

Chapter 1

Introduction

According to Robert E. Longacre (1989a:444), the storyline events, which form the mainline of a narrative, are the “main stuff” (i.e. the primary type of clausal information) from which macrostructural summaries are constructed, and thus represent a general abstract of a narrative.

In contrast, Paul J. Hopper argues that prototypical events (which are typically on the storyline) are not the central thematic element of a story, but rather, they are often employed in a story only “as a precursor to what the narrator really wants to say” (1995:147).

1.1 Objective

This study examines the relationship between two types of prominence, storyline and macrostructure, in five Solu Sherpa conversational oral stories of personal experience to determine if the storyline information of each text (here referred to as *structural thematic prominence*) is the “main stuff” (i.e. the primary type of information) employed in the construction of each macrostructural summary (referred to as the *global thematic prominence*). In order to meet this objective, this thesis attempts to answer the following question: What types of clausal information are employed in the construction of the macrostructural summaries of the Sherpa texts and how often is each type employed?

1.2 Overview of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into seven chapters. In this introductory chapter, background information for the thesis is provided. The second chapter summarizes the aspects of Sherpa phonology, grammar, and discourse that are relevant for this study. In chapter three, the literature that is most relevant to this study is reviewed. Chapter four introduces the content and structure of each text: the texts are classified, a macrosegmentation of major thematic paragraphs is presented, the narrative superstructure (i.e. surface and notional structures) is described, and the peak-marking features are identified for each text. In chapter five, the devices used to mark storyline and supportive material in each text are discussed. The sixth chapter exemplifies the process of macroanalysis that was applied to each text, presents the second-level macropropositions, and analyzes the macrostructural summaries to determine the types of clausal information utilized to construct the macrostructural summaries and the frequency with which each type is employed. Finally, in chapter seven, the results of the study are summarized and evaluated, and suggestions for future research are given.

1.3 Cultural background

The Sherpas are one of the most well-known minority linguistic groups in the world. Their homeland lies in the shadow of many of the world's highest and most beautiful mountains, including the highest peak in the world, Mt. Everest, or as the locals say, *chomolungma*. Each year thousands of tourists stream into northeastern Nepal to witness the snowcapped beauty of the Himalayas and the exotic cultural landscape of the Sherpa people (Luger 2000:19).

It is believed that the Sherpa migrated from the Kham area in northeastern Tibet to the Everest region about 450 years ago (Ortner 1992:4). Their autonym *sherwa* (Tibetan *sherpa*), which means 'people of the east', reflects this belief (Fisher 1990:55). Today, Sherpas live primarily in the mountainous districts surrounding Mt. Everest (see Figure 1) (at elevations between 8,500 and 14,500 feet, approximately 2600-4400 meters) (Ortner 1992:4 and Lee 2003:81). They are most concentrated in the Solu-Khumbu district, which is home to about 16% of the population. However, a sizable number, approximately 12% of the population, has migrated into the central hills of Nepal, to the capital district of Kathmandu (Gurung, Gurung, and Chidi 2006:84-85).



Figure 1. Nepal in its Geographical Context
(from www.nepalvista.com/travel/map.html)

The Sherpa language is primarily spoken in Nepal, but is also spoken by immigrant populations in Bhutan, China, India, South Korea, and the USA

(Gordon 2005:478-479). According to the 2001 Nepal census, there are 129,771 mother-tongue speakers of Sherpa (Gurung, Gurung, and Chidi 2006:84-85).¹

An overwhelming majority of Sherpas are adherents of Tibetan Buddhism. The religious leaders (monks and lamas who make up 5-10% of the population) learn to read and speak Classical Tibetan (Lee 2004:4). The rest of the community is educated primarily in Nepali. Only 8-9% of Sherpa are literate in Sherpa. About 35% of Sherpa are literate in a language other than Sherpa (most often Nepali, Tibetan, or English) (Gordon 2005:478-479).

1.4 Linguistic Background

The Sherpa language, like the people, is connected to Tibet and is classified in the Tibeto-Burman sub-family of Sino-Tibetan. Bradley (1997:2) divides Tibeto-Burman into four groups: North-eastern India, Western, South-eastern, and North-eastern. In this system, Sherpa is considered a Central Bodish language in the Western branch of Tibeto-Burman (see Figure 2) (Bradley 1997:3, 52-54).

¹ One major complicating factor in getting accurate data on Sherpa speakers is that among ethnic Sherpa there is a great deal of variation in Sherpa language use and ability, especially among those who have spent a considerable amount of time in Kathmandu or overseas. Kelly (2004:200) argues that the estimates for the number of Sherpa speakers listed by Klatzfel and Zangbu (1998) and found in the 1991 Nepal census (reported in Gurung 1996) are probably artificially high. She states that many Sherpa parents say that their children speak Sherpa when in fact they are only culturally Sherpa and speak Nepali most of the time. If these children know Sherpa at all, they may be passive bilinguals, understanding it but not speaking it. Within the Sherpa-speaking community, there is a high level of bilingualism with Nepali (about 90%), and the overall use of Sherpa is decreasing, especially in the larger towns where many different ethnic groups live together (Gordon 2005:478-479). Recent estimates regarding the population of Sherpa in Nepal vary considerably, from 16,000 by Luger (2000:28) up to 200,000-250,000 by Lee in 2006 (personal communication). Lee (2003:82) states that the confusion between Solu-Khumbu Sherpa and Yohlmo, often called Helambu Sherpa (for more information see Hari and Lama 2004), sometimes contributes to an artificially high population figure for the Sherpa. In addition, Kelly (2004:200) suggests that the number might be artificially high because many non-Sherpas say they are Sherpa in order to land better trekking jobs (due to the fact that the Sherpa have a reputation for being gifted trekking guides and porters).

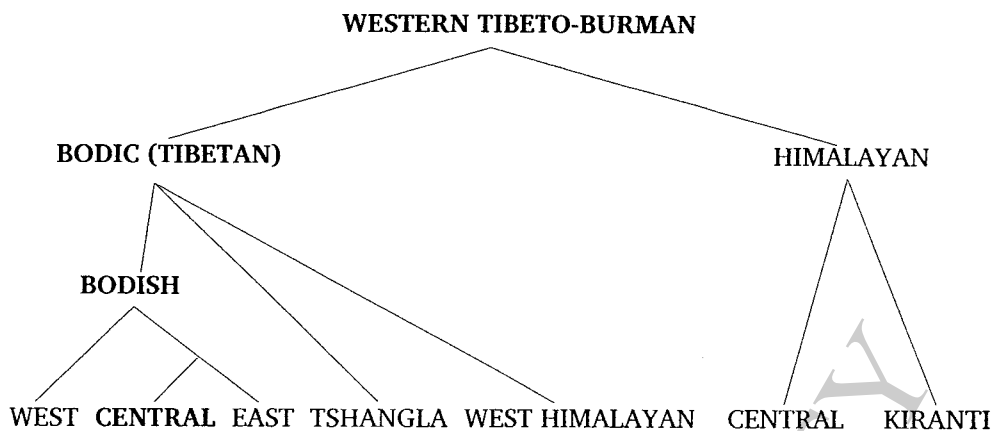


Figure 2. Western Tibeto-Burman (after Bradley 1997:3, 52-54)

Central Bodish can be further subdivided into Western Tibetan, Central Tibetan, Amdo (North-Eastern), and Khams (South-Eastern) (Figure 3). Sherpa is in the gTsang cluster of Central Tibetan. Its closest relative is Syuwa², a language spoken just south of the Sherpa area in northeastern Nepal. Other close relatives include Jirel and Lhomi³. Lhasa Tibetan is also in the Central Tibetan group of Central Bodish, but it is in the dBus cluster. Another notable Central Tibetan language is Dzongkha, the national language of Bhutan, in the Southern cluster (Bradley 1997:5-6, 8).

Thurgood and LaPolla (2003:9), Shafer (1966), Voeglin and Voeglin (1964, 1965a, 1965b, 1965c, 1965d) and Benedict (1972), all using slightly different classification systems, likewise place Sherpa in the Central Tibetan subgroup of Sino-Tibetan (summarized in Hale 1973).

² Syuwa is the autonym of the linguistic community traditionally called Kagate by Nepali speakers. However, Kagate is considered to be pejorative by the community itself (Höhlig 1978:1).

³ In support of Bradley's divisions, Pemba Nuri Sherpa and Tshering Tenzing Sherpa, two mother-tongue Sherpa speakers, suggest that Syuwa and Jirel (which they can understand to some degree because speakers of Sherpa, Syuwa, and Jirel live in the same area and the languages are closely related) seem similar enough to them to be two dialects of the same language. In contrast, see Höhlig (1978:1), who states that Syuwa is similar to Yohlmo (also known as Helambu Sherpa), rather than Sherpa or Jirel.

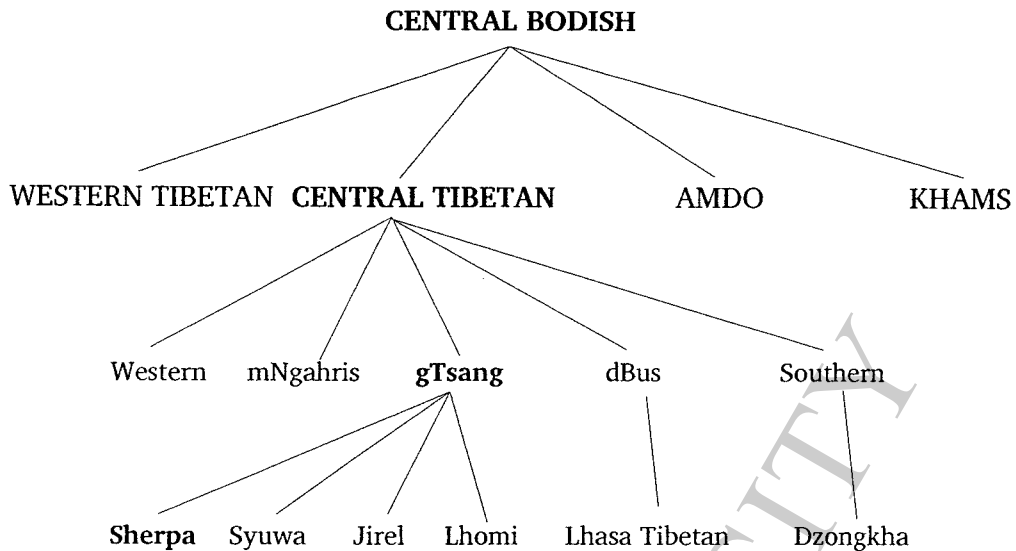


Figure 3: Sherpa and its Close Relatives (after Bradley 1997:5-6)

There are three main dialects of Sherpa in Nepal: South (Solu), East (Khumbu), and West (Ramechhap and Dolakha) (Lee 2004:3).⁴ These dialect areas roughly correspond to the geographical areas of Solu (the southern part of Solu-Khumbu district), Khumbu (the northern part of Solu-Khumbu district), and the districts of Ramechhap and Dolakha, which are just west of Solu-Khumbu (Lee 2003:84). The community of Sherpa living in the Rolwaling valley just west of Khumbu on the Tibetan border was not included in Lee's survey (2003:84). However, the data on dialect differences collected by Kelly (2004:219-221) seem to indicate that the Sherpa speakers from Rolwaling can be grouped with the Khumbu in the East dialect.⁵

⁴ Kelly (2004:219-221) based on evidence from regular sound changes, posits just two dialects of Sherpa: Northern (corresponding to Lee's East) and Southern (corresponding to Lee's West and South). One of this researcher's language consultants, Tshering Tenzing from the West dialect area, an experienced trekking guide who has traveled widely in the Sherpa area, states that speakers from the West and South areas can generally understand each other whereas speakers from the West and East areas normally cannot communicate very well.

⁵ Lama (2002:10-11) discusses the difference between "higher status" Sherpa called *khadhiku* and "lower status" Sherpa called *khamendeu* 'bad mouth'. He states that clans from these two groups can not intermarry. The linguistic differences between *khadhiku* and *khamendeu* have not been studied. But two Solu Sherpa language consultants have suggested to this researcher that these two groups speak different dialects of Sherpa.

The Eastern dialect area is geographically closer to Tibet and at a higher altitude than the Southern and Western dialect areas. As a result, the East area tends to be culturally and linguistically more Tibetan, while the Southern area and Western areas, which are closer to population centers of Nepali speakers, tend to be more highly influenced by Nepali language and culture. Both Kelly (2004:221) and Lee (personal communication) believe that there is a continuum in which the closer a Sherpa dialect is to Tibet the more Tibetan-like it is, and the farther away a Sherpa dialect is from Tibet, the more Nepali-like it is.

The stories analyzed in this study were told by speakers of the Southern (or Solu) dialect. Based on the terminology used by the speakers themselves, the geographical term Solu will be used in this study to refer to the Southern dialect area.

The primary Sherpa speaking areas of Nepal are displayed in Figure 4. Circles represent important Sherpa speaking towns. The home villages of the three storytellers whose stories are analyzed in this study are marked by a “+”. Gunsa village is not marked on any maps and not well-known among Sherpas. Ringmo is better known because it is on the trail from Jiri to the first Mt. Everest Base Camp. There is also a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Ringmo. The national capital, Kathmandu, is marked with a star. Dotted lines represent district boundaries and the names of districts are written with capital letters. The international boundary between Nepal and China is indicated by a solid line.

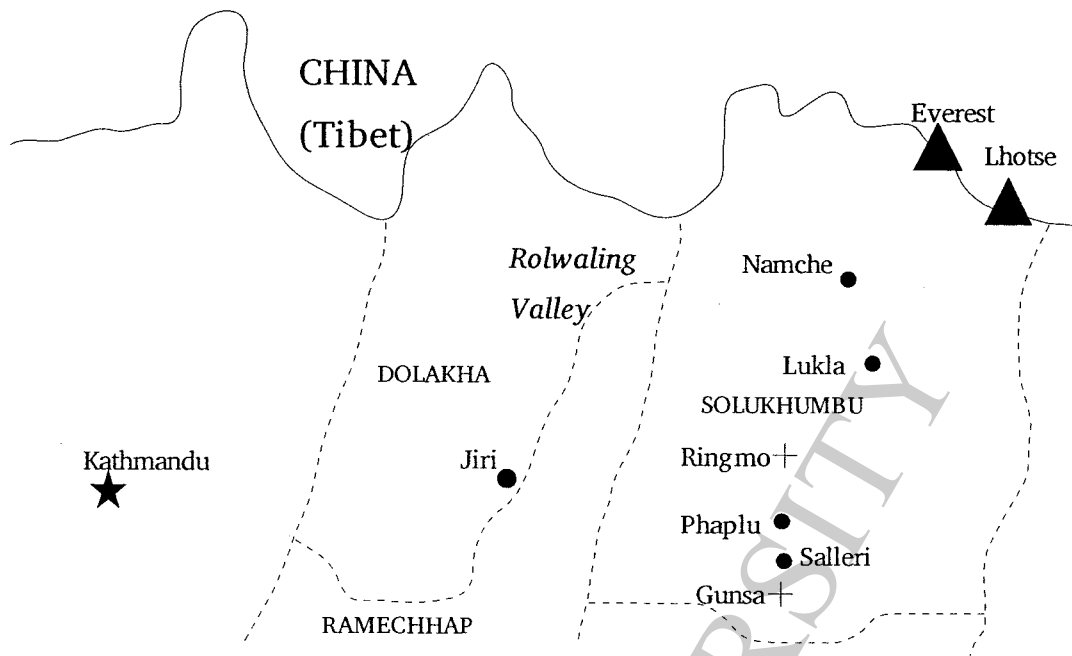


Figure 4: Map of Primary Sherpa Speaking Area

1.5 Overview of Research Methodology

Preliminary library research for this thesis took place at Payap University in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and the Kathmandu Study Center in Kathmandu, Nepal from, August 2005 to May 2006.

The texts examined in this study were collected by implementing two common ethnographic research methods: participant-observation and interviews (cf. Duranti 1997:89, 99-110). On various trips to Nepal between December 2004 and May 2008, the researcher both observed the actions of members of the Sherpa community and participated in them. The researcher developed relationships with members of the Sherpa community, ate meals with them, visited homes, had visitors to his home, attended weddings, attended a funeral, and otherwise strove to become a part of their lives.

In the midst of this observation and participation, a number of informal interviews⁶ were conducted in which a member of the Sherpa community was asked to tell a true story about something that he or she experienced, i.e. a personal narrative⁷. Each potential storyteller was asked to tell the story to the other Sherpa speaker(s) in the room and not to the researcher in order to encourage a more natural story-telling situation. Some potential storytellers chose not to tell a story. Those who agreed to tell a story were recorded by the researcher with a hand-held MP3 player/recorder, as the researcher attempted to act as a disinterested on-looker.

Five personal experience stories were chosen for analysis because of their common dialect, discourse type, and genre⁸. These five stories were told by three storytellers. All three storytellers were men from the Solu dialect area who are considered by their peers to be good speakers of Sherpa. Pemba Nuri told two stories: *Sick Mikaru* (SICK) and *Rat on Fire* (RAT).⁹ The third story, *Fire in Baksila Market* (MRKT), was told by Pemba's father, Kami Sherpa.¹⁰ The fourth and fifth

⁶ Taking the suggestions of Grimshaw 1974:421-422, an attempt was made to conduct these interviews in such a way that the researcher maintains enough control to get the desired data, yet also encourages an atmosphere that was similar enough to naturally occurring communication situations in the community that the language produced was more or less 'natural'.

⁷ See Vaux and Cooper 2003:183-184 for a description of personal narratives and a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of using personal narratives as linguistic data.

⁸ For a classification of the texts see chapter 4.

⁹ Pemba Nuri is about 35 year of age, married, and the father of one. He grew up in the village of Gunsa, a 2-3 hour walk south from the Solu-Khumbu district headquarters of Salleri, and he attended secondary school in a village near his home, called Chelsa. However, he has lived in Kathmandu most of his adult life.

¹⁰ Kami is about 55 years of age. He is married with multiple children and grandchildren, and he has lived in the village of Gunsa all of his life. He recently visited Kathmandu for the first time.

stories, *Battle for Phaplu* (BATTLE) and *Bear Attack* (BEAR) were told by Sange Sherpa.¹¹

Two of the stories were collected in Solu-Khumbu district in April and May of 2006. The third story was collected in Kathmandu in May 2006. These three stories were collected by the present researcher with the help of two mother-tongue Sherpa language consultants, Pemba Nuri Sherpa and Tshering Tenzing Sherpa. The fourth and fifth stories were recorded at the researcher's Kathmandu apartment in March 2008.

Once the stories were recorded, at least one mother-tongue speaker was asked to listen to each story to verify that the story represented a good example of the Solu Sherpa language. All the stories were said to be good examples of Solu Sherpa.

After the five stories were recorded, they were transcribed, divided into numbered sentences, and interlinearized. As part of the transcription and interlinearization process, pauses and other potentially important sounds (such as laughing and audience commentary) were represented in a conventional way in the transcription of each text (see chapter 2 and the Table of Abbreviations and Symbols for details about the transcription method).

The transcription of the five stories was done by the researcher with the help of Pemba Nuri Sherpa, Tshering Tenzing Sherpa, Sange Sherpa, and Ang Babu Lama (Sherpa). The English glosses and free translations were then entered into

¹¹ Sange is about 25 years of age. He grew up in the village of Ringmo, a 4-6 hour walk north of the Solu-Khumbu district headquarters of Salleri. He moved to Kathmandu a few years ago to attend university.

Field Linguist's Toolbox version 1.5.1¹² with the help of Ang Babu, Sange, Pemba Nuri, Tshering Tenzing, and two of their Sherpa friends.¹³ Transcription and pause measurement was facilitated by Speech Analyzer, version 3.0.1.¹⁴

After the texts were transcribed and interlinearized, the dependent and independent clauses were identified and numbered. Then in order to gather the data necessary to answer the research question, the texts were analyzed in the following ways:

- 1) Signals of continuity within sections and discontinuity between sections were studied using the list of surface markers described by Barnwell (1980:236-240) and van Dijk and Kintsch (1983:202-204), the semantic indicators given in Givón (1984:240-241) and Dooley and Levinsohn (2001:37), and the span charts found in Larson (1998:426-430).
- 2) The narrative superstructure of each text (i.e. surface structure and notional structure) was analyzed according to Longacre's (1996:33-48) framework, with special attention given to the surface peak.
- 3) Longacre's (1996:21-29) approach was used to identify the storyline and various types of supportive material.
- 4) A summary of each text was constructed primarily based on the cognitive model of macrostructures in van Dijk and Kintsch (1983:52-53, 190-194) with additional insights from van Dijk (1977:143-147). In this approach to

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¹³ A number of published resources were also consulted for guidance during the process of transcription and interlinearization. These included: Schöttelndreyer and Schöttelndreyer 1973, A. Sherpa 1999, N. Sherpa 2006, and L. Sherpa et al. 2006.

¹⁴ Copyright 1996-2007 SIL International

macrostructure analysis, macrorules are applied to all the clauses of a text. The resulting summaries of each text were then analyzed to determine the types and frequency of clausal information that were employed in their construction.

1.6 Scope of the Study

This thesis builds on Schöttelndreyer's (1978) study of Sherpa narrative discourse. However, the approach of this study differs from Schöttelndreyer's in a number of ways.

First of all, where Schöttelndreyer looks at narratives from various different sub-genres, this study focuses on one: oral stories about a memorable incident in a person's life. Secondly, this thesis only studies a total of five texts, which seems to be far fewer than the number used by Schöttelndreyer.¹⁵ Thirdly, while the present study only analyzes stories told in the Solu dialect, Schöttelndreyer's texts are taken from three speakers originating in at least two different dialect areas (1978: 248, 254, see footnotes).

A fourth difference is the type of discourse features that are analyzed. While Schöttelndreyer focuses on paragraph boundaries, the introduction of participants and types of information, the present study looks at the boundaries between major thematic units and types of clausal information (but not participant introduction), and adds the analysis of narrative superstructure and macrostructures.

¹⁵ Schöttelndreyer does not actually say how many texts he used in his 1978 analysis, but based on the number of narrative sub-genres he posits, it seems likely that he used considerably more than five texts.

Furthermore, in areas where there is some overlap of content (boundaries and types of clausal information), the theoretical approach of each study is different. Whereas Schöttelndreyer's paper was originally produced as part of a 1973 workshop directed by Joseph E. Grimes, and as a result applied Grimes' framework for the study of discourse, the present study has been conducted primarily employing the textlinguistics approach described by Longacre (1996) and the cognitive theory of macrostructures developed by van Dijk and Kintsch (1983).

Like Schöttelndreyer (1978), this study does not present an in-depth description of the phonological features of Sherpa discourse. Hence, the phonological features of Sherpa will be under-analyzed and under-represented in this study's transcription. Considering the degree of scholarly disagreement regarding the phonological system of Sherpa, it seemed better to wait until a more unified scholarly opinion had been achieved in order to attempt a detailed analysis of the phonological characteristics of Sherpa discourse. In this study, general features such as pauses and rate of speech are addressed without any reference to phonological theory.

Also following Schöttelndreyer (1978), this study does not conduct an in-depth analysis of the sentence level grammar of Sherpa. However, a summary of grammatical features relevant to this study is presented in chapter 2. It is hoped that the results of this thesis will be utilized to inform future research on Sherpa grammar.

1.7 Benefits of this Study

At this point in the history of the Sherpa, there seems to be a slow but steady shift from using Sherpa at home to using the national language, Nepali. Although a thorough sociolinguistic survey documenting the relationship between Sherpa and Nepali has yet to be conducted, this researcher's experience and the anecdotal evidence provided by others (e.g. Kelly 2004:200 and Gordon 2005:478-479) indicates that these changes are in fact taking place. As a result, the present study first seeks to be a contribution to the continuing documentation, analysis and development of the Sherpa language.

Secondly, the present study can be utilized as a gauge for measuring language shift and language change in the Sherpa context. B. Schöttelndreyer and H. Schöttelndreyer (1973) have published a large corpus of texts that can be compared with texts collected by Sang Yong Lee and the texts studied in this thesis to measure the degree of language change in Sherpa since 1973 and the influence of Nepali on various dialects of Sherpa.

Thirdly, this study can benefit those interested in translating texts from Nepali or other languages into Sherpa, especially texts about personal experiences.¹⁶

Fourthly, the results of this study can also contribute to the development of linguistic theory. The conflicting views held by Hopper (1995:147) and Longacre (1989:444) seem to indicate that there is not a scholarly consensus about the role and importance of prototypical events and non-events in a narrative. In this context, it is difficult to know for certain *what exactly* one has described when

¹⁶ Katharine Barnwell (1980:235-236) and Aaron Uche (1998) discuss the importance of understanding discourse structure in order to produce appropriate translations. For more on discourse and translation see Callow 1974, Longacre 1977, and Hatim and Mason 1990.

one has identified the storyline of a text or the conventional storyline markers in a language. One way to further specify the role and importance of the storyline of a text is to determine its relationship with other types of prominence. This study, therefore, seeks to be one part of a move toward clarifying the role and importance of storyline.

Finally, this study seeks to contribute to the further development of methodologies for analyzing discourse. At this point, there seems to be an assumption that storyline does “often” correlate with global semantic prominence, and thus researchers have conducted macrostructure analyses using the storyline alone as input rather than the entire text. However, the words of Hopper (1995:147) challenge the assumptions of this type of analysis. This study seeks to find empirical evidence in favor of or against using the storyline alone as input for macrostructure analysis in Sherpa.