

### **COMPREHENDING NARRATIVE: THE COGNITIVE DIMENSION**

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*Readers of narratives construct complex mental models or 'spaces' within which to locate themselves. During this process, readers construct, activate, and adjust a spatio-temporal focus to integrate interpretation of individual sentences in a global interpretation. This focus, the 'deictic center', shifts constantly. Although linguistic markings help orient the readers, they must draw not only on complex inferential skill but also schematic socio-cultural knowledge. This can create difficulties for readers from other linguistic and cultural environments. Examples from several narratives and a poem are examined, and the cognitive skills required are considered. In each, a base reality "of this time, of that place" is established, and readers are moved from that mental space to spaces representing other times and places, real and hypothetical, which may include counterparts of events and participants already encountered. The notion of 'sameness' is thus a complex one, since it links counterparts across different kinds of spaces. In our examples, each author uses sometimes subtle linguistic markers pointing to sociocultural schemata assumed familiar to the assumed readership. Readers from other social and cultural contexts must surmount the differences in order to construct a plausible cognitive model of the narrative.*

*Key words: cognition, deictic center, cognitive skills, mental space, sameness, sociocultural schemata.*

## 1. Introduction

Much of what is involved in comprehending a narrative is not in the actual words or sentences, which are really cues to evoke frames or scenarios drawing on both inferential skills and complex socio-cultural knowledge. Weigand (1999: 764) points out that the standard use of language assumes communication between members of the same community and the same cultural world. With written language and in particular in art forms such as the novel, short story, or poem, given the absence of immediate feedback, the writer must assume an idealization of the reader that may be very different from many actual readers. The notion of the native speaker is itself no more than a convenient idealization overlooking very real socio-cultural differences among speakers of the same language. Indeed, the most insightful readership of a novel might include non-native speakers while excluding many native speakers. The categories of class and culture can cut across those of specific languages.

At a fairly basic level, we can ask readers if they “follow” the story. We are here, of course, using a journey metaphor in which the story-line is viewed both as a path that readers follow and a moving target that readers must pursue. The movement of a story is not always forward—there are pauses, backtracking, and temporary departures from the forward movement. The major portion of most narratives in English employs simple past tense forms to mark the NOW point of the story, a moving NOW point to which other events and times are related as past, future, or hypothetical. Other forms such as spatial adverbs and deictic verbs like *come* and *go* mark the HERE, the sometimes moving location from which events are witnessed. Readers must position themselves at this “deictic center” (Segal 1995), a moving window from which the story’s situations and events are viewed and the sentences interpreted. Often located at the deictic center is one of the characters, possibly a major protagonist such as Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* or a spectator like Jack in Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*. Readers need to recognize the path of the story, the characters they meet along the way, the places through which they pass, the times at which

specific situations are in force, and, perhaps subliminally, the socio-cultural assumptions underlying the situations presented, knowledge likely to vary in degree depending on reader variables of language, culture, and age.<sup>1</sup>

Readers are therefore cued to construct a mental representation of the narrative and to locate themselves within its times and spaces as the scenes of the narrative shift. The story units include people, objects, events, and states which are cued by and correspond to linguistic units. Noun phrases are likely to be interpreted as referring expressions mapping primarily onto characters and objects, sentences as propositions mapping onto events and states, preposition phrases mapping onto locations and times (Segal 1995, Jacobs 1995).

## 2. The Deictic Center

Consider now the following paragraph from a classic children's novel. The main character, Tom, is at the deictic center—the now and where of that stage of the story. The WHERE remains stable—Tom's bedroom—but the focalized NOW 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, *Tom's Midnight Garden*: 14.

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<sup>1</sup> For a useful and compact overview of Mental Space Theory, see Fauconnier & Sweetser (1996). Zubin & Hewitt (1995) present an excellent account of Deictic Center Theory, one very relevant to the present paper.

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 focalized NOW, which is situated as part of the deictic center along with the focalized HERE and the focalized WHO Tom. The past simple and progressive forms in (1) and (2) are cues marking the steady progression of time, of the NOW. But (3), which provides an explanation for Tom's being able to hear noises in another room, shifts us into another mental space, one out of the time sequence, as the modal plus adverb combination *could always* shows. Within that mental space is embedded yet another, introduced by the space-building form *as if*, a hypothetical space. The shift back to the deictic center NOW is signalled by *tonight*. The temporal adverbs later and finally mark the continuing temporal progress of the deictic center. But now we encounter the verb *meant*, marking a shift into another space, one inside Tom's mind. Tom is not just the focalized WHO but also the focalizer, the one through whose mind we are witnessing the events and the mode is one of judgment/inference. Within that space, the past perfect cluster *had been switched off* marks a look backward from the NOW.

Similarly, the deictic HERE, 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 that HERE, 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.

### 3. Shifting the Narrative Perspective

Whereas in the Pearce example the perspective stayed constant—the deictic center is always located at Tom's bed—this is often not the case. Look now at the following narrative segment from a popular crime novel:

PARAGRAPH ONE

6. Pirtle hid his patrol car in a driveway on Monroe Street and walked across the front lawns to Jake's house.
7. He saw nothing.
8. It was 12:55 A.M.
9. He walked around the house with his flashlight and noticed nothing unusual.
10. Every house on the street was dark and asleep.
11. He unscrewed the light bulb on the front porch and took a seat in a wicker chair.
12. He waited.
13. The odd-looking foreign car was parked next to the Oldsmobile under the veranda.
14. He would wait and ask Ozzie about notifying Jake.

PARAGRAPH TWO

15. Headlights appeared at the end of the street.
16. Pirtle slumped lower in the chair, certain he could not be seen.
17. A red pickup moved suspiciously toward the Brigance house but did not stop.
18. He sat up and watched it disappear down the street.

*Grisham A Time to Kill: 272-73.*

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 HERE. 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. Pirtle is not blind. Obviously, he 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 become real in the story.

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.

Expert writers like Grisham know how to lead through the narration the kind of reader they expect. Non-native speakers usually have more work to do, but how much depends both on their skill level and their sociocultural background, factors that may be lacking in some native speakers of English.

#### 4. Manipulation of Mental Spaces

Since all events unfolding in a story are presented through the eyes of a teller, the one whose mind we are in, the identification of the teller is important. We need to determine whose mental space we are in. The novelist Ann Tyler likes to play on this need. Consider the following opening paragraph of a chapter part-way through her novel *Morgan's Passing*:

19. The newspaper said, Crafts Revival in Baltimore? Festival Begins June 2.
20. There was a picture of Henry Prescott, ankle-deep in wood chips, carving one of his decoys.
21. There was a picture of Leon Meredith holding up a puppet, with his wife beside him and his daughter at his feet.
22. He was a grim, handsome, angular man, and his mouth was sharply creviced at the corners.
23. He was not a young boy any more.
24. It took a photo to make Emily see that.
25. 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.
26. The porous quality of the newsprint gave Leon a dramatic look—all hollows and steel planes.
27. Next to him, Emily seemed almost featureless.
28. Even Gina failed to show how special she was.

Tyler, *Morgan's Passing*: 131-132.

The events of the chapter preceding this one were presented through the mind of Morgan, the major character. He is, in deictic center terms, both the focalized WHO and the one who is focalizing. The first chapter of the novel employs a third person narrator. But 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 (21) starts with an existential *there* clause partly echoing sentence (20). 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 up to sentence (23), 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 (23) and (24) mark a crucial point in the narration. Sentence (23) is a judgment. The teller has just come to the realization that the second mental space is no longer a valid representation, that it has now been superseded. Sentence (24) 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 (24)—and in (25)—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 (27) 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 takes 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.

According to Craik, *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, to create internal representations. We form structured mental spaces inhabited by real or imaginary entities with sometimes complex interrelations and correspondences. We reason and come to conclusions by manipulating these spaces. We perceive shared systems of relations between experienced situations and internalized schemata, as Emily did when she examined the photograph, and this led her 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.

### **5. Blending and cultural schemata**

Mental spaces can be interrelated in yet more subtle and complex ways. Two or more spaces can contribute to a third space a blended space (Fauconnier & Turner) inhabited by counterparts of some elements in the source spaces, yet differing in crucial ways. In art forms of language, especially poetry, this is not uncommon, with culturally determined schemata supplying additional dimensions. The poet exploits selected properties of each space simultaneously, so as to create a more powerful and evocative effect, one in which the elements may be closely interlocked. The interlocking can be very subtle, so that readers are not conscious of many of the elements which are working their magic.

William Blake's lyric, "The Sick Rose" is a compact example. Reuben Brower, 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 who has just noticed the diseased state of the flower. The rose is the central character, the focalized WHO. The NOW is the time of this utterance by the speaker, the time to which every other time point in the poem relates. This information is inferred from an embedded space, the space of the spoken utterance which 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 particular kind of rose. There is 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 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. *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 focalized location, the HERE, 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 layers superimposed on the horticultural space to form a much richer and more complex space which is a composite of the other spaces. The entities that might inhabit each space can vary in obvious ways, but the complex layered object would exclude many. 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 by her to defend herself against rape. Similarly the Eden space could have included not only a corrupted Eve but a corrupted Adam. But these do not actually occur in the spaces because they would radically modify the thrust of the poem. The contribution of each space to the blended object is therefore severely restricted. Essentially, 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.

## **6. 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. 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. 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.

Especially interesting is the mapping of one domain of experience onto another in order to provide the reader with a specific kind of conceptualization 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.

The task for readers, whether or not they are native speakers, is to associate the words and constructions on the printed page with the rich fund of human experience underlying the linguistic forms. Meaning arises from the interaction of mind and language. Without the fund of human experience that readers must bring to them, stories are just black marks on paper.

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