Aboutness in Fiction:
Methodological Perspectives for Knowledge Organization

Abstract
The subject analysis of narrative texts of fiction is complex; the methodological model of identification of concepts as elaborated for scientific texts is not applicable to fiction. It is proposed here that theoretical and methodological use of the Generative Trajectory of Meaning postulated by Greimas may contribute to the identification of aboutness in narrative texts of fiction.

Context
Subject analysis in knowledge organization reveals different levels of complexity depending on the nature of the material. The complexity is significantly higher when dealing with literature and fiction. The traditional methodological model of subject analysis (specially the concepts identification procedures) elaborated for scientific texts does not seem to fit to narrative texts, since these materials have different characteristics compared with scientific documents in terms of both structure and content. There is also a lack of methodological studies on subject analysis of fiction compared with the scientific literature; Information Science field, apparently, does not give necessary attention to fiction considering them primarily as material for leisure and entertainment. There are texts directed only towards entertainment, the so called pulp fiction; however, there are those which are considered works of art with words, the foundation of literature.

There are institutions in which fiction occupies primacy, for example, the public libraries, as well as university libraries with focus on arts, literature and social sciences. It must also be said that the development of reading habits, particularly in Brazil, begins with the reading of literature or literary texts; because of this there is a need for greater attention to issues related to organization of these.

Classification and indexing of fiction is not an issue that has only been discussed in the last few decades. As a matter of fact, presumably, the first article on the subject appeared in 1898, when the noteworthy British librarian Ernest Baker wrote about the classification of fiction in the Library World, and in the beginning of the 20th century a discussion concerning the same issue took place in the American Library Association (ALA). (Eriksson, 2005, p. 01). In the last thirty years, the subject of fiction seems to have come up again, and several studies have been reported; Peitersen (1978, 1979, 1983, 1984,1998), Beghtol(1986, 1992, 1994, 1995, 1997), Hayes(1992), Nielsen(1997), Saarti(1999), García-Marco; García-Marco(1997), Moraes, J. B. E.; Guimarães, J.A.C.(2006), Guimarães, J. A.C.; Moraes, J. B. E.; Guarido, M. D. M.( 2007), Moraes, J. B. E.(2008), García-Marco et. al. (2010) among others.

The problem that motivated this paper is the lack of an analytical procedure to guide the identification of aboutness of fiction. As a hypothesis, we present the methodological tool offered by the Greimas’ semiotics theory called Generative Trajectory of Meaning. As a general objective, this study intends to make methodological contributions to the area of knowledge organization in imaginative literature or fiction. More specifically, it aims a) to study Generative Trajectory of Meaning as a tool to organize literature or fiction, b) to discuss the concept of aboutness; and c) to analyze discursive semantics as a tool to study imaginative literature or fiction.
**Aboutness**

John Hutchins (1977) was the first one to discuss the *aboutness* question, according to Caffo (1988, 24). For Hutchins, the crucial problem is to identify "what documents are about". In author's conception, the first question to be made is "what is meant by the topic of a document in the context of an information system?" For Hutchins (1977, 17) a superficial answer would be: the topic of a document is the subject description in an index entry relating to that document, but, in fact, there is rarely a straight equation of subject description and 'what the document is about'. As can be seen in post-coordinate indexing systems the subject description in an index entry may represent only part of the document's content.

A second question by Hutchins (1977, 17) is: “What do we mean by the content of a document?” According to the author, we need to be clear about the distinction between the ‘sense’ of a linguistic expression and the ‘reference’ of that expression. In other words, the choice of a particular expression to refer to a particular individual is determined by the appropriateness of the expression, and whether an expression is appropriate or not depends primarily on its meaning or 'sense'. The sense of an expression is determined principally by its relationship to other expressions of the language (Hutchins, 1977, 18).

Maron (1977) discusses the main point of a retrieval system and observes: “Since *about* is at the heart of indexing, how are we to formulate any proper theory of indexing if we cannot explicate precisely the key concept of *about*?” (Maron, 1977, p. 38).

Thus, Maron (1977, 40) suggests that there are several different *about* concepts. The first one is the *S-about* (subjective about), a relationship between a document and the resulting inner experience of its readers, and cannot be analyzed further in objective terms.; the *O-about* (objective about), the interpretation for this concept of *about* is obtained by considering an external or observer’s point of view, as opposed to the internal or subjective point of view, and refers to the (actual or potential) behavior of asking or searching for writings; *R-about* (retrieval about), explained statistically and behaviorally, in terms of those who would be satisfied with it and where such people would be looking for it.

Despite the complexity of the definitions, it's interesting to note that the author considers not only the document itself, but also the search and retrieval contexts.

Ingwersen (1992) also studied the *aboutness* question. According to him, *aboutness* can be seen from four different points of view: from the *author* – this the common method of natural language representation; from the *indexer* – this implies in transforming author's natural language in a documental language accepted or created by a indexer; from the *user* – formulated from the new knowledge user's needs; from the *request aboutness* – formulated by the user.

Caffo (1988) presents another view of *aboutness*, considering the relationship between the "document discourse towards a concept and the concept theoretically defined as a part of the general knowledge" (Caffo, 1988, 23). Indexing is not concerned so much with the conceptual analysis in knowledge theoretical complex, but with the conceptual dimension of a materialized knowledge, in this case the document, as Michel Buckland (1991), among others, recognize. Beghtol (1986) distinguishes 'meaning' and 'aboutness':

Whatever terms are chosen, a distinction between 'aboutness' and 'meaning', as the terms used here, seems justifiable on the assumption that a document has an intrinsic subject, an 'aboutness', that is at least to some extent independent of the temporary usage to which an individual might put one or more of its meanings. (Beghtol, 1986, p. 85).
As can be seen, Beghtol (1986, 85) refers to *aboutness* itself and to a *meaning*. Thus, according to the author, *aboutness* is something intrinsic to the document, with a relatively permanent nature, itself unchanged; on the other hand, we have a *meaning* that can change according to the situation, location, user's interests, etc. In other words, "the same document can have different meanings for the same reader at different times, but the document itself, is assumed to possess a fundamental aboutness" (Beghtol, 1986, 85).

Finally, we have to mention Layne (2002) who uses Panofsky’s classification scheme to deal which „subject access to art images”. The author uses the expressions *aboutness* and *aboutless* in order to search for the contents of art images. As we deal only with imaginative fiction, we are not going to explore Layne’s theory.

**Generative Trajectory of Meaning**

For Greimas; Courtès (2008) the *Generative Trajectory of Meaning* can be defined as follows:

We designate by the expression generative trajectory the general economy of a semiotic theory (or just linguistic), as say, the disposition of its components one related to the others, and this in a generative perspective, e.g., postulating that every semiotic object can be defined according the way of its production, the components that intermediate in this process are articulated to each other according to a 'trajectory' from the simplest to the most complex, and from the most abstract to the most concrete. (Greimas; Courtès, 2008, p. 232).

Table 1 Resumes, in a graphical way, the Generative Trajectory of Meaning:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generative Trajectory of Meaning</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Semio – narrative structures</strong></td>
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<td>Fundamental Syntax</td>
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<td><strong>Discoursive structures</strong></td>
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Source: Greimas; Courtès, 2008, p. 235

Fiorin (2011, 17) says that the trajectory scheme is composed by:

- Semio-narrative structures with syntactic components (deep level: fundamental syntax; surface level: narrative syntax) and semantic components (fundamental semantics; and narrative semantics) and
- Discourse structures with syntactic components (discoursive syntax; discoursivization – actorialization, temporalization, spationalization) and semantic component (discoursive semantics; thematization; figurativization)

Moraes & Guimaraes (2006, 39) claim that the generative trajectory of meaning is composed of three levels: *fundamental structures; narrative structures and discursive structures*. Each one of them is detailed by Moraes; Guimaraes; Guarido (2007):

In *fundamental structures* we can find the semantic categories that ordinate the text content in a more general and abstract way; the *narrative structures* can be defined as state changes in terms of conjunction and disjunction (manipulation, competence, performance and sanction); in the *discoursive structure level* emerge the abstract narrative structures that can be achieved by figurativization or thematization, e.g., by themes or figures (Moraes; Guimaraes; Guarido, 2007, p. 97).
Deep or Fundamental Level

Moraes & Guimarães (2006, p. 39) say in fundamental structures are found the semantic categories that ordinate the text contents in an abstract. To understand the value of each category it is necessary to find elements in the other concrete text levels.

According to Fiorin (2011, 20) we find in the deep level the semantic categories that are the basis of text building, and these categories are based in a difference, in an opposition. Greimas called this opposition Semiotic Square:

Semiotic Square can be understood as a visual representation of a logical articulation from any semantic category. The elementary meaning structure, when defined – in a first moment – as a relationship at least with two terms, lays only on a distinction of opposition which characterizes the language paradigmatical axis: it is, therefore, enough to built a paradigm composed by n terms, but do not allow, by this, distinguish, in this paradigm, semantic categories based on isotopie ("kinship") of the distinguished that can be recognized. (GREIMAS & COURTÉS, 2008, p. 400).

In this way, the deep level syntax involves two operations: assertion and negation. These transforming operations, which occur in the narrative and discursive levels can be represented by the semantic square, as shown in Figure 1:

Fig. 1: Semiotic Square

(Source: Greimas; Courtés, 2008, p. 402.)

Negation and assertion operations are in the surface and other articulations are in the deep level. Negation is close to contradictory terms that many times work as passage terms. Assertion is linked to contradictory terms that articulate the opposition that exists in a text.

Narrative Level

For Moraes & Guimarães (2006, 39) the narrative structures can be defined as state changes in terms of conjunction and disjunction.

Texts are not minimal narratives, but complex ones where the state utters (making and being) are hierarchically organized in a canonical structure composed by four phases: manipulation component has to do with changes in wanting-to-do and/or having-to-do; competence is the component that has to do with changes (creation, maintenance, increase, decrease, loss) in the prerequisite elements of performance (accomplishing the action); performance is the component that has to do with the action's realization (in the strict sense), which was made possible by positive competence. Performance presupposes competence (and manipulation, naturally, since it involves wanting-to-do and having-to-do, just as competence does): If there is performance, then competence was necessarily positive; sanction is the component that concerns the epistemic judgment (evaluation) of performance and the accompanying retribution that the performing subject has incurred.

Moraes; Guimarães; Guarido (2007, p. 97) say that a canonical order does not mean a preformatted order in which all narrative texts must to fit, but, on the contrary, some phases can only be assumed, or have a different detach than others.
Discourse Level

At the Discourse Level the narrative level abstract forms are covered by terms which give them a concrete form. In this sense, we have two levels that compound the concretization of the narrative structures: thematization and figurativization.

According to Fiorin (2011, 72) figures apply to natural world elements, real or fictional, that can be perceived by senses: stone, boy, moon light, fly. Themes apply to elements that organize, categorize and regulate perceived reality: hostility, ingenuity, to imagine, happy.

The opposition theme/figure can lead to the conclusion that it is an opposition abstract/concrete. However, one must have in mind that concrete and abstract are not polar terms which are opposite each other, but they constitute a continuum that goes, in a gradual way, from most abstract to most concrete.

Themes are organized through a chaining called thematic trajectory. The same thing happens with figures, and this chaining is called figurative trajectory.

In fact, the themes array, concatenated in the body of the narrative texts, will guarantee the themes extraction. In the same way the figures are chained in a coherent way in order to have a text harmony. If there is a break in the internal coherence of themes and figures web the text may become improbable or new levels of meaning may arise. Thus, according to Fiorin (2011, 79) everything in a text is relationship. For this, to find the meaning of a figure set chained is to find the theme underlying it.

A meaning amalgamator element for the thematic and figurative trajectory is the isotopy.

According to Greimas; Courtés (2008, 275-8):

A.J. Greimas has taken to the physics-chemistry domain the term isotopy and transferred it to the semantic analysis, gave it a specific meaning, having in consideration its new application field. (…) Isotopy constitutes a new way of reading that become homogeneous the text surface, since it allow eliminate ambiguities. One can say, therefore, that arise isotopies is identify the semantic continuities which makes the read text in a coherent set. (Greimas; Courtés, 2008, 275-8).

Generative Trajectory of Meaning and Aboutness

The scientific texts seem to possess an apparently „stable” structure, independent of the subject field, that seems to facilitate the work of the indexer. Therefore, it has something similar to a script to be followed, which, most of the times, starts by the title, the keywords, and the abstract.

On the other hand, fiction also can possess some structural elements that can be considered constant – although very different from the scientific texts - which can facilitate the performance of the indexer when searching for aboutness of these texts.

In this way, there is a superstructure, which presumes that in fiction, mainly in narrative texts, action is predominant, as well a sequence of events in which complication, evaluation and resolution are involved.

Moreover, the indexer also can use the narrative structures to locate the manipulation, competence, performance, cognitive sanction and pragmatic sanction, constituent elements of the call canonical sequence of the narrative structures, according to the Greimas’ Generative Sense Course.

An approximation of superstructure theory, postulated by Van Dijk (1997), and the narrative structures, postulated by Greimas shows that both can be useful in a complementary way as tools to the subject indexer when searching the aboutness of fiction literature. The first one provides concrete and consistent elements in order to identify the form of the text, confirming it as a narrative text; the second one allows to the analyst identify some parts which are more or less constants in this kind of text. However not all the canonic sequence elements appears in a text, some parts can be presumed, in general the initial portion, manipulation, and the final, sanction, are present during the analysis.
It must be mentioned the **macrostructures**, also postulated by Van Dijk (1997), as an element of fiction analysis. In that, the presence of characters, human or anthropomorphized, as well an idea of action, of state changing, of transformation or happenings, in which the chronological sequence is fundamental, can be identified.

The analysis of **fundamental structures**, postulated by Greimas, can also be linked to **aboutness**. The first concept is concerned with the semantic question which originates the process of signification, e.g., the primary and fundamental element, and that builds its relationships in terms of values. The second concept is concerned with that basic element over which the text is built, and can be observed in terms of relationship, so at this point the **meaning** can be established. The focus, in this case, is the process of insertion of a document meaning in a system which serves information retrieval.

**Conclusion**

However there are some differences in the origin fields; we pointed out that the studies on **aboutness** and generative meaning trajectory have some points in common. Of course, none of them is linked to the coincidence of the term **meaning**. It’s the same term, but concepts are much different.

But we can consider the concept of **fundamental structures** so much close to the **aboutness**; the first one considering an opposition between two terms indicated by the semantic square; the second one indicates the text intrinsic content.

In fact, many studies carried on with short stories (Moraes; Guimarães, 2006, Guimarães; Moraes; Guarido, 2007) confirmed that the Generative Sense Course can be useful to find the **aboutness** of imaginative literature or fiction, and opens the possibility to future studies on larger texts, like romances.

**References**


