

Style in Fiction Symposium (SIFS)

International Symposium, 11th March 2006, Lancaster University

Narrative anchors and the processes of story construction: the case of Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin*

Barbara Dancygier

The University of British Columbia, Canada

The concept of *meaning construction* has become a central shared idea among (by now numerous) theories in cognitive linguistics. The term was coined to represent the fact that describing the senses of simple linguistic expressions cannot fully account for the resulting interpretation of a complex expression which contains them. Instead, words and other linguistic forms can be treated as prompts for the construction of meaning, and the analyst's task is both to identify the meaning chunks the expressions prompt for, and, perhaps more importantly, to describe the processes which explain the construction of the higher levels of meaning.

In retrospect, Leech and Short's *Style in Fiction* can be seen as a book which first talked in clear theoretical terms about meaning construction in a literary text. And indeed, literary discourse is a perfect example of an expression mode where the emerging interpretation relies on the use of specific expressions, but cannot be fully explained through those expressions alone.

In the paper, I will identify some of the aspects of meaning construction in narrative fiction, using *The Blind Assassin* as an example. Atwood's novel is a very interesting representative of a category of fiction narratives which, at least ostensibly, tell more than one story, and profile the presence of more than one author and/or narrator. Reading (and interpreting) requires, among other things, that the different stories be constructed into a coherent emergent story, which, in turn, requires re-assignment of authorial and narratorial roles, shifts of viewpoint, and revised understanding of the identity of main characters. In some texts, as in *The Blind Assassin*, some aspects of the emergent story can be interpreted differently based on what constructional choices the reader makes.

I will focus on introducing the concept of *narrative anchors* – aspects of narrative structure which have a special status as prompts in the construction of the emergent story, and instantiated, among others, by referential expressions, aspects of setting, concrete objects, event types, and character traits. Using the theory of mental spaces and conceptual integration as my framework, I will show how their recurring presence in the narrative influences the shifts and re-evaluations in the emergent story. I will also argue, referring to other examples of prose fiction, that narrative anchors (even when less conspicuous) are necessary for the reader to build an interpretation of any

fiction narrative. Finally, I will explore the correlation between the aspects of story construction relying on narrative anchors, and those prompted by the comprehension of temporal order.