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# C. Coffin, Historical discourse: The language of time, cause and evaluation

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## C. Coffin, Historical discourse: The language of time, cause and evaluation

### **Abstract**

Published as part of the *Discourse Studies* series edited by Ken Hyland, Coffin's *Historical Discourse* provides a systematic, informative and insightful description of the nature of historical discourse, its function and role, and of its pedagogic potential in the context of secondary schools. The book draws on and expands the scholarship Coffin has developed over some ten years, which includes her work in the 'Write it Right' Project of the disadvantaged Schools Program (xiii), her PhD (Coffin 2000) and her later work on historical discourse (Coffin 2002; 2003; 2004). The book makes a significant contribution to understanding the value of educational linguistics in illuminating the language demands of school history curricula and on this basis gaining insight into the learning and teaching of history.

### **Keywords**

discourse, time, cause, c, coffin, historical, language, evaluation

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○ **C. COFFIN, *HISTORICAL DISCOURSE: THE LANGUAGE OF TIME, CAUSE AND EVALUATION***

(LONDON: CONTINUUM, 2006. PP. XIII, 208)

Published as part of the *Discourse Studies* series edited by Ken Hyland, Coffin's *Historical Discourse* provides a systematic, informative and insightful description of the nature of historical discourse, its function and role, and of its pedagogic potential in the context of secondary schools. The book draws on and expands the scholarship Coffin has developed over some ten years, which includes her work in the 'Write it Right' Project of the Disadvantaged Schools Program (xiii), her PhD (Coffin 2000) and her later work on historical discourse (Coffin 2002; 2003; 2004). The book makes a significant contribution to understanding the value of educational linguistics in illuminating the language demands of school history curricula and on this basis gaining insight into the learning and teaching of history.

The book has eight chapters. Each chapter builds on and expands the discussions in the previous chapters. Together the chapters paint a comprehensive picture of the key linguistic resources for understanding and producing historical discourse. Chapter 1 sets the scene for the book, discussing the influential role of the discourse of history and its nature as a complex and specialised form of language. It follows from this that there is a need for a fine-grained linguistic description of historical discourse. Coffin argues for the need for two reasons: to help to identify the potential language challenges students may encounter in reading and writing history, and to inform a language-based pedagogy for school history curricula.

Chapter 2 introduces the Systemic Functional Linguistics framework that underpins the chapters that follow. Coffin does an admirable job of presenting the complex and sophisticated theory in an easily accessible manner. Drawing on examples taken from history textbooks and student writing, she effectively demonstrates how SFL analysis can be used as a powerful means for mapping linguistic resources that are instrumental to the study of secondary school history. Indeed, the corpus of history texts included in the book allows the reader easy access to the key theoretical principles of SFL, making this work a useful and valuable resource for teachers (of other disciplines as well as history), literacy and language educators, teacher trainees and researchers who are interested in educational linguistics.

Genre categorisation and description is the focus of Chapters 3–4. Coffin extends the discussion of genre in Chapter 2, describing the kinds of texts that students are required to read and write as they progress through history schooling (44–94). Moving away from the traditional classification of history genres as simply narrative or argumentative text types, she puts forward a taxonomy of three genre families (46), comprising *recording genres*, *explaining genres*, and *arguing genres*. Each genre family is made up of a set of sub-genres that share similar social goals but draws on different strategies to present different perspectives of past events. Coffin draws our attention to the ways in which recording genres are differentiated among *the autobiographical recount*, *the biographical recount*, *the historical recount* and *the historical account* (48–60). Fine distinctions are made between *the factorial explanation* and *the consequential explanation* of the explanatory texts (67–71), and among the different types of argumentation, namely *the exposition*, *the discussion* and *the challenge* (76–86). These genres are arranged on a cline of increasing linguistic complexity, moving from the less complex recording genres valued in the earlier years of secondary schooling (Chapter 3) to the more sophisticated and abstract *explaining* and *arguing* genres that are privileged in later years (Chapter 4).

The value of these two chapters goes beyond finer genre categorisation and rich linguistic and structural descriptions of the different genres. Coffin proposes the notion of educational progression characterised as a process of students expanding their repertoire of language resources for construing historical discourse. The notion offers an ontogenetic perspective of historical discourse mapped as unfolding through different stages of the school history curriculum (Coffin 2000). She argues that students can be best supported when learning and teaching strategies take into account possible learning pathways that they need to go through in order to develop their control of the language of history. It is this insightful exploration of learning progression that makes this book an invaluable addition to the *Discourse Studies* series.

In Chapters 5–7, Coffin elaborates on three semantic domains that further differentiate the history genres, namely those of time, causality, and evaluation, demonstrating a different level of delicacy of historical discourse. As the chapters unfold, she provides the reader with a dynamic picture of the role of temporal connections in realising the different genres (Chapter 5), the spread of causal resources within and across the genres (Chapter 6), and a repertoire of evaluative resources for construing abstract negotiation and argumentation of past events (Chapter 7). In each of these chapters, Coffin describes the linguistic shifts which students need to make in representations of these meaning dimensions in order to gain control of more abstract and sophisticated language of history. The last section of each chapter is devoted to the discussion of textbook representations

of time, cause and effect, and evaluation. Its aims are twofold: to map out the differences between textbook realisations and what is expected of the students in their studies, and to allude to the significance of explicit modelling of linguistic resources that underpin successful control of historical discourse.

Readers who are interested in writer identity and subjectivity will find Chapter 7 particularly useful. Drawing on the recently developed appraisal theory, Coffin provides a rich description of a repertoire of evaluative resources at the writer's disposal for responding, judging and evaluating past events. As in the previous chapters, the reader is provided with a detailed account of the linguistic patterning of values and judgements manifested within and across the different genres. In particular, I find her account of linguistic construals of voice potential fascinating and insightful. The different configurations of evaluative choices that are identified as constituting voice potential of historical discourse will provide valuable insights into ways in which writers' authorial identities are construed in academic discourse.

There is, however, a minor flaw in terms of the organisational structure of Chapter 6. In this chapter, the section on 'the role of cause-and-effect in historical knowledge construction' provides a basis for understanding what is required in order to write successful history texts. It is, however, discussed after the section 'Writing successful history texts: expanding the language of cause-and-effect' is dealt with. Perhaps a reordering of the sections would help develop a more compelling argument that successful control of historical discourse relies to some extent on the student's knowledge of ways to create causal meanings.

The final chapter provides an understanding of how a language-based model of pedagogy can facilitate the learning and teaching of historical discourse.

*Historical Discourse* is an exceptionally well-written book that expounds on the role of language in learning and teaching history. It offers a systematic and comprehensive account of a rich array of language resources that are critical to success in history and provides valuable insights into the nature of, and the teaching and learning of historical discourse. The learning progression mapped out by Coffin is particularly insightful and invaluable, highlighting potential pathways for the development of successful control of more complex and sophisticated language of history.

This book is intended for history teachers, teacher educators, textbook writers and policy makers. Researchers who are working in the areas of educational and applied linguistics will equally benefit from such a rigorous study of one particular domain of language use, history.

*Review by Honglin Chen, Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong.*

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