Two kinds of perspective taking in narrative texts

Stefan Hinterwimmer, University of Cologne

In this paper, I argue for the existence of two distinct kinds of protagonists’ perspective taking in narrative texts. The first, Free Indirect Discourse (henceforth: FID) involves context-shifting, i.e. all context-sensitive expressions with the exception of pronouns and tenses are interpreted with respect to the fictional context of some salient protagonist (Schlenker 2004, Sharvit 2008, Eckardt 2014). The second, which I dub viewpoint shifting (henceforth: VS), does not involve context-shifting. Rather, a situation is described as it is perceived by a salient protagonist or in a way that reflects the doxastic state of such a protagonist, not with respect to the Common Ground (CG) of narrator and reader. Crucially, FID is only available at the level of non embedded matrix clauses (cf. Banfield 1982). Consequently, the temporal and spatial parameters of the protagonists’ contexts with respect to which the shiftable context-sensitive expressions are interpreted cannot be introduced by temporal adjunct clauses, for example. To see this, consider the contrast between (1a) and (1c), on the one hand, and (1b), on the other:

(1) a. On her way home, Mary heard a song that she liked on the radio. She would try to contact the singer via Facebook tomorrow.
   b. When Mary heard a song that she liked on the radio on her way home, she would try to contact the singer via Facebook tomorrow
   c. When Mary heard a song that she liked on the radio on her way home, she thought: “I will try to contact the singer via Facebook tomorrow”.

The final sentence in (1a), which is an instance of FID, can easily be interpreted as expressing a thought of Mary. The temporal adverb tomorrow is then interpreted with respect to the temporal parameter of Mary’s fictional context, i.e. it picks out the day following the day on which she has the thought, while both the third person pronoun and the past tense marking on would are interpreted with respect to the narrator’s context (Schlenker 2004, Eckardt 2014). The main clause in (1b), in contrast, cannot be interpreted this way. Consequently, it sounds extremely awkward. The variant in (1c), where Mary’s thought is explicitly introduced in the main clause and its content is given in Direct Discourse mode (DD), is fine again. Now consider the text fragment in (2), which describes the thoughts of the ego-narrator, a young man who takes care of his younger brother Toph after the death of their parents, in the following situation: The ego-narrator has spent the night with a woman away from home, while Toph has slept at a friend’s house, and is afraid of Toph being home before him.

(2) I wanted to be home in case he came back early ... made it in time. ... The house was empty, and I dove into bed, fell back asleep, and when he came back home his brother was there, of course had been there the whole time, of course had never left. (D. Eggers, A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, p. 112, cited in B. Dancygier 2012, p. 62).

The main clause of the sentence in italics can only be understood with respect to Toph’s perspective, not the perspective of the ego-narrator: First, it would be extremely weird for the ego-narrator to refer to himself as his brother. Secondly, the ego-narrator obviously knows that the proposition denoted by that clause is false, while Toph can plausibly be assumed to consider it true. At the same time, the clause is not an instance of FID: First, the spatial and temporal parameters for the then required context with Toph as author would have to be provided by the when-clause – which we have seen to be impossible in (1b). Secondly, since deictic local adverbs are shiftable, there would have had to be replaced by here since it clearly refers to the place where Toph is at the relevant time. To see this, consider the variant of (2) given in (3) with the relevant clause in DD, where only here is acceptable.
(3) I wanted to be home in case he came back early ... made it in time. ... The house was empty, and I dove into bed, fell back asleep, and when he came back home, he thought: „My brother is here/there, of course has been here/there the whole time, of course has never left“.

The main clause of the sentence in italics in (2) thus involves a different kind of perspective taking, namely VS. Consider next the main clause of the sentence in italics in (4b): As shown by the contrast with the relevant sentence in (4a), the second occurrence of the indefinite can only be interpreted as picking up the T-Rex introduced in the first sentence – in violation of the Novelty Condition (Heim 1982) or Maximize Presupposition! (Heim 1991, Singh 2011) – because the main clause is automatically interpreted as describing the scene in a way that is compatible with Billy’s doxastic state, not the CG of reader and narrator.

(4) a. [The T-Rex], hesitated. Maybe the little dinosaurs had hidden themselves in the cave on his left. [A T-Rex]/[The T-Rex], bent down to the entrance of the cave and squinted into the dark
b. [The T-Rex], hesitated. Maybe the little dinosaurs had hidden themselves in the cave on his left. When Billy looked up in his hiding place a few seconds later, [a T-Rex], bent down to the entrance of the cave and squinted into the dark.

Again, it is clear that we are not dealing with an instance of FID: First, the temporal and spatial parameters of the then required protagonist’s context would be introduced by a when-clause, which, as we have seen, is impossible. Secondly, it strikes me as extremely implausible that the main clause is interpreted as a conscious thought of Billy. From the contrasts considered I conclude that two radically different mechanisms are at play in FID and VS. In FID, a speech or thought act of some salient protagonist is accommodated, which goes along with the introduction of a second context in addition to the narrator’s context (as in Eckardt 2014) – namely the context in which the respective speech or thought act has occurred and whose temporal and spatial parameters are provided by the eventuality introduced by the preceding sentence. The sentence that is interpreted with respect to the narrator’s as well as the salient protagonist’s context then provides the content of the respective speech or thought act. Since only independent sentences can be interpreted as speech or thought acts, contrasts like the one between (1a) and (1b) are expected.

Concerning VS, in contrast, I assume that a covert operator can be inserted at the level of finite clauses which takes the eventuality predicate denoted by the respective clause as its argument and returns an eventuality predicate that has the following properties: It characterizes perceiving eventualities e whose experiencer is a contextually determined prominent individual x such that in all worlds that are compatible with x’s doxastic state at the time of e the proposition is true that there is an eventuality satisfying the eventuality predicate denoted by the clause to which the covert operator has been adjoined. I assume that whenever an individual x consciously perceives an eventuality e, the proposition that e has occurred is automatically added to the set of propositions that are true in all worlds compatible with what x believes. Crucially, this does not mean that x has a conscious thought whose content is the respective proposition. The sketched account is flexible enough to handle both cases like (2), where a protagonist draws a false conclusion from a perceived eventuality, and ones like (4b), where an actually occurring eventuality is described in a way that is compatible with the relevant protagonist’s doxastic state. The entire sentence in italics in (4b), for example, is then interpreted as shown in strongly simplified form in (5), where DOX(billy)/(τ(e’))(w) is the set of worlds compatible with Billy’s beliefs at the time of e’ in w. The sentence in italics in (2) receives a similar interpretation, with the relevant perceiving eventuality presumably being one of Toph seeing his brother lying in bed and sleeping (or hearing him snore).
(5) \[ \lambda w. \forall e e' \left[ \text{look\_up}(e)(w) \land \text{Agent}(e, \text{billy})(w) \land \text{perceive}(e')(w) \land \text{Experiencer}(e', \text{billy})(w) \land \forall w' \in \text{DOX}(\text{billy})(\tau(e'))(w) \left[ \exists e'' \exists x \left[ \text{bend\_down}(e'')(w') \land \text{T-Rex}(x)(w') \land \text{Agent}(e'', x)(w') \right] \land \text{overlap}(\tau(e), \tau(e'))(w) \right] \right] \land \text{overlap}(\tau(e), \tau(e'))(w) \] 

**Selected References:**