

AGENCY, PLOT, AND A STRUCTURAL AFFECT THEORY OF LITERARY STORY  
COMPREHENSION

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For Festschrift in Honor of Elrud Ibsch

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When a reader is lost in a book, the wheels of comprehension move on many levels. Most of the wheels need to be in working order and the wheels must mesh in harmony. Damage to a single wheel can spoil the entire experience. This chapter focuses on three wheels that need to mesh when adults comprehend literary short stories: plot, agents, and emotions. The plot consists of a structured configuration of events, actions, goals, plans, and conflicts among protagonists. The agents include the story characters and the pragmatic agents (i.e., narrator, narratee, reader, writer). Each of these agents has a point of view that witnesses some of the actions and events in the plot. Regarding emotions, it is important to track the emotions of both the characters and the reader as the plot unfolds. Our contention is that a captivating short story has a clever plot, has multiple agents with different points of view, has a complex texture of emotions, and has harmony among these components. No doubt, there are other wheels that amplify the aesthetic experience, such as novelty, metaphor, and stylistics (Gibbs, 1999; Ibsch, Schram, & Steen, 1991; Schmidt, 1982; Steen, 1994). But our contention is that plot, agency, and emotions are central.

Brewer's structural affect theory was the first model in discourse psychology that seriously attempted to integrate plot, agency, and emotions (Brewer, 1996; Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1981; Brewer & Ohtsuka, 1988). According to this theory, the emotions of the reader are systematically determined by the configuration of the plot and the knowledge states of various agents. For example, consider what happens when the reader has the emotion of surprise. The author withholds critical information at the beginning of the story, information that is necessary for a correct interpretation of the story. Later on, the critical information is revealed, which triggers surprise in the reader. The emotion of suspense is set up quite differently. There is an initiating event that has the potential to lead to a significant outcome,

which may be good or bad for a central character. The reader comprehends an intervening set of events and actions in anticipation of the significant outcome. For example, suppose that a man in a mask puts a bomb in a car. The reader expects the negative outcome of the bomb exploding and killing an important character. But the reader does not know exactly when this negative outcome will occur. The reader experiences suspense, episode after episode, until the negative outcome occurs. A good writer can prolong the suspense with many episodes. A clever writer includes “false alarm” episodes, i.e., a negative outcome is expected during an episode but never occurs. The writer controls the tension and arousal of the reader as the reader experiences a complex texture of emotions. As a good experimental psychologist, Brewer tested his model by (a) manipulating features of the text and knowledge states of the reader and (b) observing whether these manipulations systematically predicted readers’ self reports of particular emotions and how much they liked the story. The structural affect theory fared quite well in accounting for the psychological data.

It is somewhat remarkable that there has not been more research to follow up on Brewer’s structural affect theory. Most of the follow-up research on suspense is covered in a book edited by Vorderer, Wulff, and Friedrichsen (1996), but other reader emotions (such as surprise and curiosity) have not received much attention. There has been a large amount of research on the emotions that readers experience while comprehending narrative (Cupchik, Oatley, & Vorderer, 1998; Miall & Kuiken, 1994; Tan, 1995) and a separate line of research on the construction of plots (Graesser, Golding, & Long, 1991; Jose & Brewer, 1984; Lehnert, 1981; Trabasso & van den Broek, 1985), but these two bodies of research are more detached than tightly integrated. One might have expected a flurry of research activity that maps plots to reader emotion after Brewer introduced the structural affect theory.

The role of agency is central to structural affect theory. It is critical to keep track of the knowledge states of the various characters and of the reader in order to set up suspense and other reader emotions. For example, the reader may know that the car has a bomb and the masked rogue may also know it, but other character agents may be totally ignorant, e.g., the victim who enters the car, an innocent bystander, and the victim's wife in another city. This dissociation in knowledge between the pragmatic agent (reader, writer, narrator, narratee) and a character agent creates a dramatic tension and makes the story interesting. The suspense can even be recreated when the story is read multiple times (Gerrig, 1993). When the reader has privileged knowledge that is not known by a particular character, there is the question of whether the reader is capable of keeping these different mental perspectives straight. In the case of suspense, the reader is at least partially successful in keeping track of the knowledge of different agents. Otherwise, suspense would not work. Suspense would die if all of the characters in the storyworld knew about the bomb in the car. The emotion of surprise also involves a discrepancy in knowledge states among agents; in this case, the writer and narrator know about the surprising event, but not the narratee and reader.

We have recently investigated the extent to which readers track the various agents when literary short stories are comprehended (Graesser, Bowers, Olde, & Pomeroy, ; Graesser, Bowers, Olde, White, & Person, 1999; Graesser, Bowers, Bayen, & Hu, in press; Graesser, Swamer, & Hu, 1997). Comprehenders potentially construct multiple agents in their cognitive representations when they read a story. Each agent has human qualities, such as speaking, perceiving, believing, knowing, wanting, liking, acting, and experiencing emotions. The characters in a story constitute one ensemble of agents. The protagonists and antagonists are presumably more salient in the reader's mind than are the minor characters and the characters

who are functionally props. Another ensemble of agents, called the pragmatic agents, participate in a one-sided communication from the narrator to the narratee, or from the author to the reader. The narrator is the agent who presents the story to an imaginary addressee or recipient, called the narratee. The author is the actual person who writes the story whereas the reader is either an actual or virtual reader of the story. The notion that there are multiple agents, multiple voices, and multiple conversations between agents has been assumed by virtually all scholars in narratology, literature, and literary criticism (Bakhtin, 1981; Banfield, 1982; Chafe, 1994; Duchan, Bruder, & Hewitt, 1995; Prince, 1982; Van Peer & Chatman, in press). However, the “multiagent view” has only recently been investigated by discourse psychologists who investigate the comprehension of *bona fide* literature (Duchan et al., 1995; Millis, 1995). Our contention is that an appropriate tracking of agents, in a society of story agents, is very critical for setting up a plot that works and for creating the intended reader response.

The present chapter briefly describes two lines of research that assess agent tracking in the minds of adult readers while they read literary stories. Graesser et al. (1999) investigated the extent to which readers could remember “who said what?” after they finished reading a literary short story. Graesser, Bowers et al. (in press) investigated the extent to which readers keep track of “who knows what?”. We await future research to explore the tracking of “who saw what?”, “who heard what?”, “who wants what?”, “who experienced what emotion?”, and so on.

Ideally, the reader should be able to keep the various agents distinct and should faithfully update each agent on all dimensions as the story unfolds. From a computational perspective, however, an accurate tracking of agents would be a very difficult achievement. Suppose there were 10 symbolic expressions associated with proposition P: X said P, X liked P, X wanted P, X knew P, X saw P, X heard P, etc. Suppose further that there were 20 agents in the storyworld

and 1000 propositions about the storyworld. There would be  $10 \times 20 \times 1000 = 200,000$  expressions to evaluate. There would indeed be a combinatorial explosion problem when viewed from this computational perspective. If the human mind is capable of pulling this off, that would be a remarkable achievement. However, there may be cognitive representations and strategies to circumvent the combinatorial explosion. According to research in discourse psychology, there are psychological constraints on the process of constructing mental microworlds, so ideal complete representations are frequently not constructed (Graesser, Kessler, Kreuz, & McLain-Allen, 1998; Graesser, Singer, & Trabasso, 1994; Kintsch, 1998; Zwaan & Radvansky, 1998).

#### The Salience of Character Agents and Pragmatic Agents in Memory: Tracking “Who Said What?”

Adult readers are perhaps able to keep the various pragmatic agents and character agents distinct in their minds. In essence, the reader processes the storyworld on multiple tracks (one per agent) and multiple communication channels between particular agents. However, tracking the agents and communication channels may be difficult because sometimes two or more agents are intentionally amalgamated by the author. This is illustrated by contrasting first-, second-, and third-person narration.

First-person narrator. I opened the letter and read my own obituary.

Second-person narrator. You open the letter and read your own obituary.

Third-person narrator. She opened the letter and read her own obituary.

The narrator agent is amalgamated with a character agent in the case of first-person narration.

The narrator takes the point of view of one character and speaks to the narratee through that character's eyes. This allows the reader to see the world and experience consciousness from the point of view of the character. When the story has a second-person narrator, there is an

amalgamation of four agents: narrator, narratee, character, and reader. By fusing the reader with the other three agents, the author attempts to sweep up the reader as a participant in the storyworld and thereby increase reader involvement. The narrator and character agents are functionally separated in third-person narration. The separation facilitates any attempt to discriminate the different mental perspectives. When the third-person narrator is omniscient, the narrator sits above the storyworld, with a privileged access to the mental states of all characters, and tells the story to the narratee.

Graesser, Bowers, et al. (1999) investigated whether there are differences in the relative salience of agents in long-term memory after literary stories are read. The psychological status of the pragmatic agents has always been controversial in the case of written text because many of these agents are invisible or minimally constrained by the explicit text (Duchan et al., 1995; Gerrig, 1993). Authors do not normally introduce themselves explicitly in the text (e.g., "I am Art Graesser and I am going to report some research on ..."). Similarly, third-person narrators do not normally introduce themselves (e.g., "I am the narrator and I will be telling you the story about ...."). The text virtually never refers to the narratee and the reader. Pragmatic agents are linguistically and visually co-present in oral, face-to-face conversations (Clark, 1996), but pragmatic agents are not normally co-present when printed text is read. If readers do construct the pragmatic agents during reading, they do this without obvious cues in the text that unambiguously refer to the existence of authors, readers, narrators, and narratees.

Graesser, Bowers, et al. tested some predictions about the relative salience of narrator and character agents. An agent amalgamation hypothesis predicts that amalgamated agents are more salient during comprehension and subsequent memory than agents that are not amalgamated. Amalgamated agents have multiple roles and functions, so they are part of more levels of

structure (i.e., storyworld versus pragmatic context), have more associations with other text constituents, have more retrieval routes, and have richer elaborations. According to the agent amalgamation hypothesis, there is the following gradient in salience among three types of narrators: third-person narrator < first-person narrator < second-person narrator. Moreover, those character agents who are not affiliated with a pragmatic agent (hereafter referred to a nonnarrator character agents) are predicted to be less salient than the character agents who are affiliated with first- and second-person narrators. Our corpus of literary stories ended up including first-person and third-person narration, but not second-person narration (second person narrations are rare in the English language). Therefore, the agent amalgamation hypothesis generates two predictions about the relative salience of agents in first-person and third-person stories.

Prediction 1: third-person narrator < first-person narrator

Prediction 2: nonnarrator character agent < first-person narrator

The agent amalgamation hypothesis does not offer a prediction about the relative salience of a third-person narrator and a nonnarrator character agent.

Communication theories (Jacobson, 1960; Reddy, 1979; Rosenblatt, 1978) make different predictions than the agent amalgamation hypothesis. Communication theories assume there are multiple levels of embedded communication and that the top levels are more salient than the bottom levels. Suppose, for example, that the following sentence occurred in a story with a third-person narrator: “Adam told Bob that the boss said that Bob would be fired.” There would be three levels of communication in this example (Bruce, 1981), as represented below.

TOP LEVEL: told (narrator, narratee, SECOND LEVEL)

SECOND LEVEL: told (Adam, Bob, THIRD LEVEL)

THIRD LEVEL: told (boss, Adam, (Bob would be fired))

A structural analysis predicts that the narrator and narratee are the most salient agents because they are at the top level. If the agents at the superordinate levels of structure are more salient than the agents at the subordinate levels, then there is the following predicted gradient in salience: (narrator, narratee) > (Adam, Bob) > (boss). A structural prominence hypothesis generates the following prediction about the relative salience of agents.

Prediction 3: third-person narrator > nonnarrator character agent

An invisible third-person narrator hypothesis generates a prediction that is directly incompatible with the structural prominence hypothesis.

Prediction 4: third-person narrator < nonnarrator character agent

The invisible third-person narrator hypothesis is consistent with those theories which assume that readers do not notice the third person narrator unless there are obvious features in the text that reveal the existence of that narrator (Banfield, 1982; Duchan, Bruder, & Hewitt, 1995; Gerrig, 1993). A strong form of this hypothesis predicts that the salience of the third-person narrator is zero, unless the text has explicit cues that flag the existence of the narrator. A weak form of this hypothesis generates prediction 4, but allows for the possibility of an above-zero salience of the third-person narrator.

The study by Graesser, Bowers, et al. (1999) tested the predictions of the agent amalgamation hypothesis, the structural prominence hypothesis, and the invisible third-person agent hypothesis. A sample of 120 college students read one of the 10 literary short stories in the corpus. The 10 literary short stories were written by professional authors. Five stories were written in first-person perspective and 5 in the third-person perspective. For example, one of the first-person stories was "What men love for" (Dale Ray Phillips, 1989) and one of the third-

person stories were "Conscience of the cop" (William Fay, 1956). The stories ranged in length from 9 to 18 pages and were judged to be sufficiently captivating for college students. Each story contained at least two prominent characters (designated here as characters A and B) and a narrator.

After reading the story, the participants completed a source memory test on a set of speech acts (statements) expressed in the story. The source memory test measures how accurately the participant can remember who said what. The original test statements were expressed by either the narrator, character A, or character B, but each test statement conceivably could have been expressed by any of the three agents. That is, we did not select test statements in which the speaker could be reconstructed by sophisticated guessing strategies. There were four answer options available to the subjects when they gave source memory judgments for each statement, as illustrated below.

Who said that if forced to choose someone else to sleep with, Vicky would choose Jim?

Vicky [the narrator]

David [character A]

Jim [character B]

Neither [none of the three agents said it because it was not a true statement ]

The "Neither" test statements were systematically generated by transforming the original statements. For example, the yoked statement for the example statement was: "Who said that if forced to choose someone else to sleep with, David would choose Michele?". (Michelle was another character in the story). Different versions of the test booklets were prepared for each story so that any given statement was sometimes in the original form and sometimes in the transformed false form.

Measures of agent salience supported the invisible third-person narrator hypothesis and the agent amalgamation hypotheses, but not the structural prominence hypothesis. The results followed the following pattern on a gradient from low to high salience: First-person narrator > nonnarrator character > third-person narrator > 0. One measure of agent salience is simply the proportion of source memory decisions that are correct. These scores were .75, .62, and .53 for first-person narrator, nonnarrator character, and third-person narrator, respectively. Given that there are four response options, .25 is chance performance. Additional measures were collected that partialled out guessing biases and that segregated source memory from statement detection. Source memory assesses whether the reader can remember "who said what" after they finish reading a literary story. Source memory is to be distinguished from "statement detection", which is memory for the content of what is said (i.e., discriminating whether the statement is true or false from the standpoint of the storyworld). The measure of source memory for the narrator was computed as  $N/(N+A+B)$  for the items in which the narrator spoke; N, A, and B refer to the number of decisions for the narrator, character A, and character B, respectively, when the correct response was the narrator. Similarly,  $A/(N+A+B)$  was the measure of source memory when character A was the speaker and  $B/(N+A+B)$  was the measure of source memory when character B was the speaker; an average source memory was computed for the two characters. Once again, the results supported the predictions of the agent amalgamation hypothesis (predictions 1 and 2) and the invisible third-person narrator hypothesis (prediction 4), but not the structural prominence hypothesis (prediction 3). The source memory scores were .84, .73, and .65 for first-person narrator, nonnarrator character, and third-person narrator, respectively. In contrast, a measure of statement detection did not differ significantly among the different classes of agents. This measure is the proportion of observations in which the participant decided that one of the

agents spoke (N, A, or B), given that the narrator spoke or one of the characters spoke. Statement detection scores were .89, .85, and .81 for first-person narrator, nonnarrator character, and third-person narrator, respectively. Graesser, Bowers et al. (in press) conducted a number of follow up studies that ruled out potential confounding variables (e.g., sophisticated guessing, text features, story reading time) and that assessed the generality of the findings across readers (e.g., the gender, verbal ability, literary expertise). The source memory effects could not be explained by potential confounding variables and robustly persisted across readers with different abilities.

There are at least at least two practical implications of these results from the standpoint of crafting a text in a fashion that assists the reader in tracking agents. First, the third-person narrator is nearly invisible, so there needs to be explicit cues to designate its existence. Sometimes text cues can do this (e.g., “I’m going to tell you the story about ...”). In this age of film and talking heads on computers, the narrator can be depicted in a visual animated form. Second, the first-person narrator is very salient, so this is an excellent way of magnifying the psychological state of a particular character agent. When the storyworld is viewed from the perspective of the first-person narrator, the filter may be incomplete or distorted, but readers will better be able to keep track of the character’s point of view. Scholars in literature and literary criticism have perhaps known this for many years, but the Graesser, Bowers, et al study was the first to substantiate the claim in a psychology experiment.

#### Propagating Knowledge in a Story World: Tracking Who Knows What?

The reader needs to accurately track the knowledge of characters in order to comprehend and have an appropriate emotional response to some stories. For example, consider *Oedipus Rex*, the Greek drama by Sophocles. At one point in the story, Oedipus is ignorant of his own identity, the fact that he murdered his father, and the fact that he married his mother. However,

these facts are known by the sightless prophet Teresias and the audience. The meaning of Oedipus Rex would indeed be very different if Oedipus was fully aware of his identity when he murdered his father and married his mother. Some of the readers' emotional reactions would shift from suspense to horror. An adequate understanding and appreciation of a story requires an accurate tracking of "who knows what".

Suppose that the following speech act is expressed by a character in a story: "Glenda told her husband that she has cancer." The propositional content of this speech act (i.e., "Glenda has cancer") is potentially propagated among various character agents in the storyworld. Glenda and her husband obviously know proposition P as a consequence of the speech act, but who else in the storyworld knows it. The doctor should know it, but will their children, their friends, and strangers. Will it take time for the knowledge to propagate, as the news travels through networks of kinship, friendship, and acquaintances. Knowledge propagation may spontaneously occur when speech acts are comprehended during reading, but an alternative possibility is that knowledge propagation primarily occurs when readers are probed with "who knows what?" questions.

Graesser et al. (1999) conducted a study that assessed knowledge tracking among character agents in literary short stories. College students read literary short stories and subsequently rated whether particular characters had knowledge of the information expressed in the speech acts. The stories and speech acts were the same as those used in the Graesser, Bowers et al. (in press) study except that the test involved knowledge ratings (who knows what?) instead of a test of source memory (who said what?). There was a 6-point character knowledge rating scale, varying from 1 (character definitely does not know proposition P) to 6 (character definitely

does know proposition P). Mean ratings were collected for different classes of character agents in the storyworld.

The classification of agents in the storyworld was contingent on the speaker of the speech act in the story. For example a “Friend” would be regarded as a story character who is a friend of the speaker. We adopted Clark’s definitions of conversational roles when considering those agents in the scene of the conversation where the speech act occurred (Clark, 1996). These categories and definitions are shown in Table 1, under “in scene of conversation”. These categories include the speaker (S), addressee (A), side participant (SP), and overhearer (O). For example, in the story “Almost Her” by Bridget Mazur (1993), there is a conversation in which Jim says that he sent Michelle poems. Jim is addressing Dave, but Vicky is at the same table. A bartender is nearby whereas several other characters are not present in the scene of the conversation. Jim is assigned the role of the speaker, Dave the addressee, Vicky a side participant, and the bartender an overhearer. When Jim utters the speech act, the knowledge is presumably propagated systematically among the other characters. These character agents who are in the scene of the conversation should have a much higher likelihood of knowing P than would the character agents who are “out of the scene of conversation.” Affiliation status should predict the knowledge propagation for these out-of-scene agents: friend, acquaintance, disliked person, or stranger to the speaker (see Table 1). We would expect knowledge to be propagated to agents who have a close affiliation to the speaker by virtue of auxiliary conversations, i.e., conversations other than the one with the speech act under consideration.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Table 1 shows the mean knowledge ratings that college students gave to the characters in the various classes of agents. Graesser et al. (1999) reported that the pattern of ratings were compatible with the following principles of knowledge propagation

(1) Speaker primacy. The speaker has the most knowledge of the content expressed by the speaker. The

predicted pattern is:  $S > \max(\text{remaining classes of agents})$ . That is, the mean for the speakers should be

higher than the highest mean among the other classes of characters.

(2) Conversational circle. The parties of a conversation have more knowledge of the information expressed in the conversation than do characters who are not part of the conversation. The predicted

pattern is:  $\min(S, A, SP) > \max(O, F, AQ, D, ST)$ . That is, the lowest mean of S, A, and SP should be

higher than the highest mean of O, F, AQ, D, and ST.

(3) Spatial proximity. Characters who are spatially near a conversation (within hearing distance) should have more knowledge of the information in the conversation than characters who are distant from the conversation. One prediction is overhearer-friend  $> F$ .

Another prediction is overhearer-nonfriend  $> ST$ .

(4) Affiliation. Friends of the speaker in a conversation should have more knowledge of the information in the conversation than should nonfriends. The predicted gradient is  $F > AQ > ST$ .

These results indicate that readers can discriminatively track the knowledge of character agents in a storyworld. The results could have turned out quite differently. It may have been the case

that the reader simply assumes that the characters know what the reader knows. That would predict equivalent ratings for all of the agent classes in Table 1. However, this egocentric perspective was not supported by the data. The knowledge ratings robustly differed among agent categories: speaker > addressee = side participant > overhearer > out-of-scene friend > disliked person > acquaintance > stranger.

The Graesser et al. (1999) study performed follow-up research that dissected the psychological processes that apparently explain knowledge propagation. They assessed the extent to which the knowledge ratings were affected by the episodic retrieval of the speech acts from long-term memory, by the reconstruction of information from different sources (i.e., full story, story summary, character key, versus content of speech act), and by differences among readers. However, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss such mechanisms. The important point, from the present standpoint, is that readers are quite discriminating and systematic in knowledge tracking. This result is compatible with our claim that the tracking of agents needs to mesh with plot and reader emotions. Interesting stories have a systematic mapping among agents, plot, and emotions. For this to happen, readers need to be able to track character knowledge with some accuracy.

#### Closing Comment

We have not yet discovered most of the interesting links among plot, agency, and emotion. Just a handful of mappings have been identified, as in the case of Brewer's structural affect theory. We hope that more plot-agency-emotion interactions are explored in the future research agendas of IGEL scholars and scientists. It will take serious interdisciplinary projects between literary scholars and social scientists in order to identify these interactions and to

formulate theories that explain them. But such interdisciplinary projects are at the heart of the IGEL enterprise.

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Table 1

Knowledge Ratings (Who Knows What?) for Different Classes of Character Agents (based on Graesser, Bowers, Olde, White, & Person, 1999).

Category of Agent	Mean Rating	Definition
<u>In Scene of</u>		
<u>Conversation</u>		
Speaker (S)	5.61	The character who utters the speech act
Addressee (A)	5.15	The character who hears the speaker, is recognized as a participant in the conversation, and is the recipient of the utterance
Side Participant (SP)	5.08	A character who hears the speaker, is recognized as a participant in the conversation, and is <u>not</u> the addressee
Overhearer (O)	4.05	A character who hears the speaker but is not openly recognized as a participant in the conversation. Clark (1996) segregates this further into bystanders (whose presence is recognized by the speaker) and eavesdroppers (whose presence is not recognized by the speaker)
<u>Out of Scene</u>		
<u>of Conversation</u>		
Friend (F)	2.90	A character who has an intimate personal relationship with the speaker, such as a close friend or family member

Acquaintance (AQ)	1.93	A character who the speaker has met, but does not know well
Disliked Character (D)	2.23	A character who the speaker knows but does not like
Stranger (ST)		A character who the speaker has not met.
Important	1.87	
Unimportant	1.39	

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