

USING THE CONCEPT OF CONSTRUAL TO ENHANCE STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Studiul dat poartă un caracter interdisciplinar ce combină rezultate din domeniul naratologiei, al gramaticii cognitive și al pedagogiei stilisticii și are drept scop elaborarea unui model de analiză a perspectivei narative în baza conceptului de construal/conceptualizare, pe larg utilizat în lingvistica cognitivă pentru a desemna capacitatea de a percepe, a înțelege, a interpreta și a reprezenta lingvistic lumea înconjurătoare. Utilizând aspectele conceptualizării la explicarea procesului de actualizare a perspectivei narative, în baza studiului textului literar axat pe dimensiunea lingvistică, obținem o abordare integrativă și o analiză mai detaliată a categoriei vizate ce cuprinde atât nivelul conținutului, cât și cel discursiv, care, totodată, contribuie la dezvoltarea unei sensibilități a subiectivismului textual la studenți în cadrul cursurilor universitare de analiză textuală.

Cuvint-cheie: perspectivă narativă, conceptualizare, punct de vedere, subiectivizare, domeniu focalizat, figură vs. fundal

The present article endeavors to prove the efficiency of using the Ronald W. Langacker's theory of construal and Leonard Talmy's categories of perspective system in enhancing students' understanding of narrative perspective. Making students aware of the process of perspective actualization in narrative contexts helps them in the inferential work in the course of text comprehension. It is noteworthy that in this study the terms *perspective*, *point of view*, and *focalization* are interchangeably used to denote the same process of mediating the story through the subjectivity of a certain agent, character or narrator. Drawing on the concept of construal used in cognitive grammar, an attempt is made to explain how perspectivized domains in the story, i.e. focalized object, entities, situations, and events, are represented linguistically at the level of narrative discourse and subsequently interpreted by the readers in the process of text comprehension.

According to David Herman, narrative perspective "can be interpreted as a reflex of the mind or minds conceptualizing scenes represented in narrative texts" [3, p. 99]. Hence the term focalization or perspective can be replaced by the phenomenon of conceptualization. The rationale behind this assumption is that using the concept of *construal* in explaining the narrative category of point of view/focalization yields a comprehensive approach to point of view realization and its linguistic manifestation and, therefore, raises students' awareness of text subjectivity and enhances their engagement with the text. In this line of thought, Barbara Dancygier states that "'viewpoint' and 'perspective' are the broadest terms in use with respect to both macro-level phenomena (such as narratorship, temporal and spatial anchoring of the narrative, etc.) and micro-level phenomena, which are often referred to in terms of Genette's (1980) concept of 'focalization,' or 'who sees.'" In the cognitivist's view, these concepts denote a broad range of phenomena concerned with the specific use of narrative space topology – temporal, spatial, perceptual, and the like [2, p. 87].

In cognitive linguistics it is claimed that conceptualization processes or construal operations govern linguistic representation. Linguistic framing of the same situation, event, concept, etc. depends on the way the speaker perceives, understands, and interprets the immediate reality, i.e. the humans' ability to mentally construe the same situation in alternative ways. An expression's meaning is not just the conceptual content it evokes; it is also the way this content is construed. Alternative expressions and formulations are employed to encode apparently truth-functionally equivalent situations [1, p.40; 3, p. 103; 5, p. 55]. Consider the examples below:

- (I) The family of raccoons stared at the goldfish in the pond.
- (II) The goldfish in the pond were stared at by the family of raccoons.
- (III) A family of raccoons stared at some goldfish in a pond.

Examples (I) and (II) illustrate how alternate figure-ground relationships yield contrasting conceptualizations. Examples (I) and (III) show how different locutionary coding can render different construals of hearer's state of knowledge/information status – given vs. new. David Herman claims that although cognitive grammarians study such construal operations at the clause and sentence level, they can be extrapolated onto discourse-level structures in narrative [3, p. 104].

In Langacker and Talmy's view perspective represents a conceptual structuring system involving a number of parameters and relying upon the visual metaphor [5, p. 55; 8, p. 34]. The explanation behind the ubiquity of this type of metaphor in rendering narrative viewpoint, following Barbara Dancygier, relies on the fact that visual perception is human's primary cognitive source of conceptualizing the surrounding world. Therefore it seems natural to express mental processes by means of expressions of visual perception [2, p. 103]. Ronald Langacker

decomposes the process of construal into the following dimensions: *specificity*, *focusing*, *prominence*, and *perspective* [5, p. 55].

Specificity, in Langacker's account, denotes the level of precision and detail at which a situation is characterized. Alternate terms are **granularity** and **resolution**. A highly specific expression describes a situation in fine-grained detail, with high resolution. Expressions of lesser specificity render coarse-grained descriptions whose low resolution reveals only gross features and global organization. The converse dimension of specificity is **schematicity** [Ibidem]. At the discourse level of the narrative text this opposition roughly correlates with the distinction *external vs. internal focalization* of the perceptual facet translated into spatial terms as *bird's-eye view vs. that of a limited observer*.

Focusing is the dimension of construal which refers to the selection of conceptual content for linguistic representation, as well as its arrangement into what can broadly be described as **foreground vs. background** [Ibidem, p. 57]. Linguistically, the semantic structure of spatial expressions can be represented as a dependency relation between two or more entities: a *located object (figure)* and a *reference object (ground)*. Figure-ground relationships are basic to the process of narration. The reconstruction of a story world is based on the articulation of the perceptual field into focused-upon participants, objects, and places and a background against which those focused-upon entities stand out [4, p. 274-275].

Prominence relies on profiling or selection, for linguistic representation, of a certain body of the conceptual base, for example hub-wheel, spoke-wheel, etc. [5, p. 66].

Perspective, the last dimension of construal, is the **viewing arrangement**, the most obvious aspect of which is **the vantage point** assumed. R. Langacker also considers the phenomenon of **dynamicity** under the rubric of perspective, referring to how a conceptualization unfolds through processing time. In the situation of utterance, the vantage point is the actual location of the speaker and hearer. The same objective situation can be observed and described from any number of different vantage points, yielding different construals. For many expressions the vantage point is an inherent part of their semantics, for example *in front of* and *behind* rely on vantage point to specify the trajector's location vis-a-vis the landmark [Ibidem, p.73-75]. An important aspect of construal related to vantage point is the relationship known in cognitive linguistics as **subjectivity vs. objectivity**. It refers to the viewer's role in the process of perspectivisation "as an offstage locus of perceptual experience that is not itself perceived", in the case of the subjective construal, or "as an onstage focus of attention, which does not engage in viewing", in the case of objective construal [Ibidem, p.77]. Consider the examples:

(IV) Vanessa is sitting across the table from Veronica.

(V) Vanessa is sitting across the table from me.

(VI) Vanessa is sitting across the table.

Sample (VI) is an example of subjectification of the *across* phrase. This utterance only refers to the situation where Vanessa is sitting across the table from the speaker (unlike IV), yet explicit reference to the speech act participant is absent (unlike V) [1, p. 62-63].

In parallel with Langacker's model, Talmy's account of the perspective system includes several parameters that mirror the semantic system of a given language [8, p. 34-38]:

Perspectival location – spatial positioning of a perspective point within a larger frame.

Distance from the perspective point and the regarded entity. The main member notions of this category are a perspective point's being *distal*, *medial*, or *proximal* in its relative distance from the perspectivized entity.

Perspectival motility refers to the situation whether the perspective point is *stationary* or *moving*, the *viewing* is *synoptic* or *sequential*.

Distribution of attention is "the schematic system which consists of the various patterns of different strengths with which one's attention is directed over a referent object or scene" [Ibidem, p. 38].

Having considered the perspective-related parameters of construal, it can be stated that perspective-taking process or point of view actualization in narrative contexts relies on a number of parameters involved in the conceptualization of the fictional reality:

- The spatio-temporal positioning of the conceptualizing entity/vantage point either at level of fictional mediation, having access to a wider *scope of the visualized domain*, or at the level of the action, accessing *an immediate scope of the visualized domain*, a distinction which determines the degree of *granularity* of the conceptualized/visualized frame and the actualization of a *distal, medial, or proximal* viewpoint *horizontally or vertically* oriented, which can be *objective or subjective*.

- The conceptualized/perspectivized domain can be *static/synoptic* or *dynamic/sequential*, with elements arranged as *figure vs. background*, characterized by a *retrospective, simultaneous, or prospective* temporal organization.

The linguistic means that code the above mentioned parameters include a whole array of lexical, morphological, and syntactical devices:

- Perceptual, spatial, temporal, and social deixis, i.e. personal pronouns, demonstratives, spatial and temporal adverbs, locatives, verbs of motion, system of denomination, mental and perception verbs, modality, value-laden and ideologically slanted expressions.

- Definite reference, tense and aspect in verb forms.

- Thematic and information structures, fronting of adverbial modifiers of place and direction, elements of subjectification, psychological sequencing, free indirect and free direct discourse, mimetic syntax, broken syntax, which shows a momentary dominance of impression over clarity of expression, employing questions, exclamations, ellipses. The following extract and its subsequent commentary instantiate the rich framework offered by construal phenomena in the process of perspective taking:

Jody plodded on up the hill toward the ridge top. When he reached the little cleft where the road came through, the afternoon wind struck him and blew up his hair and ruffled his shirt. He looked down on the little hills and ridges below and then out at the huge green Salinas Valley. He could see the white town of Salinas far out in the flat and the flash of its windows under the waning sun. Directly below him, in an oak tree, a crow congress had convened. The tree was black with crows all cawing at once.

Then Jody's eyes followed the wagon road down from the ridge where he stood, and lost it behind a hill, and picked it up again on the other side. On that distant stretch he saw a cart slowly pulled by a bay horse. It disappeared behind the hill...Then the cart came into sight and stopped. A man dressed in black dismounted from the seat and walked to the horse's head. Although it was so far away, Jody knew he had unhooked the check-rein, for the horse's head dropped forward... [7, p. 2105].

The first and third sentences announce the conceptualizer, *Jody standing on the ridge top of the hill*, and the conceptualized domain linguistically revealed by verbs of visual perception along with spatial deixis (*the little hills and ridges below, the huge green Salinas Valley, the white town, the oak tree black with crows*), whose elements are both vertically and horizontally organized (*he looked down...and then out..., directly below him*). Considering the narrative perspective of the first quoted paragraph, we can ascertain the actualization of a synoptic mode of an internal stationary perspective, with a global scope of attention. In the second paragraph the focus of attention captures another frame of the spatial setting – the wagon road. The deictic “*on the other side*” is an element of subjectification, i.e. it involves implicit reference to the focalizer who is conceptualizing the scene, the boy. Gradually the grandfather's wagon enters the boy's visual domain, an action linguistically marked by the deictic verb “*came into sight*”. Hence the second paragraph reveals the profiling of a sequential moving domain whose elements are gradually advancing towards the conceptualizer and are arranged as figure (wagon) vs. ground (the descriptive scene “*of the distant stretch*”).

The incipit extract from Virginia Woolf’s story “Solid Objects” serves as an additional illustration of how construal operations can be used in explaining the narrative perspective:

(A) The only thing that moved upon the vast semicircle of the beach was one small black spot. (B) As it came nearer to the ribs and spine of the stranded pilchard boat, it became apparent from a certain tenuity in its blackness that this spot possessed four legs; (C) and moment by moment it became more unmistakable that it was composed of the persons of two young men [9].

As suggested by M. Short, the division of the fragment in three parts, (A), (B), and (C), helps readers envisage them as three different versions or conceptualizations of the same scene [6]. Resorting to the concept of construal and its constituting parameters indicated by particular linguistic features, readers may grasp an understanding of the process of perspective actualization, which subsequently helps them in fictional world inference. The extract reveals a stationary distal perspective source (focalizer/conceptualizer/viewer) with a global scope of attention following a gradually approaching entity – the perspectivized object. This vantage point, belonging to the level of the action and whose identity is not disclosed, is situated close to the remains of “*the stranded pilchard boat*” with which the viewer is already familiar, a fact linguistically rendered by the familiarizing article “*the*” in the afore quoted noun phrase. Hence sentence (A) represents the actualization of a synoptic pespectival mode of a progressional situation whose elements are arranged according to the relationship figure (“*one small black spot*”) vs. ground (“*the vast semicircle of the beach*”). On the level of the story, what we infer is a large open expanse against which the viewer has just seen something so far away that it almost cannot be made out – it looks like a black spot. In sentence (B) the deictic verb “*came nearer*” evokes the movement of the focalized entity towards the vantage point, thus reducing the distance between the conceptualizing entity and its object. As a result, the black spot now looks like a four-legged being. The perception of the focalizer is marked in this sentence by the verbal expression related to factivity “*it became apparent...that this spot possessed four legs*”. In the last part of the fragment the distance between the conceptualizer/vantage point and the regarded entity becomes proximal – the black spot is now close enough to be identified as two young men, but still reasonably distant, as no more details are provided. The drawings below can help readers visualize the three different versions of the same scene and the gradual actualization of the narrative perspective.



Figure 1. Visual representation of scene (A)



Figure 2. Visual representation of scene (B)



Figure 3 Visual representation of scene (C)

The following suggested activities might guide students in their evaluation of narrative perspective or viewpoint using the concept of construal:

- Determine the identity and position of the vantage point (focalizer/perspective point), and the nature of the viewed/focalized/perspectivized domain;
- Establish the distance between the vantage point and the viewed domain (proximal, medial, or distal) and the effect attained;
- Identify the type of construal sub-parameters used in the text under analysis and the linguistic indicators revealing them ;
- Determine the level of precision and detail of the presented domain;
- Comment on the relationship figure vs. ground applied to the representation of the perspectivized domain;
- Account for the motility of the perspective point (synoptic vs. sequential mode);
- Analyze the temporal organization of the perspectivized domain (*retrospective, simultaneous, or prospective*).
- Evaluate the contribution of narrative perspective to the textualization of the content in a given literary text.

These activities are meant to cultivate an active element in the students' approach to text, making them sensitive to details of form and structure in the process of text comprehension and fostering their competences in conducting a critical linguistic analysis of narrative perspective.

Having examined the role of construals in explaining the process of perspective actualization and enhancing students' understanding of the given narrative concept, the following conclusions can be drawn: 1) correlating focalization with conceptualization yields a rich framework for the analysis of perspective taking processes in narrative contexts bearing on a number of construal constituting elements related to the spatio-temporal and perceptual aspects of the perspective source and perspectivized domain; 2) formulating pertinent questions on the manifestation of construal sub-parameters on the level of the story (content) and the level of discourse (linguistic manifestation) in a given literary text offers an efficient guidance for students in evaluating narrative perspective; providing students with checksheets of construal parameters and their linguistic indicators contributes to student's acquisition of narrative perspective metalanguage or terminology required for a critical and analytical engagement with the text.

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