

Blazing the narrative path: Motion events and narrative structure in the English pear stories

Nicholas A. Lester
University of California, Santa Barbara

Theorists concerned with the verbalization of experience have proposed that language use is at its core processual, highlighting the immediacy and interactivity of a multitude of cognitive domains as they are brought to bear on the task of linguistic encoding or comprehension. One method which has proved fruitful for investigating the nature of this process empirically has been the elicitation of online narrative (Chafe, 1980). An important finding which has come out of such research is that translational motion, along with its corollary 'path,' plays an important role in the structuring of narrative. More specifically motion and path have been shown to provide structure both within and without the 'narrative domain' or 'story world' (Chafe, 1980; Talmy, 2000). For example, we use motion in a local sense to characterize spatial relationships between characters in a story, but globally to trace developmental trajectories of plots or individual psyches. We also use motion to navigate subjective paths, most commonly when we shift our viewpoint or perspective with respect to a more-or-less static conceptual scene (Talmy, 2000). I argue in this paper that these various uses of motion can all be subsumed under a higher-order process – namely, the creation of a 'narrative path' which is built up locally through the individual actions of characters, but which persists as an abstract organizational principle. Furthermore, this path provides a crucial source of continuity and orientation for the conceptualizer throughout the online process of narrative production.

I examine the 455 translational motion events contained in the original sample of 20 English pear stories (Chafe, 1980), paying special attention to those instances of volitional motion carried out by an animate trajector. Through a quantitative analysis, I attempt to characterize several of the fundamental properties of the narrative path and its relation to the conceptualizer and the process of narrative construction.

I discuss three primary aspects of these events as organizational tools – narrative function, path creation and maintenance, and motion discontinuity. The first of these concerns the correlation between motion type and narrative function. Past research has suggested that intransitive motion predicates can be used in a presentative function to introduce new participants into the on-going discourse; however, this analysis takes that claim one step further by arguing that participants can be introduced differently depending on their motion status within the context of the overall discourse. Consider the following excerpt, in which the man with the goat is introduced as a trajector with the deictic *come* in (1), with more specific details about the manner of his motion to follow in (3):

1. And a man comes along with a goat,
2. And the goat obviously is interested in the pears. ...
3. But the man just .. walks by with the goat.

The second aspect relates to the co-construction of the narrative path at both local and global image-schematic levels, particularly through the use of path-specifying satellites such as *along*, *up*, *by*, *back*. These satellites cluster around localized event frames at various positions along the narrative path, which suggests an additional orientational function. For instance, the use of *along* in (1) gives us information about the man's entering the current scene, while *by* in (3) situates the man within the current scene, though all actions are fitted to the underlying path-shape established schematically by *come*.

Finally, I discuss the endpoints of motion segments and their importance to the construction of the narrative path. When motion ends, salient zones of action within the overarching narrative are established. The establishment and abandonment of such zones appear to correlate with the episodic boundaries discussed by Chafe (1987).

References

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