

Introduction

The relationship between language and literature is a contentious issue. On the one hand, it may simply be described as a relationship between raw material and a finished product – language provides the basis on which creative and unique works of literature emerge. On the other hand, once we look at meaning, the dividing lines begin to fade – it is difficult to define a sharp boundary separating the meaning of literary works and the meaning of other texts. One way of downplaying the obvious links is to claim that fiction engages knowledge in a much broader and much more culturally specific way than everyday use of language does. But that would be an exaggeration. One could not follow an ordinary discussion of, say, climate change if one did not have any prior knowledge of the issue. Terms such as *global warming* or *carbon neutral* mean something only in the context of the debate and the science underlying it. It is also not true that literature is different simply because it is not intended to describe facts which have actually occurred. Linguistic constructions such as conditionals do that too – they set up imaginary scenarios and explore their consequences. The dividing line is either too fine to see, or shifts too much, depending on the assumptions.

In this book I attempt not to debate those differences, but instead to talk about literary texts as linguistic artifacts, focusing on the description of language processes which participate in the emergence of literary meaning. My point of departure is the belief that if a text means something to someone, there have to be linguistic phenomena that make that possible. I found much inspiration and help in two cognitive theories of language: construction grammar, with its interest in the interaction between lexis and grammar and its trust in the meaningfulness of syntactic choices, and conceptual integration, with its focus on the mechanism of the emergence of meaning, regardless of the means that lead to the initiation of the process.

Both theories have been applied to various works of fiction. However, the goal of this book is not to discuss specific interpretations of specific texts in terms of blending and construction grammar, but rather to explain how such interpretations might be arrived at. In other words, this book explores the processes of meaning construction which yield (all the varied) interpretations

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00582-2 - The Language of Stories: A Cognitive Approach

Barbara Dancygier

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Introduction

of literary texts. Crucially, I attempt to start with sentence-level phenomena and study the ways in which they contribute to text-wide meanings, relying on blending through all the levels. This project is thus an attempt to propose a blending interpretation of fictional storytelling, along with the linguistic strategies it involves.

In order to talk about linguistics and literature, I had to accept the necessity of zooming in and out all the time. Some of the fragments in this book are closer to linguistics, especially when the analysis focuses on specific sentence-level choices, while other parts discuss the structure of entire novels, with limited attention to the sentence-level language they rely on. Such shifts of focus may seem somewhat distracting, but I also hope they will keep various kinds of readers engaged. This book is addressed to cognitive linguists, stylisticians, narratologists and literary critics alike, though these groups will surely find different parts of it relevant to a different degree. It also attempts to facilitate a conversation across these divisions.

The structure of the book also reflects its multiple foci. Chapter 1 discusses recent work which sheds some light on the role of narratives in our understanding of language, literature, and culture; it contextualizes the ensuing discussion against a broader range of research. Chapter 2 briefly introduces blending theory and constructs some of the main tools of my methodology. Among others, the chapter discusses primary mechanisms of story construction and explains my understanding of the story as a conceptual construct. In Chapter 3, I propose the analysis of the concept of a ‘narrator’ in terms of epistemic viewpoint. Going against the tradition which assumes that every story needs a teller, I discuss ‘narratorship’ as a cluster of epistemic and linguistic choices which organize the text-wide viewpoint structure of the story. Chapter 4 investigates viewpoint configurations at lower levels of narrative structure, and argues for an understanding of narrative discourse as directed primarily at prompting conceptualizations of various kinds. In this chapter I also introduce the primary mechanism of story emergence – viewpoint compression. Then, Chapter 5 discusses the story-constructing role of referential expressions, especially pronouns and role descriptors.

Chapter 6 briefly introduces narrative underpinnings of the discourse of theatre, arguing for tight conceptual connections between the text of the play, the space of the theatre, and the bodies of actors. I also show how the cognitive specificity of the theatre set-up affects linguistic choices, especially the emergence of specialized constructions. In the remainder of the chapter I attempt to trace the route which leads from on-stage narratives, where all the modalities contribute to the emergence of the story, to novelistic, or on-page, narratives, relying exclusively on linguistic forms. In this context, I also discuss the primary importance of the forms through which fictional minds are represented in narratives. In Chapter 7, I continue the discussion of the ways in which

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00582-2 - The Language of Stories: A Cognitive Approach

Barbara Dancygier

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

3

representing characters' thoughts and emotions (not just words) lies at the core of narrative discourse. I give a brief overview of the constructions used to represent conceptualizations held by various story participants, to conclude that such textual choices are subordinate to the overall mechanisms of view-point compression. Finally, Chapter 8 provides some closure to the main themes of the book.

While there may be only limited explicit attention given to the issue, the ensuing text also argues for a mode of analysis which treats the goals of literary, linguistic, and cognitive studies as possibly overlapping or even shared. There was much uncharted territory and a vast volume of research to contend with, but some of the central questions have emerged clearly. How does the mind negotiate the divide between everyday discourse and fiction? How does our creativity work in these two contexts? What assumptions about the nature of mind and language yield results potentially relevant to the humanities? What exactly can literary work contribute to the discussion? There are clearly more such questions than any single book can raise. This book attempts to identify and discuss the few that seemed important.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00582-2 - The Language of Stories: A Cognitive Approach

Barbara Dancygier

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Language and literary narratives

There is nothing so strange it cannot be true, and no story so unlikely it cannot be told. No story is a lie, for a tale is a bridge that leads to the truth.

(The Arabian Nights, retold by Neil Philip)

This book is about how the centuries-old thoughts quoted above are indeed true. Why are stories not lies, even though they don't tell the truth? How do they help us to learn from our experience and the experience of others? And how does language support the meaning of stories? The structure of that "bridge ... to the truth" is what I will try to understand.

The human ability, or even desire, to tell, understand, watch, and create stories has engaged a number of disciplines, each of which poses a different set of questions about the core of the phenomenon. Why do we enjoy stories? What's in it for us as a species? Could our culture exist without stories? Are they a mental construct, a linguistic construct, or a cultural construct? Is there a difference between real stories and fictional stories? These are just some of the questions of interest to anthropologists, psychologists, narratologists, philosophers, linguists, and literary scholars. The answers have been, by necessity, partial, and directed at the interests of the disciplines they emerge from, but it is becoming increasingly clear to all concerned that some cross-disciplinary dialogue is necessary. This book is an attempt to bring together at least some of the questions out there while focusing on one central aspect of storytelling: how do stories construct meaning?

The answer to a broad question like this requires making some assumptions about the general mechanisms of meaning construction and about the correlations between formal choices and the meanings prompted. This approach would naturally define the project as a basically linguistic or stylistic one, if not for the fact that while meaning construction is a process prompted by forms (linguistic, visual, artistic, and otherwise), it is in fact a cognitive process, involving various faculties of the mind. Elucidating the emergence of meaning in various storytelling contexts thus requires adopting a methodology which is sensitive enough to fine-grained linguistic details, while opening itself up to questions about cultural context, our cognitive capacities, and

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00582-2 - The Language of Stories: A Cognitive Approach

Barbara Dancygier

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the simple fact of there being various ways to interpret any storytelling artifact.

The very term ‘meaning construction’ requires a brief explanation, so as to be clearly distinguished from literary and anthropological work reliant on ‘social constructivism.’ Throughout this book I will be using ‘meaning construction’ to refer to the processes which yield meanings of language expressions based on the frames evoked, constructional meaning patterns, and, among others, blending. Meaning construction in this sense relies on the specific word and grammar choices. Even in the simplest case such as a choice of *I will do it*, which commits the speaker, versus *I would do it*, which does not commit her at all, the construal of the former expression as a promise and of the latter as advice relies on meaning-construction processes crucially dependent on the local language choices. The construction depends on all the linguistic forms used, from the choice of the first person *I* (rather than third person *he*, which would not commit the speaker in any way), and of the modal *will* (rather than *might*, which would not involve a commitment), to the choice of tense. The present tense form *will* prompts a more committed meaning than the past form *would*. Also, while a social constructivist reading of a text is a matter of a critic uncovering frames possibly (but not necessarily) existing in the writer’s mind, the framing of past tense is a different phenomenon. Past tense forms are commonly used to mark epistemic or emotional distance, and thus are often used for politeness (so that *Could you call me tomorrow?* is more polite than *Can you call me tomorrow?*). The framing of the past tense such that it marks the speaker as less committed is a matter of standard language use, independent of any particular language user.¹

The methodological framework to be used in this book relies primarily on two theories – *mental spaces theory* and its extension known as *blending*, or conceptual integration.² Both theories assume that meaning is not a set of discrete conceptual packets neatly correlated with linguistic forms, especially lexical forms, but that in each case it emerges as a result of one’s use of formal signals (verbal or not). It also relies on processes which economically use the available complexity of possible aspects of meaning to yield an interpretation which optimally fits the needs of ongoing discourse. In actual discourse, though, interpretations are often negotiated rather than simply communicated, and thus any account of meaning needs also to consider signals built into the form being communicated which address the argumentative and inferential aspects of meaning construction. The fact that such mechanisms take the form of specialized grammatical constructions (cf. Verhagen 2005, 2008; Dancygier 2008c) should further convince us of the centrality of meaning negotiation to any meaning-emergence processes. As this book argues, understanding narratives relies on very similar processes: emergence, construction, and negotiation of meaning through specific language choices. The choices may be found at the lowest level of linguistic structure (such as using the first or the third person in

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00582-2 - The Language of Stories: A Cognitive Approach

Barbara Dancygier

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Language and literary narratives

the representation of narrative voice) or they can pertain to text-wide decisions on narrative structure (whether the story is presented chronologically or in a fragmented manner), but they are language choices readers rely on in the construction of narrative meaning.

1.1 Where does narrative meaning come from?

Meaning is often talked about in terms which seek to divorce it from the situation in which it emerges, and to propose formal constraints on what counts as a meaningful utterance. In the context of stories, this approach would not yield any understanding of their meaning, simply because stories do not open themselves to this kind of analysis. The same can be said about attempts, especially in structuralist narratology, to arrive at clear taxonomies and terminological distinctions. These taxonomies range over a very broad spectrum of phenomena, starting from representations of time flow to a typology of ‘narrators.’ While this kind of work has alerted linguists and stylisticians to phenomena which can now conveniently be talked about as ‘flashbacks’ or ‘intrusive narrators,’ it has not explained adequately why these forms would be used and how they are understood. Trivializing things a little, one could ask why flashbacks are so common in novels or movies (and, yes, also in natural conversations and oral stories), if most narratologists claim at the same time that the story is (roughly) a temporal sequence of linked events? And is a narratorial voice which (who?) addresses the reader directly just a frill, a naïve stage in the development of narrative form, or a charming attempt to make written fiction feel like a conversation? Admittedly, recent work in cognitive narratology (cf. Herman 2002, 2003a), Fludernik’s natural narratology (1997, 2003) and stylistics³ marks a move away from taxonomies and in the direction of cognitive explanations, but there is still much to say about the connection between the lowest-level language choices and the narrative, and, primarily, about how this connection is mediated by cognitive mechanisms involved in the emergence of meaning.

It seems to be an accepted view in many disciplines (including some linguistic and cognitive theories) that language is a separate module of the mind and thus cannot be considered in the context of art, literature, or culture. The fallacy is compounded by a common belief that linguistic analyses are too formal and too focused on representing structural patterns to be useful in an enquiry into meaning in any context broader than a sentence. While this is true in many cases, it is not always true. The linguistic models to be relied on in this book, within the broadly understood discipline of cognitive linguistics, assume that meaning construction is a process which affects numerous levels, and that the overall meaning does not arise as a result of simple addition or compounding of the lower-level constructs. On the contrary, meaning-construction processes

1.1 Where does narrative meaning come from?

7

invariably involve selection and narrowing on the one hand, and emergence of new configurations on the other. There is a significant range of linguistic work using mental spaces and blending to account for meanings of nominal compounds and sentential or phrasal-level constructions,⁴ and such analyses typically involve uncovering the composite constructs at the lower levels. Research has also been done on the emergence of meaningful blends in discourse and conversation (cf. papers in Oakley and Hougaard 2008; Pascual 2002, 2006a, 2006b, 2008). What the analysis proposed in this book aims at is describing the consequences of lower-level linguistic choices at the higher levels of narrative discourse. While there are some limits to treating the whole text as a linguistic artifact, the focus on processes rather than forms opens longer and more complex stretches of discourse to linguistic analysis. Thus the intended contribution of the analyses proposed in this book is to offer a view of meaning-construction processes in multidimensional artifacts such as novels or plays.

The processes of selection, narrowing, and emergence of new meanings are complex and depend on more than the understanding of specific language items. As Deacon argues (2006), blending is an interpretive process which relies on our generic symbol-processing and referential capacities. That is, the ability to use linguistic symbols in new combinations, to juxtapose them or compose them into new configurations opens our capacity for coining new meanings to nearly limitless possibilities. One might read this to mean that the potential for our linguistic abilities to be used in the construction of new meanings is not inherently limited and relies on the fact that manipulation of symbolic concepts is the daily bread of our cognition. Indeed, even a very simple expression can illustrate that potential. For example, the expression *emotional roller-coaster* cannot be explained without an analysis of the meaning of the component concepts, especially *roller-coaster*. It is a fully conventionalized expression which refers to a machine found in amusement parks which takes people on a seemingly dangerous ride involving abrupt ups and downs, lack of control of one's movements, as well as high speed. While any such experience in real life would be unwelcome, it is treated as 'fun' in the context of an amusement park. The addition of the adjective *emotional* changes the meaning significantly. There is no longer any physical object involved, there is nothing suggesting entertainment, or even an experiencing person's conscious decision to be engaged in the activity. An *emotional roller-coaster* evokes negative (rather than amused) emotional response parallel to what roller-coasters do (jerking people up and down at a breakneck speed); it applies to a person's psychological state, unpleasantly and abruptly altering between elation and depression. The composition process of this blend creates a concept not available in the component expressions, and, even more important, evokes an emotional response opposite to the original. This is also one of the points Deacon makes when he stresses the fact that emergent reference may involve conflicting emotions.

8 Language and literary narratives

The brief discussion above does not do justice to the complexity of the blend described, even though it remains at a relatively low level of complexity, which is the lexicon. And yet, the analyses throughout this book will attempt to look at narrative structure in its entirety through the lens of such low-level choices. While longer texts will be the target, sentence-level phenomena such as pronominal choice, the use of tense, the impact of referential expressions, or representation of discourse will be considered as the lowest level of meaning construction. In general, the assumption of this book (and other cognitive linguistic texts) is that grammar is as meaningful as lexis, and thus grammatical choices impact the meaning of texts. That is, a text's reliance on interior monologue or on direct discourse is a stylistic choice which, via the interpretation of the specific constructions, impacts the way the narrative is understood.

This analysis will also go a step further in arguing that a use of a specific form, associated with a meaningful construction, may 'infect' other aspects of the expression and carry constructional meaning while only one bit of the construction is present. The linguistic process whereby chunks of constructions spread constructional meaning has been described as the mechanism of *constructional compositionality* (Dancygier and Sweetser 2005; Dancygier 2005b). Examples are common. The simplest instance I can recall is an advertisement for Schweppes tonic in the London underground, many years ago. It consisted primarily of the letters *Sch . . .*, running on the wall along the tracks. The combination of letters, unusual in English, brought up the brand name, and its flagship drink. It seems a long way from this to a novel, but I will argue that strategic (rather than random) linguistic choices, such as the choice of first-person or third-person narration, do propagate through narrative structure to orchestrate narrative viewpoint throughout the levels. In other words, anaphoric and cataphoric use of pronouns is a concept which explains a host of referential meanings affecting sentences, but in a longer text these concepts do not suffice (cf. Emmott 1997). Similarly, a consistent choice of past tense as the narrative form affects not only the meaning of every sentence used as 'narration,' but also the viewpoint construction in any sentence elsewhere in the narrative which could be described as representing speech or thought. For these aspects of meaning to be accounted for, we need to assume that grammatical choices can single-handedly construct (not just participate in) meaning configurations that they are ordinarily a part of.

1.2 Literary analysis and linguistic analysis

To be able to make its point, this book will engage with a number of storytelling artifacts. I will be relying on material mainly from novels, but also from travel narratives and plays; there will also be some short examples from poetry. Texts will be chosen to represent particular phenomena, though some questions

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00582-2 - The Language of Stories: A Cognitive Approach

Barbara Dancygier

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1.2 Literary analysis and linguistic analysis

9

regarding the historical emergence of various narrative strategies will also be addressed. Crucially, none of the literary periods will be specifically foregrounded.

This evokes the question often raised in the discussions of cognitively motivated attempts to talk about literary texts. As Weber 2004 (among others) points out, cognitive methodology often downplays or disregards the historical and cultural embedding of the texts, or differences among readers. If it is indeed the case, then does it mean that such analyses are lacking something essential? Certainly not, and there are many reasons for this. First, it does not seem to be the case that everything that can be said about a historically situated text is period specific. If anything at all is indeed wrong, it is the suggestion that only period studies can reveal frames and cognitive patterns. What cognitive methodology intends to capture is patterns of thought, and not exclusively patterns of Victorian thought or modernist thought. Still, this approach does not preclude cognitively informative work looking at a specific period. In fact, quite a few Renaissance scholars (Hart and McConachie 2006; Cook 2007, 2010; Moschovakis 2006) are doing cognitively informed work themselves, and the conversation between the generic and the specific is most fruitful for both sides.

Second, it is not true that ‘cognitive’ equals ‘culture neutral.’ Some of the most thorough cognitive analyses of literary texts (cf. Sweetser 2004; Turner 2004; Canning 2008) are also deeply immersed in the beliefs of their respective periods. Still, there are probably many cognitive analyses where writers ignore literary/cultural/historical expertise, either because it is not relevant to their topic or because they have different goals, and it would seem unreasonable to assume that all cognitive work on literary texts has to be supported with in-depth considerations of their historical context.

Also, there is the question of bridging the gap across different ways in which language is talked about in linguistics and in literary studies. Current approaches to language in the work of philosophers such as Derrida or Lacan are not easy to reconcile with routine linguistic analysis. However, cognitive approaches to meaning are less formal than most and also more open to questions of cultural or emotional framing, so it seems possible that the linguistic and literary scholars might find shared interests here.

Linguistic work on literature is often seen as restricting the freedom to offer a new interpretation (cf. Jackson 2005). Yet, while meaning is not entirely indeterminate, it is also not determinate. It is a perfectly natural reaction on the part of those engaged with various sources of interpretation to feel that someone arguing for a single interpretation is missing the point. And it is true that many stylistic and cognitive analyses can be easily read to claim that what they discuss is the ‘prescribed’ interpretation (even though I am not aware of research where such claims are made explicitly). The assumption of this book, for comparison, is that while it is impossible to predict all reader responses and

possible interpretations of a text, the focus on cognitively based processes of interpretation should in principle open the floor to this discussion. Indeed, what is it that counts as an interpretation? Are there perhaps interpretations out there which depart excessively from optimal avenues of text processing? Certainly. And, also, are there perhaps language-based interpretations out there which are too restrictive? Of course, there are many. The point in these cases seems to be that the interpretive tools employed are either not specific enough or too rigid, and, I argue, these limitations are the result of broader assumptions about . . . yes, about language. Whether one believes that linguistic conventions are irrelevant to meaning or that they determine meaning entirely via grammar and discrete lexical packets, the distortion is almost equally dangerous.

The model of language which at least attempts to avoid these kinds of traps is a model which assumes that all meaning is constructed, regardless of the level we are looking at. The semantics which would be satisfied with the characterization of the word such as *a rock* as [–animate] [+concrete] [+count] will not be able to open itself to the contexts where a rock is viewed as a geological specimen, material suitable for sculpture, material suitable for construction, a weapon, a tool, or a symbol of stability and certainty, or to the possible contextual ambiguities. By the same token, if a linguistic model assumes that the present tense is simply an aspect of the morphology of English and that it is different from the imperative form, it will not even address the possible interpretation of a common usage where these forms are difficult to distinguish, as in an airport BMW ad featuring an attractive picture of a car and the line *Miss your flight; still make the meeting*. The slogan is obviously not issuing an imperative, and it is not describing a situation which can be construed as the use of ‘present tense.’ What is required is an understanding that a similar use of a present form appears in non-predictive clauses of predictive constructions (*If you miss the flight, you can still make the meeting*), and that the verb form is to be understood as neither future nor present nor imperative in meaning, because the specific constructional meaning evoked is ‘non-predicted assumption to be used in further reasoning.’ Dancygier and Sweetser (2005) propose a broader discussion of how a verb form may take its meaning from a construction it participates in and how the use of the form may prompt the meaning of a whole construction. The point I am trying to reiterate here is that grammatical and lexical choices may carry more meaning than some grammars allow.

On the other hand, from the language perspective, an interpretation may appear unnecessarily open-ended. Results vary, but there are clear cases where interpreting passes over central aspects of narrative meaning because of over-reliance on cultural concepts. In Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Blind Assassin* the actual plot, or ‘what really happened,’ is not narrated directly, but requires construction by the reader. The crucial question of the plot is whether a man accused of arson actually did commit it. He is wanted for the crime, and the