Storytelling and Meaning Reconstruction: A Metaphorical Perspective

M L Mojapelo
University of South Africa
mojapml@unisa.ac.za

Abstract

Storytelling consists of an interaction between a narrator and a listener, both of whom assign meaning to the story as a whole and its component parts. The meaning assigned to the narrative changes over time under the influence of the recipient's changing precepts and perceptions which seem to be simplistic in infancy and more nuanced with age. It becomes more philosophical in that themes touching on the more profound questions of human existence tend to become more prominently discernible as the subject moves into the more reflective or summative phases of his or her existence. The aim of this article is to demonstrate the metaphorical character of a story, as reflected in changing patterns of meaning assigned to the narrative in the course of the subjective receiver's passage through the various stages of life. This was done by analysing meaning, from a particular storytelling session, at different stages of a listener's personal development. Meaning starts as literal and evolves through re-interpretation to abstract and deeper levels towards application in real life.

Introduction

> Stories are how we explain how things work, how we make decisions, how we justify our decisions, how we persuade others, how we understand our place in the world, create our identities… (Rutledge, 2011, par. 7)

Stories consist of events and experiences that are passed on by a storyteller or narrator to an audience. Storytelling is the act or process of transmitting these events and experiences. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines storytelling as the art of portraying real or fictitious events in words, images and sounds. Storytelling consists of an interaction between a narrator and a listener, both of whom assign meaning to the story as a whole and its component parts. Participants in storytelling make distinct contributions to the longevity of the process or event. For example, the narrator's ability to perform his or her task and the level of sophistication of the listener's interpretation influence the length of time the story will be remembered. A good narrator leaves a lasting impression on his/her listener. He/she achieves this by being skilful in selecting "pertinent details" and arranging the events into a "meaningful sequence" (Thompson & Fredricks, 1967:71).

Discussions on storytelling often revolve around the narrator's experiences and how they influence the shape and organisation of the story, the techniques he or she uses and how skilful he/she uses the

language to realise the intended purpose. The spotlight on the narrator serves as a turf from which to observe and discover things about him/her for various applications, for example, in forensic examinations and clinical therapies. The other participant in storytelling interaction is the listener. It is deemed necessary to find out what storytelling does to the listener. The listener may not have to retell the story, but does the story have any effect on him/her? How does the listener receive the story and assign meaning to it? Does the listener at a later stage remember the story and the experience? Does the story have the same meaning every time he/she remembers it? What does the listener do with the story or the storytelling experience and what does the story do for the listener?

This research article explores storytelling from the listener's perspective. A particular real-life oral storytelling session from a listener's autobiographical memory forms the basis for analysis. The article analyses the changing patterns of meaning assigned to the same narrative in the course of the subjective receiver's passage through the various stages of life, thereby demonstrating the metaphorical character of a story. The next section lays out the theory that informs the analysis. It is followed by an explanation of the concepts that form a tripod for this article, namely; the story, memory and thought development. The story that forms the subject matter will be presented and analysed according to the theory of conceptual metaphor, as it reflects in meaning assignment, followed by the conclusion.

Theoretical framework

The underpinning theory of this is that a story is a metaphor. A metaphor compares two objects, actions or experiences without using explicit comparative words "like" or "as". Chandler (2001:25) cites Jakobson's view that metaphor is paradigmatic in character, based on selection, substitution and similarity. Some of the terms that have been employed over the years and across sub-disciplines to explain this "similarity" between the two things that "substitute" one another via metaphor include "tenor-vehicle" (Richards 1936) and "target-source" (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). The terms "ground-figure" and "signifier-signified" (attributed to Saussure) are also used to describe the same dichotomy. The Collins English Dictionary (2000:978) defines metaphor as "a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action that it does not literally denote in order to imply a resemblance". The latter definition also alludes to the occurrence of two things that are perceived to resemble one another. It offers the fundamental components of metaphor, but explains metaphor on a linguistic level. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary goes further to define a metaphor in a manner that does not confine it to words and phrases: a "thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else, especially something abstract". This definition is corroborated by Richards's (1936:94) explanation that "fundamentally it is a borrowing between and intercourse of thoughts, a transaction between contexts". According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980:235) a "metaphor is not

merely a matter of language. It is a matter of conceptual structure." It follows that, according to Evans and Green (2006:303), "we expect to find evidence of metaphor in human systems other than language".

This article has its basis in conceptual metaphor theory, also known as cognitive metaphor theory. Conceptual metaphor theory owes its development and recognition to cognitive linguistics research. The cognitive linguistics perspective is that meaning is reliant on conceptualisation. According to conceptual metaphor theory, metaphor operates fundamentally at conceptual level. Lakoff and Johnson (1980:5), through whose work the theory became widely known, argue that "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another". Metaphor is, therefore, not merely between words or phrases; it can be non-linguistic as well. An experience or impression can be interpreted or understood by a metaphoric link to another.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) contend that metaphor links two conceptual domains, the source domain and target domain, through mapping. The source domain consists of familiar concepts that are coherently organised and the target domain feeds from it through conceptual metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson further explicate that concepts in the source domain are typically familiar and concrete while the target domain comprises unfamiliar and abstract concepts. According to their model *target* IS *source*. To this effect metaphors such as "*argument* IS *war*" (Lakoff & Johnson1980), "*love* IS *a journey*" and "*life* IS *a journey* (Lakoff 1993) are used to illustrate the linguistic realisation of metaphor by mapping component parts of argument and war, love and a journey, and life and a journey, respectively. The linguistic realisation is, according to the conceptual metaphor theory, born of conceptualisation. Understanding of an abstraction such as life, love or argument (target domain) takes form from something familiar, a journey or war (source domain), thus conceptualising and expressing the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar.

Grady's primary metaphor theory (cited in Evans & Green 2006) does not dispute the existence of the two domains, rather it specifically disputes conceptual metaphor theory's concrete-abstract mapping. Primary metaphor theory argues that the target concept should not be relegated to abstraction as it also comprises "primary" experiences and that the difference between the two domains is a matter of degree of subjectivity. In analysing the meaning assigned to the story, this article identifies a source domain B and a target domain A, according to Lakoff and Johnson (1980). The target domain is experienced and played out in terms of the source domain. What is observed in alignment with Grady's primary metaphor theory is that the target domain will appear subjective in comparison to the source domain, as different layers of meaning in the story are unearthed through metaphor.

Story, memory and thought development

Storytelling is a participatory process involving a storyteller or narrator and a listener or audience. While the narrator relates the events, the listener receives them and attributes meaning to them. Stories may be told orally or in a written form, but originally they were transmitted to the listener by word of mouth only and were dependent on living memory for survival.

Memory is the ability to remember past events and experiences. One of the explanations of memory, according to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, is that it is "the power or process of reproducing or recalling what has been learned and retained especially through associative mechanisms". A person remembers something that has been part of his or her experience, stored in his or her mind and may be retrieved to fulfil a certain purpose. Often something happens to trigger a memory. In relation to storytelling, a listener stores a narrative in his or her memory and assigns to it a meaning that makes sense to him or her. This meaning might not be the same as that which the next person may assign to the same narrative. He or she knows and remembers the story as part of his or her life experience. In her application of verbatim-gist distinction to the interpretation of metaphor Reyna (1996) makes reference to experiments that were conducted in the 1970s on constructivism of the human memory. The results indicated that "memory was constructed based on the subjects' understanding of the meaning of presented material" (Reyna 1996:41). Taking this to be the case, therefore, the memory of a story, in other words recollection of the storytelling experience is expected to be influenced, to a great extent, by how it was encoded and decoded. Although the human capability to retain and retrieve information is evident from early infancy, it gains prominence, momentum and complexity over time depending on the cognitive development of the individual.

According to Piaget's theory of development (cited in Moshman 1999:7), "cognition is a developmental phenomenon. Over the course of childhood and early adolescence, individuals show qualitative changes in the nature of their cognition...such changes are progressive in the sense that later cognitive structures represent a higher level of rationality than earlier ones." Notwithstanding criticism of his investigation methods (sampling) and development stages (how he views development to move from one stage to another) Piaget's works have been very influential in cognitive development studies. Of relevance to take from Piaget in the context of this article is that children's thinking is qualitatively not on the same level as that of adults and that this development happens gradually over time.

The capacity of people to recollect their lives is called autobiographical memory (Howe, 2000:81 citing Baddeley). Thomson and Madigan (2005:8) identify autobiographic or episodic memory as one of the two types of explicit declarative memory, and explain it simply as the memories of one's own experience. According to Conway (1990), autobiographical memory is characterised by self-

reference, the experience of remembering, personal interpretation, variable accuracy of recall, durability, context-specific sensory and perceptual attributes, and imagery. Howe (2000:86) states that "a memory system that supports autobiographical memories develops slowly over the preschool years and contains information specific to events (e.g. time and place)". The information that children are exposed to, coupled with their experiences, influence "what they encode, how that information is organized in storage and the manner in which it is retrieved" (Howe 2000:48). Thus, retrieved material is subject to continuous reconstruction over time. Although forensic experience has shown that eyewitness accounts are contaminated within minutes after an event, regardless of developmental factors (Esgate & Groome 2005), the difference in interpretation levels of retrieved material can be attributed to cognitive development. Retrieved information can be applied to real life, and in the case of a story, parallels may be drawn between the story and real life.

This article uses a real-life storytelling session from a listener's autobiographical memory as the means to illustrate the metaphorical nature of a story. As part of personal memory, the story is retrieved and may fulfil some functions in real life. The function may be a culmination of the cognitive development, as reflected in the continuous alterations of the meaning assigned to the narrative in the beginning. The article reflects on the two conceptual domains, A and B, and demonstrates how meaning construction and reconstruction link to the development of human cognition as the research subject subjectively assigns meaning to the story.

The story and its background

The story serving as subject matter here is a real-life oral, undocumented narrative that was retrieved from a listener's autobiographical memory. Therefore, the listener serves as the research subject. The original narrator was the listener's father, who told the story in the listener's childhood (preteen years). "Although autographical memories may primarily represent interpretations and not facts, it is clear that at least some factual information is preserved" even though it is "open to distortions" (Conway 1990:12). Thus, this particular story may contain inaccuracies attributable to factors such as the receiver's age at the time when the story was first heard and the attendant continuous "replay" of retrieval and reinterpretation in the memory of the receiver as time has gone by. The story was told orally. It was not narrated in English, but there are no language-specific aspects that could benefit this article. In addition, being part of autobiographical memory linked to experiences in preteen years, efforts to reproduce the story may prove futile as only pertinent parts survived. Reyna's (1996) fuzzy-trace theory of memory shows that it is often the gist that stands the test of time rather than verbatim content. Essentially, it is the concepts that survive, rather than specific words and phrases.

The story went along the lines of:

> There was once a father and his little girl whom he loved very much. The father worked hard so that the girl could have anything her heart desired. He gave her everything that she ever asked for. But on one fateful evening the little girl asked her father for the moon. Her father wanted to give her the moon but he couldn't. It pained him that there was a thing in the world that his daughter wanted to have and he was not able to give it to her. The little girl, on the other hand, was pained by the realisation that her father was not giving her what she was asking for. Both their hearts were broken and they died.

Other details of the story eluded the listener's recollection, except that an overriding sense of pity for the couple remained.

The reason for the long-preserved memory of the story is not clear. Possible reasons include the manner in which it was narrated, which the listener cannot remember; the listener was the only member of the audience and may have felt directly addressed; due to limited physical contact with the narrator, which also limited the number of stories heard from him, the stories stood out in her memory; the bizarre content of the story; or that because the physical environment contributed to the story being alive – the listener can remember that they were outdoors in the evening, and that the moon was bright. It is not clear why, but for some reason the story did not seem fictitious. It was perceived as being factual about people the narrator knew or had heard of; a perception that could also be attributed to the age and mental development of the listener at the time.

The following section illustrates the notion of conceptual metaphor, in which one conceptual domain is understood and interpreted in terms of another. Metaphor forms a link between two domains, namely the life in the story and real life.

Emergence of the metaphor

During the early primary school years the story would occasionally come to mind for reasons that hardly seemed to matter. The listener felt sorry for the little girl and her father, and she vaguely remembers wondering what kind of people they could have been to have been upset about the futility of yearning for the moon.

Ten days after the listener's 12th birthday, the narrator died. After his death, together with other thoughts, the story would come to mind vividly, first occasionally and then regularly. There were times when the listener became deeply preoccupied with the story. This can be understood as the significance of the story became apparent to her at the onset of adolescence, a stage when young people typically begin to search for and establish a specific sense of their own identity. This stage is also associated with their increased capacity for abstract and rational thought that enables them to engage in deep complex analysis of events and situations. The listener went through this phase after

the narrator had died and she could not confront him with questions about the narrative that naturally arose in her mind. The first of these questions was: "Why was the story told or created?" (The listener had begun to conceive of the possibility that the story could be fictitious.) Every subset of questions contained a different combination, influenced by different circumstances associated with the retrieval. Under the circumstances, the only person who could provide the answers would have to be the listener herself.

In her attempts to answer the first question another arose: "Did the narrator have an agenda in telling the story?" Perhaps. So, why did he tell the story? These are profound questions, signifying a higher level of thinking, seeking rationality about the broader question of human existence. The following are some of the subjective answers the listener formulated and that lay the foundation for the establishment of conceptual domain B (time of storytelling; preteen stage; formative phase; literal and simplistic) and conceptual domain A (years after storytelling; teenage years and beyond; reflective and summative phase; abstract, analytic, deep and philosophical). The listener reasoned that like the father in the story, her father had loved her. Like the father in the story he did his best to provide for her. Like the father in the story he wished he could give her everything her heart desired. But, unlike the father in the story, he was aware that some things were beyond his control. So, the listener guessed, he thought that forewarned would be forearmed and had consciously laid some foundation for the listener to know from an early age that although it is important to work hard and try to reach for the stars, not everything in life is within reach; regardless of how much your parents care about you. Is this the true meaning of the story being discovered or is it a new story being written? We will never know. So, we may as well continue constructing and reconstructing on the original narrative.

Two major factors that could have contributed to the questions and answers being different are the personal development of the listener and the physical absence of the storyteller. The continuous answering of different questions, the analysis of the situation, and the examination of several component parts of the story independently and in combination with others, all convinced the subject that the story was not about a certain man and his daughter but about herself and her father. With reference to Lakoff and Johnson's view (1980:83), as a way of conceptualising the experience, the listener picked out the "important" aspects of the experience. And by picking out what was "important" in the experience, she could categorise the experience, understand it, and remember it. The two conceptual domains were thus clearly defined.

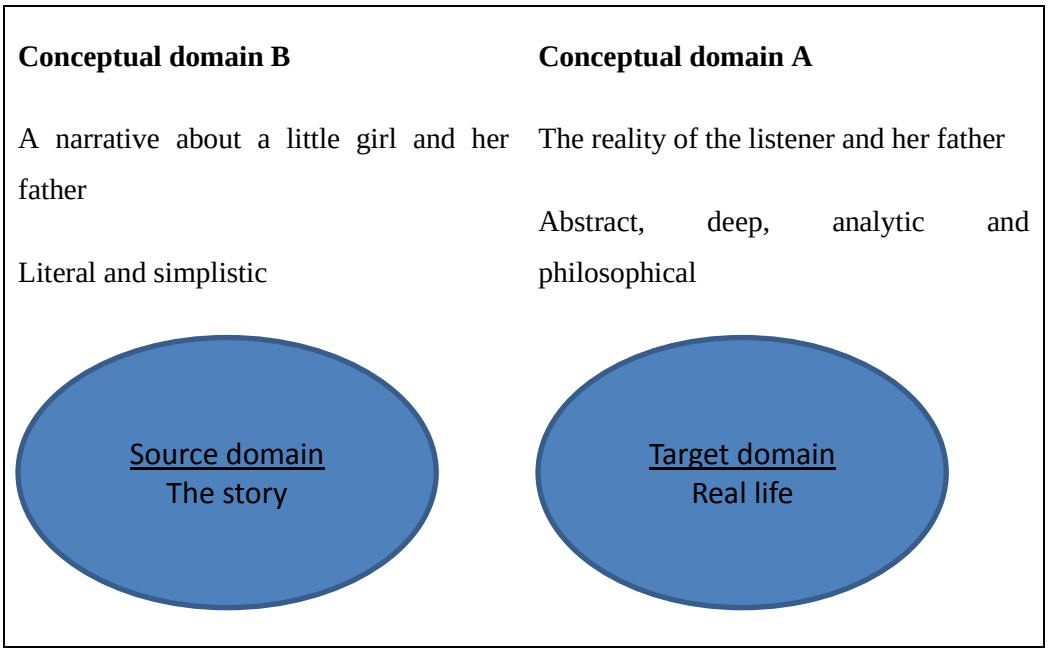

Fig 1: Conceptual domains A and B

According to conceptual metaphor theory, metaphor operates fundamentally at conceptual level and therefore should not always be thought of as a linguistic phenomenon. In the case of the narrative serving as the present subject matter, the story provides associations between non-linguistic realms, namely life in the story and real life. The conceptual theory model according to Lakoff and Johnson (1980) advocates that *TARGET* IS *SOURCE* or A is B, which means that the target domain (domain A, unfamiliar) is conceptualised in terms of the source domain (domain B, familiar). Thus, the story as a whole and its component parts compares with and informs real life and real life's events. Looking at Figure 1 above, the source domain consists of components such as the father, the daughter, the moon, communication, actions and sentiments that the listener is familiar with from the storytelling session. The target domain is real life, which the listener tries to understand. In trying to fathom situations in real life, the listener uses the story, as a conceptual metaphor to map component parts of the life in the story to real life and its component parts.

In the case of the story forming the basis of analysis here, a set of correspondences gets established between constituent parts of the source (life in the story) and target (real life) domains. How the activities of conceptual domain A unfold is that the listener draws from the story and the whole storytelling experience to write the story of her own life, to direct it by making and justifying her decisions, to craft her own identity (Rutledge 2011). Therefore, conceptual domain B is used to shape or direct conceptual domain A and conceptual domain A is explained in terms of conceptual domain B. When the story is retrieved for application to conceptual domain A, questions like: "Why did the

girl ask her father for the moon? What did she want to do with the moon? Was she stupid? Did she not know that people did not buy moons in shops? Why was the father sad that he could not give her the moon? Did he expect to be able to give her the moon?" were not considered, because in conceptual domain A there is no physical moon, no physical father but only the physical daughter. So, "the moon" would change from time to time according to different contexts. The father would sometimes be a mere thought and sometimes a voice of reason. For example, when patterns of meaning were reconstructed, conceptual domain B would inform conceptual domain A that the father and the daughter wanted the same thing – look how devastated they both were when the moon could not be reached. Therefore, the listener would convince herself that her father had (and still has) her best interest at heart. The interaction of conceptual domains A and B would often create a platform for the listener to interrogate most real life situations thoroughly; often even the smallest of details of real life would make sense by mapping constituent parts of conceptual domain A with constituent parts of conceptual domain B. The moon would map to a variety of things according to different contexts of retrieval. The sentiments and actions, as well as the daughter and father would also map to constituent parts of the target domain, addressing philosophical, deep, complex, analytical, profound questions of human existence.

Due to varying levels of sophistication at thought development level, a younger listener tends to interpret stories in a literal and simplistic way while a mature listener is capable of abstract and deeper levels of interpretation. As the listener matures and develops cognitively he or she is able to reach different layers of meaning. The story stored in his or her memory that had an initial simplistic meaning, can later be retrieved for abstract, sophisticated and philosophical applications. The meaning will be naturally subjective in that it will be influenced by the recipient's changing precepts and perceptions. The question remains whether ultimately the real meaning of the story is discovered or whether the story serves as a script to direct the course of the listener's life. Either way, the meaning of the story evolves through different stages of the listener's personal development. Lakoff and Johnson (1980:156) point out that "metaphors may create realities for us ... a metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. In this sense, metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies".

Conclusion

This article has used an oral undocumented story to demonstrate that memory and cognitive development provide an opportunity for the listener to appreciate a story as a metaphor. In the preteen years when abstract thought is in the early developmental stage, the meaning assigned to the narrative may be literal and simplistic. At about adolescence and beyond human cognition meaning continuously develops into a sophisticated system that can handle complex and abstract applications. The meaning of the narrative evolves to become more nuanced and elaborate, developing into a rich

tapestry of cumulative experience as the similarity between the story and real life is established. The article has illustrated that storytelling creates ineradicable memories and that early experience can be a powerful impulse that deeply affects a person's whole life.

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