

A web of analogies: key descriptive constructions in modern fiction

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One key feature of modern fiction is the frequent use of descriptive lexis, especially descriptive verbs (verbs that, besides having a core lexical meaning, contain a further semantic element, such as *jerk* [‘movement’ + ‘sharply arrested’], *stiffen*, *huddle*, *gasp* [cf. Snell-Hornby 1983]) and adverbs (e.g. *swiftly*, *suddenly*, *briskly*). Although most such words are also found in everyday language, the patterns in which they occur in fiction are often specific to that genre; thus, the motion verb *jerk*, for example, occurs in resultative (depictive) constructions with adjectival and prepositional complements of the type *awake*, *erect*, *into wakefulness*, etc. (Siepmann 2015); similar considerations hold true for verbs of gesture such as *nod*, which in literary usage frequently occurs in a ‘reaction object construction’ (Levin 1993, Martinez Vazquez 2014), typical collocations being *nod (one’s) agreement/approval/assent/understanding/satisfaction/encouragement*.

The patterns underlying such recurrent literary uses of language may be described in terms of argument-structure-constructions (Goldberg 2006). An attempt will be made to show how valency-increasing argument-structure-constructions, especially resultative and reaction object constructions, are systematically exploited by novelists to express dynamic action in four major descriptive fields (human behaviour, movement and position, sound, and light) which are related through a complex web of analogies. The use of argument-structure-constructions involving descriptive verbs will be shown to be one of the most salient but as yet under-researched characteristics of fictional style. Comparison will be made with French, where similar constructions are far less complex and varied.

References

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