

The Role of Construal in Shaping Foreboding and Panic in Alice Munro’s “My Mother’s Dream”

Oksana Hural

Lviv Ivan Franko National University

Faculty of Foreign Languages

1 Universytetska St., 79007 Lviv, Ukraine

Email: oksana.hural@lnu.edu.ua

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7475-7159>

Research interests: cognitive linguistics, narratology, discourse studies

Abstract. This study applies the Cognitive Grammar framework to Alice Munro’s short story *My Mother’s Dream*, which centres on a young woman’s struggle to reconcile motherhood with her identity as a violinist in a post-war provincial Canadian community. The narrative intricately plays with the theme of infant death, presented initially as part of the young mother’s dream and revisited as a possibility in the post-climactic scene. Both scenes are analysed through the Cognitive Grammar concept of *construal* and its dimensions of *specificity*, *prominence*, and *perspective* (Langacker, 2008), complemented by the *reference point model* and the notion of *action chains* to explore how narrative meaning emerges through conceptual patterns. These tools enable a scientifically justified explanation of foreboding in the early scene and panic in the later one. Employing a qualitative, interpretive methodology based on close reading and the manual application of the Cognitive Grammar toolkit (Stockwell, 2014; Harrison, 2017a; Giovanelli, et al., 2021), this study demonstrates the framework’s potential to illuminate the processes of meaning encoding and decoding in fictional texts.

Keywords: cognitive grammar; stylistics; short story; Alice Munro; Canadian literature.

Introduction

In recent years, Cognitive Grammar has moved from the periphery to the centre of conceptual approaches to the analysis of both sentence-level and broader discourse-level structures (Giovanelli and Harrison, 2018; Giovanelli, et al., 2021; Hamawand, 2023). This article draws upon the Cognitive Grammar (CG) framework introduced by R. Langacker (1987, 2008), which has since evolved into a fully-fledged analytical model applied to fictional texts (Harrison, et al., 2014; Harrison, 2017a; Giovanelli and Harrison, 2018; Nuttall, 2018; Rundquist, 2020).

Submitted 10 September 2025 / Accepted 28 February 2026

Įteikta 2025 09 10 / Priimta 2026 02 28

Copyright © 2026 Oksana Hural. Published by Vilnius University Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License CC BY 4.0, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium provided the original author and source are credited.

The paper argues that narrative events are always presented through a specific *construal*, which shapes the reader's perception of the fictional world and interacts with it through linguistic verbalisation. Authorial *construal* can be examined through the dimensions defined by Langacker (2008, pp. 55–85): *specificity*, *prominence (scope and focus)*, and *perspective*. The present analysis combines a stylistic approach with the CG model to investigate how *construal* operations shape the reader's emotional response and engagement with the text of Alice Munro's *My Mother's Dream*.

First published in *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998), the short story is a semi-autobiographical narrative set in post-war provincial Canada.¹ Retrospectively narrated, the story depicts a young woman's struggle to cope with motherhood while pursuing her career as a violinist. Upon becoming a mother, Jill finds herself under close societal and familial surveillance from the baby's two paternal aunts, Ailsa and Iona. Jill's fear of failure as a mother manifests in a dream-turned-nightmare, where she loses the baby through negligence. This scenario later reappears in reality, when the baby is found seemingly dead after the young mother spends an exhausting day alone with it.

The analysis focuses on two sequences: an initial dream-like scene and a post-climactic scene of panic. Both scenes have been selected for their emotional intensity, discussion value, and contrasting effects they produce. Following the methodological model proposed by P. Stockwell (2014) and later elaborated by C. Harrison (2017b) and L. Nuttall (2021), these passages are indicative of *the grammar of foreboding* and *the grammar of panic*.

The objective of this study is to demonstrate how the CG concepts of *construal*, *reference point model*, and *action chain* shape the reader's emotional response to narrative structure and dynamics. The paper explores the following research questions:

- RQ 1: How do different dimensions of *construal* contribute to the effect of foreboding in the opening passage of *My Mother's Dream*?
- RQ 2: In what ways do reference point chains guide the reader's attention toward potential targets in the initial scene?
- RQ 3: How are agency and causality distributed in the post-climactic passage, and what do they reveal about the emotional tension and the sense of urgency?
- RQ 4: What types of action chains, including shifts in agent-patient roles, are at play, and how does linguistic structure shape the emotional rhythm of the narrative?

1. Literature review and methodology

Alice Munro, a master of short stories and a Nobel Prize winner (2013), is well known for her subtle, emotionally complex stories. Therefore, her oeuvre has been a prolific field for investigation from the perspectives of literary criticism and narratology (Gadpaille and Mohar, 2022; Ignjatović, 2022), stylistics and functional grammar (Francesconi, 2023), and cognitive poetics (Farsi, 2022; Stadnik, 2024). Gadpaille and Mohar (2022) edited a special issue of *ELOPE* bringing together eight articles examining A. Munro's

¹ All quotations are taken from the 2021 reprint of the same collection (see references).

fiction through feminist methodology, linguistic stylistics, the theory of spatiality and translation studies. Ignjatović (2022) analyses focalization as a rhetorical instrument in A. Munro's *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, arguing that deixis and cognitive-poetic frameworks reveal how focalization guides the reader's reception of the narrative and challenges conventional interpretations of third-person narration. Francesconi (2023) investigates the formal and functional variation of the verb *seem* in Munro's early collections, showing through quantitative and qualitative analysis how its fluctuation constructs an uncertain, subjective point of view. Farsi (2022) applies G. Gavins's text world theory to *Runaway*, demonstrating how the story's free indirect discourse creates layered text worlds that conceal the narrator's biases and prejudices behind the surface of neutrality. Stadnik (2024) uses the conceptual metaphor of *Weaving an autobiographical narrative is weaving a web* alongside CG to analyse the use of the English present tense in *The Peace of Utrecht*. Although Langacker (2014) recognises the complexity of the CG approach resulting in its highly selective application, further research suggests it can complement cognitive stylistics by offering "a fine-grained, text-driven, and construal-based model for investigating the reading experience" (Harrison, 2017a, p. 135). It proves particularly useful for close analysis of precise textual sequences, providing new insights into the relationship between textual features and the reader's interpretative experience. This is the focus of the present study.

The research draws on key theoretical foundations in CG, including works by R. Langacker (1987, 2008), A. Verhagen (2007), C. Harrison (2017a), and Z. Hamawand (2021, 2023). It also incorporates insights from stylistics (Simpson, 2004; Stockwell and Whiteley, 2014; Lugea and Walker, 2023) and builds on the practical application of CG to literary texts (Harrison, et al., 2014; Giovanelli and Harrison, 2018; Giovanelli, et al., 2021).

According to Langacker, construal is "our manifest ability to conceive and portray the same situation in alternate ways" (2008, p. 43). While other classifications exist, such as R. Talmy's *schematic systems* (2000, pp. 40–41) and W. Croft and D. A. Cruse's *construal operations* (2004, p. 46), this analysis adopts R. Langacker's model of *construal* which includes the dimensions of *specificity*, *prominence*, and *perspective* (2008, pp. 55–85), due to its previous application in stylistics by M. Giovanelli and C. Harrison (2018), L. Nuttall (2021). These operations reflect general cognitive processes such as attention, perspective-taking, and mental simulation, central to the *Cognitive Commitment* in cognitive linguistics (Evans and Green, 2006, p. 40). Meaning, in this view, arises not only from conceptual content, but from the way it is construed (Langacker, 2008, p. 44). As J. Lugea and B. Walker note, construal highlights "the importance of choice in linguistic expression and in forging stylistic patterns" (2023, p. 14). Langacker likens it to viewing a scene: what we see depends on focus, selection, and vantage point (2008, p. 55). Subsections 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 below provide an overview of the CG tools used in the analysis.

1.1. Construal dimensions

Specificity. By analysing specificity, we access the level of precision with which a concept is profiled, from abstract schemas to richly detailed expressions (Langacker, 2008,

pp. 55–58). Higher resolution (granularity) is reserved for the most important aspects of the scene, while less significant ones are rendered more schematically. The text creates a zoom-in or zoom-out effect, as the specificity of an object increases or decreases in the reader's mental focus.

Prominence. *Focusing* involves selecting and organising conceptual content for linguistic presentation, typically in terms of foreground versus background (Langacker, 2008, p. 57). It encompasses *profiling*, the ability of language to direct attention to certain aspects of a scene, and *scope*, which distinguishes between *maximal scope* (MS), the full extent of coverage, and *immediate scope* (IS), the portion directly relevant for a particular purpose (e.g., face [IS] – body [MS]). The immediate scope is the “online portion of a concept” (Giovannelli and Harrison, 2018, p. 38); it is foregrounded against the maximal scope (Langacker, 2008, p. 63). Profiling manifests through grammatical constructions, such as voice, transitivity, and energy transfer between agent and patient, often analysed as an action chain. *Trajector/landmark alignment* is another form of prominence: the trajector (TR) is the most prominent participant, construed as located, evaluated, or described, while a landmark (LM) may serve as a secondary focus (Langacker, 2008, p. 70).

Perspective. Conceptualization can be metaphorically understood as viewing a scene, and *perspective* as the viewing arrangement, including *vantage point*, a particular viewing position from which a scene is being viewed, and *dynamicity* (Langacker, 2008, p. 73). Perspective involves *subjective construal*, in which the speaker is mentally present and expresses internal or experiential viewpoints, and *objective construal*, in which the speaker is excluded, and the scene is presented neutrally. Construal is profiled through *verbal* (tense, mood, aspect) and *nominal* (determiners, pronouns, quantifiers) *grounding elements*, both *overt*, mentioned above, and *covert* (e.g., plural count nouns, mass nouns), which attach events and states to the current speech event (Giovannelli and Harrison, 2018, pp. 114, 118–119).

Dynamicity captures conceptualisation as a process unfolding through time, gradually (sequential scanning) or as a static summarising configuration (*summary scanning*) (Langacker, 2008, pp. 71–74). Summary scanning means construing the situation as a whole, so that the situation is viewed in retrospect.

1.2. Reference point model

A *reference point* is the initial focus of attention that facilitates access to less salient objects (Croft and Cruse, 2004, p. 51). In narratives reference points guide readers' focus following characters' or narrators' mental paths and direct attention toward *targets* or potential targets (*dominion*) (Langacker, 2008, pp. 77–84). Targets are elements of the scene that are less obvious on their own, but become identifiable when construed in relation to the reference point (e.g. Do you remember Natalie [reference point] you have met at the wedding? This is her son [target]).

1.3. Action chains

In CG, the action chain model explains energy transfer, first at the clause level and now at the level of discourse (Harrison, 2017b, p. 8). Langacker's "billiard-ball model" is used to illustrate how energy flows from *agent* through *instrument* to *patient*, with additional roles including *mover*, *experiencer*, *zero role*, and *locative* (Langacker, 2008, pp. 355–356; Giovanelli and Harrison, 2018, pp. 92–93). This framework enables multi-dimensional analysis of textual structure and reader interpretation.

2. The grammar of foreboding in the dream scene

2.1. Perspective

The dream-scene presents a blended perspective: the adult daughter recounts events from her early childhood, which she could not remember since she was a baby at the time. Retrospective I-narration introduces the scene through *summary scanning*: "During the night – or during the time she had been asleep – there had been a heavy fall of snow" (Munro, 2021, p. 293). Further events are processed *sequentially*. Perfective verbs represent actions as complete wholes, unfolding gradually, while the past tense adds temporal distance.

At the beginning, the mother's static viewing position is *inside the house* and *above the scene*, as the prepositions suggest:

My mother looked *out from* a big arched window such as you find in a mansion or an old-fashioned public building. She looked *down on* lawns and shrubs, hedges, flower gardens, trees, all covered by snow that lay in heaps and cushions, not levelled or disturbed by wind. The white of it did not hurt your eyes as it does in sunlight. The white was the white of snow under a clear sky just before dawn. Everything was still; it was like "O Little Town of Bethlehem" except that the stars had gone out (Munro, 2021, p. 293, italics added – O. H.).

The narrative voice blends with the mother's perspective, making her both the subject and the object of conception and creating a rather *subjective construal* of the situation. This is reinforced by a retrospective narrative technique through free indirect thought (FIT). This is "a case of dual grounding" (Rundquist, 2020, pp. 152–153), since it combines the narrator's context (past tense, third person pronouns) with the character's subjective context, which includes *perception and cognition verbs*: "she thought", "she could not hear", "she did not even know", "she remembered"; *modality* "she had to get out of the house", "perhaps it was not last night", "she might even have travelled"; and also includes *evaluative elements*: "Yet something was wrong. There was a mistake in this scene" (Munro, 2021, p. 293).

Since purely subjective (e.g. greetings, apologies) or purely objective (e.g. isolated objects) construals are rare in narrative (Verhagen, 2007, p. 65), most narrative forms in the analysed short story fall along the continuum between the poles, ranging from the

third-person omniscient narration (objective pole) to the first-person narration (subjective pole) with free indirect speech/thought positioned in between.

2.2. *Action chains and dream logic*

The dream-like quality of the scene may be accounted for by the action chain model. The serenity of the scene is achieved by the succession of intransitive clauses, which create an impression of stasis and minimal dynamism. The entities described fulfil *a zero role* in terms of archetypal participant roles, defined as “an entity that inhabits a static location” (Giovanelli and Harrison, 2018, p. 92). “All the trees, all the shrubs and plants, were out in full summer leaf. The grass that showed underneath them ... was fresh and green” (Munro, 2021, p. 293). The following sentences ascribe the snow *a mover role*, which is defined as anything that moves or “changes position in relation to its external surrounding” (Langacker, 2008, p. 356). At first, it settles, as the anxiety grows, then disappears: “Snow had settled overnight on the luxury of summer” (Munro, 2021, p. 293); “The snow and the leafy gardens and the strange house had all withdrawn” (Munro, 2021, p. 295). The mother’s dream contains another dream, and awakening from it reveals the shocking news that her baby has been left outside for a prolonged time: “When she got outside, she remembered. She remembered that she had left a baby out there somewhere, before the snow had fallen” (Munro, 2021, p. 294); “She had left her baby out overnight, she had forgotten about it. Left it exposed somewhere as if it was a doll she tired of” (Munro, 2021, p. 294).

The scene conveys minimal motion through the action chain: mother (agent) – mental action (remembered, left, forgotten) – baby (patient), with the mother functioning primarily as *a mental agent* or *experiencer*, rather than as an active performer.

Causality and agency are disrupted in sentences where *an abstract agent* (memory) acts upon her or where sorrow renders her *a patient* of her own emotions: “This memory, this certainty, came over her with horror” (Munro, 2021, p. 294); “The sorrow that came to my mother was the sorrow of the baby’s waiting...” (Munro, 2021, p. 294). Jill’s body functions as CONTAINER metaphor for her grief: “She could hardly breathe for her sorrow. There would never be any room in her for anything else. No room for anything but the realisation of what she had done” (Munro, 2021, p. 294). The compositional path is rendered smooth by perfective verbs and past tense, producing a soft, cinematic quality to the scene, as if it were replayed from memory.

2.3. *Specificity and prominence*

The time span is underspecified when the mother wakes up from night or day sleep, and the circumstances are described as deliberately vague “...everybody had gone away, though she could not think who ‘everybody’ was” (Munro, 2021, p. 293); “... whatever had happened would soon be made known to her” (Munro, 2021, p. 294). The mother is profiled as *the trajector* against the scene’s background, moving downward from her

room, outside into the garden, while moderate schematization of lexemes – “lawns and shrubs, hedges, flower gardens, trees” – keeps the garden vegetation in the background.

The stillness in the air is likened to the stillness of the holy night in the Christmas song “Everything was still; it was like ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem’ except that the stars had gone out” (Munro, 2021, p. 293). The allusion is evoked by the song title and profiled against the background of the rest of the text. Despite its serene tone, the scene instantly creates cognitive dissonance: lush green foliage clashes with snow, creating a dreamlike effect, which, together with lexical negation “the stars had gone out” (Munro, 2021, p. 293), shifts the scene from tranquil to ominous, evoking foreboding.

Awakening from the dream comes to the mother as a revelation: the baby has been left outside for a long time. Attention shifts from the mother to the baby, while the time span increases from “quite a while” to “overnight”, “a week or a month ago” and “for a season or for many seasons”, reflecting her growing anxiety. Her fear is objectified in the image of a dead baby, and the clause “she foresaw” presents her as an experiencer anticipating the worst outcome:

She went around looking under hedges and broad-leaved plants. She foresaw how the baby would be shrivelled up. It would be dead, shrivelled and brown, its head like a nut, and on its tiny shutup face there would be an expression not of distress but of bereavement, an old patient grief. There would not be any accusation of her, its mother – just the look of patience and helplessness with which it waited for its rescue or its fate (Munro, 2021, p. 294).

Here, the construal is imaginary rather than factual, signalled by the modal verb “would”, which grounds the clause in potential reality. The zooming-in effect is achieved through a chain of cognitive reference points (CRP) and targets (T1–T3): the image of the dead baby’s corpse (CRP1) → the baby’s head (T1) → its shut-up face (T2) → an expression of bereavement, of old patient grief, and the look of patience and helplessness (T3).

The narrative then shifts to the relief of finding the baby alive:

What a reprieve, then, to find her baby lying in its crib. Lying on its stomach, its head turned to one side, its skin pale and sweet as snowdrops and the down on its head reddish like the dawn. Red hair like her own, on her perfectly safe and unmistakable baby. The joy to find herself forgiven (Munro, 2021, p. 294).

Gradually, the background whiteness disappears, leaving only the whiteness of the baby’s blanket in focus:

The snow and the leafy gardens and the strange house had all withdrawn. The only remnant of the whiteness was the blanket in the crib. A baby blanket of light white wool, crumpled halfway down the baby’s back. In the heat, the real summer heat, the baby was wearing only a diaper and a pair of plastic pants to keep the sheet dry. The plastic pants had a pattern of butterflies (Munro, 2021, p. 295).

Here, the reader follows a different mental path: the whiteness of the snow (CRP1) → the whiteness of the baby blanket (T1), which becomes CRP2 → the baby's back (T2), then the diaper (T3) and plastic pants (T4), leading to the butterfly pattern (T5). The imagined scene, where the baby might be dead, contrasts sharply with the actual scene, where the baby is alive and sleeping peacefully.

Attention is drawn to the baby's skin, "pale and sweet like snowdrops," and hair, "the down on its head reddish like the dawn," profiled against their *immediate scope (IS)* – the baby's head – granting access to *the maximal scope (MS)* – the baby, apparently alive and healthy. This contrast highlights the mother's earlier fear that the baby would be "brown and shrivelled, its head like a nut" (Munro, 2021, p. 294).

As the narrative progresses and the focus shifts from the disoriented mother to the baby (presumably dead), then back to the sorrowful mother and to the baby (alive and peacefully sleeping), the reader is guided through an emotional arc: uncertainty and confusion → climactic tension and disbelief → grief and sorrow → emotional resolution, awe, and relief.

3. The grammar of panic in the real scene

3.1. *The multiplicity of perspectives*

The panic scene opens in the aftermath of Jill's exhausting night alone with the baby, when the aunts, Ailsa and Iona, upon their return after a 24-hour absence, trigger a crisis that exposes each character's distinct construal of the same event.

The focal scene is mediated via the infant-narrator perspective: "Iona is screaming. Jill wakes up to a house full of hurtful sunlight and Iona's screaming" (Munro, 2021, p. 327). The imperfective aspect and present tense place the reader directly in the process. After a brief narrative report about the aunts' return, the reader is introduced to Iona's fragmented construal: "Now she is screaming. *Dead. Dead. Murderer*" (Munro, 2021, p. 327, italics in original). The character's interior monologue suggests an immediate cognitive shift from presumed death by suffocation ("dead") to an accusation ("murderer").

Iona's speech is characterised by ellipses and aposiopesis, an abrupt breaking off of speech or thought, suggesting an inability to articulate, caused by emotional overwhelm: "*Baby. Love my. Darling. Ooh. Oh. Get the. Suffocated. Blanket. Baby. Police*" (Munro, 2021, p. 328, italics in original). Her paratactic and ungrammatical utterances create a rushed, breathless tone.

The scene offers multiple perspectives on the baby's apparent death. The infant-narrator deliberately withholds the outcome of the scene (passage 1 below). Iona reacts hysterically to the lifeless child, as her shock turns into a mental breakdown (as discussed in the passage above). Jill, still disoriented from sleep, struggles to understand the situation (passages 2, 3 below); Ailsa worries about legal consequences and family reputation (passages 4, 5 below).

- (1) She knows nothing about the pills. So why does she scream "Murderer"? It's the blanket. She sees the blanket pulled up right over my head. Suffocation. Not poison. It has not taken her any time, not half a second, to get from "dead" to "murderer." It's an immediate flying leap. She grabs me from the crib, with the death blanket twisted round me, and holding the blanketed bundle squeezed against her body she runs screaming out of the room and into Jill's room (Munro, 2021, p. 328).
- (2) She isn't sure where she is or what day it is. And what did Iona say? Groping her way up out of a vat of warm wool, Jill sees rather than hears Iona's cries, and they are like red flashes, hot veins in the inside of her eyelids. She clings to the luxury of not having to understand ... (Munro, 2021, p. 328).
- (3) But Jill thinks that Iona has made a mistake. Iona has got into the wrong part of the dream. That part is all over.
The baby is all right. Jill took care of the baby. She went out and found the baby and covered it up. All right (Munro, 2021, p. 329).
- (4) Ailsa is able to think now about some things that have to be done. Whatever has happened, there has got to be no question of such a thing as a murder. Babies do die, for no reason, in their sleep. She has heard of that. No question of the police. No autopsy – a sad quiet little funeral. The obstacle to this is Iona ...
The thing is to get Iona into Morrisville. This is the Hospital for the Insane, which used to be called the Asylum and in the future will be called the Psychiatric Hospital, then the Mental Health Unit (Munro, 2021, p. 330).
- (5) The investment she has made in this family's respectability and the blows she's had to take, from her father's shabby career and her mother's mixed-up wits to Iona's collapse at nursing school and George's going off to get killed. Does Ailsa deserve a public scandal on top of this – a story in the papers, a trial, maybe even a sister-in-law in jail? (Munro, 2021, p. 331).

Each construal is mediated differently: the infant's subjective construal (passage 1) is rendered via I-narration with first-person references *me*, *my*, indicating her involvement. Jill's and Ailsa's less subjective construals are mediated through psychonarration (passage 2) and free indirect thought (passages 3, 4, 5). Such alternation of narrative modes filters the event every time through a different emotional and cognitive lens, generating suspense and narrative tension.

Soon the narrative shifts back to the baby-daughter's subjective construal (I-narration), presenting dynamic events in the imperfective aspect and present tense: ("running around", "throwing herself", "refusing", "not standing up to", "falling apart"), which immerses the reader into the chaos:

Now there is an absurd scene of Iona running around, throwing herself at the front door ... by refusing to be given an injection she surrenders to her nervous breakdown: she is not standing up to them at all but falling apart. Falling apart as embarrassingly and inconveniently as possible ... (Munro, 2021, p. 332).

Ailsa attempts to take control through repeated imperatives (“Put it down”, “Look”, “You pipe down”, “Fix yourself up”) and moral judgments: “You ought to be disgusted with yourself” (to Iona) and “You look drunk” (to Jill) (Munro, 2021, pp. 329–330). Although her speech conveys urgency via deontic modality and short imperative clauses, she simultaneously avoids confronting reality, as can be seen in her modalized refusals: “I won’t look ... I’m not going to look at a corpse” (Munro, 2021, p. 329).

The narrative then shifts to Jill’s vantage point (“In the midst of this Jill thinks she has heard a faint cry...”) before returning to the baby’s perspective: “That’s where I am, pushed in beside the violin” (Munro, 2021, p. 333). The scene closes with psychonarration featuring Jill, when she recalls the events and feels horror, followed by joy at finding the child alive:

During that short trip from the hall to the living room, Jill has remembered everything, and it seems as if her breath stops and horror crowds in at her mouth, then a flash of joy sets her life going again, when just as in the dream she comes upon a live baby, not a desiccated nutmeg-headed corpse (Munro, 2021, p. 333).

The baby-daughter’s I-narration frames the scene symmetrically with its opening. “She holds me. I don’t stiffen or kick or arch my back” (Munro, 2021, p. 333). She explains her choice to live by her final surrender to her mother after the whole night’s battle.

3.2. *Dynamicity: agency and role shifts*

The action chain model, introduced by R. Langacker (2008, pp. 355–356) and later applied to sequences above sentence level by C. Harrison (2017b, p. 8), M. Giovannelli and C. Harrison (2018, pp. 92–93) highlights shifting agency in the scene in terms of agent–patient–experiencer relationship.

At the outset, Iona is the dominant *agent*, overwhelmed by apprehension: “She grabs me from the crib ... and holding the blanketed bundle squeezed against her body she runs screaming out of the room and into Jill’s room” (Munro, 2021, p. 328). Iona’s subjective, irrational construal (“You’ve killed my baby”), when she is talking to Jill, reflects her obsessive attachment to the baby and intensifies the chaos.

The baby is largely construed as a *patient*, wrapped in a blanket, squeezed against Iona’s body, and imagined as a corpse (“the blanketed bundle”, “a corpse”) (Munro, 2021, pp. 328–329).

As Iona disintegrates emotionally (“groans”, “doubles up”, “stumbles down the stairs... bumping into Ailsa”), her physical clumsiness reflects her decreasing agency (Munro, 2021, p. 328). Overwhelmed by emotions, she drifts toward the archetypal role of an *experiencer*, the term which “alludes to mental experience, whatever its nature: intellectual, perceptual, or emotive” (Langacker, 2008, p. 356). Her actions become erratic and uncontrolled due to panic and recognition of the baby’s death: “*Baby. Love my. Darling. Ooh. Oh. Get the. Suffocated. Blanket. Baby. Police.*” (Munro, 2021, p. 328, italics in original).

Jill, meanwhile, is rendered as an *experiencer* from the start (see passage 2 above in section 3.1.). She is not acting but *receiving* reality in a confused state. Synesthesia is used to profile her perplexity ("Jill sees rather than hears Iona's cries"). Her position as an experiencer places her in the background of action, revealing cognitive disorientation and delayed understanding.

Meanwhile, Ailsa acts as a *rational agent*. As the family's crisis manager, she strives to contain the turmoil and preserve respectability. She mentally formulates a future-oriented action chain: putting Iona into a psychiatric clinic, ensuring that Dr. Shantz, her lover, provides all the necessary evidence for the baby's unexplained death (see passage 4 above in section 3.1.). Here she acts as a *mental agent*, creating a narrative of the baby's unexplained death to override the potential narrative of a murder.

When Dr. Shantz arrives, he briefly becomes *an agent* imposing control: "Dr. Shantz gets hold of her and straddles her, pinning her arms and saying, 'Now, now, now, Iona. Take it easy. You'll be okay in a little while'" (Munro, 2021, p. 332). The only male figure, he acts without inner conflict and restores order both physically (by sedating Iona) and socially (by supporting Ailsa's version of events).

Mrs. Kirkham, the sisters' senile mother, acts only as an *experiencer*: offering a blurred summary of events: "Ailsa and Iona are all upset with each other. Iona found the baby at the door and now she says it's dead" (Munro, 2021, p. 332).

Throughout the scene, the baby is mostly passive, functioning as the central *patient* in the action chains. Grabbed and hidden by Iona, later on unwrapped and examined by others, the baby becomes a part of a number of construals within the scene (as a corpse, a murder victim, a forger). The baby acquires *agency* again at the resolution, only after Jill hears a faint cry and follows it: "But the faint cry comes again and she follows the sound to the sofa and looks underneath it. That's where I am, pushed in besides the violin" (Munro, 2021, p. 333).

The fluctuation between vague, schematic construal of events and zoomed-in details heightens the depicted confusion. Jill's blurred understanding of reality contrasts with Iona's frantic activity, conveyed through high-energy perfective verbs (*runs, grabs, groans, doubles up, stumbles*) and simultaneous imperfective actions (*screaming, holding the baby, bumping into Iona*). Against this chaos, Ailsa's imperatives and accusations, together with Dr. Shantz's composed actions, function as attempts to restore order.

The backgrounded depictions of Jill's and Ailsa's mental processes are interspersed with moments of sharp focus on concrete details. Objects such as a blanket, profiled by the noun "blanket", the compound "death blanket" and the noun phrase "blanketed bundle", or Jill's halter that is "twisted partway round, so that most of one breast has got loose" (Munro, 2021, p. 330) are profiled with heightened specificity. The shifting focus thus becomes a narrative strategy that dramatises confusion, adds to the scene's tension and aligns the reader with the characters' psychological turmoil.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the CG concepts of construal, the reference point model, and the action chain provide a principled framework for analysing how narrative choices shape the reader's emotional response to literary texts. While other theories from cognitive semantics, such as Conceptual Blending Theory and Conceptual Metaphor Theory address individual aspects of literary texts, the CG approach represents an emerging trend in text analysis, which, if combined with rigorous stylistic methodology, has the potential to become an encompassing framework capable of explaining the full range of literary textual phenomena and grounding the connection between narrative choices and reader effect in psychologically motivated terms.

The choice of Alice Munro's *My Mother's Dream* was motivated by its narratological complexity: the retrospective first-person narration, the cinematic quality of the opening scene, and the multiple focalisations of the same episode through different characters' perspectives in the examined post-climactic scene together present a demanding test case for the CG analytical toolkit.

The analysis confirms that CG is not confined to sentence-level stylistics, but scales effectively to emotionally complex, multi-perspectival passages of literary prose – a domain where its application remains significantly underexplored. Future research could extend CG analysis beyond individual episodes to the macro-level of literary discourse, testing the scalability of its toolkit across complete texts and across genres. Comparative studies applying the same framework to authors with contrasting stylistic profiles would help establish where the explanatory power of CG is strongest and where it requires supplementation by complementary frameworks.

Source

Munro, A., 2021. *My Mother's Dream*. In: *The Love of a Good Woman*. London: Penguin Random House, Vintage, pp. 293–340. Available at: <https://www.google.com.ua/books/edition/The_Love_of_a_Good_Woman/CcBtAQAAQBAJ?hl=uk&gbpv=1>. [Accessed 12 October 2025].

References

- Croft, W., Cruse, D. A., 2004. *Cognitive Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511803864>.
- Evans, V., Green, M., 2006. *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction*. London: Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315864327>.
- Farsi, R., 2022. Point of view in Alice Munro's *Runaway*: A cognitive study. *Neohelicon*, 49 (1), pp. 277–298. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11059-022-00634-0>.
- Francesconi, S., 2023. “It Seemed to Me It Might Be True”: Formal and functional variation of “seem”-patterns in Munro's stories. *Iperstoria*, 21, pp. 362–379. <https://doi.org/10.13136/2281-4582/2023.i21.1301>. [Accessed 24 February 2026].
- Gadpaille, M. and Mohar, T. eds., 2022. Alice Munro: Precise, paradoxical and Pret-ty Trick-y. *ELOPE*, 19 (1). <https://doi.org/10.4312/elope.19.1>.

Giovanelli, M., Harrison, C., 2018. *Cognitive Grammar in Stylistics: A Practical Guide*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474298957>.

Giovanelli, M., Harrison, C., Nuttall, L. eds., 2021. *New Directions in Cognitive Grammar and Style*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350111141>.

Hamawand, Z., 2021. Construal. In: Eds. W. Xu, J. R. Taylor. *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Cognitive Linguistics*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351034708-17>.

Hamawand, Z., 2023. *English Stylistics: A Cognitive Grammar Approach*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-22556-7>.

Harrison, C., 2017a. *Cognitive Grammar in Contemporary Fiction*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1075/lal.26>.

Harrison, C., 2017b. Action chains and grounding in *Enduring Love*. In: C. Harrison, *Cognitive Grammar in Contemporary Fiction*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 31–48. <https://doi.org/10.1075/lal.26.c3>.

Harrison, C., Nuttall, L., Stockwell, P., Yuan, W., 2014. *Cognitive Grammar in Literature*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1075/lal.17>.

Ignjatović, S., 2022. Focalization in Munro's Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You – Cognitive poetics in practice. *Teme – Časopis za Društvene Nauke*, 46 (2), pp. 597–613. <https://doi.org/10.22190/TEME201023031I>.

Langacker, R. W., 1987. *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar. Volume I: Theoretical Prerequisites*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. Available at: <https://www.google.com.ua/books/edition/Foundations_of_Cognitive_Grammar/g4NCRFbZkZYC?hl=uk&gbpv=1&dq=the+foundations+of+cognitive+grammar&printsec=frontcover>. [Accessed 12 October 2025].

Langacker, R. W., 2008. *Cognitive Grammar: A Basic Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195331967.001.0001>.

Langacker, R. W., 2014. Foreword. In: C. Harrison, L. Nuttall, P. Stockwell and W. Yuan, eds. *Cognitive Grammar in Literature*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. XIII–XIV. <https://doi.org/10.1075/lal.17.003>.

Lugea, J., Walker, B., 2023. *Stylistics: Text, Cognition and Corpora*. Cham: Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10422-0>.

Nuttall, L., 2018. *Mind Style and Cognitive Grammar: Language and Worldview in Speculative Fiction*. Advances in Stylistics. London: Bloomsbury Academic. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350010567>.

Nuttall, L., 2021. *Guilty Grammar: See-saw Perspective and Morality in a Poem by E. E. Cummings*. In: M. Giovanelli, C. Harrison & L. Nuttall, eds. *New Directions in Cognitive Grammar and Style*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 75–90. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350111141.ch-005>.

Rundquist, E., 2020. Literary meaning as character conceptualization: Re-orienting the cognitive stylistic analysis of character discourse and Free Indirect Thought. *Journal of Literary Semantics*, 49 (2), pp. 143–165. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jls-2020-2024>.

Simpson, P., 2004. *Stylistics: A Resource Book for Students*. London: Routledge. Available at: <<https://books.google.com.ua/books?id=etBY2Vtu9MEC&printsec=frontcover&hl=uk#v=onepage&q&f=false>>. [Accessed 12 October 2025].

Stadnik, K., 2024. Weaving the autobiographical web: A cognitive linguistic analysis of Alice Munro's *The Peace of Utrecht*. *Annales UMCS Sectio N Educatio Nova*, 9 (1), pp. 347–362. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17951/en.2024.9.347-362>.

Stockwell, P., 2014. War, worlds and cognitive grammar. In: C. Harrison, L. Nuttall, P. Stockwell and W. Yuan, eds. *Cognitive Grammar in Literature*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 19–34. <https://doi.org/10.1075/lal.17.02sto>.

Stockwell, P., Whiteley, S., eds., 2014. *The Cambridge Handbook of Stylistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139237031>.

Talmy, L., 2000. *Toward a Cognitive Semantics*. Vol. 1: *Concept Structuring Systems*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/MITPRESS/6847.001.0001>.

Verhagen, A., 2007. Construal and perspectivization. In: D. Geeraerts and H. Cuyckens, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 48–81. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199738632.013.0003>.