The Language of Stories: A Conceptual Integration Approach

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Abstract

This paper outlines a cognitive linguistics framework for an analysis of narratives. It uses the theory of conceptual integration to propose a way of accounting for the emergence of narrative meaning and the correlations between form and interpretation.

Processing the language of a narrative text, be it a novel, a film, or a play, is a crucial component of narrative comprehension. The research reported here shows how processes driven by general linguistic and conceptual patterns of meaning construction prompt the reader's or viewer's response to the narrative artifact.

I rely on the basic claims of the theories of Mental Spaces and Conceptual Integration (fully described recently in Fauconnier and Turner 2002). The theory argues that linguistic and visual forms serve as prompts for evocation and setting up of semantic frames and conceptual 'packets' called mental spaces. These conceptual structures are then subjected to processes in which new meanings emerge as contextually relevant and discourse-based interpretations. The processes involve projections from one activated conceptual 'packet' to another, selection of relevant typology, and blending of mental space and frame topologies in novel ways.

The approach is particularly useful in the study of narratives. Much of the research on stories focuses on lower level linguistic choices, such as narration, speech and thought representation, or focalization, or, alternately, on general cognitive processes (see e.g. Herman 2003). I propose a conceptual integration mechanism that explains the participation of the lowest level linguistic forms in the overall construction of meaning. These processes result in the emergence of a coherent, sequential story. I also define standard narratological concepts such as 'narrator', 'story' or 'focalization' in terms of mental spaces and blending (see Dancygier 2011).

The basic fact that requires an explanation is how the specific formal choices make it possible for the reader (or viewer) to come up with an overall understanding of the narrative and also respond emotionally. To address this, I propose the concept of a 'narrative space' – a story-based mental space structured with local topology (time, place, participants). These lowest-level narrative spaces are blended to yield higher-level narrative spaces, such as sub-plots or temporally marked parts of the narrative (e.g. extended flashbacks). These subsequent levels of blending of narrative spaces eventually yield the emergent space, traditionally described as 'the story'. The final product of narrative comprehension is thus a mental construct, a mega-blend, which emerges through multiple levels of selective projection and construction of coherence.

All the spaces are constructed from the viewpoint of what I refer to as the 'story-viewpoint' (SV) space, which determines the temporal and spatial frame of the narrative (such that the story is told from the present or past perspective, from within the story-space or outside of it). The viewpoint structure of the SV-space also provides a set-up wherein the narrative is conceptualized against a communicative deictic ground. The set-up creates the illusion of a human 'teller', or 'narrator', but this surface effect is in each case the result of a specific SV-space viewpoint configuration. In other words, the text constructs a narrative space in which there is a voice mimicking a human communicator. This set-up has broad interpretive consequences for the processing of the story as a whole.

I argue that the primary blending mechanism responsible for subsequent integration of narrative spaces into the emergent story is viewpoint compression (Dancygier 2005). Compression is the central mechanism of narrative blending, which makes it possible for elements of various spaces that are conceptually distant to become less distant or fused in the blend. For example, characters may appear under different identities in different narrative spaces (as in the case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde), but need to be blended in the overall interpretation. Such a re-alignment of identity requires the use of textual clues in the story-construction processes the reader goes through, but consists in compressions of identity across narrative spaces. Blending theory talks about compressions along dimensions such as identity, change, or causation, but narratives also involve a specific kind of compression

wherein a viewpoint of a narrative space is compressed with the perspectives of other spaces, until it becomes fused with the viewpoint of the SV-space, so that all textually set up spaces can contribute to the emerging story, and be viewed entirely from the SV-space. Viewpoint compression is also what explains formal characteristics of specific linguistic constructions in the narrative, such as representation of speech and thought. Subsequent levels of compression then make the emergence of a coherent story possible.

The mechanisms of story construction viewed through this framework put the traditional time-based definition of narratives in question. There are several reasons not to treat a 'story' as a sequence of events. Not only are stories (spoken, visual, or written) usually not told sequentially, but temporal disruptions in many texts (such as Heller's novel *Catch 22* or the movie *Memento*) overtly question the validity of sequentiality as central to the story. Instead, in agreement with Fauconnier and Turner's analysis of time metaphors (2007), storiness relies much more consistently on the experience of characters and on causal or motivational links between events. Such links, however, typically emerge in the reader's interaction with the text, rather than being based in some explicit narrative space topology, such as time.

We should also reconsider the traditional understanding of representation of characters' minds, whether in the form of speech or thought. Firstly, fictional narratives often make it difficult to distinguish between external (spoken) and internal construals attributed to characters. Secondly, there is no formal consistency in linguistic representation of speech and thought (in fact 'thought' is very often represented through linguistic constructions identical to conversational speech). Thirdly, the issue is further complicated by various narratorial intrusions, which often resemble a character's discourse, but are not naturally identifiable as spoken or thought. To account for these inconsistencies, I treat a wide range of narrative forms as representing construals, not discourse. These construals can be attributed to specific characters, but within the entire narrative they are compressed with higher spaces in order to be relevant to the overarching story. For example, in Atwood's novel *The Blind Assassin* the initial text has the main character-plus-narrator reporting on a car accident in which her sister had died. She quotes the observations provided by the policeman and his account of the eye-witnesses' reports, and comments on them as a narrator, and thus the initial paragraph is full of expressions of represented speech and thought. However, their role is not to accurately represent what was said or thought, but to set-up two crucial story frames – suicide and accident. These two framings of the events structure most of the reader's interaction with the narrative as a whole. Viewpoint compression quickly downplays who said what, but the frames remain active throughout the book.

These (and other) processes account for the emergence of global narrative meaning out of the linguistic and visual choices. At the same time, specific attention to linguistic form of narratives can inform language study in a number of ways. For example, the use of forms such as tense or referential expressions in the narrative poses problems which are quite different from the ones linguists encounter in analyzing spontaneous spoken discourse. This observation does not suggest, of course, that the language of narratives is different in some essential way, but it poses interesting questions for areas of linguistic analysis. In the context of Construction Grammar, for one, it is possible to speak of specific form-function mappings emerging in the narrative context. This approach not only extends the applicability of certain tools of linguistic analysis, but also opens new questions regarding the nature of well-established linguistic categories. Specific cases of the use of pronouns in narratives (for example, pronoun shifts from *I* to *he* or from *he* to *I,* when the referent remains the same and there is no clear shift in focalization) suggest that phenomena such as viewpoint compression or blending can be useful in explaining how the pronominal and deictic systems work in language in general.

The specificity of narratives thus manifests itself in at least two ways. Firstly, linguistic constructions in the narrative, while building on conceptual structures shared with spoken discourse, are tailored to the needs of story construction. Secondly, narrative meaning relies on mental space networks and on mechanisms of compression, in ways which maximize coherence and causal connections. At the same time, narratives rely on various forms of conceptualization and reasoning available in other language contexts, such as frames and schemas, blending, or understanding of identity, change, and causation.

Processes of story construction remain the same regardless of the form of the narrative. Stories may be told entirely through language, but also trough visual means (film, comics, graphic novels). Regardless of form, they play the same role: they prompt the setting-up of narrative spaces and determine their topology, they are manipulated through compression and blending, and they participate in the emergence of the story as a mental construct.

References

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