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Weaving the Autobiographical Web: A Cognitive Linguistic Analysis of Alice Munro's "The Peace of Utrecht"

Opowieść autobiograficzna jako sieć. Analiza „Pokoju utrechckiego" Alice Munro w ujęciu językoznawstwa kognitywnego

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Abstract. The paper uses the conceptual metaphor WEAVING AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE IS WEAVING A WEB as an analytical tool to guide the exploration of the autobiographical aspects of Alice Munro's short fiction, in which the writer often reconstructs the emotional reality of her past. The paper analyses Munro's *The Peace of Utrecht* through the lens of Langacker's Cognitive Grammar, focusing on the use of the English Present tense. To conclude, the study bears out Langacker's epistemic account of the English present, revealing how the protagonist's conception of reality changes as she weaves her narrative in an attempt to reconnect with the past.

Keywords: Alice Munro; autobiographical narrative; the English Present tense; cognitive grammar; *The Peace of Utrecht*

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Abstrakt. Artykuł odwołuje się do metafory pojęciowej SNUCIE OPOWIEŚCI AUTOBIOGRAFICZNEJ TO TKANIE SIECI, przywołanej w celu objaśnienia struktury opowiadania autobiograficznego Alice Munro *Pokój utrechcki*, w którym autorka rekonstruuje emocjonalną rzeczywistość swojej młodości. Analiza utworu wyjaśnia, jak pisarka używa angielskiego czasu teraźniejszego (prostego). Zaczerpnięte z gramatyki kognitywnej Langackera ujęcie epistemiczne czasu teraźniejszego pozwala na uchwycenie tworzenia znaczeń autobiograficznych w opowiadaniu, którego główna bohaterka zmaga się z trudnymi wspomnieniami z okresu wczesnej młodości.

Słowa kluczowe: Alice Munro; autobiograficzna narracja; czas teraźniejszy prosty; gramatyka kognitywna; *Pokój utrechcki*

INTRODUCTION

Writing and reading autobiographies is central to human life and cultural experience. It may be argued that to a certain extent the Internet has replaced literature as the main channel through which the practice of autobiographical narrative is performed. The World Wide Web has allowed people to form connections and share the stories of their lives with others on an unprecedented scale. The advent of social media, which prompted the online performance of autobiographical acts, has shifted emphasis from life *writing* to life *showing*, generating a wide variety of different types of autobiographical practices (Schmitt 2018). However, the recent movement to embrace the Internet as the shaper of human identity has not been met with unanimous enthusiasm. For instance, Paul J. Eakin (2020: 97) indicates that online autobiographic practices may imply "the erasure of personhood that results from the mismatch between what we are and what information technology is capable of saying we are" (cf. also Özdeş, Kemal 2023). What such online practices often impinge on is self-reflection, one of the hallmarks of autobiographical writing, which algorithms for social platforms such as Facebook rarely allow to flourish (cf. Simanowski 2018).

To the extent that using social media and other online forms of autobiographical practices might affect the depth with which the individual's identity may be probed and studied, it seems necessary to provide a different perspective on the autobiographical aspects of Man in the web. Given the main theme of the current volume of "Educatio Nova", the present paper is designed to offer as a complementary view of the subject matter by drawing on another meaning of the lexical item *web*, which denotes an intricate structure consisting of interconnected parts, which might converge on the hub at the centre of the web. Using this idea of web, I invoke the conceptual metaphor WEAVING AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE IS WEAVING A WEB to tap into the two important aspects of the source domain: the central position of the web's hub and the interconnections

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giving rise to the complex overall structure. A conceptual metaphor, which maps the structure of a more concrete domain (e.g. SPACE) onto a more abstract domain of human experience (e.g. TIME as in *Astronomers are time-travellers*), enables to derive knowledge through inference. For instance, invoking the source domain WEB may have implications for how we reason about the target domain AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE in that the conceptual metaphor will highlight some aspects of the target, while hiding others (cf. also Kövecses 2020).

As people engage in weaving autobiographical narratives on a daily basis, literature of autobiographical character helps the reader mentally re-enact this intricate process, in which fact and fiction intermingle (Maruszewski 2011). The conscious use of linguistic conventions in literary discourse implies that grammar, including devices such as the first-person narrator, may be seen as symbolic (inherently meaningful) of human experience, which dovetails with the main tenet of the most prominent Cognitive Linguistic approach to linguistic structure: Ronald Langacker's Cognitive Grammar.

In the paper, I seek to address the question of how grammar may help convey autobiographical meanings. Specifically, the study concerns the issue of how the use of the English tense-modal system, particularly the English Present tense, can aid in structuring autobiographical narrative. Attention is paid to the literary forms of autobiographical stories, defined by the interplay of fact/fiction. The specific example discussed in the current study is Alice Munro's *The Peace of Utrecht* (henceforth also *Utrecht*), a short story blending personal material from the writer's own life with an incisive inquiry into the limits of self-knowledge and moral progress. The analysis seeks to explore the confession/diary of Helen, the autodiegetic narrator of *Utrecht*, based on the Canadian writer's difficult relationship with her own mother, who died of a form of Parkinson's disease when the author was an adolescent girl.

In this way, the paper speaks to the two elements of the "Educatio Nova" theme. It is hoped that the analysis this paper offers will be an instructive example indicating how Cognitive Linguistics may inform the study of literature. Using ideas from Langacker's Cognitive Grammar in the analysis of literary discourse is meant to yield fresh insights into the complexity of autobiographical writing.

CONSTRUING THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TRUTH

It is clear that autobiographical writing is a phenomenon examined from many scholarly perspectives, including psychology, sociology, cultural and literary studies. In literary studies, autobiographical narratives are often investigated in terms of the relation between memory and/in/of literature (Trybuś 2014).

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Whether literary or not, autobiography "may cover documentary facts and poetic truths, or neither, or any mixture of truths, lies, pretenses, illusions, delusions, cross-purposes, and other complications" (Stich 1988: ix). This means that autobiographical narrative cannot be reduced to a factual account of events from the empirical author's personal life.

The psychological import of constructing one's life story involves the recognition that such narratives help people integrate various events into coherent wholes, giving individuals a sense of purpose and direction in life (cf. e.g. Pohl 2019). The I-here-now in which the first-person narrator is both physically and socioculturally situated gives rise to the deictic centre relative to which the past is recalled, memories retrieved, connected and tailored to the goals entertained by the individual constructing an autobiographical story (Maruszewski 2011; cf. also Marszałek 2014). If so, autobiographical truth may be considered as socioculturally situated because the embodied self is embedded in the local environment (cf. e.g. Mischel, Shoda 2010). As Martin Conway and Laura Jobson (2012: 58) have it, "the self is always situated in and reflects its context (…). Consequently, autobiographical remembering both is shaped by culture and is a shaper of culture." The interdependence may be linked to the fact that autobiographical memory has a narrative quality, which ensures a feedback loop between how people's identity shapes and is shaped by their embedding in culture. The interrelatedness may manifest itself in cultural life scripts, the idea that presupposes "culturally shared ideas about major life transitions that influence autobiographical retrieval" (Heux, Rathbone, Gensburger, Clifford, Souchay 2022: 7). As Robyn Fivush (2013: 14) explains,

> autobiographical memory becomes a site for the individual and cultural construction of truth (…). That is, autobiographical memory becomes a way of accounting for what happened that implies *accountability*. It is not simply that something happened, but how and why, who was the agent, and who is responsible? It is in this sense that autobiographical memory becomes autobiography. It involves the telling of a life story that is motivated and agentic (…), and thus has moral power.

Thus, it is not enough for the story to be told. It must be recognised by others. This means that the issue of accuracy in autobiographical narratives should be framed in a manner reflecting the situatedness of the individual. Hence, it ought to address the question "whose accuracy for what purpose?" (Ibidem: 26). Also, insofar as the validity of such accounts hinges on the memory of the author, constructing autobiographical stories entails, at least in part, transition from reality to fiction.

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While there may be many different approaches to the problem of fact/fiction in autobiographical narrative, Cognitive Linguistics subscribes to the conception of experiential realism, which underscores the fact that human embodied and cultural experience bears on people's view of reality. From the perspective of Langacker's Cognitive Grammar, autobiographical truth may be considered as a matter of construal, the "capacity to conceive and portray the same situation in alternate ways" (Langacker 2017: 263). That is, grammatical structures may affect how specific conceptual content is mentally simulated through the activation of one's memories of embodied experience and social interaction (Langacker 2008: 535–539).

The construal of autobiographical content presupposes the language user's imaginative abilities because it implies their ability to assume different perspectives on various situations and events in one's life. Thus, construal is pivotal to shaping accountability in autobiographical narratives. For instance, when describing a particular scene, the language user might want to include the agent in the construal of an apprehended scene or omit to indicate the agent. In either case, the aim may be achieved through the selection of appropriate constructions (cf. Fausey, Long, Inamori, Boroditsky 2010 on (in)transitive and ergative verb usage; in his analysis of the aspects of construal related to agent/theme orientation, Langacker [2008: 369] explores the problem in terms of profiling specific segments of the action chain, as in the examples *Floyd broke the glass with a hammer* > *The hammer broke the glass* > *The glass broke*).

LANGACKER'S EPISTEMIC MODEL OF THE ENGLISH TENSE-MODAL SYSTEM

What this implies with respect to the issue of fact/fiction in autobiographical narrative is that the epistemic status of the same event in narratives told by different individuals participating in the situation may vary, depending on who tells the story and for what purpose. What they accept as integral to their reality conception (and integral to their autobiographical memory) may not coincide with what others consider as real (cf. Langacker 2009: 290–291), hence relevant. Since in any cultural community people may have different conceptions of reality, the need for getting others to recognise the view of reality inherent in our autobiographical account implies the need for negotiating worldviews through language.

Telling an autobiographical narrative might be seen as inviting the interlocutors to think cooperatively in order to work out a shared perspective on what happened (cf. Tomasello 2014). Linguistic conventions are instrumental in bringing it forth. As the scholar has it, linguistic units are abstracted from

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usage events and therefore they can be understood as schematised (conventionalised) patterns of interlocutors' initiative and reactive actions, accepted within a culture (cf. Langacker 2009: 157). Langacker (2017: 262) explains that construal "[grounds] language structure in social interaction through discourse, so that linguistic elements are characterized in terms of their interactive and discursive functions."

As a vital aspect of construal, imagination allows language users to transcend the limitations of their own reality conceptions by considering not situations or events themselves but the epistemic status of propositions related to them. Cognitive Grammar gives an insight into how people make sense of the world in terms of what they consider as (conceptually) immediate or non-immediate. In Langacker's epistemic account of the English tense-modal system, the scholar describes our epistemic landscape as consists of more than our direct experience of things in the real world (Langacker 2009: 202). In fact, our mental universe encompasses more than what people consider as real. The deictic centre (the I-here-now) from which the conceptualiser comprehends the world is situated in immediate reality. Langacker's metaphor of epistemic distance aids in understanding how the conceptualiser situates a given object of thought (e.g. an event, or, in Langacker's terms, the profiled process) relative to their reality conception: it is the path the conceptualiser mentally follows to comprehend the object of thought. Put briefly, epistemic (non-)immediacy implies that (non-)immediate reality is (not) the basis for its epistemic assessment (Ibidem: 217). While the use of a tense indicates grounding a process profiled by a clause relative to the language user's reality conception, the presence of a modal verb leads to an elaborated conception of reality, whereby the individual entertains the possibility of accepting the process as real. When a modal verb is not used, the difference between using the Past vs. Present tense is that the former implies that the profiled process is found in non-immediate reality (i.e. it is conceptually distant) and the latter indicates that it is confined to immediate reality. Importantly, the analysis this paper offers focuses on the Present tense. Given the complexity of the issue, modal usage in *Utrecht* must be examined in a separate study.

THE COGNITIVE LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE ENGLISH PRESENT TENSE IN *THE PEACE OF UTRECHT*

The analysis seeks to examine the formal complexity of *Utrecht*. Therefore, before we start off with the investigation of how the English present helps shape the epistemic landscape of the narrative, it is necessary to illuminate the formal features of *Utrecht*. First and foremost, it is important to indicate how the story

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draws on the genre conventions of diary and confession, which Munro invokes to construct her narrative.[1]

1. Autobiographical aspects of Alice Munro's short fiction

Alice Munro's short fiction is often described as a prime example of psychological literature, concerned with life's uncertainties and human struggle to get a grip on complex reality. Munro's first collection of short stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, was published in 1968. Since then, the consecutive volumes have earned her recognition as a writer whose carefully crafted narratives encapsulate perceptive insights into the human condition. Provincial Canada provides the main setting for many of her narratives, in which the writer explores the seemingly uneventful lives of small towns. Yet, beneath the surface of people's mundane existence lurk unwelcome or disturbing truths about them. Although reality remains persistently elusive, Munro characters often attempt to get a better understanding of themselves and others through the use of language. For many of them, constructing self-reflective narratives is the key to attaining the goal.

It is possible to distinguish two important perspectives on autobiographical aspects of Munro's short stories. Firstly, one of the hallmarks of Munro's fiction is that she uses the device of the first-person (female) narrator reminiscing about the past. Recollection is a part of the narrator's effort to understand reality, both past and present, and gain self-knowledge. Munro's stories frequently contain many temporal and spatial shifts, mediated through carefully selected forms of tense, aspect, and modality, helping the author to explore the theme of identity central to her fiction. Secondly, autobiography underpins not only the textual product of Munro's writing, but also the process of writing. The material she frequently builds on comes from her personal experience. The figure of the mother is particularly prominent in Munro's works. Memories related to her mother served as the building blocks for the construction of stories such as *Utrecht*, *The Ottawa Valley* and *Dear Life*.

2. The formal features of the narrative and genres in *The Peace of Utrecht*

It is worth clarifying that the form of *Utrecht* blends elements of the two important autobiographical genres of diary and confession. What the narrative shares with diary is the overall chronological framing of Helen's homecoming,

[1] The quotations from *The Peace of Utrecht* are taken from Munro's *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1998, e-book). No page numbers are available for the e-book version.

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marked by the use of the Roman numerals I and II, indicating the division of the story into two main parts, which corresponds to the significant changes in the protagonist's understanding of her own responsibility for the fate of her mother and sister. In fact, diaries sometimes supersede the use of dates with other means of ordering recorded events, for instance, by reference to places (Schahadat 2019). Also, *Utrecht* is a first-person narrative, which is a defining feature of diaries. As Schamma Schahadat (Ibidem) points out, diaries may contain gaps, which corresponds to the fragmentary nature of Munro's *Utrecht*, which begins *in medias res* and does not have a conclusive ending. Craig Hamilton (2015) adds the use of the Present Perfect at the beginning of the story's two main parts, which may be meant to signal a new diary entry ("I have been at home now for three weeks and it has not been a success" and "I have been to visit Aunt Annie and Auntie Lou. This is the third time I have been there since I came home and each time they have been spending the afternoon making rugs out of dyed rags," respectively).

The short story shares a number of characteristics with confession as an autobiographical genre as well. Ulrich Breuer (2018) traces the origins of confession in religious and legal discourse. Its literary manifestations are situated in-between autobiography and confessional speech acts, with formal features including the employment of deictic expressions (I-here-now), the use of negative imagery, exploring topics connected with the violation of norms (Ibidem: 526). The negative metaphors include, for instance, the dehumanising metaphor THE MOTHER IS A GOTHIC MONSTER ("Our Gothic Mother, with the cold appalling mask of the Shaking Palsy laid across her features") and FAMILY HOME IS A PRISON ("feeling as I recognized these signs a queer kind of oppression and release, as I exchanged the whole holiday world of school, of friends and, later on, of love, for the dim world of continuing disaster, of home"). In *Utrecht* Munro develops the theme of transgressions and the related feelings of guilt ("Maddy was the one who stayed. (…) she was exasperated at me for my wretched useless feelings of guilt") and estrangement from other family members ("The picture of [my mother's] face which I carried in my mind seemed too terrible, unreal. Similarly the complex strain of living with her (…) now began to seem partly imaginary; I felt the beginnings of a secret, guilty estrangement").

Furthermore, Robert Kusek (2015: 366) discusses properties seen as foundational for a Munro story, defined by a set of prototypical attributes distinguishing the author's narrative art. Accordingly, non-linearity, digressions and shifting viewpoints are said to constitute the hallmarks of Alice Munro's works, in which the interplay of the past and the present serves the epistemological purpose of careful reflection (Ibidem). Other scholars tend to concur, adding that "A typical

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Munro story is a ramble that includes sudden shifts of time and place and subject, the reasons for which are often not immediately clear" (Cantiz, Seamon 1996: 69). The reader must work out how the interconnections play out in the story. Charles Forceville (1988: 41, 43) underlines "the tension between past and present, [which] has a direct connection with the fiction-reality contrast" and Munro's use of "a kaleidoscopic narrative perspective, in which past and present acquire meaning when seen from each other's vantage points".

The overview bears out Langacker's claim about the importance of introducing the distinction between epistemic immediacy and epistemic distance. The insights also corroborate the scholar's assumption that "epistemic certainty about occurrences correlates with their position in time relative to the present" (Langacker 2008: 301). In a Munro story, it is often the present moment from which the epistemic status of past events and their relevance to one's conception of reality are assessed.

In fact, as Munro demonstrates in *Utrecht*, it is possible to be immersed in one's own immediate reality and still not accept it as real, placing the situation in the realm of non-immediate reality. As Helen reflects on the feeling of alienation after the return to the home town, her words reveal that she does not embrace the experience as part of her conceived reality ("people ask me what it is like to be back in Jubilee. But I don't know, I am still waiting for something to tell me, to make me understand that I am back (…) The big brick houses that I knew, with their wooden verandahs and gaping, dark-screened windows, seemed to me plausible but unreal").

3. Alice Munro's *The Peace of Utrecht:* weaving the story, weaving the Web

Munro's craft as an author of short stories has long been recognised (cf. Toolan 2015). In the essay *What Is Real?*, Munro (1982: 224) herself sheds light on the issue admitting that

> when I write a story I want to make a certain kind of structure, and I know the feeling I want to get from being inside that structure. (…) Then I start accumulating the material and putting it together. Some of the material I have lying around already, in memories and observations, and some I invent, and some I have to go diligently looking for (factual details), while some is dumped in my lap (anecdotes, bits of speech). I see how this material might go together to make the shape I need, and I try it.

Munro also compares the structure of a story to that of a house:

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> Everybody knows what a house does, how it encloses space and makes connections between one enclosed space and another and presents what is outside in a new way. This is the nearest I can come to explaining (…) what I want my stories to do for other people. (Ibidem: 224)

The conceptual metaphor motivating the author's understanding of narrative structure is A STORY IS A HOUSE, whereby the structure of a narrative emerges from interrelating its parts.

At this point, it is necessary to underscore the dynamic, flexible character of the construction of an autobiographical memory, which is discussed, for instance, in Tomasz Maruszewski (2011: 242–245). Edward Nęcka, Jarosław Orzechowski, Błażej Szymura and Szymon Wichary (2020: 347–248) elucidate the organisation of autobiographical memory, pointing out that the autobiographical material may be organised chronologically or thematically. The authors also mention Conway's idea of hierarchical organisation of autobiographical memory, taking three forms, ranked in order of generality from knowledge about lifetime periods to general events and event-specific knowledge (Ibidem: 348–349). What this indicates is the need for taking into consideration the nature of autobiographical remembering.

In this light, the usefulness of Munro's metaphor for the analysis of the structure of an autobiographical narrative may be undermined by some of the entailments it permits. That is, the STORY AS A HOUSE metaphor presupposes that the enclosed spaces, corresponding to narrative fragments (e.g. scenes or events), are restricted in number. It is possible to move through the house in various directions, which, in turn, seems to correspond to the way the reader engages with the narrative. Ultimately, however, the connections between the enclosed spaces are fixed. As a result, even though the metaphor is designed to capture the idea of a shifting perspective on narrated events (cf. Forceville 1988), it predetermines the building blocks from which a particular autobiographical narrative might be constructed. In short, the metaphor A STORY IS A HOUSE does not seem to account for the flexibility with which an autobiographical narrative may be created. Instead, it highlights the process of playing back a set of recorded situations or events in a linear fashion.

Therefore, I argue that for the purposes of the current study it may be more useful to invoke the metaphor WEAVING AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE IS WEAVING A WEB. It is meant to underscore the central position of the I-here--now "hub" (the deictic centre) relative to which the intersections of correlated threads linking scenes, situations or events from one's life emerge as the need arises. The whole network is anchored in the conceptualiser's conceived reality, encompassing the past and their immediate reality, hence its potential to foster

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novel interrelations. In this way, the epistemic landscape of the story might be rendered in terms of a web-like structure that permits various paths the conceptualiser may mentally follow to comprehend the object of thought and assess the epistemic status of the profiled process, for instance, by locating it in non-immediate reality.

4. The use of the English Present tense in Alice Munro's *The Peace of Utrecht*

In her detailed analysis of *Utrecht*, Isla Duncan (2011) provides a study of Munro's use of tense, aspect and modality. She distinguishes two main categories of the Present tense: "the state present, a category used to express timelessness and stasis," and the habitual present, which "[implies] both an unrestricted time span and the frequency of an event's repetition" (Ibidem: 20–21). Also, the scholar examines the fragmentary nature of Helen's account through Munro's reliance on ellipses and shifts between the Present and the Past tense. The reason why these points of Duncan's analysis are mentioned is that Langacker's Cognitive Grammar allows to broaden the scope of the examination by connecting the linguistic and the cognitive aspects of the narrative's structure. The main focus is on the occurrences of the Present tense in Part I of the story.

To elucidate the problem, it is necessary to introduce Langacker's idea of anchoring to help us explain the division of the story into Part I and Part II. Anchoring implies that the order in which components of a structure are presented "has intrinsic conceptual import just by virtue of invoking semantic structures in a certain sequence" (Langacker 2015: 27). Still, sequencing does not exhaust the range of its uses in that the structure (of any size and at any organisation level) that functions as an anchor provides framing. It "frames the clause in the sense of providing an initial point of access to its content. Because it is already active when subsequent elements are activated, it has the potential to influence their interpretation" (Ibidem: 28). It is possible to explain Munro's division of the story into the two main parts in terms of anchoring. The first part, in which the protagonist describes her arrival in Jubilee and initial reactions to the rift between herself and Maddy, anchors the reader's emerging understanding of the extent of Helen's guilt. In Part II, Helen learns about her mother's erratic escape from the hospital and her subsequent death. Helen also finds out that it was Maddy who abandoned the mother in the hospital because she could not longer take the strain related to being the sole caregiver of her parent.

Therefore, Part I plays an essential anchoring role in that it provides the basis of Helen's conception of reality. As for the cognitive structures supporting meaning construction in the first part, it is possible to identify cultural life scripts

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("I exchanged the whole holiday world of school, of friends and, later on, of love, for the dim world of continuing disaster, of home"), temporal frames related to recurrent events ("The rhythm of life in Jubilee is primitively seasonal. Deaths occur in the winter; marriages are celebrated in the summer") and schemas of social cognition (e.g. role schemas related to filial duties implied in Helen's recollection of the moment when the mother's sisters shouldered responsibility for her welfare on the two adolescent daughters: "we were in our teens, and our old aunts, Aunt Annie and Auntie Lou, spoke to us of some dutiful son or daughter who had given up everything for an ailing parent"; cf. Moskowitz 2004). Despite the claims asserting the somewhat meandering, rambling nature of Munro's stories, what helps impose conceptual order onto the complex network of recording and recollection is the cognitive phenomenon of anchoring.

With respect to the use of the Past/Present tenses, Part I of *Utrecht* contains a number of paragraphs in which the occurrences of the Present tense are interspersed with past tense forms:

> (1) At night we often **sit** out on the steps of the verandah, and **drink** gin and **smoke** diligently to defeat the mosquitoes and **postpone** until very late the moment of going to bed. It **is** hot; the evening **takes** a long time to burn out. The high brick house, which **stays** fairly cool until midafternoon, **holds** the heat of the day trapped until long after dark. It **was** always like this, and Maddy and I **recall** how we **used to** drag our mattress downstairs onto the verandah, where we **lay** counting falling stars and trying to stay awake till dawn. We never **did**, falling asleep each night about the time a chill drift of air **came** up off the river, carrying a smell of reeds and the black ooze of the riverbed. At half-past ten a bus **goes** through the town, not slowing much; we see it go by at the end of our street. It **is** the same bus I **used to** take when I **came** home from college.

Duncan suggests that this Present tense use can be categorised as habitual. I argue that the accumulation of the Present tense forms should be examined not in terms of the sisters' habitual actions but in terms of Helen's conception of reality (what is conceptually immediate or distant from how she view reality at a given moment in time). The parallels in the use of present/past forms imply that for Helen her present reality conception coincides with that of her past. That is to say, she recognises and accepts as real some parts of the Jubilee's world structure, in this case those that refer to daily routines shared with Maddy. The use of the Present tense invokes certain schemas/scripts which apply to both the past and the present (e.g. the evening routine in summer, journey home on a bus), indicating that Helen does not notice any significant change in that respect.

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In the second excerpt, which comes later in Part I, the use of the Present tense also invokes mental structures capturing the essential nature of the world of Jubilee:

> (2) The rhythm of life in Jubilee **is** primitively seasonal. Deaths **occur** in the winter; marriages **are** celebrated in the summer. There is good reason for this; the winters **are** long and full of hardship and the old and weak cannot always get through them. Last winter **was** a catastrophe, such as may be expected every ten or twelve years; you can see how the pavement in the streets is broken up, as if the town had survived a minor bombardment. A death **is** dealt with then in the middle of great difficulties; there **comes** time now in the summer to think about it, and talk. I **find** that people stop me in the street to talk about my mother.

Interestingly, this fragment repeats present/past shifts that take the form of generic statements, describing reality at a more fundamental level. They pertain to the life of the whole town, not only Helen and Maddy. In Langacker's account of the Present tense, it is argued that "our knowledge of the world includes a set of structural generalizations, representing how the world is thought to work" (Langacker 2009: 297). This also pertains to social reality. Rather than describe this use as expressing timelessness/stasis (cf. Duncan 2011), it seems possible to argue that in *Utrecht* the Present tense helps express Helen's view of reality, split into her former life in Jubilee, from which she escaped, and her current life in Toronto, where she lives with her husband and children, as attested by the excerpt below:

> I remember after I went away receiving from Maddy several amusing, distracted, quietly overwrought letters (…) I read them with sympathy but without being able to enter into the once-familiar atmosphere of frenzy and frustration which my mother's demands could produce. In the ordinary world it was not possible to re-create her.

As the story progresses, the reader learns about Helen's recognition and acceptance of some crucial aspects of life in Jubilee. It is significant that in Part II the occurrences of the Present are limited primarily to the dialogues between characters. The part is an extended account of Helen's visit to her aunts, during which she learns about the possible reason for her mother's death. At this point establishing the protagonist's conception of reality is no longer necessary. In fact, the reader has already learnt about it from Part I, which enables them to reflect more fully on the issue of Helen's accountability.

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CONCLUSION

On Langacker's epistemic account of tense usage, it may be argued that the use of the Present tense in Munro's autobiographical narrative serves the purpose of combining autobiographical remembering and recording current events, which dovetails with the format of the story blending confession with diary. Taking into consideration the respective genre conventions has helped account for the use of the Present tense in *Utrecht* in a more systematic way.

To sum up, in *Utrecht* Munro uses the Present tense to provide a link between Helen's autobiographical remembering and the ongoing recording of her stay in the home town. Also, it is through the form of confession and diary that Helen, the autodiegetic narrator, weaves an autobiographical narrative, placing herself at the centre of the intricate web of conceptualisations which interrelate her memories and current life. The use of the Present tense plays an important role in this process because it helps to bridge the gap between Helen's two identities: her former identity as a daughter and sister, which she discarded, with her new identity as a happy mother and wife. It would seem that Alice Munro's *Utrecht* shows how difficult it may be to achieve the unity without acknowledging responsibility for one's actions.

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