A new
GRAMMAR
COMPANION
for teachers

A new GRAMMAR COMPANION for teachers

Beverly Derewianka

Third edition

PETAA
PRIMARY ENGLISH TEACHING
ASSOCIATION AUSTRALIA
CONTINUAL PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

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In the spirit of reconciliation, PETAA, the authors and the editor acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community.

We pay our respects to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.

FOREWORD

PETAA is delighted to publish the third edition of *A new grammar companion for teachers*. Its author, Emeritus Professor Beverly Derewianka, is well known across Australia and beyond for her work in supporting teachers to implement the English curriculum in their classrooms, as well as for her research into school literacy development. This book is informed by that knowledge and experience so teachers can be confident that they will find relevant and accurate answers to their questions about language in its pages. It is an essential item for every teacher's bookshelf.

All teachers require a sound knowledge about language in order to teach literacy according to the current Australian Curriculum. When faced with the array of books, websites, worksheets and apps available, it is difficult to find one reliable resource that addresses the demands of the curriculum and presents a coherent theory of language. This book does just that – it familiarises teachers with the basics of the English grammatical system at the same time as providing an accessible explanation of a functional approach to grammar. In this way, it acts as a bridge between what teachers may know about traditional grammar and a more meaning-based functional approach to language. Accordingly, it employs standard grammatical terminology that is familiar to teachers and the community, but also uses terms that allow for a more functional interpretation.

A new grammar companion is not intended as a comprehensive grammar of English. It provides an overview of those features of grammar that are useful in school contexts in terms of supporting and extending students' ability to use English productively for educational purposes.

The book will be an important reference to use alongside other PETAA publications such as *Exploring how texts work* (2nd edition; Derewianka, 2020), *Investigating model texts for learning* (Humphrey & Vale, 2020) and *Teaching the language of climate change science* (Hayes & Parkin, 2021). Teachers wishing further practice to consolidate their own understandings will find *Grammar and meaning* (2nd edition; Humphrey, Droga & Feez, 2012) a very useful workbook.

This third edition retains features familiar from the previous edition, the organisation of contents around the main functions that language plays in our lives: expressing and connecting ideas, interacting with others, and creating coherent texts. Some explanations have been refined and adjustments have been made to reflect the use of language in contemporary society. Our 'book extras' webpage contains additional curriculum resources linked to relevant content.

We hope this book becomes a familiar companion to guide teachers as they explore language and its patterns of meaning in the different curriculum subjects with their students.

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President, Primary English Teaching Association Australia

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Online resources

Go to https://bit.ly/PET130extras for extra resources.

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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

What is grammar?

There are many technical definitions of grammar, but for our purposes we could simply say that grammar is a way of describing how a language works to make meaning.

Why learn about grammar?

We learn about grammar to:

- be able to reflect on how the English language works
- be able to use language effectively, appropriately and accurately
- understand how different kinds of meaning are created through the use of different grammatical forms so we can control and shape those meanings more skilfully and effectively
- critically analyse texts so we can understand how grammar has been used to achieve certain effects
- examine patterns of language and word choices so we can appreciate, interpret and create well-constructed texts
- have a shared language for teaching and learning about the main features of the English language.

A multi-purpose grammar

The description of grammar provided here has been designed so that teachers can use it for a number of different purposes: for exploring how language functions to create different types of meaning; for understanding the structure or formation of various language features; and for anticipating where students might need particular assistance with certain features. This book therefore includes sections on looking at meaning, looking at form, and troubleshooting.

If you are primarily interested in **meaning**, you might like to focus on the sections that discuss how our linguistic choices create certain meanings. In this book we are viewing grammar as a resource – an array of possibilities from which we can choose. Learning grammar in this sense is seen as extending a learner's potential to make and interpret meanings.

If you are primarily interested in **form**, you might like to focus on the sections that explain how various grammatical features are structured. A traditional motive for teaching about grammar has

been the development of an analytical approach to language – an ability to 'reason grammatically' – along with identifying and naming different grammatical categories, providing students with a language for talking about language. Knowing how language is structured helps us to deal with questions such as these:

- What does a noun group consist of?
- How are different verb tenses formed?
- What does a clause look like?
- How are clauses combined to form sentences?

Preferably, however, your focus will be on the **relationship between meaning and form**. In this book, we look at how the different grammatical categories are involved in the construction of meaning with questions such as these:

- What range of meanings do verbs express?
- How can my choice of nouns affect the meaning of the text?
- How can I use certain types of adjectives to express my opinion about something?
- Which grammatical features are involved in skills such as classifying, defining, describing, generalising and exemplifying?
- Which linguistic features can help me to produce a text that is coherent and cohesive?
- How do grammatical patterns change from text to text? Why and with what effect?
- How does the context affect the kinds of grammatical choices made?

If you are concerned about the kinds of problems students might encounter, look for the **Troubleshooting** boxes that are included throughout the book. There are certain linguistic structures that often cause problems, particularly for young students and learners of English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D). In many cases, the problems will sort themselves out over time and with extensive engagement in reading. Often, however, it is useful for the teacher to be able to identify trouble spots so that the problem can be explained or so that activities can be designed to address the difficulty. EAL/D learners will need a much greater focus on developing their control over English grammatical structures and meaning.

It is this area that many people associate with learning grammar: correcting 'mistakes'. This is a legitimate area of concern. Students' writing is often judged by their control over certain grammatical features, and this can be a significant factor in exams, job applications and so on. It is important, however, not to let this get out of perspective. Many 'problems' reflect students' use of social dialects, especially in the spoken mode: *he done it*; *me and him are going home*. In the written mode, however, there are probably only a dozen or so problematic structures that regularly crop up – and most of them are to do with punctuation, not grammar. Typical of these are issues such as the use of 'comma splices' (*It was getting late, we went home.*), 'run on sentences' (*The cows got out of the paddock they ran through the streets the farmer couldn't catch them.*) and 'sentence fragments' (*There were lots of animals. Such as kangaroos, koalas and rabbits.*)

A functional perspective

The approach to grammar adopted in this book draws heavily on the pioneering work done by Professor Michael Halliday in the area of Systemic Functional Linguistics. Functional Grammar is built on a series of assumptions about the way language works in context:

- Language is a dynamic, complex system of resources for making meaning.

- Language reflects the culture in which it has evolved. It is not a neutral medium, but expresses certain world views, values, beliefs and attitudes.

- Our language choices change from situation to situation, depending on the social purpose for which language is being used, the subject matter, who is involved, and whether the language is spoken or written.

- The emphasis in language study is on how people use authentic language in various contexts in real life to achieve their purposes. The particular focus of this book will be on the language needed for successful participation in school contexts.

- A knowledge about grammar can help us to critically evaluate our own texts and those of others, for example identifying point of view; examining how language can be manipulated to achieve certain effects and position the reader in different ways; and knowing how language can be used to construct various identities or a particular way of viewing the world.

A functional approach looks at how language enables us to do things in our daily lives. To participate successfully in school and the community, for example, students need to know how to use language to:

- achieve different social purposes

- express ideas about their experience of the world

- make connections between these ideas

- interact with others

- construct coherent texts in both spoken and written modes.

Achieving different social purposes

As they progress through school and life, learners need to be able to use language to achieve a range of social purposes such as describing, explaining, arguing or recounting. These different social purposes are expressed through different text types (or genres). Young children operate with a moderate range of text types, which generally have a relatively basic, unelaborated structure (e.g. recounts involving only a couple of events, arguments that are often unsupported by evidence, explanations of only a sentence or two). With teacher guidance over the years, students should be able to confidently interpret and employ a wide range of text types for a variety of social purposes, including texts that have a more complex, unpredictable structure. This provides students with a solid preparation for the demands of secondary school and life in the community.

The *Australian Curriculum: English* requires that students develop proficiency in a range of text types for a variety of purposes. While not dealing in detail with different text types, this book will refer to how different grammatical resources are drawn on to achieve different social purposes, such as the use of the past tense to refer to events in a recount, or the use of the present tense to refer to 'timeless' actions in an information report.

Expressing ideas

A major function of language is to represent experience, to help us to express and understand what goes on in our lives. This is sometimes called the 'observer' function of language. In the school context, this includes using and understanding the language of the different areas of the curriculum. Each subject has its own way of using language to develop knowledge and understandings relevant to that learning area. The language of science, for example, is quite different from the language of history. The language used in English literary texts is quite different from that in geography texts. Students need to be able to read and write texts that become

increasingly technical, abstract and subject-specific as they move through the school system from primary to secondary school.

When starting school, students' language will be concerned with more particular, everyday understandings ('my family', 'our neighbourhood'). As they grow older, they need to be able to talk and write in more generalised terms ('families', 'dinosaurs') about less familiar topics which often require research ('the planets', 'volcanic eruptions') and specialist terminology ('solar system', 'lava'). It cannot be taken for granted that this type of language will develop automatically.

Chapter 2 illustrates how grammar functions to represent experience: the kinds of activities taking place, the participants in those activities, and the circumstances surrounding those activities.

Connecting ideas

Not only do students need to know how to express ideas through language, they also need to make connections between ideas. Simple connections can be made by using words such as *and*, *but* and *so*. However, if students are to be able to comprehend and produce more complex connections between ideas, they will need to deal with more sophisticated ways of reasoning through language. Knowing how to construct and interpret lengthy sentences that contain a number of ideas in complex relationships is a skill that continues to develop throughout high school.

Chapter 3 deals with the various ways in which ideas can be connected to create well-structured sentences involving different combinations of meanings.

Interacting with others

Another major function of language is to enable interaction. Through language we construct particular roles and relationships. Students need to be able to use language effectively to interact with a range of people. In the early years, they will use language in more informal, familiar ways with known peers and adults, freely expressing their feelings and attitudes. Gradually they will also need to learn ways of interacting that are more formal and detached, with a more subtle use of evaluative language and modality, particularly in the written mode.

In school, children need the skills of group interaction, the ability to take part in class discussions, and the poise to talk with both familiar and unfamiliar adults. They need to know how to cope in situations with different degrees of authority and power. They need to know how to take on an expanding range of roles, for example, group leader, observer, apprentice, mediator, initiator, questioner and co-learner. Students need to be able to evaluate their own interaction skills and to reflect critically on the ways in which others use language to interact with them in oral and written language. (For example, are they being persuaded to accept a particular perspective? How is language used to do this? How might they recognise this and resist if necessary?) In many cases, children will need explicit assistance in developing these interpersonal skills.

Chapter 4 looks at how different grammatical categories are involved when making statements, asking questions, giving commands, expressing opinions, making judgements and engaging with others.

Creating coherent and cohesive texts

Finally, language functions to create texts that are cohesive and coherent. One of the major shifts in children's language use over the primary years is from the spoken mode to the written mode. When students enter school, they are accustomed to using language in face-to-face, oral interactions. It is spontaneous and immediate. It generally refers to the 'here and now' and to the surrounding context. There is a conversation partner who can provide support by asking questions, giving feedback, and requesting clarification. When moving to the written mode, students need to learn how to use language in quite different ways. Texts will involve a degree of planning, revising and reworking, and will therefore be more highly structured. Because the writer has more time to compose the text, the sentences are generally more 'crafted', with greater complexity and density.

Because a written text needs to be able to stand on its own, the reader cannot get help from an interaction partner or the surrounding setting. The reader must use cues from the text itself to understand how it is developing. The writer needs to know how to guide the reader through the text. This involves quite sophisticated language skills (e.g. using the beginning of the sentence and paragraphs to indicate how the topic is developing, using text connectives, and compacting information so that it does not sound rambling). Moving successfully from spoken to written modes is one of the major achievements of primary schooling, requiring the development of a number of high-level skills and strategies. The ability to create and comprehend highly complex texts continues to develop in secondary school.

Chapter 5 deals with the ways in which texts are shaped to make them more cohesive and coherent.

Texts in context

The language choices we make are influenced by the context: the purpose, field, tenor and mode.

The **social purpose** for which we use language impacts on our choice of **genre** (or text type) and the way in which the genre unfolds in characteristic stages to achieve its purpose. For example, if the social purpose is to tell what happened, the typical choice of genre would be a recount. A recount will generally begin with an Orientation stage in which the various participants are introduced and the time and setting are clarified. This is followed by a record of events, outlining what happened in chronological order. An exposition, on the other hand, will typically begin with a statement of position, outlining the proposal being argued for. This will be followed by a series of supporting arguments which are brought together in the Conclusion.[1]

The **field** being developed – 'What is the text about?' – will involve our language choices for **expressing and connecting ideas** (the 'ideational' function of language). For example, if the field involves providing information about different types of rocks, then our language choices would probably include technical, generalised, descriptive noun groups (*Most igneous rocks are silicate minerals.*) and relating verbs in the present tense (*Sedimentary rocks are less abundant.*). Ideas might be connected in a causal relationship: *Sedimentary rocks are formed by tiny grains of material pressing against each other.*

The **tenor** of the context – 'Who is involved in the interaction?' – will reflect our language choices for **interacting with others** (the 'interpersonal' function of language). Here we are concerned with how the roles being taken up (parent/child, teacher/student, doctor/patient, shopkeeper/customer) and the relationships between people (intimate, familiar, distant or infrequent) affect the ways in which we interact through language. Factors such as age, gender, authority, expertise and class can also play a part, as can the degree to which the context is 'interpersonally charged'.

The **mode** – 'What is the channel of communication?' – will influence our language choices when we are **creating cohesive and coherent texts** (the 'textual' function of language). The free-flowing, spontaneous language of spoken texts, for example, is quite different from the compact, carefully crafted language of written texts. Here we would also need to consider multimodal texts – still and moving images of various kinds along with their relationship to the surrounding written or spoken text. The medium of transmission will also affect the choices made – digital, print, phone, television, video and so on.

Any particular combination of field, tenor and mode in a situation is referred to as the **register**. By being aware of genre and register, we are able to predict the language choices that would be typical of that situation. We can represent the relationship between the context and language system in the diagram on the following page.

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1 The various ways in which text types are structured have been described elsewhere, for example, *Exploring how texts work* (Derewianka, 2020) and *Teaching language in context* (Derewianka & Jones, 2023).
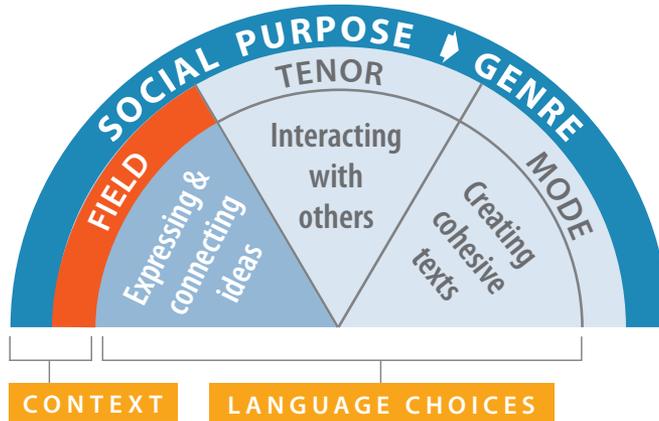
Language and learning

The following table summarises how the different language functions are involved in students' learning through the years of school.

Early years	Later years
Language for achieving different purposes	
Producing and comprehending a small range of genres with basic structures for specific purposes.	Producing and interpreting a wide range of genres for varied social purposes, with more complex structures – multiple purposes, 'hybrids' (e.g. infomercials), and less predictable stages.
Language for representing experience	
Dealing with everyday, familiar, individualised, concrete, non-specialised subject matter, represented by basic noun groups, simple verb groups using a limited range of tenses, and a limited selection of adverbials (primarily *when*, *where* and *how*).	Dealing with more technical, generalised, abstract, discipline-specific subject matter, represented by richly elaborated noun groups, complex verb groups using a broad range of tenses and aspects, and an extensive variety of adverbials expressing the circumstances surrounding the activity.
Language for connecting ideas	
Linking ideas in a simple, spoken-like manner, using connectors such as *and*, *but* and *so*.	Creating more complex connections between ideas and managing the development of lengthy, well-structured sentences containing a variety of clause types.
Language for interacting with others	
Operating in contexts that involve more personal interaction with known individuals; a limited range of roles; freely expressed emotions; and evaluations grounded in personal opinion not necessarily supported by evidence.	Operating in contexts that include more impersonal, formal interaction with a wide range of individuals and groups – both familiar and unfamiliar; expanded range of roles; more nuanced expression of emotion; more detached and informed appreciation and judgement, grounded in explicit criteria and supported by evidence; discerning use of intensifiers; careful use of modality and other resources to create spaces for alternative perspectives and possibilities; critical awareness of how language can be used to position self and others.

Language for creating coherent and cohesive texts	
Participating in face-to-face, spontaneous, context-dependent dialogues; engaging with relatively brief written texts involving minimal use of cohesive resources.	Engaging with texts that are monologic, crafted and planned, and independent of the immediate context; comprehending and producing lengthy, cohesive texts that require careful organisation and guidance of the reader.

Terminology

In most contemporary English grammar texts, there are terms that relate to the grammatical class (e.g. adjective, conjunction) and terms that relate to the functions that such a grammatical category can perform (e.g. the Participant in an activity).[2] This is important, as each grammatical category can do a variety of jobs. There is no one-to-one correspondence between form and function. An adverb, for example, describe the circumstances surrounding an activity (*quickly*), it can express a particular viewpoint (*unfortunately*), it can intensify (*very*), it can indicate the strength of commitment (*probably*), it can help to make links within a text (*firstly*) and so on.

Ideally, students should be familiar both with terms that refer to form (e.g. noun group, verb group) and terms that refer to their functions (e.g. Participant, Process). Some teachers, particularly when focusing on meaning, might choose to work just with the functional terms – especially when students are first learning about grammar. Others, particularly when focusing on form and structure, might use the formal terms. Ultimately, it is a matter of what students already know about grammar, how that knowledge can be extended in ways that are productive, and how knowledge about language is built over the years, preferably through whole-school planning for teaching and learning with the consistent use of terminology and development of skills across the years of schooling.

Over the centuries, different terminology has developed as our understanding of language has evolved. In many cases, different terms are in circulation, depending on the particular description of English and when it was in use. In this book, footnotes have been used to indicate when a particular language feature might be referred to using different terms.

Links to the *Australian Curriculum: English*

The current edition provides support to teachers as they use the national curriculum – and in particular the Knowledge about Language strand. The organisation of the Language strand reflects the three major functions of language: 'Interacting with others' (the interpersonal function); 'text structure and organisation' (the textual function); and 'expressing and developing ideas' (the ideational function). The terminology used here is very similar to that in the Australian Curriculum, though it might vary slightly in certain instances.

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2 A capital letter is often used for functional terms.

Considerations for teaching grammar

Most children will learn how to use grammar implicitly by engaging in extensive and purposeful talking, listening, reading, writing and viewing. Children – including those from language backgrounds other than English – come to school with a highly developed ability to use language in rich and complex ways. Their language will continue to develop as they use it for a variety of purposes in their homes, in the community and at school. This book will assume that – in addition to learning language through social interaction – the teacher plays a deliberate role in enhancing students' use of language and in developing their knowledge about language.

Learning to …

In the classroom, students will be learning to use language in specific ways. The teacher's role is to design contexts and plan activities in all curriculum areas that provide opportunities for learners to develop the particular language they need to participate effectively in school. The teacher's knowledge about language will assist in selecting resources, choosing texts, focusing on salient points, constructing language-rich activities, responding to questions, assessing students' work, and providing informed feedback. Throughout this book you will find sections on how teachers might monitor the development of particular language features at various stages of development. This is not intended as an assessment tool, but rather as an indication of directions in which teachers might actively promote students' language use.

The teacher plays an important role in modelling and promoting Standard Australian English – particularly for EAL/D students and students whose home language is not closely aligned with the language of the school. While respecting and appreciating the diverse language backgrounds of all the students in the class, the teacher has a responsibility to explicitly and systematically apprentice learners into the language of the school.

Learning about …

In addition to fostering children's ability to use language in particular ways, the teacher can tap into the learner's implicit knowledge about language and help to make it more explicit. The teacher can provide learners with tools for reflecting on how language works. Together they build a shared language for talking about language (a 'metalanguage') so that they can refer to the various functions and structures of language. During activities such as shared and guided reading, modelled and collaborative writing, conferencing, and in class discussions, the teacher is able to focus on how language is functioning. By carefully selecting texts and focusing on relevant features, the teacher draws students' attention to ways in which language is being used. In this way the teacher is able to demonstrate how grammar is contributing to the meaning of the text.

Grammar should generally be taught in the context of working with whole texts (e.g. identifying grammatical patterns that help a particular text type to achieve its purpose). The emphasis should not be on an ability to simply label a certain feature, but on its usefulness in creating, appreciating and evaluating texts. Students should be shown how grammar helps to build up the meaning of the text. When dealing with information reports, for example, the teacher might want to demonstrate how the timeless present tense is used for generalising (*cats **catch** rodents*). This can then be contrasted with the specific past tense actions found in recounts (*my cat Peggy **caught** a mouse*). The texts used when teaching grammar should be authentic, not artificial and contrived simply to teach a grammatical point. They may, however, need to be simplified when first introducing a certain feature.

There are times, however, when it might be more efficient to look at a particular, relevant aspect of grammar more intensively. For example, if a specific feature is presenting particular challenges, then additional language activities on that feature could be explored, using a number of clear examples taken from texts.

Certain groups of students will need more systematic and focused assistance with particular features of English grammar, e.g. students from language backgrounds other than English. Emphasis should be placed on the construction of clear, well-formed and coherent sentences and texts, and not so much on the rules of usage (e.g. whether to finish a sentence with a preposition, or whether to use *will* or *shall*.)

Teachers need to use their own judgement as to how much information or detail the students can usefully and comfortably handle at any particular time. The grammatical features outlined in this book should serve as a guide as to what might reasonably be learned by most children during their years of schooling.

The study of grammar need not be onerous or dry. There is room for playfulness and creativity, for experimentation and discovery, for enjoyment and wonder. Children have an instinctive fascination with language. It is the teacher's job to nurture this.

Levels of language

When we are teaching about language, we need to be clear about which level we are dealing with: text, sentence, clause or word level.

Text

Modern linguists recognise that language patterns extend beyond the sentence and can operate at the level of the whole text. At the text level, we find patterns that are related to a particular text type or genre (e.g. the use of commands in a procedure, action verbs in a recount, abstract nouns in an exposition, or dialogue in a narrative). We also find certain features that serve to link parts of a text: cohesive devices such as pronouns; words that create relationships within the text (e.g. synonyms, repeated words); words that signal how the text is structured (e.g. *firstly* and *on the one hand*). In achieving its purpose, the language patterns change as the text moves through its various stages. When introducing the characters in a story, for example, we find long descriptive noun groups. When the text moves to an action sequence, the emphasis is on action verbs. And when there is a reflective stage, there will be more thinking and feeling verbs.

Sentence

A text is made up of a number of sentences. Sentences can consist of a single clause or a number of clauses joined together. Students need to know how to combine clauses to make sentences and how to construct different types of relationships between clauses in a sentence (e.g. relationships of time, place, causality and concession). A text might consist of a single sentence (*Keep off the grass*) or a lengthy combination of sentences as in a novel.

Clause

A clause is a unit of meaning that expresses a message. It typically contains a verb or verb group. The clause is often seen as the basic unit for analysing language. Clauses can be combined to create sentences involving related ideas.

Group/Phrase

A clause consists of smaller 'chunks' or groups of words that do certain jobs. In the clause *a group of small children were digging in the sand*, the core of the clause is the verb group telling 'what's happening' (*were digging*). Participating in this action might be one or more persons or things,

represented by a noun group telling 'who or what is involved' (*a group of small children*). There might also be some extra information in the form of an adverbial telling 'where' (*in the sand*).

Word

Groups and phrases can be divided into individual words. In a noun group, for example, we might find an article, an adjective and a noun (e.g. *the wily fox*). It is important to see how individual words function within a group so that students can see how the words relate to each other.

In the past, grammar was often taught at the level of the individual word, e.g. nouns, verbs or prepositions. While these categories are important, students often ended up with a fragmented knowledge of the system, with little idea of how these words work together to make meaning or how different shades of meanings could be made through an author's choices.

The table below demonstrates the different levels of language.

Text level (excerpt)	Alice caught the baby with some difficulty, as it was a queer-shaped little creature, and held out its arms and legs in all directions, 'just like a star-fish,' thought Alice. The poor little thing was snorting like a steam-engine when she caught it. It kept doubling itself up and straightening itself out again, so that altogether, for the first minute or two, it was as much as she could do to hold it.								
Sentence level	The poor little thing was snorting like a steam-engine						when she caught it.		
Clause level	The poor little thing was snorting like a steam-engine								
Group/phrase level	The poor little thing			was snorting			like a steam-engine		
Word level	The	poor	little	thing	was	snorting	like	a	steam-engine