Zoltán Vecsey

Introduction: Linguistic and literary aspects of perspectivity

Abstract: The relationship between meaning and perspectivity has been recognized for a long time both in linguistics and in literary theory. It is well-known that the perspectival character of our sensory experiences constitutes an important factor in the determination of meaning. But the nature of the relationship between meaning and perspective is heavily contested. Perspectival phenomena are sometimes treated as isolated or local issues. In some cases, however, they are conceived of as playing a fundamental role in scientific theorizing. This introductory paper gives a short overview of the current trends and results from this ongoing research.

1 Perspective as a natural language phenomenon

Like other fundamental terms such as "meaning," "content," and "possible world," the term "perspective" has multiple uses in the literature of contemporary theoretical linguistics. One can broadly differentiate between two main interpretive approaches.

The first kind of approach is oriented primarily on the perceptual aspect of the phenomenon. Perspectivity is identified here with the point of view of individual language users, where "point of view" is understood simply as an ineliminable element of perceptual experiences. Perspectival phenomena are, accordingly, explained by the necessary subject-relativity of the processes of seeing, hearing, and touching. The indexical system of pronominal, spatial, and temporal expressions is often thought to be the clearest sign of the presence of this kind of subject-relativity (i.e., perspectivity) in natural languages.

Zoltán Vecsey: MTA-DE Research Group for Theoretical Linguistics. E-mail: vecseyz@freemail.hu

The second kind of approach focuses on the cognitive dimension of perceptual processes. The technical term "perspectivity" denotes, in such contexts, a more comprehensive phenomenon. In perceiving their inmediate environment, language users integrate sensory data into an internal spatiotemporal map of the world. Environmental informations are supposed to be structured in a perspectival manner in these maps. Because creating an internal map involves a set of diverse cognitive functions, such as planning, decision-making, and social cognition, perspectivity is thought of as comprising a set of diverse expressions. Beyond the paradigmatic cases of indexicals, attitude verbs, evidentials, adjectives, and possessive constructions are mentioned most frequently as possible examples of perspectival expressions.

The crucial difference between these interpretive approaches lies not so much in their underlying theoretical assumptions, but in the breadth of their scope. Most linguists would presumably agree that natural language meaning is determined, at least to a certain extent, by perspectival facts. There is less consensus, however, as to whether this determination is of a local or global significance. It might be thought that only a restricted set of meaningful expressions depends directly on the processes of perspectival perception. If this is so, perceptual perspective taking may have only a local effect on linguistic theorizing. But it is also reasonable to suppose that we are faced with a phenomenon that has important implications for many, if not all, fields of linguistics.

The localist stance was first adopted in the works of David Kaplan and John Perry. In working on the formal theory of indexicals, Kaplan (1989) pointed out that demonstrative pronouns are semantically incomplete expressions that must be completed by a demonstration. The distinguishing feature of demonstrations is that they present their demonstrata from a certain perspective. Each context determines a relevant place and a relevant time and thus each context determines a particular perspective for a demonstration. Therefore, if a particular demonstration is successful, it presents an object that looks in a certain way from here now. Kaplan argues persuasively that without these contextual mechanisms, "this" and "that" would not be genuinely referential expressions. Although agentive perspective belongs to the extralinguistic realm, it plays an essential role in the determination of the meaning of demonstrative pronouns.

In a similar spirit, Perry (1979) emphasizes that the usage of a certain set of expressions is necessarily connected to an egocentric perspective. Language users must identify the place they occupy as "here" and they must think of the time of their activity as "now" if they want to think of themselves as rational agents. The rules governing the use of the first person pronoun "I" are also tightly connected to rational agency. Perry emphasizes that in certain belief contexts the first person pronoun cannot be replaced by other expressions referring to the

same person. For example, if Perry believes that "I am making a mess," his belief seems capable of explaining why he changes the way he acts. But it is very unlikely that the belief "John Perry is making a mess" can play an analogous explanatory role because Perry may fail to recognize himself as John Perry. This example nicely illustrates that in certain contexts the phenomenon of first-person perspective is ineliminable from the explanation of our behavior. Interestingly, even those who criticize Perry's example are prepared to admit the existence of perspectival facts. Cappelen and Dever (2013) are of the opinion that there are no deep epistemic and linguistic problems around the usage of the pronoun "I." According to their view, perspectivity is "real but shallow." This is intended to mean that although some of our knowledge about ourselves is perspectival, our overall worldview is not a view from a first-person perspective. But taken in itself, this claim is nothing more than a tacit acceptance of the localist stance on perspectivity.

The most typical examples of the globalist stance can be found today in the works of cognitive linguists. In their survey of the field, William Croft and Alan Cruse (2004) argue that cognitive linguistics is based on three fundamental principles. First, the cognitive theory holds that language is not an autonomous cognitive faculty. This is the opposite of what is held by the adherents of generative grammar. Generative linguists think that language is an autonomous faculty or module that is separated from other cognitive abilities. Second, in the cognitive model, grammar is viewed as a kind of conceptualization. This view is opposed to truth-conditional semantics, in which grammar is conceived as a device that generates true and false statements. Third, in connection with the first two principles, it is claimed that knowledge of language emerges from language use. That is, cognitive linguists maintain that our knowledge and conception of syntactic, semantic, and lexical structures are rooted in the context of concrete interactions.

In a series of works, Leonard Talmy and Ronald W. Langacker have recently argued that the term "perspective" serves a bridging function in the framework of cognitive linguistics. Talmy (2000, 2008) conceives of perspective as a schematic system. The role of this system is to provide a conceptual vantage point from which the objects of reference can be cognitively accessed. Since it is coordinated with other schematic systems, perspective taking is supposed to be closely linked to the conceptualization of many grammatical forms. Langacker (2008) emphasizes the dynamic nature of these conceptualizations. In his terminology, perspective taking is a "viewing arrangement" that unfolds through the dialogical process of linguistic interactions. Viewing arrangements can thus be thought of as dynamically evolving relations between the agents of the interaction and the things being "viewed." Langacker remarks – in agreeing with the approach taken

by Talmy – that several different kinds of grammatical categories can be involved in such relations.

Brian MacWhinney (2005, 2008) takes a more broad-minded position within the cognitive linguistic framework. According to MacWhinney, the phenomena of perspective taking and perspective sharing are of central importance for the understanding of human cognition in general, and natural language structures in particular. In order to analyze in detail the dependence relations between cognitive viewpoints and linguistic perspectivity, MacWhinney developed a quite complex approach that he called the "perspective hypothesis." The cognitive modules retain their schematic features in this hypothesis, but now they are seen as grounded in embodied reasoning. The advantage of this extended approach is that it is supported by a wide array of empirical evidence. For example, cognitive constructs like body image matching, spatial projection, and empathy can be explained by reference to data obtained from neurophysiological research. In general, MacWhinney's perspective hypothesis aims to offer a new, empirically supported picture about the linkage between language, society, and the brain. Natural language appears in this picture as a means of social interaction that activates the mental processes of perspective taking and perspective sharing.

2 Literary-theoretical accounts of perspective

With regard to the use of the term "perspective," linguists and literary scholars find themselves in an analogous situation today. On the one hand, perspectivity can be associated with many aspects of literary works, beginning with authorial intentions and ending with the interpretive activities of readers. It follows from this that the term cannot be assigned a contextually invariant univocal meaning. On the other hand, in most theories of literature perspectivity retains something of its original perceptual connotations. It is plausible to suppose, then, that the treatment of perspective has a common conceptual core in different literary theories. As we have seen above, something similar can be observed within the realm of contemporary linguistics.

It is worth mentioning that there is a large body of literature within which perspective is conceived as a purely philosophical problem. For philosophers, the central question concerns the ontological and metaphysical status of literary characters. Seen from an internal point of view, protagonists of literary works like Sherlock Holmes or Anna Karenina are concrete individuals who have the same kind of properties as real people. But from an external point of view, they seem to have a quite different ontological status. As objects of literary criticism, Holmes and Karenina are merely fictional entities that have only fictional properties, if

they have properties at all. Amie Thomasson (1999) and other realist-minded philosophers attempt to resolve this tension by regarding characters as created abstract objects. Antirealists like Mark Sainsbury (2010) reject the real existence of fictional entites and claim that characters have only presupposition-relative existence conditions.

Traditionally, narratologists are not very interested in such exclusively philosophical problems. The dichotomy between internal and external points of view is treated in narratological works rather in terms of narrative mode: the question of perspective is, after all, the question of who mediates the happenings of a story. The distinction between the narrator mode and the reflector mode proved to be theoretically useful in this respect. While the external view of the narrator provides an unrestricted access to the happenings of the story, the internal view is limited to the knowledge of the reflector figure.

Monika Fludernik (2009) has recently developed a new version of this traditional account. On Fludernik's model, it is more essential to understand who has access to the minds of others than to identify the vantage point of the narrator. Instead of distinguishing between unrestricted and restricted perspectives, Fludernik uses the idea of embodied and impersonal narratorial media. "Embodied" means that an anthropomorphic figure is the narrating agent who interprets what she/he sees and who can make self-reflexive statements. "Impersonal" means, in contrast, that the the narrator is unable to make reflexive statements about her/his experiences.

Wolf Schmid's recent work on narrative theory provides a further alternative to the traditional account. Narratologists often think of perspectivization as a means for modifying a preexisting story. Schmid (2010) draws attention to the fact, however, that perspective taking is a constitutive element of storytelling. There are no stories without the structuring effects of perspectivization. In the absence of vantage points, literary texts would consist only of "amorphous happenings." Perspectivization is therefore not only an accidental operation among the structuring processes of storytelling. Quite the contrary, it plays a fundamental role that helps to integrate the multiple layers of narratives into meaningful units.

3 The present situation in research on perspectivity

In the last few decades, the debate around the nature and function of perspectivity has raised a number of conceptual, methodological, and empirical issues

both in linguistics and in literary theory. The central aim of the present collection of papers is to highlight the variety of ways in which this debate can be reframed.

In applying the framework of social cognitive linguistics, the first paper analyzes the pragmatic role of two kinds of vantage point in literary discourses. The first of these is the so-called referential center, which functions as a basis for the spatio-temporal and interpersonal relations of the narrative. The second is the vantage point of the subject of consciousness, which plays a central role in providing access to the mental processes of the participants of the story. The paper demonstrates the applicability of this two-tiered approach by an extended analysis of Faulkner's short story *That Will Be Fine*.

The second paper takes as its starting point the widely held view that authorial intentions have no proper place in the critical analysis of literary works. Many think that the opinions of authors on their own work may be of theoretical significance only in historical or legal contexts of interpretation. But some results have accumulated in the last decades in evolutionary psychology and cognitive theory that cast doubt on the correctness of this assumption. In the light of these results, one can argue that respecting authorial intentions does not lead to interpretive fallacies, but helps in understanding the fictional status of narrative texts. This is especially so in reading experiences: the clearest cases in which authorial intentions are theoretically relevant are precisely those in which readers are forced to take a global perspective on the text.

The next paper aims to differentiate various social forms of language use on the basis of the communicative intentions of the interacting agents. Communicative intentions are typically effected by a complex interplay of perspectives. Verbal interactions are evidently dependent on agentive perspectives, but in order to infer and evaluate the intentions of their partners correctly, hearers must mobilize the resources of their own point of view. The success of various forms of everyday language use is therefore dependent on the extent to which speakers' and hearers' perspectives are matched to each other.

The fourth paper illustrates a new framework that is based on Pierre-Yves Raccah's semantic theory of perspectivity. If the notion of perspective is defined in relation to both the idea of polyphony and that of presupposition, their interrelation can serve as a foundation of a semantic framework that can account for all instances of linguistic meaning without making reference to anything like informational, conceptual or mental content. This would help to clarify the conditions under which linguistic units construct meaning. And it would also elucidate why perspective taking has an explanatory priority over reference.

The fifth paper is concerned with an extension of the Kaplanian double-index theory of indexicals to the semantics of fictional discourse. According to Kaplan's

theory, the content of indexical sentences is determined on the basis of a particular collection of contextual parameters. Contents are then evaluated for truth with respect to an actual or counterfactual circumstance. But this two-step procedure seems to yield intuitively incorrect results in certain kinds of language use. For example, indexical sentences occasionally shift their content in fictional contexts, which may result in different truth value assignments. Such problematic cases can be explained away, however, if one introduces a specific perspectival element into the formal representation of contexts.

The aim of the last paper is to investigate the role of the "omniscient third-person narrator" in the interpretive activities of readers. It is commonly held that readers accept the narrator's utterances as true and regard the narrator as an authentic and "omniscient" person on the ground of typological and generic norms. Alternatively, one can argue that the confidence on the readers' part is a consequence of a grammatical feature of the narrative discourse, namely, the absence of the narrating-I. This feature is also present in scope-free representations that are not bound by scope-operators. There is good reason to think, then, that the truth ascribed to third-person narratives is a consequence of the scope-representational processing and storage of the information conveyed in form of a fictional narrative.

References

Cappelen, Herman & Josh Dever. 2013. *The inessential indexical*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Croft, William & Alan Cruse. 2004. *Cognitive linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fludernik, Monika. 2009. *An introduction to narratology*. London & New York: Routledge.

Kaplan, David. 1989. Demonstratives. In Joseph Almog, John Perry & Howard Wettstein (eds.), *Themes from Kaplan*, 481–563. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Langacker, Ronald W. 2008. *Cognitive grammar: A basic introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

MacWhinney, Brian. 2005. The emergence of grammar from perspective. In Diane Pecher & Rolf A. Zwaan (eds.), *Grounding cognition: The role of perception and action in memory, language, and thinking*, 198–223. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

MacWhinney, Brian. 2008. How mental models encode embodied linguistic perspectives. In Roberta Klatzky, Brian MacWhinney & Marlene Behrmann (eds.), *Embodiment, ego-space, and action*, 365–405. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Perry, John. 1979. The problem of the essential indexical. *Nous* 13. 3–21.

Sainsbury, Mark. 2010. *Fiction and fictionalism*. New York: Routledge.

Schmid, Wolf. 2010. *Narratology: An introduction*. Berlin & New York: De Gruyter.

Talmy, Leonard. 2000. *Toward a cognitive semantics*, vols. 1 & 2. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Talmy, Leonard. 2008. Aspects of attention in language. In Peter Robinson & Nick Ellis (eds.), *Handbook of cognitive linguistics and second language acquisition*, 27–38. New York, Routledge.

Thomasson, Amie. 1999. *Fiction and metaphysics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bionote

Zoltán Vecsey (b. 1965) is a research associate at MTA-DE Research Group for Theoretical Linguistics <vecseyz@freemail.hu>. His research interests include formal semantics, logic, and epistemology. His publications include *Names and objects: On the semantics of proper names* (in Hungarian, 2007); "On the epistemic status of borderline cases" (2012); "Borderline cases and definiteness" (2012); and "Epistemic modals: A cross-theoretical approach" (2013).