A COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE ON THE COHERENT AND COHESIVE FUNCTIONS OF O. HENRY'S SHORT STORIES

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Abstract

This paper explores a cognitive perspective on the coherent and cohesive functions within O. Henry's short stories, analyzing how his narrative strategies engage readers' cognitive processes. O. Henry is renowned for his unexpected plot twists, intricate character developments, and ironic endings, all of which create a sense of unity and structure within his works. From a cognitive standpoint, the paper examines how his stories maintain coherence through the use of mental schemas, problem-solving patterns, and reader expectations.

Key words

Cognitive perspective, coherence, cohesion, narrative strategies, plot twists, irony, character development, mental schemas, reader expectations, narrative comprehension

Introduction. The intricate nature of literary discourse, particularly in short stories, demands an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms that contribute to coherence and cohesion. O. Henry, a master of short fiction, employs a unique narrative style that relies on linguistic and cognitive strategies to establish textual unity. This study explores how cognitive linguistics can provide insight into the coherent and cohesive functions of O. Henry's short stories.

The primary problem this research addresses is how O. Henry's narrative structures and linguistic choices contribute to overall coherence and cohesion from a cognitive perspective. While traditional linguistic approaches emphasize textual cohesion through grammatical and lexical ties, cognitive linguistics extends this view by considering mental representations, conceptual metaphors, and frame semantics.

Moreover, we will find the answer to the following question: "How do cognitive mechanisms shape coherence and cohesion in O. Henry's short stories?"

This paper also discusses the role of cognitive mechanisms such as attention, memory, and inference in creating cohesive narrative threads that contribute to the surprise endings O. Henry is known for. By employing cognitive theories on narrative comprehension and interpretation, this paper highlights how O. Henry's writing fosters a dynamic interaction between the text and the reader's mind, ensuring both coherence and cohesion within the context of his seemingly simple yet complex short stories. Ultimately, the study aims to deepen the understanding of O. Henry's unique literary style and the psychological processes that underpin the reader's experience of his works.

Main part. Cognitive Linguistics views language as embedded in the overall cognitive capacities of humans. It focuses on how language reflects the ways people perceive, conceptualize, and interact with the world. Central to this field are cognitive mechanisms, mental processes that underlie language understanding, production, and structure.

"Cognitive mechanisms are the mental processes and structures that underlie human perception, thought, and language use. In Cognitive Linguistics, they explain how people conceptualize experiences, construct meaning, and communicate using language. These mechanisms include categorization, metaphor, mental imagery, conceptual blending, framing, and embodiment, among others"[14]. In other words they are the "tools" our brain uses to understand the world and express that understanding through language.

Core Cognitive Mechanisms in Cognitive Linguistics are conceptualization, categorization, mental spaces and conceptual integration (blending), embodiment, framing and perspective, image schemas, metaphor and metonymy.
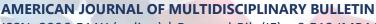
"Conceptualization is the mental process of organizing and interpreting experiences to form meaningful ideas or concepts. In Cognitive Linguistics, it refers to how language reflects the way we mentally represent and understand the world"[15]. Language is not a direct mirror of reality but a means of conceptualizing experiences. Cognitive linguists argue that meanings are mentally constructed and shaped by human experience. For example, saying "He fell into depression" reflects a metaphorical conceptualization of emotional states as spatial locations.

"Categorization is the mental process of grouping similar experiences, objects, or concepts into categories to simplify understanding and communication"[16].

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[14] Evans, V., & Green, M. (2006). Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction. Edinburgh University Press.

[15] Evans, V., & Green, M. (2006). Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction. Edinburgh University Press.

[16] Lakoff, G. (1987). Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind. University of Chicago Press.

Humans group experiences into categories to simplify and process information. Language reflects prototypes, central or most typical members of a category. For example, a robin is a more prototypical "bird" than a penguin.

"Mental spaces are temporary cognitive structures we create during thinking and communication to organize information. Conceptual integration (blending) is the process of combining elements from different mental spaces to create new meanings"[17]. For example, in "digging your own grave," we blend the concept of self-destructive behavior with the literal act of digging.

"Framing is the process of shaping how information or events are understood by emphasizing certain aspects and downplaying others. Perspective refers to the specific viewpoint from which an event or situation is experienced or described, influencing how it is interpreted"[18]. Lakoff explores how framing influences political discourse and public understanding by highlighting certain perspectives over others, how we frame a situation changes how it is understood and talked about and frames structure our understanding of events, roles, and relationships. For example, calling someone a "freedom fighter" vs. a "terrorist" shows how framing alters perception.

"Image schemas are basic, recurring patterns of sensory and motor experiences that help structure our understanding of abstract concepts, such as CONTAINER, PATH, or FORCE"[19]. Lakoff discusses how image schemas are mental structures derived from our bodily experiences that shape our conceptual understanding and language. For example, "Out of control" is based on the CONTAINER schema (something exiting a bounded space).

"Metaphor as a cognitive mechanism involves understanding one concept in terms of another, typically using physical or concrete experiences to understand abstract ideas (e.g., "time is money"). Metonymy involves using one element of a concept to stand for a related concept (e.g., "The White House issued a statement" meaning the president or the administration)"[20]. Lakoff and Johnson explain how metaphors and metonymy are central to human thought and language, shaping how we perceive and talk about abstract concepts.

Cognitive Mechanisms play a crucial role in Language Use. These mechanisms explain how people generate and interpret meaning, structure discourse, and understand figurative language. They support both language acquisition and language change over time.

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[17] Fauconnier, G., & Turner, M. (2002). The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities. Basic Books.

[18] Lakoff, G. (2004). Don't Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate. Chelsea Green Publishing.

[19] Lakoff, G. (1987). Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind. University of Chicago Press.

[20] Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). Metaphors We Live By. University of Chicago Press.

Cognitive mechanisms are foundational to understanding how language reflects human thought. They offer powerful tools for analyzing meaning, structure, and use in a way that connects linguistics with psychology, philosophy, and anthropology.

Understanding the cognitive aspects of coherence and cohesion in O. Henry's short stories enhances both literary and linguistic scholarship. It bridges cognitive linguistics with textual analysis, providing a deeper comprehension of how readers process narratives. This study is valuable for researchers in cognitive linguistics, literary studies, and discourse analysis, as well as educators seeking to improve students' textual interpretation skills.

To illustrate this concept in relation to O. Henry's short stories, let's think about how his stories typically play with expectations and structure, and how the reader's declarative memory helps tie these elements together.

For example, in "The Gift of the Magi" O. Henry creates a situation where two characters, Jim and Della, sacrifice their most prized possessions to buy each other Christmas gifts. Their actions are motivated by love, but the twist at the end, both gifts being rendered useless due to the sacrifices, creates a deep sense of irony.

Irony in "The Gift of the Magi" arises when there's a mismatch between expectation and reality, a classic conceptual incongruity. From a cognitive perspective, this activates multiple mental spaces: One mental space is "Jim sells his watch to buy Della combs". Another one is "Della sells her hair to buy Jim a chain for his watch".

The blend of these spaces results in an ironic twist: both gifts become useless. Conceptual Blending Theory (Fauconnier & Turner) explains how these scenarios are mentally constructed and merged, creating a new emergent meaning, sacrifice made in love renders the gifts symbolically powerful, but practically useless.

According to cognitive dissonance, the reader experiences a conflict between emotional expectations (gift exchange as a happy moment) and the actual outcome (the gifts are useless). This dissonance deepens emotional engagement and stimulates reflection on values like love, sacrifice, and materialism.

In accordance with conceptual highlighting, irony helps profile the core message: love is more valuable than material possessions. The story uses this incongruity to bring that moral into sharper focus.

When it comes to metaphorical framing, the title itself, "The Gift of the Magi", frames the story in the metaphor, Jim and Della = wise gift-givers, despite the apparent foolishness. This aligns with conceptual metaphor theory, LOVE IS SACRIFICE or WISDOM IS HUMILITY.

Coherence comes from readers mentally constructing the relationships between actions, motives, and consequences. Through conceptual integration, readers understand the irony and moral, forming a global coherent structure around love-driven selflessness.

From a cognitive linguistic viewpoint, O. Henry's use of irony in "The Gift of the Magi" is not just a literary twist but a tool that activates mental spaces, conceptual metaphors, and emotional coherence. The story's cohesive linguistic structure supports the reader's construction of meaning, enabling deep understanding through cognitive mechanisms like blending, framing, and profiling.

Throughout the story, readers must remember specific details about the characters' possessions (Jim's watch, Della's hair) and the temporal elements (Christmas Eve). These pieces of information help establish a connection between the actions of the characters and the final twist. As the story unfolds, the reader's memory allows them to track the sacrifices and understand the ultimate irony.

Gestalt theory, when applied to text analysis, emphasizes how the mind organizes and perceives patterns in the flow of a narrative. It suggests that the brain perceives a unified whole, even when the text is divided into separate parts. In the context of O. Henry's short stories, coherence and cohesion are fundamental aspects that create a seamless flow in his narratives, guiding the reader through the story while maintaining logical connections between events, characters, and actions.

In terms of coherence (the logical connections between ideas in a story) and cohesion (the grammatical and lexical elements that link the parts of a text), O. Henry masterfully uses specific words and phrases to help knit the text together in a way that makes the overall story feel connected and meaningful.

Coherence refers to the underlying logical connections between the ideas presented. Cognitive perspective, in this context, implies how the reader mentally connects different parts of a story based on the narrative's flow. This is where certain linking words play an important role in guiding the reader's understanding.

For example, in O. Henry's short story "The Gift of the Magi", the word "however" is used effectively to signal a contrast between Della's actions and the eventual result. Here, it helps guide the reader's expectations.

"She had put aside her pride, however, to buy a gift that would be worthy of her husband's love"[21]. In this case, "however" works to shift the narrative from Della's previous thoughts and actions to the contrasting realization of her love for her husband. The contrast introduced by "however" ensures that the reader sees

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[21] O. Henry. (2005). "The Gift of the Magi and other stories" ("The Gift of the Magi")

this shift in perspective, thus maintaining coherence in the cognitive process. The reader is led to recognize how one action (selling her hair) was taken with the intention of a thoughtful gift, even though the final outcome of the gift exchange creates irony.

Cohesion refers to the technical, grammatical connections that hold the narrative together. Linking devices such as "but", "however", and "likely" contribute to maintaining cohesion by providing explicit relationships between different parts of the text, guiding the reader's interpretation of the storyline.

Let's take the following sentence as an example from O. Henry's "The Ransom of Red Chief": "The child seemed to be likely to be more trouble than we expected, but we had no choice but to continue with the plan"[22]. Here, the word "but" introduces a contrast between the initial expectation and the emerging difficulty. It adds cohesion by showing how the situation evolved from being manageable to problematic. In the cognitive sense, "but" guides the reader to reframe their expectations and understand the change in the narrative trajectory.

Another example would be "likely" in the context of prediction or uncertainty. In "The Ransom of Red Chief", this can be seen as part of the narrative's building tension.

"We thought it was likely the kid would be a handful, but never expected he'd be such a terror"[23]. In this case, "likely" reflects the narrator's cognitive process in evaluating the situation, while "but" marks the shift to an unexpected outcome. These words serve not only to create cohesion but to guide the reader's expectations, illustrating how the author controls the flow of information.

The use of these cohesive devices helps to create a "whole" that the reader can easily process, following the narrative's development step by step. O. Henry's use of these linking words doesn't just connect sentences grammatically; it steers the cognitive understanding of the reader. The words "however", "but", and "likely" act as markers that help organize the story into a pattern where cause and effect are clearly presented, maintaining a sense of progression.

For example, in "The Last Leaf", the word "however" could be used to signal a turning point or an unexpected shift in the story's direction: "She was losing hope, however, there was a final twist of fate that changed everything"[24]. This momentary contrast marked by "however" shifts the reader's cognitive perspective, leading them to anticipate the resolution, which in turn makes the story's surprise ending (the bequest of the last leaf) more impactful.

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[22] O. Henry. (2005). "The Gift of the Magi and other stories" ("The Ransom of Red Chief")
[23] O. Henry. (2005). "The Gift of the Magi and other stories" ("The Ransom of Red Chief")
[24] O. Henry. (2005). "The Gift of the Magi and other stories" ("The Last Leaf")

O. Henry's skillful use of words like "likely", "but", and "however" demonstrates the seamless interplay between coherence and cohesion. Through these devices, the author guides the cognitive processes of the reader, helping them to build connections between events and anticipate the shifts in narrative. From a Gestalt perspective, these devices allow the text to be perceived as a unified whole, even though it consists of separate moments or actions. The reader's mind, aided by these linking words, perceives the story's flow as more than just a series of disconnected parts, but as a coherent and cohesive narrative with a logical structure.

Conclusion. Coherence plays a central role in both cognitive and communicative processes. Cognitive coherence theory emphasizes the human drive to maintain consistency across beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes, which helps individuals navigate complex social and psychological environments. This drive for coherence extends to discourse, where individuals work to maintain logical and cohesive communication, even when revisiting topics over time. Despite its importance, the role of declarative memory in discourse coherence has often been overlooked, with more attention given to cognitive impairments affecting global coherence. Ultimately, coherence whether in cognition, communication, or social interaction serves as a fundamental mechanism that promotes psychological balance and effective communication.

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