: ‘Kids say the darndest things’, from which I quote a short segment. Text 2 includes the part of the narrative in which a primary classroom teacher, Mrs Robinson, reads to her children from Roald Dahl’s Revolting Rhymes.

The sun shone through the window, illuminating her in a golden glow as she sat there in her chair, book on her lap. In a strong ringing voice, full of the expression and cadence peculiar to primary school teachers, she read:

A nice girl would at once exclaim
Oh dear! Oh heavens! What a shame!
Not Goldie. She begins to swear.
She bellows, ‘What a lousy chair!’
And uses one disgusting word,
That luckily you’ve never heard.
(I dare not write it, even hint it.
Nobody would even print it).

‘Was it fuck!’
The interruption came from nowhere. Mrs Robinson faltered and then ceased abruptly.

As one, the children turned to stare at the innocent face of little Johnny. Had Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy all decided to march into the room at that very moment and proceed to slaughter each other in a violent frenzy of blood and gore over who actually existed, they could not have been more shocked.

Text 2: Extract from Conor’s major work, Unprintable

The major work is a high-risk enterprise in anybody’s book and Conor’s exploration of swearing is indeed risky in this context. But his composition received a very high grade from examiners. His text demonstrates an understanding that the art of genre involves not only predictability (mastery of its textual features) but originality (stretching of a genre in unexpected ways). The performative awareness displayed in his composition is made explicit in his reflection on the process.

I experimented with a number of different writing styles and genres in my short stories. After my study of genre in the Extension 1 course (specifically the crime fiction genre), I realised that in order to write convincingly within generic parameters, I first had to understand those parameters and conventions. For example, my story ‘Your Utopia’ is grounded firmly in the realms of dystopian fiction, but manages to subvert the genre with its content (namely the founding principle of society being the rejection of profanity). In order to write successfully within the conventions of this genre, I researched dystopian textual examples. The most enjoyable and useful I read was Nineteen Eighty Four, by George Orwell, and the influence of this text can clearly be seen in the claustrophobic, controlled and ever-watchful atmosphere of ‘Your Utopia’. The name of the protagonist, Gareth Fawkes, is of course a farcical allusion to Guy Fawkes, the great anti-establishment hero of 17th century England’.

Text 3: An Excerpt from Connor’s reflection on his major work

Any metalanguage worthwhile for students like Conor should accommodate the play of innovation in new forms of semiosis. Genre is one useful tool. There are others. How do we discover which tools are most productive? A clear site for investigation lies in our students’ work (the texts they generate) and the kinds of tools they find helpful. Here we ask: which tools generate meta-awareness for students? I turn now to the final parameter of my framework – a metalanguage for convention.

(4) Convention

This site – the regulation of conventional uses of English – is familiar turf for educational linguists. It is
where the ‘grammar nazis’ get to ‘let rip’, to appropriate a colloquial form. But a knowledge of ‘what works’ does not have to become mired in an obsession with surface correctness in grammar use. I think the more productive option is to undertake careful and meaning-based study of students’ literacy practices (the ways that they interpret and respond to literacy events) over time in order to discern the deeper patterns of semiosis in the texts that emerge from these practices. If we do, we discover that ‘what works’ goes much further than good paragraphing, correct spelling and well-made essays.

Let’s take a brief excursion into one area of choice which is very telling as an indicator of achievement in English: this is the area of meaning that Halliday calls ‘elaboration’ and is referred to as ‘apposition’ in traditional grammar. Elaboration as Halliday defines it, ‘provides a further characterisation of a message that is already there, restating it, clarifying it, refining it, or adding a descriptive attribute or comment’ (Halliday, 1994, p. 225). When students re-formulate an utterance in this way, they say it again a different way. The regularities in use of Elaboration are signalled by the use of the equals sign.

Example 1 (from Year 3 student)
The best thing, = the only thing to do if he is in your town is run!

Example 2 (from Year 7 student)
There was one truly beautiful thing about her though. = Her eyes. = They were a stunning shade of blue.

Example 3 (from Year 10 student)
The padlock was Jenny’s mind and its snap was the awakening of reality in that mind; = a realisation that it couldn’t run away.

Example 4 (from Year 12 student)
The English language is often assumed to have a single function – = that of communication. As the overwhelming majority of its usage fulfils this purpose, it is sometimes forgotten that the English language has a second, though equally important, role. In using it to communicate ideas and values (both grand sentiments), we ignore the darker task we employ it for – = the cathartic.

Halliday suggests that Elaboration places a kind of equals sign between the two ways of saying. It is a crucial resource for re-framing experience in writing and a signifier of a deeper capacity highly valued in English for saying things in different ways. The specifics of students’ wordings (in this case, Elaboration) can give us a window on their uptake of the potential of the language system more generally. We need a metalanguage that enables us to interpret the significance of persistent patterns of wordings in English, especially those patterns that prove persistently successful.

Conclusion:
A metalanguage for Goldilocks and for Menelaus
Any metalanguage worth its salt should enable us to come to terms with both the particular and the general in language use. In fact, it should enable us to move between the specifics of an instance (where innovation occurs) and the language system (where codification occurs) and to do so in principled ways. James Gee argues that our metalanguage needs to capture both the typical (predictable patterns of meaning) and the particular (what real readers and writers work with in specific tasks). What he calls, ‘the Goldilocks principle’ is relevant to our crafting of a metalanguage for multiliteracies.

(The) patterns most important to human thinking and action follow a sort of ‘Goldilocks principle’. They are not too general and not too specific. They are mid-level generalisations between these two extremes. (Gee, 2000, p. 196)

Gee applies this notion to genres for writing and argues that categories like ‘report’, ‘explanation’, ‘argument’, ‘essay’, ‘narrative’ and so forth have a spurious generality. They are not detailed enough to help us get going on our writing. Certainly this has been my experience in working with genre-based literacy teaching. Teachers and students need to work with more differentiated categories, as Gee also argues:

Children (like all writers and readers) operate at the next level down from things like narrative in general or reports in general. They need to operate with mid-level instantiations of types of narratives (or reports) for types of context for types of purposes, whether these have ‘official’ labels or not. They need to be exposed to multiple examples of these, examples that display the sorts of variations that occur even within a ‘type’ for the purposes of ‘best fit’ to context and purposes. Children need, as well, overt guidance to focus on the features of language and context that help them recognise and produce the ‘right’ situated meanings (mid-level patterns) – that is those shared by the community of practice to which they are being apprenticed. (Gee, 2000, pp. 199–200)

Developing the mid-level generalisations that Gee has called for can only be achieved if we can range freely between the specifics and the general in communication and between persistent forms of textuality.
associated with continuity in school English and emergent forms associated with innovation (like the work of Conor). If we look closely at what kinds of linguistic choices predominate in the writing of successful students, we can discern clear patterns in their wordings. The patterns re-occur. Perhaps, like fractals, they are repeated across units of different size. It is possible, for example, to see a clause-level preference for one type of projection and to find it again, at a higher level as a kind of authorial voicing as I did in my research into the semiotics of the ‘children overboard affair’ (Macken-Horarik, 2003). The movement across modes can proceed in a similar way if we have both general enough categories (e.g. a broad category such as ‘representation’) and categories that enable us to explore different ways of representing phenomena (as in Dimitri’s and Nicole’s different transitivity choices). In short, we need a metalanguage that enables us to slide along the scale from specific to general and from one mode to another. We need to expect that the categories will fail us too, that new territory makes old tools strange, if not entirely useless.

Nevertheless, we have to start somewhere and flexibility is crucial in our exploration of the meaning potential of the system. The concept of multiliteracies draws extensively on the flexible tool kit of functional grammar.

A metalanguage needs to be quite flexible and open-ended. It should be seen as a tool kit for working on semiotic activities, not a formalism to be applied to them. We should be comfortable with fuzzy-edged, overlapping concepts. Teachers and learners should be able to pick and choose from the tools offered. They should also feel free to fashion their own tools. Flexibility is critical because the relationship between descriptive and analytical categories and actual events is, by its nature, shifting, provisional, unsure and relative to the contexts and purposes of analysis. (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000, p.24)

So, here is the task facing English. We need a metalanguage that will accommodate diverse forms and hold to the unities underpinning these. We need, like Menelaus, to hold Proteus until he releases the understandings that will enable us to continue on in the journey and confront our contemporary and future worlds without fear – without archaistic longings for illusory simplicity and without ignoring the need to continue to produce coherent narratives about this complex reality. In short, we need to develop the navigational tools that will enable us to chart new courses through seas of change.

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1 Wendy Morgan and I have been analysing the literate demands of the Queensland Literature Extension course, including all tasks and a range of students’ responses to these tasks in 2006. See Macken-Horarik and Morgan, in press.

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3 I would like to thank and acknowledge Conor for permission to quote from and reproduce his major work for the 2006 HSC Extension 2 course.

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