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Exploring Meaning Construction in Narrative Discourse

This paper proposes an analytical framework for meaning construction that is based upon two separate but compatible models in cognitive science. The first model explores a mechanism of information retrieval (Hintzman, 1984, 2010), and the second model investigates the interaction between language and cognition (Perlovsky, 2009). I shall argue that these two models, one operating on a horizontal axis, and the other operating on a vertical axis, can work effectively to explore how we understand new information on the basis of existing experience, such as when reading a fictional narrative.

According to Hintzman (1984), the process of memory retrieval operates upon interaction between secondary memory (SM) and primary memory (PM) in that PM sends out retrieval cues to SM, and receives a series of parallel and simultaneous 'echoes' that are drawn upon a pool of episodic memory traces in SM. The most activated information in this retrieval process is the one that receives the strongest echo.

Perlovsky (2009), with the focus on neural networks, proposes a dual model based on dynamic logic, which implements both top-down and bottom-up mechanisms to evolve vague and uncertain models into crisp and specific models in both language and cognition (see also Barsalou, 1999, 2008). Both models are hierarchical, and employ a similarity measure to restrict or allow information process.

I shall argue in this paper that a combined framework based upon these two models can account for crucial aspects involved in meaning construction when processing a narrative discourse. This combined framework will be illustrated through the analysis of Terry Pratchett's text Witches Abroad (1991), which calls upon the reader's existing knowledge of classic fairy tales for the construal of a magical story in Discworld.

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