

# PERSPECTIVE AND NARRATIVE STRUCTURE —A COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Written narrative discourse demands sophisticated tracking of mental spaces (Fauconnier, 1994). Such tracking requires readers to construct complex mental models incorporating much that is inexplicit in the prose. These models interact in subtle and intricate ways. The construal task involves more than the evocation of sequential scenarios, since particular stages in a narrative may arise from the blending of two or more mental models drawing on subsets of features of the source models. During this process of creative construal, readers construct, activate, and adjust a spatio-temporal focus enabling them to integrate the interpretation of individual sentences into more global interpretations. This focus, referred to as the "deictic center" (Rapaport et al, 1989), shifts constantly as the narrative progresses. Characters in a narrative shift in and out of this center over the course of the narrative. Although such linguistic phenomena as anaphora, motion verbs, tense-marking, relative clause structures, and nominalizations may mark the ever-shifting deictic center, it is also true that readers must also draw on complex inferential skills to interpret the narrative flow, i.e., to construct a coherent model of the narrative events, incorporating unexpressed information. The mental spaces evoked are interrelated, even blended, in complex and sometimes subtle ways illustrated here in an examination of narrative segments from novels by Philippa Pearce, John Grisham, and Ann Tyler, and a Blake lyric.

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper I develop an account of the kind of creative construal that enables readers to situate themselves within a fictional narrative. My account draws from two partially complementary theoretical frameworks, those of Deictic Center Theory (Zubin & Hewitt, 1995) and Mental Space Theory (Fauconnier, 1994).<sup>2</sup> Both are cognitively based frameworks primarily concerned with the ways in which, as we process language, we construct complex mental representations combining our own world knowledge and information provided by the stretches of language processed. In contrast to the claims of the Chomskyan tradition, the cognitive theories just referred to view language expressions not as fairly explicit carriers of propositional content but rather as often somewhat minimal prompts guiding us in the model construction process by relating our already highly structured background knowledge to the appropriate contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a revision of a paper presented at the annual conference of the American Association for Applied Linguistics in Orlando, Florida, in March 1997.

<sup>2</sup> For a useful and compact overview of Mental Space Theory, see Fauconnier and Sweetser (1996). Zubin and Hewitt (1995) present an excellent account of Deictic Center Theory, one very relevant to the present paper.

## MENTAL MODELS AND STORY WORLDS

We as readers of a narrative must construct the story as a mental model within which we locate ourselves, witness the events, and hear the dialogue. The story moves us through constructed times and spaces inhabited by entities of various kinds—nurses, houses, icebergs, pancakes, marriages, quarrels, cabbages, and kings, all occupying certain positions in time and space relative to the others and often causally related. The units of the story are such people, objects, events, and states. They correspond in part to narrative linguistic units, noun phrases most often interpreted as referring expressions mapping onto characters, objects, and so forth, sentences as propositions mapping onto events and states, prepositional phrases mapped onto locations and times (Segal, 1995). We enter into this story world, seeing some events as past, others as yet to come, following characters as they move from room to room, across oceans and, of course, across the time continuum created by the narrative. A character may be a major participant in the action, a *focal WHO* in terms of Deictic Center Theory. Others appear and disappear.

## NAVIGATING A STORY WORLD

We might be viewing this story world from the perspective of a third person omniscient narrator, or it may be mediated through a more subjective narrator. Such a narrator, termed the *focalizing WHO*, may be a focal WHO or perhaps a less central character such as Jack in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*. Whatever the narrative perspective, it leads us through sequences of mental spaces, some embedded in others, each inhabited by entities, events, or states that may be counterparts of entities, events, and states in other spaces.

As readers, we are situated at the *deictic center* of the story world, the spatio-temporal location from which the sentences of the discourse are interpreted, and normally the location of the focal WHO. Although the linguistic discourse units are arranged sequentially, left to right typically, we can move both forward or backward in the space-time continuum, the movements being marked by such linguistic phenomena as tense, verbs, temporal and locative adjuncts, and prepositional phrases. These markers enable us to identify the WHEN and WHERE of the deictic center. As the deictic center moves, so do we. Although the major portion of the narrative is told with past tense forms in English, this past tense marks the now point of the story, the deictic center. Other events may be presented as past or future relative to this point. In the following paragraph from a

classic children's novel, the focal WHO is Tom throughout, the focal WHERE remains stable—the bedroom where Tom sleeps, but the focal WHEN dimension of the deictic center moves steadily forward, marked by simple past tense:

- (1) They had left him, and now they were going to bed.
- (2) Uncle Alan took a bath, and Tom lay listening to him and hating him.
- (3) For some reason, Tom could always hear what went on in the bathroom next door to his bedroom as clearly as if he were there himself: tonight he was almost in the bath with Uncle Alan.
- (4) Later he heard other movements and conversation from elsewhere in the flat.
- (5) Finally, the line of light under his door disappeared: that meant that the hall-light of the flat had been switched off for the night.

(Pearce, 1958, p. 14)

The sequence of events is clear from the tense usages, the time adverbs, and the modals. The past perfect marking on “had left” indicates a time prior to the focal WHEN, which is situated with the rest of the deictic center with focal WHERE and WHO. The past simple and progressive forms in (1) and (2) mark the steady progression of the WHEN component of the deictic center. But (3), which provides an explanation for Tom's being able to hear noises in another room, shifts us into another mental space out of the time sequence, as the modal plus adverb combination *could always* shows. Within that mental space there is another, hypothetical, space introduced by the space-building form “as if.” The shift back to the deictic center time is signaled by “tonight.” The temporal adverbs “later” and “finally” mark the continuing temporal progress of the deictic center. The verb “meant” indicates a shift into a judgment/inference mode in which Tom is not just the focal WHO but also the focalising WHO. Within that new mental space, the past perfect cluster “had been switched off” marks a look backward from the deictic WHEN.

Similarly, the deictic WHERE, Tom's bed, is the point to which all other locations and changes of location are oriented. The verb “left” is deictic, indicating movement away from the focal WHERE, and the use of “going to bed” rather than “coming to bed” signals space away from the deictic center. Prepositional phrases like “in the bathroom next door,” “from elsewhere in the flat” and the noun-phrase “the hall-light of the flat” keep us informed about the location relative to the deictic center.

## SPACE MANIPULATION

Since all events unfolding in a story are presented through the eyes of a teller posited by the author, the identification of the teller is important. This is because we need to determine whose mental space we are in. The novelist Ann Tyler (1983) likes to play on this need. Consider the following opening paragraph of a chapter partway through her novel *Morgan's passing*:

- (6) The newspaper said, *Crafts Revival in Baltimore? Festival Begins June 2.*
- (7) There was a picture of Henry Prescott, ankle-deep in wood chips, carving one of his decoys.
- (8) There was a picture of Leon Meredith holding up a puppet, with his wife beside him and his daughter at his feet.
- (9) He was a grim, handsome, angular man, and his mouth was sharply creviced at the corners.
- (10) He was not a young boy any more.
- (11) It took a photo to make Emily see that.
- (12) She placed the paper on the kitchen table, pushing away several breakfast dishes, and leaned over it on both elbows to study it more closely.
- (13) The porous quality of the newsprint gave Leon a dramatic look—all hollows and steel planes.
- (14) Next to him, Emily seemed almost featureless.
- (15) Even Gina failed to show how special she was. (pp. 131-132)

The events of the chapter preceding this one were presented through the mind of the Morgan, the major character. He is, in deictic center terms, both the focal WHO and the focalizing WHO. The first chapter of the novel employs a third person narrator. The first sentence of the excerpt provides no clear indication of the teller. The teller could be an external narrator, or we could be in the mind of one of the characters reading the paper. The second sentence is a little more helpful. The photograph is of Henry Prescott, someone not referred to anywhere else in the novel. The use of the proper name marks the reference as given information, indicating a teller familiar with this wood-carver, perhaps someone well acquainted with the Baltimore crafts scene, but not, for example, the woodcarver's brother or son, since a close relative would not use the carver's full name. So we are now in a mental space created by this newspaper reader. Sentence (8) starts with an existential *there* clause almost exactly echoing sentence (7). Again the artisan's first and last name is specified, indicating acquaintance but not a close relation. This is

reinforced in the sentence—the picture shows not only Meredith and his puppet, but also two individuals identified as “his wife” and “his daughter.” We can therefore eliminate these two individuals (as well as Meredith himself) as the teller.

From the beginning of the quoted excerpt to sentence (10), two images have been presented, constituting two mental spaces. One is expressed in the teller’s perception of the hierarchically configured photograph group with a grim, full-grown Meredith occupying the central position. There is irony in the fact that one of the figures in the photograph is a puppet, which is as inert and unindividualized as the wife and child in the picture. The second space is occupied by an earlier counterpart of this full-grown Meredith, the young boy Meredith. But sentences (10) and (11) mark a crucial point in the narration. Sentence (10) is a judgment. The teller, the focalizing WHO has just come to the realization that the second mental space is no longer a valid representation, that it has now been superseded. Sentence (11) takes us further, identifying the teller as Emily, Meredith’s wife. The specification “Emily” rather than the pronoun “her” suggests that we have been shifted into a third mental space in sentences (11)—and in (12)—that of a third person narrator. Compare “It had taken a photo to make her see that.” The new space contains Emily the newspaper reader looking at the newspaper on the kitchen table. But the use of “seemed” in (14) clearly shows that we have been taken back into that Emily’s mental space, as does the judgment about her daughter in the last sentence. Emily the almost featureless wife and Gina the unspecial child in the photograph space contained within Emily-the-reader’s space have counterparts in that container space—an Emily with more individuality and a special Gina.

We as readers have been led up a narrative garden path. The photographs, the knowledge of the local arts and crafts scene, the realization that Leon Meredith had changed radically, have all been perceived through the filter of Emily’s consciousness. Since we know from previous chapters that Emily has been active in the crafts world, it is hardly surprising that she knows about the woodcarver, Henry Prescott. We are in Emily’s space. Emily is replacing her old internal representation of her family with a new and very different representation. Until now in the novel, Leon has repeatedly been presented as a boy, a very young husband, a somewhat stubborn and defiant youth who readers can presume has time to grow and mature. Emily has thought of herself and Leon as a very young couple starting a family.

Emily the evaluator has now been examining an iconic representation reflecting an abstract structural schema in which counterparts of her husband, herself, and her child appear in schematic form. The representation in the photo space is interpreted by Emily in the light of a more generic space containing the stereotypical male-dominant family structure. The references to “Leon Meredith,” not just “Leon,” and to “his wife” indicate

that Emily has been trying to look at the picture as if she were an impersonal and objective observer, in other words she has created for herself a new mental space in which the relations perceived are very different from those she had imagined previously. The shift to this new space indicates her alienation from her husband. Emily's vision of her husband has changed very abruptly. She reinterprets and thereby re-creates the mental space which contained her image of her family. The phrases "his wife beside him and his daughter at his feet" take on a different significance, marking for Emily her very subordinate role and the domination of the family unit by the grim Leon, beside whom she, Emily, and their daughter seem relatively insignificant and characterless.

Craik (1943) wrote: "Thinking is the manipulation of internal representations of the world." We have within us a whole range of abstract structural schema to enable us to make sense of our perceptions. We form structured mental spaces inhabited by real or imaginary entities with sometimes complex interrelations and correspondences, and we reason and come to conclusions by manipulating these spaces. We perceive shared systems of relations between experienced situations and internalized schemas, as Emily did when she examined the photo, and this led to new inferences and insights. Emily's marriage is essentially finished now. We have seen here a very skillful portrayal of the workings of one woman's mind.

Note the fluidity and creativity of the discourse construction process. As Fauconnier points out, "Provisional categories are set up in appropriate spaces, temporary connections established, new frames are created on line, meaning is negotiated. ... The reader must therefore keep track of the maze of spaces and connections being built, partly through point of view and point of view shifts."

### SHIFTING NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVES

Obviously, not all authors use such complex narrative strategies. Tyler was presenting a crucial mental event. But even a superficially straightforward representation of a primarily physical event sequence reveals interesting complexities when examined more closely.

Consider the following narrative segment:

***Paragraph One***

(16) Pirtle hid his patrol car in a driveway on Monroe Street and walked across the front lawns to Jake's house.

(17) He saw nothing.

(18) It was 12:55 A.M.

(19) He walked around the house with his flashlight and noticed nothing unusual.

(20) Every house on the street was dark and asleep.

(21) He unscrewed the light bulb on the front porch and took a seat in a wicker chair.

(22) He waited.

(23) The odd-looking foreign car was parked next to the Oldsmobile under the veranda.

(24) He would wait and ask Ozzie about notifying Jake.

***Paragraph Two***

(25) Headlights appeared at the end of the street.

(26) Pirtle slumped lower in the chair, certain he could not be seen.

(27) A red pickup moved suspiciously toward the Brigrance house but did not stop.

(28) He sat up and watched it disappear down the street.

(Grisham, 1995, pp. 272-273)

Readers who have not read the book up to this point can still orient themselves reasonably accurately within the narrative flow. The scene is presented (or "focalized") initially by the narrator. The focal WHO at this point is Pirtle, and the reference to his patrol car identifies him as a policeman on patrol. The elements of the scene—officer, patrol car, walking around a house with a flashlight—are a configuration familiar to us, background knowledge and generic information about a particular type of event gained from our own past experiences, include those gained from movies, television, and books. We move as the deictic center shifts its WHERE. Along with the narrator, we track Pirtle spatially from his car across the lawns to Jake's house.

But then we come to "He saw nothing." This is not an objective report by the narrator. The sentence is not meant to be taken literally. Obviously, Pirtle saw many things, but he believes he has seen nothing of the kind that should attract the attention of a lawman.

This is a judgment made by Pirtle. We have thus been shifted momentarily into a different space, Pirtle's interior consciousness. The spatial movement has stopped for a moment. It is then that we are told the precise time. We infer that the information has come from Pirtle. Pirtle must have checked his watch and then made this observation. Pirtle, along with the rest of us, starts to move again and we are out of Pirtle's consciousness, his interior space, and back with the all-observant narrator—until we come to the conjunct “and noticed nothing unusual.” Unusual, that is to say, from a policeman's perspective. Here again we have a judgment. We are in Pirtle's consciousness. He is looking down the street: the houses are “dark and asleep.” Back once more into the narrator's space until we get to the “odd-looking foreign car”—odd-looking to Pirtle rather than the narrator. The modal “would” in the final sentence of the paragraph shifts us into a different modality. Pirtle is making a decision about a future event, a mental space in which he is conferring with Ozzie. Unlike everything else so far, this event is not real and indeed may not be realised.

What we have here is a narration that in fact demands a sophisticated tracking of mental spaces, drawing considerably on the mental schemata created from our own prior experience, enabling us to construct a mental model of what is happening. Along with the focal character, we move through time and space, stopping occasionally to shift from the steady onward movement to enter Pirtle's mind as he evaluates the situation in his terms. A single word can signal such a shift, an adverb such as “suspiciously” in the next paragraph, not an external judgment by the invisible narrator but Pirtle's unspoken evaluation.

Readers must thus shift very frequently between the narrator space and a space created within it, that of Pirtle. But the Pirtle space itself has spaces embedded within it, in our excerpt the space created by the modal “would,” the possible future space in which Pirtle is consulting his colleague Ozzie.

### **BLENDING AND CULTURAL SCHEMATA**

Indeed, mental spaces can be interrelated in subtler and more complex ways. Two or more spaces can contribute to a third space, a blended space (Fauconnier and Turner, 1994) inhabited by counterparts of elements in the other spaces, yet differing in crucial ways. In art forms of language especially, culturally determined schemata supply additional dimensions.

William Blake's lyric, “The Sick Rose” is a compact example. Reuben Brower (1951), writing in the nineteen-forties” mode of New Criticism, points to the poem's double narrative structure and archetypal imagery. The two narratives, running in parallel,

each occupy distinct spaces, but the situation and its participants and its participants in one space have counterparts in the other:

O Rose, thou art sick!  
The invisible worm  
That flies in the night  
In the howling storm

Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy;  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.

The framing situation, the parent space, has its WHERE, a garden containing a rose-bed, a diseased rose, and, of course, the speaker. The rose is the central character, the focal WHO. The WHEN is the time of utterance, the NOW to which every other time point in the poem relates. This information is inferred from an embedded space, the space of the spoken utterance that is the poem itself. In this embedded space—call it the horticultural space—there is, of course, the rose flower—“Crimson Joy” is a not unlikely name for a kind of rose—the rose-bed, and traces of a nocturnal flying pest. The dismayed initial exclamation, “O Rose, thou art sick!” marks the NOW situation. The rose-worm is described in the generic present “flies in the night,” but the present perfect “has found out” both looks back to an earlier time when the worm flew to the rose-bed, and also to the present resulting state of the rose—it is diseased.

This is the most concrete space, the source space for a non-identical twin, which is a target space deriving its narrative structure from its source. The two spaces share a schematic infection structure: X INFECTS Y WITH Z, ELIMINATES Y, which can be viewed as the generic space that, as Coulson (1996) illustrates in her discussion of a computer virus joke, underlies narratives in other semantic domains. The central entities, events and states in the source space map onto counterparts in the target space. Essentially the Rose is a woman’s name. The focal WHO is a person, a woman. The vocative address, “O Rose,” even the capital *R* of the name, makes it clear that the counterpart is a woman. The worm is a male, as indicated in “his dark secret love.” The focal WHERE is a bed, presumably in a bedroom. The noun phrase “crimson joy” here takes on a sensuous erotic sense in the context of a male’s secret love, the bed, and the woman. Rose’s sickness is caused by an evil, corrupting creature, a mysterious supernatural-sounding creature flying through the stormy darkness to the Rose-person’s

bed. She is now sick because of something wrong with the dark, secret, furtive nature of this love.

So here we have three spaces. One is horticultural, a second is human, but with a supernatural counterpart of the rose-worm, and a third is the generic space containing the infection schema. The invisible worm connects us to a fourth, culturally derived space, a mythological one in which Satan, the former Lucifer, flies from Hell to the Garden of Eden, appearing in the guise of a giant worm, the Serpent, bringing death and knowledge of evil to the previously innocent beings there.

It is as if the target space—the human situation—and the mythological space are superimposed on the horticultural space to form a blended space, a composite of the other spaces. Not all the structures of each space are integrated into the blended space. The horticultural space evoked includes a rose flower, which presumably has thorns. Such thorns might have been mapped onto the human space as, for instance a woman's sharp nails used to defend herself against rape. Similarly the Eden space includes not only a corrupted Eve but a corrupted Adam. But the poet obviously does not want to include these phenomena, which would change the effect of the whole poem. The source space contributes the narrative structure: the gardening experience, which itself derives structure from the generic infection space; the target space exploits this structure to portray a human drama, while the Eden space contributes the sense of the destructiveness of corrupting evil. The resultant blend in the poem: a flower that is spoken to, a rose-worm that is an evil force, a rose-bed that is a bed of furtive corrupting loving, is a powerful composite drawing us into the experience of witnessing evil at work.

### CONCLUSION

Reading is thus a complex cognitive process by which readers construct meaning as they track their way through a text. The text provides signposts, deictic markers guiding and orienting us through a complex of mental spaces, moving us along spatial, temporal and human dimensions and thereby enabling the mental construction, interlinking and blending of the cognitive representations I have described as mental spaces. Pearce, in the extract from her *Tom's midnight garden* keeps the focal character, Tom, in a single central physical location from which he hears and sees activity in other locations, but she leads readers in and out of other spaces which are out of the time sequence. Tyler keeps her readers guessing as to whom the parent space belongs. By so doing, she is able to lead them into a sudden recognition of the ownership of the space at the same time as the central character, Emily, comes to her surprising recognition of a new Meredith and the state of her marriage. Grisham takes readers in and out of Pirtle's mind as they follow

him on his patrol. Objects and events in the narrator's space correspond to (or are mapped onto) counterparts in Pirtle's mental space.

Especially interesting is the mapping of one domain of experience onto another in order to provide the reader with a specific kind of conceptualisation of the target space, frequently one that the reader might not have thought of. Such mapping is commonplace in the too often manipulative language of politics, where "spin-doctors" may frame the unemployed drawing benefits from the state as parasites sucking the life out of a parent organism. In that sense, Blake is also putting a spin on the human sexual situation as he saw it in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The effect, of course, is aesthetically very different. The power of the experience that the poem "The Sick Rose," evokes for us derives from an especially concentrated exploitation of our cultural schema and our ability to construct and creatively construe the world of text.

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