Have you read the novel *Jasper Jones*? This young adult novel was written by Craig Silvey and first published in 2009 by Allen and Unwin. Since then it has been shortlisted for a number of awards and won several of them. It is written from the perspective of the thirteen-year-old protagonist, Charlie Bucktin, who narrates the life-changing events that take place in his family and community, the regional mining town of Corrigan, at the end of 1965. It is not an easy read—far from it—as it tackles the issues of teen suicide, incest, adultery, racism, war, and family breakdown. And yet, every time I read *Jasper Jones*, I continue to find it a beautiful, compelling and satisfying book. Despite the heavy themes, there is also humour, particularly in the special friendship between Charlie and his best mate, Jeffrey. I particularly love how Silvey successfully captures that clever, silly, witty banter that often characterises boys' chatter amongst themselves. While the sensitive issues explored in *Jasper Jones* may be challenging for many students (and even teachers), some schools have recently chosen to include the novel in their English programs at Years 10 and 11. A close reading and investigation of *Jasper Jones* offers so much to explore and discuss in terms of plot, characters, and themes. Crucial to students' study of all these aspects of the novel is a focus on the language used by the author. The author’s language choices help develop the story, shape the mood of the book, construct the characters, and enhance the meaning and, ultimately, our understanding and appreciation of *Jasper Jones*.

Grammar and all things linguistic tend to provoke a range of different responses in each of us, obviously influenced by our own varied experiences of language learning in our education. Whatever these differences, the Australian Curriculum: English provides us all with a clear understanding of the fundamental role of language in the English classroom. Language teaching and learning has a strong importance and focus in the Australian Curriculum: English. The Australian Curriculum: English promotes a *contextual* view of grammar (language is influenced by the context of use) and a *functional* view of grammar (language is used for different goals and social purposes). The Australian Curriculum: English encourages the idea that language is to be investigated, analysed and evaluated for how it creates meaning in a given text. As one of the three strands in the Australian Curriculum: English, language is given equal status; it is as important as the study of literature and the development of literacy skills. It cannot be separated from the other two strands—they are all interrelated. To help our students more fully comprehend what they hear and read requires both the necessary knowledge of grammar and metalanguage, and also the ability to identify and articulate how certain language choices create various kinds of meaning in particular texts.

The following extract from *Jasper Jones* (ch. 8, pp. 280–281, Windmill Books, 2010) offers much scope for discussion about the importance of language in the novel. This extract has been numbered to facilitate the discussion of language features and the identification of specific examples. Charlie’s relationship with his mum becomes increasingly fraught as the novel progresses and hits a crisis point when he discovers her infidelity. This discovery is the catalyst for her decision to leave her family, her home and the town of Corrigan, described in devastating detail in this extract.
1. But my mother leaves.

2. She left that night. She packed her things and she drove out, our car fishtailing wildly down the street, our curious neighbours forming a loose guard of honour on their lawns. They heard it all unfold. And within hours, the whole town would know everything. In an instant she’d stripped her name of whatever careful varnish she’d glossed it with for so many years. In a single scene she revealed herself, ugly and loud and mean. And they heard it all.

3. She left that night, but not before she’d ranted and raged. Not before she’d picked a fight and, like always, didn’t get one back. My father just let her go. It was like yelling at a statue. He let her scream and holler, let her beat at him and weep. He didn’t give her comfort, nor did he give in to any anger.

4. She left, but not before she tore into my room, hoping I’d be there. She tipped things, stripped things, tore things. Threw and broke things. She found my father’s manuscript on my desk and ripped it apart. Cast it across the room. She left, but not before finding my suitcase and unlatching it. The only time I’ve left it unlocked. She emptied its contents on my bed. Sifted through those treasured sheets, searching in vain for her name. And she dragged that empty suitcase to her vanity table. She stole it from me, but she had nothing precious of her own to pack in it. She just shoved in her clothes, her jewellery, her perfumes. She snatched the keys from where they’d skittered after she’d thrown them at my father. And she announced her intentions with our front door open. She finally told my father what she thought. No more threadbare hints or poor metaphors. She finally said what she’d been meaning to say.

5. Of course, it came as no surprise to my father. He knew she was miserable here, he even knew the company she’d been keeping. He knew all her little secrets, the holes she’d dug for herself. I’m not sure when it was he realized. Perhaps he knew all along. Though I often wonder why he kept it to himself, why he let it go on. Perhaps he thought it made her happy. Or maybe it was easier for him to shrug and sweep it under the rug and pretend otherwise. Or maybe it was to save me the grief. Maybe he wanted to shelter me from the disruption and hurt. I don’t know. Maybe he hoped she’d stop of her own volition. That’d she see sense and admit her wrongdoing and they’d mend back to new. Or maybe he still believed in the commitment, the sanctity of loyalty, so he stood firm even while she strayed away and made a cuckold of him.
35. I don’t know.
36. But he didn’t intervene as she dragged my suitcase out to the car. He didn’t
37. implore her to stay. He stood on our veranda and coolly observed. He let her go.
38. He cut the string on his finger. And he watched her weave away and leave for
39. good. She was free of every bind; she had severed ties with the town she hated
40. from the moment she arrived.
41. And she hasn’t once returned. Not in two weeks. She’s moved to the city to be
42. cosseted by her family. She’s back to being the spoiled girl. They’ve given her a
43. house all to herself, full of furniture and trinkets and paintings and a cleaner that
44. visits on a Friday. Maybe she thought we might follow her, that we’d call her
45. bluff.
46. She’s spoken to my father only once since that night, on the telephone. She said
47. she wasn’t coming back. He said he didn’t ask her to. But he did urge her to talk
48. to me, try to put things right. But she declined. She didn’t say why. Maybe she’s
49. too ashamed. Or maybe it’s all a part of her being liberated. She’s cut me loose
50. too. A whole fistful of kites left on their own to spread in the sky.

A close reading of this extract shows how important the language choices are in moving the narrative along and helping to develop the characters, in particular Charlie’s mother. There are a range of language features in this extract which help build the character of the mother, at least from Charlie’s perspective, and give us an insight into the family relationships and dynamic.

Did you notice how the mother is repeatedly referred to by the third person singular subject pronoun ‘she’? This emphasises Charlie’s poignant sense of detachment from his mum. He makes only one reference to ‘my mother’ (ln 1), whereas he frequently refers to his dad as ‘my father’ (lns 9, 14, 22, 24, etc) underscoring their closer connection. Similarly, he refers to his mother’s relations as ‘her family’ (ln 42), the use of this possessive pronoun again reinforcing how disconnected Charlie feels from his mother. The repetition of the possessive determiner ‘her’ in the listing in line 19 (her clothes, her jewellery, her perfumes) emphasises the mother’s selfish behaviour, evident not only in her adultery and abandonment of her family but also in her complete disregard for the things most precious to her husband and son (lines 12-17). In contrast, the author uses the first person plural subject pronoun ‘we’ to bring Charlie and his dad together against the mother, as can be seen in line 44, ‘Maybe she thought we might follow her, that we’d call her bluff’.

A particularly useful activity for students is to have them identify and list the various verbs in the extract that are associated with the mother, and compare these with the verbs used in association with Charlie’s dad. There is clearly a contrast, highlighting the parents’ differences and particular characteristics. The verbs used around Charlie’s mum include: ‘stripped’, ‘ranted’, ‘raged’, ‘picked a fight’, ‘scream’, ‘holler’, ‘beat’, ‘weep’, ‘left’, ‘tore’, ‘threw’, ‘broke’, ‘ripped’, ‘stole’, ‘dragged’, ‘emptied’, ‘shoved’, ‘snatched’, ‘strayed’—there’s an opportunity here also for students to discuss connotations and synonyms. All of these verbs are the opposite of what we traditionally consider nurturing maternal actions. This can also be seen with the author’s choice of the verb ‘declined’ (ln 48) to describe Charlie’s mother’s refusal to see her son—it’s so cold and detached. While mum is all action, the father is more passive. The verbs that are associated with Charlie’s dad include: ‘let her... ’ (lns 10-11), ‘shrug’, ‘pretend’, ‘observed’, ‘watched’. The verbs in the negative in lines 36-37 also emphasise dad’s passivity, ‘He didn’t intervene... He didn’t implore... ’. In contrast to the mother, his father’s verbs are more positive and typically parental, such as,
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'save', 'shelter', 'believed'. Sound patterning occurs with 'tipped', 'stripped' and 'ripped' (Ins 12-14); alliteration in line 8 'ranted and raged'; and assonance with 'weave' and 'leave' (In 38).

This characterisation of Charlie's mother and father is highlighted in other ways. The use of the adverb 'wildly' (In 3) to describe mum's driving contrasts with the adverb 'coolly' (In 37) to describe dad. This builds on the earlier reference to dad as a 'statue' in the simile 'It was like yelling at a statue' (In 10). This image of dad is again echoed in the antithesis in lines 33-34, 'he stood firm even while she strayed away'. The reference to mum's 'vanity table' (In 18) links to the earlier expression 'searching in vain' (In 17), both of which seem to reinforce this selfish image of the mother. Interestingly, Charlie's mother morphs back into a girl, 'the spoiled girl' (In 42), when she returns to her family, further shedding any remaining elements of her maternal role.

To support the descriptive function, the author adds depth and colour to the narrative through the use of adjectives, for example, 'curious neighbours' (In 3) and 'threadbare hints' (In 22). This is also achieved through the use of non-literal language. The author uses irony to describe the neighbours forming a 'guard of honour' watching Charlie's mother leave in disgrace, revealing herself 'ugly and loud and mean' (In 7). There are also a number of different metaphors used to engage the reader. For example, the damage to his mother's reputation is described by Charlie as stripping 'her name of whatever careful varnish she'd glossed it with for so many years' (Ins 5-6). His father is aware of his wife's indiscretions, 'the holes she'd dug for herself' (In 26) but prefers to 'sweep it under the rug and pretend' (In 29). There is the recurring motif of cutting: Dad's willingness to let mum go: 'He cut the string on his finger' (In 38); and the mother's resolute abandonment of her former life, 'she had severed ties with the town she hated' (In 39), and even of her son, 'She's cut me loose too' (Ins 49-50). And yet, the metaphor that concludes this extract significantly shifts the mood of the text: 'A whole fistful of kites left on their own to spread in the sky' (In 50). Despite the devastating events narrated by Charlie in this extract, we are actually left with a sense of hope, the metaphor of the kites floating up into the sky suggesting a real sense of liberation and release for Charlie.

Charlie's purpose, in this extract, is to list and describe the events of that terrible night and therefore all the sentences here are declaratives. In contrast, there is the full range of sentence structures: simple sentences ('Of course, it came...' In 24); compound sentences ('She found my father's manuscript...' Ins 13-14); complex sentences ('Perhaps he thought...' In 28); and compound-complex sentences ('Or maybe he still believed...' Ins 32-34). The wide range of sentences provides variety, helps convey a lot of detail, and adds to the dramatic tension. There is some ellipsis in this extract, including 'Threw and broke things' (In 13) and 'Cast it across the room' (In 14), and also sentence fragments, such as, 'No more threadbare hints or poor metaphors' (In 22) and 'Not in two weeks' (In 41). In this way, the language in this extract deviates from Standard English. This can also be seen in the way that many sentences start with a conjunction, either a coordinating conjunction, 'And she dragged...' (In 17), or a subordinating conjunction, 'Though I often wonder...' (In 27). These non-Standard features, however, play an important role in helping to create the narrative voice of Charlie. They are often typical of the language of storytelling and create a conversational tone. These features help create a sense of spontaneity in Charlie's narration of these events, drawing us into his thoughts as he tries to process and come to terms with what has happened as he describes them.

Listing provides both emphasis and an economical way of adding detail, in this case, about the mother who is described as 'ugly and loud and mean' (In 7) and too focused on empty, extravagant objects, 'her clothes, her jewellery, her perfumes' (In 19), 'furniture and trinkets and paintings' (In 43). Emphasis on key moments or important points in the extract is also achieved through repetition and parallelism. The sentence 'She left [that night]' is repeated by Charlie at the start of three paragraphs (Ins 2, 8, 12) and again in lines 14-15, as if he needs to convince himself that this is really happening. The repeated reference to the neighbours, They heard it all' (Ins 4, 7), stresses the significance of the public nature of his mother's disgrace. Charlie's repeated 'I don't know' (Ins 31, 35) heightens our sympathy for him as a young person struggling to understand both his mother's and his father's motives and actions which have lead them all to this dramatic turning point in their lives.
Parallelism, referring to repeated syntactic structures, works in a similar way to add emphasis to significant points in Charlie’s story. The fact that the mother did not leave quietly is underlined by the repetition of the syntactic structure ‘[She left], but not before…’ (Ins 8–9, 12, 15). Parallelism is also evident in the paragraph in which Charlie wrestles with understanding his father’s attitude towards the mother. This can be seen with the repetition of ‘He knew…’ (Ins 24–27) at the beginning of this paragraph, and then with the repeated expressions ‘Maybe it was…’ (Ins 28–29) and ‘Maybe he…’ (Ins 30–32). In this way, the author uses language to help highlight Charlie’s bewilderment and struggle to understand adult relationships and behavior.

Students could explore these language features in a number of ways: short-answer questions, class discussions, creating a ‘map’ or poster showing how these language features help ‘construct’ the character of mum from Charlie’s perspective and highlight the nature of his relationship with his parents. An extended task for students could be to write or present a short commentary/analysis discussing an aspect of the language features in this extract, for example, a paragraph on the choice of verbs and how these relate to the wider context of the novel, its characters, themes and plot.

As you can see, there is so much to discuss about language in the novel Jasper Jones. Starting with a shorter extract, such as the one discussed here, can really help students see and appreciate how important the language choices made by the author are across a whole novel. Developing our students’ knowledge of language and their ability to see and articulate how language works in a certain text is challenging but really rewarding. It will hopefully lead students to a more mature and nuanced reading and help them gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of all texts.

References
