Interaction through Text Worlds

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1. Introduction

In this paper I will show how the notion of text worlds can be used in order to account for the reader's active interaction with a literary text. My analysis of the text is based on Werth's study on text worlds and sub-worlds, which is elaborated on in *Text Worlds* (Werth 1999). I will, therefore, begin by giving a brief overview of his approach to the study of text worlds. Then, following the way Werth uses to explain how the text worlds are constructed, I will examine some extracts from a short story *Crossing Spider Creek* by Dan O'Brien (Appendix), showing some diagrams which I assume illustrate mental constructs projected from the text. Furthermore, from a standpoint of stylistics, I will discuss the effects of thought presentation in this story, whereby the readers are required to be actively involved in building up mental worlds as they read.

2. Werth's approach to text worlds

A discourse, as Werth points out, is not only a combination of a text and its relevant context, but also a language event which consists of situations including participants, i.e. speakers (producers) and hearers (recipients). These participants inhabit a *discourse world*. He also notes that, through the medium of a discourse, participants construct a conceptual space of understanding called a *text world* depending on their resources of memory and imagination. Sentient entities at the text-world level are characters, but not participants. Therefore, when we, as hearers or readers, receive a complex utterance, we make sense of it by building up mental constructs, i.e.

a text world, backed up by relevant knowledge (1994: 90; 1999: 17).[1]

Sub-worlds, which can be viewed as inner worlds projected from the text world, are created either by the participants or by the characters. Though the characters are not responsible for the construction of the text world they inhabit, they are responsible for the sub-worlds they create. Such character worlds are called *character-accessible sub-worlds* and the participants (e.g. readers) have no access to any entity in them. These types of sub-worlds do not have enough information for the reader to assess the truth or probability of their propositions. For example, the world created by an episode from a character's memory is character-accessible because it does not carry 'the same reliability for the reader as a narration vouched for directly by the author' (Werth 1999: 219).

3. The mental worlds in *Crossing Spider Creek*
3.1 The text world creation

The beginning of a story is, in general, of particular interest to readers and of crucial importance in establishing the fictional world in their mind. Some literary texts, for example, use a device called *in medias res*, whereby the reader is thrown into the middle of a situation by the occurrence of a definite article, deictic terms and so on. With a little less impact compared to such works, the story examined here starts with introduction of characters by the use of indefinite articles. So the reader mentally constructs a text world with something like a distanced bird's-eye viewpoint. Sentences are numbered for convenience of reference.

(1) Here is a seriously injured man on a frightened horse.
(2) They are high in the Rocky Mountains at the junction of the Roosevelt Trail and Spider Creek. (3) Tom has tried to coax the horse into the freezing water twice before. (4) Both times the horse started to cross then lost its nerve, swung around violently, and lunged back up the bank. (5) The pivot and surge of power had been nearly too much for

Tom. (6) Both times he almost lost his grip on the saddle horn and fell into the boulders of the creek bank. (7) Both times, when it seemed his hold would fail, he had thought of his wife, Carol. (8) He will try the crossing once more. (9) It will take all the strength he has left.

In order to describe the present state of affairs in the main text world, sentences (1) to (3) provide information about world-building elements such as the time, place, entities and relevant relationships between them. Among them, the reader's attention is probably directed to a human character *an injured man*, which is modified by the phrase *on a frightened horse*. Once a configuration of characters and a location in the fictional world is established in this way, the reader retains it in the mind, assuming that it remains as introduced until the text signifies change in the entities. Thus, the anaphoric use of the definite article in (3) allows the readers to associate the noun phrase *the horse* with *a frightened horse*, i.e. one of the characters present in the text world that has just been created. Similarly, to make sense of the proper noun *Tom*, readers will be more likely to identify *Tom* with *an injured man* since they are already aware of the existence of an anonymous character in the mental world than to update it by adding another character named Tom. This tentative matching is to be confirmed when the expression *Tom's injury* is provided in the following paragraph of this story.

The present perfect and the temporal deictic adverb *before* in sentence (3) serve to set up a scene in the recent past, which is delineated in (4) to (7). Sentences (4) to (7) depict the preceding events, i.e. the past situation where Tom tries to cross the creek on the horse two times. The text world which this part of the story creates can be conceptualised as one of the previous stages of the present text world because it represents the events in which the same characters were involved at the same location. Therefore I would consider this series of text worlds to be text-world updating from the preceding text world (T1) to the current one (T2) with temporal divergence indicat-

ed by the tense shift (Figure 1). The events in T1, which in a strict sense do not take place simultaneously and consequently refer to different temporal points in the past, are presented in the past tense and described within a single text world by the repetitive use of *both times*.
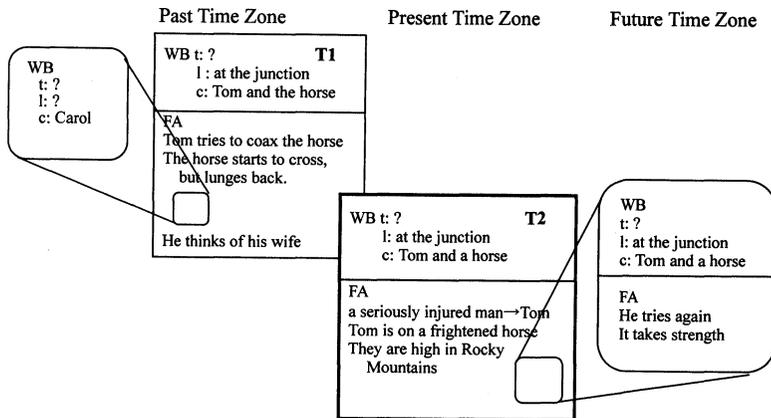

Figure 1

WB (World-building elements) t = time, l = location, c = character

FA (Function-advancing propositions): new information for setting up a text world

Text worlds are shown as squares, while sub-worlds are shown as rounded squares.

3.2 Preliminary Indications of sub-worlds

As for the above extract, the establishment of sub-worlds is also worth mentioning because they are to be depicted fully in the following paragraphs. In fact, detailed representations of the sub-worlds account for the most part of this short story. First, the narrator's representation of the character's thought act in the latter half of sentence (7). This sentence builds up a deictic sub-world, which involves spatial transfer from the text world (T1). This mental representation deals with what is occurring in Tom's mind, presumably

a scene from his memory and the like, with no specific reference to time and place. Next, the last two sentences (8) and (9), and specifically the modal auxiliary *will*, function as a clue to set up an epistemic sub-world regarding a notion of probability in the future-time zone. Although sentence (8) seems ambiguous in the sense that it can be interpreted either as the narrator's representation of the character's intention or as the narrator's prediction about a future event, sentence (8) as well as (9) conveys some degree of probability with regard to a future state of affairs. Consequently, these sentences prompt temporal extension of the fictional world in the reader's mind.

The sub-worlds mentioned above do not reveal their details to the reader at this point; in other words, it is narratively incomplete. They are character-accessible sub-worlds which the reader cannot assess for their truth or probability. For instance, we cannot decide whether Tom will try crossing the creek again, let alone whether he will succeed or not. Nonetheless, the reader maintains these sub-worlds in consciousness while reading on the following part of the story even if the text does not overtly represent any related events. This accounts for the reader's active involvement with the text during the process of interpreting it.

4. Tense varieties
4.1 Time in the discourse world and the text world

Strictly speaking, the writer's discourse world and that of the reader's are not absolutely identical in a written discourse. The situation of text production by the writer and that of text processing by the reader are normally different. But both the writer and the reader are there for a common purpose, i.e. to construct a text world by way of the text. On the other hand, temporal/spatial differences between the fictional world and the discourse world are far more distinct; characters and readers are, in general, separate. It is, however, possible that the readers feel psychologically close to the characters in fiction. One of the ways to make this happen is to synchronise the

discourse world with the text world, and vice versa.

　　The following extract helps the reader to refresh the text world, by which the gap in time between the discourse world and the text world becomes less obvious.

　　　　This is not the Old West.　It is nineteen eighty-seven, autumn, a nice day near the beginning of elk season.　Two days ago Tom had led the horse, his camp packed in panniers hung over the saddle, up this same trail.　He had some trouble getting the horse to cross the creek but it hadn't been bad.　This was a colt, Carol's colt and well broke to lead. It had come across without much fuss.　But that was before the nice weather had swelled Spider Creek with runoff, and of course the colt had not had the smell of blood in his nostrils.

Negation in the first sentence has a foregrounding effect on the reader's understanding of the time of the situation.　It seems as if the narrator directly interacts with the reader.　By denying the assumption that 'this is the Old West', the reader's awareness of time in the text world is heightened.　In fact, knowledge stored away from real life experience may well cause the reader to assume that the fictional time reference of this story is in the distant past because Tom uses a horse for transportation and has no electronic communication tools.　Thus, by challenging the assumption that the reader may have, the narrator refreshes and reinforces the notion about the location in time.

　　It is also probable that the present tense in the second sentence *It is nineteen eighty-seven, autumn...* affects the way in which the reader processes the whole text.　The present tense in this sentence contributes to generating synchronicity of the discourse world and the text world.　It brings us to the deictic centre of time and gives an impression that we are also in the text world of 1987, watching a state of affairs in progress on the spot.　From a viewpoint of the

discourse world in which the reader interprets the text and envisages mental pictures of the story, however, the year 1987 is usually viewed as a time in the past. As a result, what happens in 1987 can be perceived mentally at a distance because of its temporal remoteness. For these reasons, it is not only necessary but also effective to emphasize that this is not a story in the past. This foregrounding technique makes it possible to put the reader into a fictional situation, or into a position where the reader can share dramatic tension with the character.

4.2 Time in the sub-world

The deviant representation of time in the text world in this story seems to have caused a two-fold use of the tense system which refers to its sub-worlds. The paragraph quoted above builds up a deictic sub-world, where Tom crossed Spider Creek two days earlier. This sub-world can be referred to as a flashback.[2] An example of the diagram for the above extract is given below.


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┌─────────────────────────────────────────┐
│            DISCOURSE WORLD                │
│   ┌───────────────────────────────┐       │
│   │          TEXT WORLD            │       │
│   │ WB t: 1987, autumn (Present tense) │   │
│   │      l: at the junction        │       │
│   │      c: Tom & the horse        │       │
│   │ FA   It is a nice day.         │       │
│   │   ╭───────────────────────╮    │       │
│   │   │      SUB-WORLD         │    │       │
│   │   │     (FLASHBACK)        │    │       │
│   │   │ WB t: two days ago     │    │       │
│   │   │       (Past tense)     │    │       │
│   │   │     l: at the junction │    │       │
│   │   │     c: Tom & the horse │    │       │
│   │   │ FA                     │    │       │
│   │   │ Tom leads the horse.   │    │       │
│   │   │ It comes across…       │    │       │
│   │   ╰───────────────────────╯    │       │
│   └───────────────────────────────┘       │
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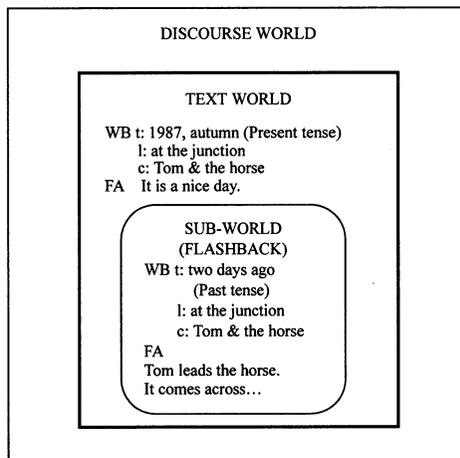
Figure 2

The sentence *Two days ago Tom had led the horse...*, in particular, shows a conceptual clash in terms of reference points in time. The time deictic adverb *ago*, which denotes a period of time measured back from the present to a point in the past, occurs with the past perfect, which refers to an event or a situation prior to a reference point that is in the past. The event and state of 'two days ago' are represented in the past tense as well as in the past perfect even in a single sentence. I reproduce it with italics below.

> He *had* some trouble getting the horse to cross the creek but
> it *hadn't been* bad.

When decoded in the discourse world, the temporal deictic zero-point in the text world can be viewed as a point in the past although it is textually represented as the present as in *It is nineteen eighty-seven*. The event time in this sub-world, therefore, is shown not only as a reference point in the past by the character, but also as a past-in-the-past by the participants of the discourse world such as readers of the text.

5. Sub-worlds and thought presentations

In the previous sections I examined how the text is monitored by the reader in terms of text world construction, referring to temporal parameters in particular. Now this section focuses on the way the narrator describes these worlds and how it affects the reader's interpretation of the story.

The sub-world where the character Carol inhabits, discussed briefly in 3.2, contains no other entities presented so far (see Figure 1). The following extract sheds light on the sub-world that has been temporally retained in the reader's mind, but not a newly-built one. The readers look back on their mental record of all the fictional worlds and highlight the one which accords with the description.

As shown below, details are provided by means of thought presentations, which, as Werth notes, 'offer the reader privileged entry into

the mental processes of a character' (1999: 221). For ease of reference, I give numbers to each sentence.

(1) Tom knows that it is the loss of blood that is making him so weak. (2) He wonders if that is why his thoughts keep wandering from what he is trying to do here, with the horse, to Carol. (3) She has never understood his desire to be alone. (4) From time to time, over the years, she has complained that he cares less for her than solitude. (5) He has always known that is not true. (6) But still it seems vaguely funny to him that now she is all he wants to think about. (7) He wishes she could know that, hopes he will have a chance to tell her.

(8) Perhaps it is being on this particular horse, he thinks, the one Carol likes better than any of the others. (9) Maybe Carol has spent enough time with this horse to have become part of it.

(10) The horse moves nervously under him as he reins it around to face the water again. (11) Tom wishes there were a way to ease the animal through this. (12) But there is not, and there is clearly little time. (13) There is just this one last chance.

Sentences (1) and (2) with verbs of cognition *know* and *wonder* are internal representations of Tom's thoughts. What he thinks is reported by the narrator in the form of so-called Indirect Thought (IT). In sentences (3) and (4), on the other hand, the reporting clauses such as *he thinks* are omitted and the character's flow of thought is represented as a mixture of direct and indirect features of thought presentation known as Free Indirect Thought (FIT). Due to the effect of the preceding FIT mode and the verb of cognition *know*, sentence (5) can also be interpreted as FIT though it looks, at first sight, like IT. The distinction is not absolutely clear-cut, as is often the case. Nonetheless, we go back to an obvious case of the

IT presentation in sentence (6).

Sentence (8), with the reporting clause inverted, seems to be DT, whereas sentence (9) seems ambiguous in that it can be interpreted either as DT with no reporting clause or quotation marks[3] or, alternatively, as FIT. Whichever mode is being used here, however, these two presentations of thought allow the reader to see things from the character's stance. Such modal adverbs as *perhaps* and *maybe* as well as the proximal deixis *this* also indicate Tom's point of view, so we feel as if we are reading his mind. In this way, the use of FIT enables the reader to see things from the character's viewpoint, so that the reader can feel close to Tom and even sympathise with him (Leech & Short 1981: 336 - 48; Short 1996: 311 - 9).

Character's worlds are basically those which characters create and separate from the participants of the discourse world such as readers (Werth 1999:213). But the passage with IT slipping into DT or FIT, as we have seen in this section, makes the reader feel progressively more compassionate towards characters. This occurs by virtue of the creation of the character's world that the reader is allowed to have access to. In other words, the readers take the position of a participant in the text world, namely the character's position, and then become responsible for creating the sub-worlds on their own. Therefore, the sentences (12) and (13) above seem to be not only the narrator's or the character's representation of thought, but also the representation of thought projected onto the reader's mind, as if the voices of the three were merged into one.

6. Concluding remarks

Interestingly, the last paragraph of *Crossing Spider Creek* gives us a descriptive scene where 'a man' and 'a horse' are characterised as follows.

Here is a seriously injured man on a frightened horse. They are standing at the edge of Spider Creek, the horse's trembling front feet in the water and the man's spurs held

an inch from the horse's flanks.

We can easily recognise that the first sentence of the paragraph quoted above is exactly the same as the first sentence of the whole story. Although the characters are introduced by the use of indefinite articles, the readers are able to associate those characters with 'Tom' and 'Carol's colt' in the text world that they mentally keep hold of. Depending on knowledge gained from the rest of the text, the readers are also able to understand that the close-ups of the scene, such as *at the edge, front feet*, and *the man's spurs*, are crucial elements which signal the start of the characters' future action. These interpretations are available through the text world and the sub-worlds the readers have already constructed in their minds.

The effective use of thought presentations has made it possible for the readers to relate themselves to the character. As a result, they are led to see the situation and contemplate the future possibilities in the same manner as the character. With all the interaction taking place while a stretch of text is processed, the last paragraph of this story seems to initiate a fictional world, which can be developed by the readers themselves. The above paragraph, in fact, sounds like the beginning of another story.

Notes

1. The concept of text worlds has similarities with that of 'mental space' (Fauconnier 1985) and some others put forth by cognitive linguists. With
. regard to Fauconnier's mental space theory, however, Werth argues that "the fact that it is essentially based on a sentence perspective makes it ultimately unsatisfactory as a fully integrated language theory" (1999: 77), which seems acceptable.

2. In figure 2, I present the events that happened 'two days ago' as a sub-world, while in figure 1 I explain them in terms of text world updating. The distinction, as Werth notes, is not always obvious but there can be some 'overlapping cases' (Werth 1999: 218). The extract in question mainly describes the sequence of events just as Tom's recollection of the past or flashback (a sub-world). In fact, the deictic determiner 'this' implies that

we see things from his viewpoint.

3. Such freer forms of DT were formally classified as Free Direct Thought (Leech & Short 1981: 337).

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Appendix

Crossing Spider Creek
Dan O'Brien

Here is a seriously injured man on a frightened horse.

They are high in the Rocky Mountains at the junction of the Roosevelt Trail and Spider Creek. Tom has tried to coax the horse into the freezing water twice before. Both times the horse started to cross then lost its nerve, swung around violently, and lunged back up the bank. The pivot and surge of power had been nearly too much for Tom. Both times he almost lost his grip on the saddle horn and fell into the boulders of the creek bank. Both times, when it seemed his hold would fail, he had thought of his wife, Carol. He will try the crossing once more. It will take all the strength he has left.

This is not the Old West. It is nineteen eighty-seven, autumn, a nice day near the beginning of elk season. Two days ago Tom had led the horse, his camp packed in panniers hung over the saddle, up this same trail. He had some trouble getting the horse to cross the creek but it hadn't been bad. This was a colt, Carol's colt and well broke to lead. It had come across without much fuss. But that was before the nice weather had swelled Spider Creek with runoff, and of course the colt had not had the smell of blood in his nostrils.

Tom's injury is a compound fracture of the right femur. He has wrapped it tightly with an extra cotton shirt but he cannot stop the bleeding. The blood covers the right shoulder of the horse, the rifle scabbard, and the saddle from the seat to the stirrup. Tom knows that it is the loss of blood that is making him so weak. He wonders if that is why his thoughts keep wandering from what he is trying to do here, with the horse, to Carol. She has never understood his desire to be alone. From time to time, over the years, she has complained that he cares less for her than solitude. He has always known that is not true. But still it seems vaguely funny to him that now she is all he wants to think about. He wishes she could know that, hopes he will have a chance to tell her.

Perhaps it is being on this particular horse, he thinks, the one Carol likes better than any of the others. Maybe Carol has spent enough time with this horse to have become part of it.

The horse moves nervously under him as he reins it around to face the water again. Tom wishes there were a way to ease the animal through this. But there is not, and there is clearly little time. There is just this one last chance.

They begin to move slowly down the bank again. It will be all or nothing. If the horse makes it across Spider Creek they will simply ride down the trail, be at a campground in twenty minutes. There are other hunters there. They will get him to a hospital. If the horse refuses and spins in fear, Tom will fall. The horse will clamber up the bank and stand aloof, quaking with terror and forever out of reach. Tom sees himself bleeding to death, alone, by the cascading icy water.

As the horse stretches out its nose to sniff at the water, Tom thinks that there might be time, if he falls, to grab at the rifle and drag it from the scabbard as he goes down. He clucks to the horse and it moves forward. Though he would hate to, it might be possible to shoot the horse from where he would fall. With luck he would have the strength to crawl to it and hold its warm head for a few moments before they died. It would be best for Carol if they were found like that.

Here is a seriously injured man on a frightened horse. They are standing at the edge of Spider Creek, the horse's trembling front feet in the water and the man's spurs held an inch from the horse's flanks.