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Building Coherent Text Worlds in Virginia Woolf's Short Story "Solid Objects"

Abstract: The article delves into the *text world theory*, a cognitive-linguistic model of human discourse processing, and its application to the short story "Solid Objects" by Virginia Woolf. Drawing on an interdisciplinary approach, the essay seeks to collocate the traditional concepts of narrative perspective and coherence with newly researched reading-oriented principles in cognitive poetics, *contextual frame theory* and *text world theory*, in order to provide an explanation of understanding and interpretation processes applied to complex narratives, such as Virginia Woolf's short fiction. Generalizing from the cognitive theory of text worlds, the study focuses on the comprehensive set of world building elements, perspective actualization processes, and narrative techniques that help readers solve the inconsistencies resulting from various mismatches between the narrative content and narrative form. Thus, the study of the textual means that help readers construct a coherent mental representation of the different levels of the world represented in the story and the markers of point of view aspects proffer an explanation of literary reading experience, such as the immersion of readers into literary worlds of fictional texts by assuming various spatio-temporal positions and adopting characteristics and attitudes, perceptions and beliefs represented in the text.

Keywords: text world theory, text comprehension, narrative perspective, conceptualization, coherence

Introduction

In cognitive poetics the process of text comprehension is regarded as both a mental and emotional experience that allows readers to be “transported” by literary content via an imaginative projection into the world of the literary text. This activity presupposes a continuous mental process of decision-making and creative meaning construction combined with the emotional processes of experiencing the array of feelings evoked by the literary text. In this context, cognitive text studies use the metaphor of *transposition* in order to account for the process of text understanding. According to P. Stockwell, “this involves the reader adapting themselves to new conditions, taking on assumed characteristics and attitudes, even assumed perceptions and beliefs, in order to make sense of the literary scene” (*Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* 152). The text’s architecture of formal patterns and genre characteristics may enable readers or impede them to build a coherent representation of the world of the literary text.

In this paper the construction of meaningful, coherent text worlds is investigated with the aim of accounting for the reader’s sense-making processes and orientation in the short story *Solid Objects* by Virginia Woolf, a text which displays a complex narrative architectonics amplified by frequent and scarcely signaled shifts of perspective within different ontological planes or within the same level of fictional communication. In attaining the stated goal, we proceeded from the general overview of cognitive explanation of narrative comprehension mechanisms and its correlation with text world theory (TWT) focusing on the mechanics of text building processes, levels, constituting elements, and language indicators cuing various accessing and transitioning processes within the given text. The TWT in conjunction with narrative perspective and literary coherence theories have been applied to the selected piece of prose fiction in order to explain how fictional worlds are created and developed as the story runs. Our interest has particularly been directed to fragments of literary texture devoid of explicit text building elements, a property which amounts to text ambiguity and produces a low degree of coherence, thus soliciting additional efforts and expertise on the part of a reader in order to find their way through in the text.

Cognitive poetics proponents explain text comprehension by equating the process of seeing, understanding fiction to the phenomenon of seeing reality. The overall comprehension relies on several elements: the knowledge of the actual world readers bring to the text, the propositional content of the literary work, and its social and personal impact on the reader (*Ibid.* 154).

To account for the way readers process the information about characters and events while reading, Catherine Emmott developed the *contextual frame theory*. The basic notion involves the idea of a *contextual frame* – a mental representation of the circumstances included in the current context that are built from the text itself and inferences drawn directly from it (*Narrative Comprehension: A Discourse Perspective* 121). Thus, the knowledge construed from the episodes making up a narrative is regarded by Peter Stockwell, as “a series of ongoing and shifting mental representations of the world of the literary work” (Stockwell, *op. cit.* 155). Readers access different frames, i.e. experience *progressive frame switches*, a feature apparent in the structural organization of the narrative, following certain linguistic markers which roughly coincide with Teun A. van Dijk’s episode signals in narrative texts: paragraph indentations; time change markers (*in the meantime, the next day, etc.*) and tense changes; place change markers (*in Amsterdam, in the other room*); introduction of new individuals (often with indefinite articles) or reintroduction of known ones (with full noun phrases instead of pronouns); change of perspective markers, by different focalizing agencies or differences in time/aspect morphology of the verb, (free) indirect and direct style (*Episodes as Units of Discourse Analysis* 181).

A sense of incoherence is produced by instantaneous switch frames, i.e. when elements, actions, objects, simply appear or disappear, or turn up unannounced in another frame without being directly referenced or their entrance or exit predicated with a verb, or when discontinuities of time, place, and perspective take place.

The TWT advanced by Paul Werth in *Text Worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse* (1999) and developed later by Joanne Gavins in her work *Text World Theory. An Introduction* (2007) explicates how language, as well as the context in which it is produced and received, combined with readers’ own knowledge both about the world in general, and the story world of the fiction in particular, guides the participants in the discourse, i.e. readers, to build mental representations or text worlds, corresponding to readers’ actual world, for the situations, events being represented in the literary narratives.

Following Werth, TWT designates a complex cognitive phenomenon involving a three-leveled system. The highest level contains the *discourse world*, “the situational context surrounding the speech event itself” (*Text Worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse* 83). The discourse world is made up of resources of direct perception, which may be found on real

external circumstances, it is the particular act of linguistic communication, with participants occupying different spatial and temporal points. Using the terminology of narrative discourse, this is the level of non-fictional mediation which comprises the author and reader. The TWT treats the discourse participants as completely psychologised with a full repertoire of mental aspects, such as knowledge, beliefs, memories, dreams, intentions they draw upon while processing the language of the represented literary content.

A further level to the discourse world is that of *text world*, a construct formed from cognitive resources of memory and imagination and described by Paul Werth as “a deictic space, defined initially by the discourse itself, and specifically by the deictic and referential elements in it” (*Ibid.* 180). The text world is the situation rendered by the discourse, the story, i.e. set of represented events along with the characters and the circumstances attending those events. Unlike discourse worlds, text worlds are conceptual as they are mental representations which readers form in order to understand the discourse or the particular stylistic textualization of the content. The two basic component elements that activate the text worlds are *world-building elements* and *function-advancing propositions*. Peter Stockwell explains these elements as follows:

World-building elements constitute the background against which the foreground events of the text will take place. They include an orientation in time and place, and they create characters and other objects that furnish the text world available for reference. Function-advancing propositions propel the narrative or dynamic within the text world forward. They constitute the states, actions, events and processes, and any arguments or predications made in relation to the objects and characters in the text world. (*Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* 137)

On the level of discourse, *time* is construed from the tense and aspect systems of verbs, temporal adverbs and adverbial clauses. The *place* or *location* is constructed from locative adverbs, adverbial clauses and noun phrases specifying a place, verbs of motion, etc. Characters and objects are recoverable from the system of denomination, i.e. noun phrases (including proper names) and pronominals, definite reference (Gavins, *Text World Theory. An Introduction* 35-52). The world-building processes rely heavily on inference, as readers, while processing the literary text, assemble cues and combine them with their stored knowledge of the world, in general, and with the previously accumulated text knowledge in the *common ground*, a

term suggested by Paul Werth (*Text Worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse* 51).

Werth's version of text world theory also includes the concept of *subworld*, a further conceptual construct which originates from within text worlds forming thus a relation of inclusion with the matrix world from which it emerges. The degree of their actualization varies from being richly detailed to scarcely developed. Werth classifies these mental constructs as *deictic*, *attitudinal*, and *epistemic* (*Ibid.* 216). Deictic subworlds occur when there is a shift from the temporal or spatial coordinates of the main *text world*, signaled by the main line of the narrative, through flashbacks, flashforwards, the world within direct speech, or character's any view onto another scene. The switch from the text world to the deictic subworld is linguistically marked by shifts from the third to first and second person, a proximal-remote reversal, and other features deictically recentered on the speaker within the narrative. *Attitudinal subworlds* are subsequently classified into *desire worlds* (marked by predicates such as *wish*, *hope*, *dream*, *want*), *belief worlds* (marked by predicates such as *believe*, *know* and *think*) and *purpose worlds* (which include promises, threats, commands, offers and requests) of characters (Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* 140). *Epistemic subworlds* are introduced by such predicates as *would*, *will* and *should*, conditional constructions of the prototypical form *if...then...* and concern the degree of certainty expressed by a protagonist to a particular utterance and can be used to account for hypothetical situations or assumptions made by protagonists. Accessing epistemic subworlds involves shifts in time, location, character, and objects as a new textured world of possibility can be evoked (*Ibidem*).

Text worlds are construed from a particular perspective associated with one of the possible enactors inhabiting various levels of the text, such as from narrator's perspective belonging to the level of fictional mediation, in the case of the heterodiegetic narrative and offering accessibility to text worlds, or from the characters' perspective inhabiting the level of action and offering the accessibility to text worlds and text subworlds. Hence the narratological category of viewpoint is essential in building mental representations of the fictional context and world building elements functioning as point of view indicators that prompt the reader's shift into the text world of the literary prose fiction.

Multistage Analysis and Interpretation of Text World Building Processes in Virginia Woolf’s Short Story “Solid Objects”

The explicit linear cueing of conceptual domains helps readers construe a meaningful representation of the text content they are currently reading. The difficulty arises when the literary texture fails to provide the reader with sufficient language clues triggering the temporal, spatial, object, and character shifts within the text worlds and their respective subworlds. Virginia Woolf’s short story “Solid Objects” is an epitome of complex narrative abundant in scarcely signaled viewpoint shifts along all the constituting coordinates of narrative perspective, i.e. temporal, spatial, and personal. The story features the degradation of an upper class man, named John, a former member of Parliament who, after finding a piece of glass buried into the sand on the beach, develops a continuous liking for frequenting rubbish dumps and plots of waste ground in his pursuit of *objets trouvés*, being sustained by the belief that his searches will one day be rewarded. This unusual passion determines John to neglect his duties and gradually succumbs into seclusion completely retreating from society.

On the basis of the main tenets of the TWT and its connection with the narratological category of perspective, we suggest the following stages in the cognitive process of text world building in the literary piece under discussion:

1. Building a mental representation of the prepositional content and inferences drawn from each contextual frame or episode on the basis of specific text world building indices and function advancing proposition.
2. Attribution of this domain to a perspectival source: author, narrator, or character.
3. Identification of further shifts to subsequent text worlds or lower level subworlds originating from the above-mentioned entities
4. Integration of the text world or subworld mental representation into previously established *common ground* – the totality of information relevant for the comprehension of the current contextual frame. As Stockwell claims, in order for the reader to achieve a coherent representation of the story content, they have to rely on their lower-level capacities, which include the semantic processing of the propositional content of the text and inference, combined with

higher-level capacities, i.e. hypothesis-formation, analysis, deduction, etc., competences characteristic of a model reader (*Op. cit.* 155).

The reader's immersion into the text world under analysis by adopting the origo / point of view of the discursal or fictional entity whose characteristics, attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs are being represented in the text is rather difficult as the text displays an empty deictic centre, in Banfield's terms. These are sentences containing highly prominent elements of subjectivity, such as place and time deictics, demonstratives, quality adjectives revealing an entity's opinions, feelings or thoughts, exclamations, but devoid of the subjective entity who perceives the evoked story content, represented linguistically by subjective elements and constructions implying the mental states of a personal subject (*Describing the Unobserved: Events Grouped Around Empty Centre* 273).

Extract 1

(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. (D) Even thus in outline against the sand there was an unmistakable vitality in them; an indescribable vigour in the approach and withdrawal of the bodies, slight though it was, which proclaimed some violent argument issuing from the tiny mouths of the little round heads. (E) This was corroborated on closer view by the repeated lunging of a walking-stick on the right-hand side. (F) "You mean to tell me . . ." You actually believe . . ." thus the walking-stick on the right-hand side next the waves seemed to be asserting as it cut long straight stripes upon the sand. (Woolf, *Solid Objects* 54)

The initial extract of the story reveals a stationary distal perspective source (focalizer/conceptualizer/viewer) with a global scope of attention observing a gradually approaching entity – the perspectivized object (the object of focalization). The stated perceptual process is implied by the reader as no explicit verb of sense perception is used in this incipit. 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", a world building element the viewer is already familiar with. This fact can be inferred from the occurrence of the familiarizing article "the" in the quoted noun phrase. Hence sentence (A) represents the actualization of a synoptic

perspectival 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 (C) 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 (another world building element), but still reasonably distant since no more details are provided. Hence (A), (B), and (C) helps readers envisage the propositional content as three different versions or conceptualizations of the same scene.

Analyzing the subsequent sentences of the quoted excerpt, the progressive actualization of the text world is noticed, considerably modal in nature, cued by the following epistemic modal propositions stemming from the conceptualizer’s perceptual act and betraying its limited point of view: “*moment by moment it became more unmistakable [...]*”, “*there was an unmistakable vitality in them; an indescribable vigour in the approach [...]*”, “[...] *seemed to be asserting*”. Sentence (F) of the extract contains the fleeting shift to a subworld through the characters’ free direct speech in the scene “*You mean to tell me [...] You actually believe [...]*”. The lack of an attributive tag makes this stretch of discourse incoherent within the quoted context.

The content of the following four paragraphs are anchored within the same spatio-temporal frame announced as the story opens. What changes is the use of function-advancing propositions which propel the plot forward (Charles’ skimming the stones across the water, John’s childlike play in the sand and his digging up of the piece of glass out of the sand) and the vantage point which becomes now closer to the focalized scene with switches to perspective points situated at different ontological planes. The first shift to an external text world in relation to the main line of the narrative can be witnessed in the second cited extract, sentence (B):

Extract 2

(A) They flung themselves down by the six ribs and spine of the black pilchard boat. (B) You know how the body seems to shake itself free from an argument, and to apologize for a mood of exaltation; flinging itself down and expressing in the looseness of its attitude a readiness to take up with something new—whatever it may be that comes next to hand. (C) [...] and John, who had exclaimed “Politics be damned!” began burrowing his fingers down, down, into the sand. [...] (D) He remembered that, after digging for a little, the water oozes round your finger-tips; the hole then becomes a moat; a well; a spring; a secret channel to the sea. (E) As he was choosing which of these things to make it, still working his fingers in the water, they curled round something hard—a full drop of solid matter—and gradually dislodged a large irregular lump, and brought it to the surface. [...] (F) It was a lump of glass, so thick as to be almost opaque; [...] it was nothing but glass; it was almost a precious stone. (G) You had only to enclose it in a rim of gold, or pierce it with a wire, and it became a jewel [...]. (H) Perhaps after all it was really a gem; something worn by a dark Princess trailing her finger in the water as she sat in the stern of the boat and listened to the slaves singing as they rowed her across the Bay. (J) Or the oak sides of a sunk Elizabethan treasure-chest had split apart, and, rolled over and over, over and over, its emeralds had come at last to shore. (K) John turned it in his hands; he held it to the light [...]. (L) It pleased him; it puzzled him; it was so hard, so concentrated, so definite an object compared with the vague sea and the hazy shore. (*Ibid.* 54-55)

The shift from the main line of the narrative to a higher extradiegetic level of discourse, signaled by the generic second person pronoun *you*, the present tense, and epistemic modality (“*You know how the body seems to shake itself free from an argument...*”), disturbs the linearity of the action and, consequently, affects the coherence of the text. This stylistic peculiarity requires readers’ additional inference in order to solve the inconsistencies and incorporate the representation of the content into the already existing common ground. A similar discontinuity is produced in section (F) – (G), but, unlike the previous switch, the transition occurs without explicit indicators to a subworld which originates from the character’s subjectivity, namely John’s perception (sentences (F) and (G)), modality, and imagination (sentences (H) and (J)). The process of attaching various wonderful characteristics to the stone (“[...] *it was almost a precious stone. You had only to enclose it in a rim of gold, or pierce it with a wire, and it became a jewel*”), and wondering at hypothetical scenarios that might have brought it to the shore – a princess’s lost position or “*the oak sides of a sunk Elizabethan*

treasure-chest had split apart, and, rolled over and over, over and over” is ambiguous in terms of viewpoint attribution. The origin of perspective is mentioned only at the end of the paragraph (*John turned it in his hands; he held it to the light*) through a reverse switch to the previously established text world, accompanied by a subsequent shift to the same character’s attitudinal subworld: “*It pleased him; it puzzled him; it was so hard, so concentrated, so definite an object compared with the vague sea and the hazy shore*”.

A similar unmarked transition to a subworld occurs in the six paragraph of the text when the narrator shifts from his commentary on John’s impulse to keep the stone to the anthropomorphized stone’s free direct speech:

Extract 3

- (A) That impulse, too, may have been the impulse which leads a child to pick up one pebble on a path strewn with them [...] believing that the heart of the stone leaps with joy when it sees itself chosen from a million like it, to enjoy this bliss instead of a life of cold and wet upon the high road.
(B) “It might so easily have been any other of the millions of stones, but it was I, I, I!” (*Ibid.* 56)

The excerpt feels disjointed because the direct discourse of the supposedly sentient object is introduced without an attributive tag that would signal the source of the uttered content. As a consequence, the reader establishes an undeveloped subworld, ambiguous in terms of perspective ascription. The transition to this subworld is acknowledged though inference. The complete effacement of the telling agency in the end of the cited paragraph might read as a gradual actualization of the character’s perspective – John’s echoing of the presupposed delight experiences by the anthropomorphized object.

As the story unfolds, the pace of the narrative progression changes significantly. Now the narrator resorts to commentary intertwined with summary presentation and iterative telling of a sequence of events following the day when the stone was found which plot John’s steady decline into obsessive monomania and his retreat from the real world. The construction of the subsequent text worlds is deficient, mental representations being built mainly on implicit location indices and function advancing propositions. Such spatial elements as *mantelpiece, windows of curiosity shops, neighbourhood waste land, etc.* help readers envisage brief text world switches. The progression of the story line is occasionally interrupted by transitions to the ontologically higher discourse world of the author’s generalizing statements signaled by tense shifts to gnomic present, inclusive

personal pronoun we, and indefinite reference (sentences (B) in extracts 4 and 5):

Extract 4

(A) [...] the lump of glass had its place upon the mantelpiece [...] and served not only as an excellent paper-weight, but also as a natural stopping place for the young man's eyes when they wandered from his book. (B) Looked at again and again half consciously by a mind thinking of something else, any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it. (*Ibid.*)

Extract 5

(A) He now began to haunt the places which are most prolific of broken china, such as pieces of waste land between railway lines, sites of demolished houses, and commons in the neighbourhood of London. (B) But china is seldom thrown from a great height; it is one of the rarest of human actions. You have to find in conjunction a very high house, and a woman of such reckless impulse and passionate prejudice that she flings her jar or pot straight from the window without thought of who is below. (*Ibid.* 57-58)

The first sentence of extract 4 represents the main line of the narrative textualized in the telling mode and anchored in the narrator's text world. The implicit iterative nature of events account makes the construction of mental representations rather deficient. Although sentence (B) is thematically related to the preceding one, the perspective shift this time to the author's agency and henceforth the actualization of the respective discourse world takes place through generalizations that exceed the limited story frame. The same patterning of presentational modes and text world switches is replicated in extract 5.

Conclusions

The linear meaningful construction of text worlds in the short story "Solid Objects" by Virginia Woolf is hindered by the intricate architectonics of the text. First, the variation in presentational modes and durational aspects ranging from slow-down in the initial part of the story to speed-up in the rest of it, summarizing the whole of the main character's life in nearly half of the story, leads to reader's forceful adjustment to different actualization patterns of text worlds. Second, building consistent mental representations

of the given piece of prose fiction is precluded by linguistically scarce text worlds, as well as by constant unmarked alternation between the narrator's text world and the author's discourse world or between the narrator's text world and the character's subworlds. Hence the process of construing a coherent text world in the text under analysis relies heavily on inference and hypothesis making and their subsequent validation on the basis of evidence explicitly or implicitly provided on the level of the story and discourse. Another important factor in these cognitive procedures is the reader's sensitivity to point of view actualizations and shifts throughout the story.

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