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Making sense of place: Further descriptions of Circumstance of location

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Making sense of place: Further descriptions of Circumstance of location

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Abstract

In the year in which the new Australian government has officially apologized to the Stolen Generations for taking them away from their “place” of origin, that is to say, from their families, communities and lands, we think it appropriate to revisit the notion of place as it relates to voice, identity and culture. In systemic functional theory, notions of place are typically accounted for experientially through the subsystem of Circumstance (of spatial location or place) within the system of Transitivity. This paper concerns itself with further classification of the category of spatial location. The work reported on in this paper was driven from data collected on two projects (one a large ARC examining the development of writing during adolescence and one a PhD examining primary school literacy pedagogy), where the category of Circumstance of place was found to be not sufficient nor delicate enough to capture the semantics of what was being classified as a Circumstance of spatial location. We examine texts from the public arena and the classroom to consider the contribution of circumstantial information as cultural life unfolds through them. In the texts examined, the more delicate descriptions of locational circumstances reveal how ‘place’ may be concrete or abstract, and often imbued with psychological, social and cultural significance. This paper shows the tentative categories of Circumstance of spatial location, with a view to extending the metalinguistic tools available to teachers and learners for close encounters with texts and meanings. We suggest the extended categories make richer, more complex readings available to both analysts and learner reader-writers, readings which assist them to participate in changing civic life.

1 Introduction

‘Place’ is generally conceived as being ‘space’ imbued with meaning. Thus, it refers more to the meanings that are invested in a location than to the physicality of locality.

(Vanclay 2008 pxxi)

The notion of ‘place’ is not new in systemic functional descriptions of language. In his descriptions in and of the world, within the clause, Halliday (1994, 2004) accounts for place within the system of Transitivity. Within the system of Transitivity there are three types of constituents: participant, process and circumstance, and it is within the circumstance that we find the kind of information about place, about *where* something happens (the process describing the event and the participant describing the things that take part in the process). However, there has been no further descriptions or analyses of finer categories of place, in terms of the semantic domain and SFL leaves it at this level of generality (see Halliday 1994 p161; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004 p280).

In terms of grammatical categories, circumstances can be realized by either adverbial groups or prepositional phrases (Halliday and Matthiessen 1999) but the decision to categorise the types of circumstance is semantically driven (See (Halliday and Matthiessen 1999 p262). There is a discussion of abstract space and some categorization of concrete places as definite/indefinite, absolute/relative, rest and motion on p266 of IFG3. In this discussion Halliday & Matthiessen make the point that it is the “where” probe that distinguishes whether a circumstance is of abstract location rather than some other kind.

In contrast to this, within other fields such as cultural studies, philosophy and human geography, notions of place have been explored in more depth, in an attempt to understand how social, cultural and physical worlds intertwine and how places are “lived, perceived and associated” (Pickford 2005).

In other words, the very essence of who we are is shaped by the places we inhabit.

However, this is a very concrete take on the concept of place; that is to say, in all of the above fields the places we inhabit are confined to the physical places in the material world around us. However, the philosopher/geographer Malpas (1999 p31) raises the question whether there is a “need for a concept of place beyond the notion of simple location”.

A concept of place that extends beyond the notion of simple location seems useful from our work in the study of a variety of texts. It seems evident from these texts that humans occupy a multiplicity of spaces that include but extend beyond the physical. Halliday (1994 p161) acknowledges that the concept of place extends beyond the purely concrete, pointing out that “in the modern elaborated registers of adult speech especially writing, the circumstantial elements are evolved far from their concrete origins – especially the spatial ones.” He continues, “It is beyond our scope here to treat these developments systematically”. We take this as the point of departure for this work, which is based upon written texts from the social sciences within institutional contexts, and the public life; specifically, we will argue that the places that we occupy extend from the concrete to the abstract, from the physical to the psychological, from the personal to the socio-cultural. It is with this in mind that this paper aims to continue the conversation around the category of location:place within the field of sfl.

2 The data

The idea for this expansion has come from data from two sources: the first is a corpus data collected in a large ARC project “Key indicators in adolescent writing” and the second a doctoral study of primary school literacy practices. In the former, the project team collected data from three subject areas, English, history and science, across the school years 7, 10 and 12. It is from the history corpus that the ideas for this paper initially arose, as it became evident that within the history texts there were numerous ‘places’ where the events in history occurred that were not confined to physical spaces. For example:

the elements surrounding the Anzac tradition and spirit have been apparent and constant in Australian society, which is suggestive of a social location;

The sacrifice at Gallipoli guaranteed the tradition a place in the hearts and minds of all generations, suggesting a psychological and emotional space;

On April 25th 1915, the Anzacs took part in war, suggesting a metaphorical place for where humans go to kill each other.

For those of us who are seeking educational interventions for students to be able to construct and interpret such texts, the category of Circumstance: location: place does not capture the semantics of what is occurring. For example, for the clause *The ANZACS took part in war*, a student might well say that war is not a place¹.

From the doctoral study involving classroom use of grammatics with young learners, deeper analysis of circumstances of place became critical in supporting a close reading of one of the texts, which was a biographical account of a young Aboriginal woman from the Stolen Generations. Such examples include:

Missionaries moved my family from our own country to Malak Malak country in the Daly River area.

I come from the Ngangiwumerrri people.

Then as a child I was forcibly taken from my family

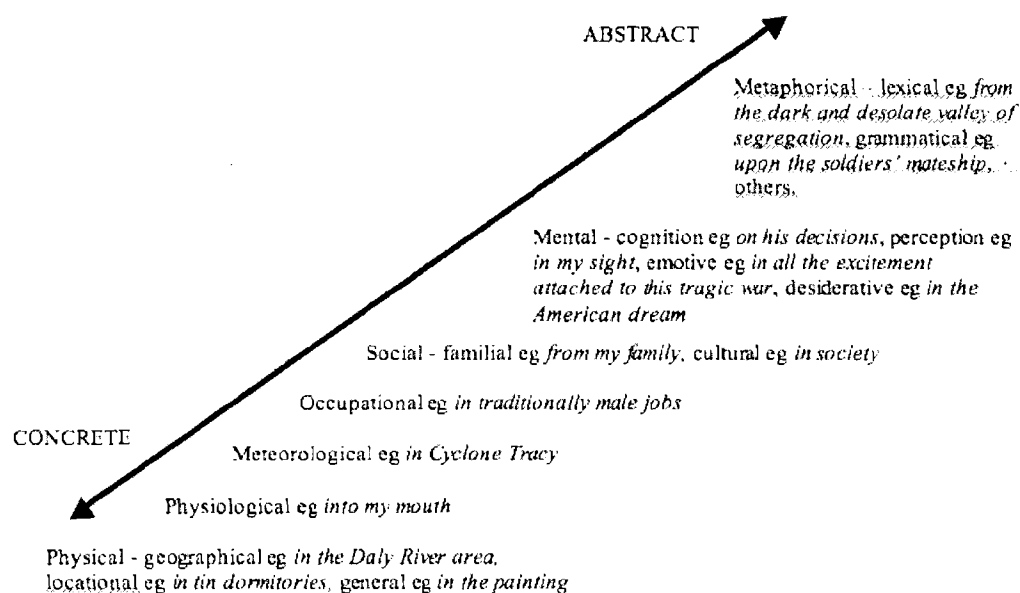
Understanding the complexity of the ramifications of the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their place can be made possible by a further level of delicacy in the circumstance of location: place categories. That is to say, to be removed “from our own

¹ Note that we are focusing on circumstances of place realized grammatically as prepositional phrase and not adverbs.

country” is different from but nevertheless deeply connected to, being removed “from my family”. Coming “from the Malak Malak country in the Daly River area” is a geographical place, again different but connected to coming “from the Ngangiwumerrri people”, which is a sociocultural place. In order to get to the ‘heart of the matter’, one needs to recognize the differences between these physical and social places and understand their interconnections.

To date, this matter has been dealt with sparingly within the field. Within the category of Circumstance location: place, Matthiessen and Canzhong (2007) distinguishes between “place” and “non-place”, however no exemplification is provided to show what might constitute a “non-place” location. Thus, after Halliday’s lead, which identifies the evolution of the category of place from concrete to abstract, we set up the finer categories of circumstance of place on a cline from concrete and abstract. This is to account for the fact that while some circumstances of place are very clearly concrete (eg *on my table*) and others clearly abstract (eg *in our own attitudes* Halliday 1994), the distinction is not always so clear cut, such as *in the teaching profession* or *in my opinion*. This very tentative work plots these on a cline, beginning with concrete, as it is the most easily recognized and the least problematic.

3 A cline of Circumstance: location



We stress here that these preliminary categories are of course, derived from and bounded by the data analysed thus far.

Physical

The most concrete end of the cline begins with physical, which is subdivided into geographical, locational and general. Geographical refers to places that can be located geographically and their location is named and identified eg *in the Daly River area* in the clause listed above, or *at Heliopoli* in *Thutmosis constructed a shrine to Ra at Heliopolis*. Locational refers to places that can be located in a geographical place but their location has not been named, eg *in tin dormitories* in the clause *We lived in tin dormitories* or *in the creek bank* in *[her family] had dug holes in the creek bank*. General describes places that are physical but not tied to location or geographical place eg *in the painting* in the clause *In the painting Ngambu Ngambu there are different living things and around their boots in they even wrapped sandbags around their boots*.

Physiological

Physiological places refer to the somatic, that is, places of the physical body but not the mind. For example *into my mouth* in *a lot of flies flew into my mouth*.

Meteorological

The category refers to weather events such as in Cyclone Tracy as in *My father was killed in Cyclone Tracy*.

Occupational

This category describes places to do with employment such as in traditionally male jobs in women were needed in traditionally male jobs, and in the building and shipping industries as in women were trained to work in the building and shipping industries.

Social

This category has many facets and is of particular relevance to our texts. Given that social space can encompass immediate family environments and much wider social networks such as community and society and the difference between these is significant, our subcategories reflect these different social spaces but are somewhat underdeveloped as yet. The first subcategory is called familial because it refers to the social space of the family as in *from my family* in the clause above. The second subcategory we have termed cultural because it refers to the wider socio-cultural context as in *from the Ngangiwumerrri people* in the clause listed above. The nominal element in Circumstances in this category can occur as actual humans, such as those in the examples above, or as nominalisations, such as in *Australian society* in the clause *Mateship...is frequently displayed in current Australian society*. The first congruent type does not answer the probe 'from where' but 'from who/m'; the second nominalised type answering the 'from where' probe.

Mental

This category contrasts with the physiological category in that it relates to kinds of experiences captured in mental processes; that is, sensing, thinking, feeling and wanting (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004 p208). It marks an intensification in the drift toward abstraction because the matter we are describing shifts from more concrete places to the realm of ideas, emotions, desires and thoughts. We have divided this category similarly. Cognitive describes categories of place to do with thinking, for example *on his decisions* in the clause *this places heavy emphasis on his decisions*. Perceptive describes categories of the senses, such as in *my sight* in the clause *I have him firmly in my sight*. Emotive describes affective places, such as in *all the excitement attached to this tragic war* in the clause *The ANZACs wanted to get involved in all the excitement attached to this tragic war*. Desiderative refers to emotions of desire, such as in *the American dream* in the clause *It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream* (King, 1963).

Metaphorical

The final and most complex category of circumstance of location place is the metaphorical. In many ways, this category has driven the current exploration. It began with queries about the nature of circumstances of place in the history texts, in particular those about the experience of war. Such examples that stimulated the current discussion include *Soldiers went to war*. This can be contrasted with *Soldiers went to the mess tent*, which clearly identifies a physical concrete location, whereas, as mentioned above, *going to war* is a metaphor which renders a whole series of events around killing into a semiotic representation. We acknowledge this work is not without problems. For example, there is contention about whether being born and dying are material or behavioural processes, and

accordingly, the places *life* and *death*, in clauses such as *At the Nek 375 charged to their deaths*, is problematic.

This category is most problematic because, in a sense, we are trying to classify the multiplicity of abstract places in human consciousness and cognition. As we examined other texts particularly those marking significant points in human struggles such as King's speech and more recently Kevin Rudd's apology to the Stolen Generations, we found a range of metaphorical circumstances.

We think thus far that this category includes lexical metaphors, such as *from the dark and desolate valley of segregation* in the clause *Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation* (King 1963); grammatical metaphors, such as *upon the soldiers' mateship, courage, determination, bravery, loyalty and confidence*, in the clause *The ANZAC legend is based upon the soldiers' mateship, courage, determination, bravery, loyalty and confidence*, and other types of abstractions such as *on our most elemental humanity in the hurt, the humiliation, the degradation and the sheer brutality of the act of physically separating a mother from her children is a deep assault on our senses and on our most elemental humanity* (Rudd 2008). There is much work to be done here.

To conclude, sfl has long gone to work in social life; it has always been concerned with how texts and meanings both construct and reflect the ideas and events of human struggles. The significance of this work to further classify circumstances of location:place is that firstly, it allows us to better understand the array of meanings caught up in this category of place: thinking of the difference of the meanings in being forcibly removed from one's family, as opposed to one's people, as opposed to one's land or one's life. Similarly, such work helps to better understand the complexity of the extraordinary events caught up in the simple but lethal phrase *in war*. Secondly, this work aims to enhance the analytical tools available to teachers and analysts interested in developing fine-grained readings of texts. Such readings, we argue, are important for understanding each other, the events and happenings for which we are responsible and the consequences of our actions in the world.

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