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Abstract

In a report on field work on Hobongan, an Austronesian language spoken by approximately two thousand people on the island of Borneo, I introduce crosslinguistic patterns in the ways causality is connected to other aspects of narrative, specifically, character, time, and location. In prior research (e.g., Perkins, 2009), causality, character, time, and location have been treated as semantically equal components of narrative with pragmatic rankings based primarily on culture. For example, in English, character and causality are closely linked, with some scholars proposing motivation as a way to indicate the connection (Zwaan and Radvansky, 1998; Morrow et al, 1987). Culturally, this pragmatic relationship between causality and character emphasizes personal responsibility: people cause. However, Hobongan has a closer relationship between causality and location than between causality and character. This relationship is demonstrated throughout the linguistic aspects of the language, in particular by the use of a focalizing particle to draw attention to locational information in narrative, suggesting that the focalizing particle has semantic content for locational information, beyond the usual expectations for focalizing particles. This material is extended to suggest the full rankings of location, character, and time in both English and Hobongan, and I further suggest an investigation into the rankings of the elements of narrative throughout the world's languages, moving toward a typology of narrative elements in which each language, and family of languages, can be analyzed for patterns in narrative with regard to how each ranks the elements of character, time, and location with regard to causality.

Keywords:

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Introduction

In English and many other Indo-European languages, there is a close connection between causality and character in narrative, with the other aspects of narrative (time, location) being backgrounded. This pattern has been noted with regard to discourse analysis (Perkins, 2009; Zwaan and Radvansky, 1998; Zwaan, 1999) and assumed throughout linguistic and literary studies on materials in the Indo-European languages, but the pattern turns out not to be universal. Rather, based on research conducted on Hobongan, an Austronesian language spoken by approximately two thousand people on the island of Borneo, I suggest that causality is the highest-ranked aspects of narrative and that the other aspects of narrative are foregrounded or backgrounded with regard to causality in ways that differ across languages, cultures, and language families.

Causality is most likely the highest-ranked aspect of narrative, with there being several different kinds of evidence.

First, it is the *sine qua non* of narrative. If nothing happens, there is no narrative. Causality must be available in some form in order for a narrative to be a unit of linguistic discourse (Perkins, 2009; Goldman et al., 1999; Adams, 1989). This evidence can be elicited by asking linguistics, literary theorists, or anyone else what the role of causality in narrative is—the assumption that causality is central to narrative is universal. When asked why they believe this, answers begin to diverge, but there is additional evidence.

Studies on human processing of narrative suggest that causality is, indeed, the central aspect of narrative, with people paying attention to causality in great detail and with great accuracy (Blanc and Tapiero, 2001; Zwaan, 1999).

Unfortunately, the models that have been proposed relative to causality in narrative, including Situation Models and Deictic Center Theory (Duchan et al., 1995) and my forthcoming work on how to determine what is a unit of discourse (Perkins, forthcoming), assume the centrality of causality rather than arguing for it, but the relative predictive success of the models does provide indirect evidence that the assumption is accurate: it is a basic logical point that poor ideas result from either poor reasoning or poor assumptions, and the results have been good, despite reliance on some otherwise questionable research materials, such as textoids (Graesser et al., 1997, 166). At this time, all of the research that I have found on causality in narrative has been done by researchers who are native speakers of Indo-european languages on languages that are Indo-European, but the grammars of non-Indo-european languages that are currently available do not challenge the idea that causality is central to narrative.

What appears to be universal, then, is the centrality of causality. Given that centrality of causality, then, the question remains what the relationships are between and among the other aspects of narrative—time, character, and location—to causality. In the following section, I note linguistic evidence for the primacy of one aspect of narrative over the others with regard to causality, in English and Hobongan.

A Note on Method

As mentioned, this study is a brief report on fieldwork conducted in Indonesia, on the island of Borneo, during 2012 and 2013. More specifically, it is a report on one aspect of the material collected during the field work. I spent the time living in the main Hobongan village and participating in the routines of the people's quotidian life, making observations and notes as data became available in the contexts that were available. Because this area of the world and its languages and peoples are a new field for linguistic research, I relied on some additional material supplied by Rachel Searcy, who works with the Hobongan to translate the Bible into Hobongan. Her approach to working with the Hobongan is therefore quite different from, yet overlapping with, a linguistic approach, and where possible and necessary, her insights have been included.

Comparing English and Hobongan

Evidence from English

There are many kinds of linguistic evidence for the connections in English and other Indo-European languages between causality and character.

At the pragmatic level, the assumption is that people make things happen. This assumption was evidenced by a colleague who, when asked about the role of character in narrative, suggested that it was a silly question even to contemplate.

Sociolinguistically, the relatively tighter connection between causality and character is evidenced by an emphasis on personal responsibility. People make things happen, and people can be blamed and held responsible when what happens is undesirable. The entire legal system in the English-speaking world is based on this idea; this is just one instantiation of the sociolinguistic connection between causality and character. Another example is the early tendency of children to blame someone when parents indicate that some aspect of the household is not proceeding as well as might be desired. The desire to blame someone can instantiate early on as blaming even an inanimate object, but as has been shown, young children take a while to realize that inanimate objects do not have agency (Rakison & Poulin-Doubois, 2001). In addition, the seeming reliance of native speakers of English on imagining themselves to be part of the action ('action simulation,' Zwaan, 2008), could be taken as a demonstration of the idea that characters are the closest-linked component of narrative to causality. Experimental results are, unfortunately, unavailable for non-Indo-european languages, but it could be expected that this 'embodied' approach to narrative comprehension would be much weaker in languages that do not prioritize character as English does.

At the level of discourse analysis, both linguists and literary analysts who are native speakers of Indo-european languages and have worked on narratives recorded in Indo-european languages have traditionally and universally assumed that character is the essential component of narrative. At a recent

conference, a presenter expressed shock that anyone would question the centrality of character to the causal flow of narrative (de Kreij, 2013, p.c.). Further evidence of the phenomenon at this level comes from the fact that people do not consider a narrative to be a narrative until they have a character to follow, which is why writers in the Indo-European literary tradition introduce temporal and locational aspects of narrative via the perspective of a character or characters (Perkins, 2009).

At the level of semantics, there is a lexical item, 'motivation,' that specifically connects causality and character and that has been suggested to be another aspect of narrative in part because of the connection (Zwaan, 2003; Zwaan, 1999).

Syntactically and morphologically, there is a phenomenon known as 'fronting,' in which a subject is repeated, as in 'My father, he lives in Beijing.' Although this phenomenon is not part of standard North American English, it is available in English in colloquial speech and is nearly obligatory in many Indo-European languages, including Spanish and Russian, and is available for many others. In the case of ancient Greek, the phenomenon was available in this Indo-European language at least 2,500 years ago. This suggests that the strong link between causality and character is at least available throughout the Indo-European domain and has been for as long as there is documented material on the Indo-European languages. The depth and persistence of the phenomenon could help to explain the cultural emphases on personal responsibility that were noted previously, at least for some of the Indo-European cultures.

In the sound systems of English and other Indo-European languages, vocal prominence is given to information regarding character and not as much for other types of information. To examine English specifically, syllables that are associated with very specific content are often emphasized (poetry is useful in determining which syllables are stressed or emphasized and which are not—in standard North American English, stress is cued by a slightly louder volume, a slightly longer vowel, and a slightly rising pitch), whereas structural words are less often emphasized, as exemplified in Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, that starts 'Shall I compare thee two a summer's day?'. The requirements of iambic pentameter place the stress on the 'I' narrator of the poem. Although both 'shall' and 'I' are closed-class terms in English, the character-indicating pronoun takes the vocal stress. Talmy (2001, 2006) has noted this difference in his work on closed-class items such as prepositions and tense suffixes, and open-class items, such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives. At the lexical level in English, most semantic content is delivered via open-class terms, and most structural content is delivered via closed-class terms. In English, temporal and locational information is often noted with prepositions such as 'before,' 'after,' 'above,' 'under,' 'on,' 'along,' and others. In part because they are closed-class terms, these lexical choices are often phonetically backgrounded. This distinction in the delivery of character information and temporal and locational information is additional evidence of the prominence of character in English narrative, even when written in poetic form.

Evidence from Hobongan

In Hobongan, many of these same linguistic strategies are available, but with emphasis on the primary connections between causality and location. Because of the differences between emphasizing location and emphasizing character, the instantiations of these patterns are slightly different from the instantiations in English, but parallels are available.

Pragmatically, the Hobongan do not make the assumption that people make things happen. Rather, they assume that places determine what is available to happen. This can make sense, even to non-Hobongan speakers: what I can do at Walmart is quite different from what I can do in a forest. Hobongan idioms reflect this, with one noting that the gold in the river 'wants' to be found (Searcy, p.c.), rather than noting all of the time and effort that the Hobongan themselves put into finding and mining the gold in the river.

Sociolinguistically, there is a consistent backgrounding of personal, individual responsibility among the Hobongan, which instantiates as blaming a place rather than a person when there is a problem. The nails in the boards by the river cut feet, and the Hobongan say that the place where the boards were thrown out is a bad place. It also instantiates as a lack of blame for individuals when there is a problem in the village. Rather, when a problem arises that is serious enough to warrant legal proceedings conducted by the village council, individuals are removed from the circle of discussion created by the village council and interested parties, and they are informed of the council's decision. At no point in this process is the individual who create the problem addressed, or addressed as the direct cause of the problem being discussed. The members of the council talk amongst themselves, about the individual, and they reach a decision without consulting the individual.

For discourse, the Hobongan will not pay attention to a unit of discourse as a unit of discourse until they know where the information they are being given takes place (Searcy, p.c.); this is parallel to English-speakers not paying attention to a narrative as a narrative unless they know who the characters are. In addition, there is a discourse marker [dʒoʔ] that functions as a focalizer; it is used almost exclusively to mark locational information in sentences, which suggests that it is not a focal marker in the generic sense but a focal marker for locational information. This indicates that the focal marker includes, as part of its semantic content, the meaning of attending to a location:

(a). [dʒoʔ   naʔ   na   mo.no hi.ro   a moʔ   bo.ko.niʔ
        Loc.foc distal emph.now now   3rd. pl time-lapse deliver-baby

       ko.niʔ   ko.niʔ   ko.niʔ   mo.no na]
       del-baby-again del-baby-again del-baby-again now   emph.now

       'From there they now gave birth again and again.'

The emphasis on locational information is further confirmed by children's early acquisition of the idea that locational information is important in the language and the lexical and syntactic choices that children make to

accommodate the connection between causality and location. Instead of asking 'now what?' (evidence of the secondary importance of time relative to causality—see below) or 'What is he/she doing?' with regard to a narrative, a Hobongan four-year-old instead asked, 'and here what?'

(b). [moʔ ho.moʔ hi.ni]
 and here loc.int

as an inducement to keep his mother moving through a story that she was telling.

In the sound system of Hobongan, prominence is given to the locational discourse marker [dʒoʔ] by the lexical rarity of the affricate [dʒ], which shows up in only a few of the six thousand words that are currently recorded for the language. However, because the locational focal marker shows up in nearly every sentence, it is one of the more commonly used sounds in the language.

Secondary and Tertiary Links in English and Hobongan

Throughout both English (and the Indo-European languages), all of the major aspects of the language provide evidence to prioritize one aspect of narrative with regard to causality over the other aspects of narrative.

The consistency of the evidence suggests the question of how the other aspects of language are prioritized or backgrounded with regard to causality in English and Hobongan, and more broadly, it suggests the possibility for a taxonomy for how the elements of narrative are ranked with regard to causality in all of the world's languages and language families.

The evidence for the secondary rankings is a bit less direct, as would be expected with a less prioritized connection.

Evidence from English

I here suggest that, for English, time is the secondary aspect of narrative with regard to causality, after the primary character, as noted above. Evidence for this is two-fold. First, the conflation with time and causality is a common logical error in English. Examples abound, but because length is limited, I note only a couple. Students believe that they can pass a course by showing up for class only, rather than doing the work. They believe that getting credit for the course necessarily follows paying for the course, as if education works like a vending machine: after the quarter comes the gumball, and after the tuition comes the degree. Another example, noted previously, is a common question for figuring out what comes next (another aspect of the importance of temporality): 'Now what?' This drives time forward, and with it, causality. Additional evidence comes from psycholinguistic studies that show that people know when things happen relative to causality and often do not pay attention to locational information (e.g., the Situation Modelers: Sundermeir et al, 2005; Zwaan & Madden, 2004; Zwaan, 1999; Magliano et al., 1999; Langston & Trabasso, 1999; Zwaan & Radvansky, 1998; Garnham, 1997; Zwaan, 1996;

van den Broek et al., 1996; Zwaan et al., 1995; Graesser et al., 1994; Zwaan & van Oostendorp, 1993; Kintsch, 1992; de Beaugrande, 1987).

   This leaves locational information as the most backgrounded aspects of narrative in English. Again, the Situation Modelers as cited previously suggest that locational information is the information that people track least when working with narratives. This is not to say that English is locationally impoverished but that locational information is not as closely linked to causality as is character and then time (Perkins, 2009).

Evidence from Hobongan

   Hobongan works differently, with locational information being the most highly ranked with regard to causality, as noted. For Hobongan, character is likely the secondarily ranked aspect of narrative. Evidence for this is primarily sociolinguistic: the Hobongan spend a great deal of time and interpersonal energy managing relationships: when working in groups, they frequently recite family connections and histories. These histories are important because the Hobongan have a complex set of kinship terms and terms of address (Searcy, p.c.) that rely on the connections between and among people. Without knowing the connections and histories, they cannot properly talk to one another.

   By process of elimination, this leaves time as the most backgrounded aspect of narrative. Again, the evidence for this is primarily pragmatic and sociolinguistic, with the Hobongan almost not managing time at all. Most of their temporal management is conducted around the rice cycle, with seasons relying on preparing fields, planting, managing, and harvesting. They also have ways of discussing the time of year when the rice has run out and before the next harvest; they use this less commonly now because they can buy rice and because the hunger-season overlaps with seasons of production and management. Fruit seasons happen every two-three years in the Bornean rain forest, rather unpredictably, which limits relying on fruit availability as a tool for temporal management. Seasons of the calendar year are about rainfall, with there being a relatively wet season and a relatively dry season. Because of the rains and attendant cloudiness, the Hobongan do not manage calendrical time by astronomical phenomena (Searcy, p.c.). Numbers larger than three or four are likely to be invented: for example, 'ten' [pu:], as with any number that is five or larger, although it means ten when counting items that are immediately available, is more frequently used in casual conversation to mean unspecified 'a lot'. The choice of a number to represent 'a lot' is made based on how the speaker feels about the quantity: 'five' [di.mo] is less 'a lot' than 'ten' [pu:] on some measure that is relevant to the speaker. Signals in the environment keep daily time for the Hobongan: daylight is the time to work and be awake; there is also a type of insect that sounds when there is twenty-thirty minutes of daylight left, at which point the Hobongan go home and begin their evening routines. Additional evidence comes from the fact that, when the Hobongan need to figure out a temporal reference that is most past than the current rice cycle, they calculate the years based on the location of their rice fields in

various years past. Thus, time management is almost entirely external to the Hobongan language, and that is reflected in their customary lack of precision with regard to communicating about time and in their reliance on locational information when they do want to be precise.

Logical Possibilities

Given the patterns identified in English and Hobongan, it would be expected that there would be a time-priority language. Although not currently the focus of this study, Kalaw Lagaw Ya, a Papuan/Austronesian language spoken primarily by people living in the Western Torres Strait, might be a candidate for this phenomenon. This language has six distinct tenses that speakers must manage (Lewis, 2009).

It is also likely that each of the logical possibilities for the rankings of time, location, and character with regard to causality are exemplified in the world's languages. It should be possible to have a language with causality-character with location and then time, a language with causality-location with time and then character, a language with causality-time with character and then location, and a language with causality-time with location and then character. English fills the slot for causality-character with time and location, and Hobongan the slot for causality-location with character and then time. Identifying languages that complete the logical possibilities for the currently recognized aspects of narrative is an intriguing possibility for additional research.

Further, it is possible that there are languages that include narrative genres that will necessitate the inclusion of additional aspects of narrative beyond causality, character, time, and location. Studies on the cross-linguistic aspects of narrative genre could contribute to an enriched understanding of narrative and genre, leading to a more thorough typology of narrative structures in the world's languages. In short, this research is the first step toward a discourse-analytical typology of narrative in the world's languages.

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