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Translation of the *Mahābhārata* and Cognitive Linguistics

Abstract This article analyses the battle descriptions in the *Mahābhārata* from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, focusing on how the epic's oral character shapes its linguistic and narrative structure. Drawing on the author's experience as a translator of Sanskrit into Polish, the study explores the relationship between word order and viewpoint construal, showing how syntactic strategies guide the listener's imagination and evoke emotional responses. Using a passage from Book VI, the analysis demonstrates how shifts in prominence and perspective—expressed through zooming in and out—create a dynamic interplay between proximity and distance, slowing down or accelerating narrative time. These changes enable the audience to experience the battle both as spectacle and as tragedy. The article argues that the *Mahābhārata*'s orality fosters an imagery-oriented mode of storytelling, in which grammar itself becomes a tool of visualisation. A comparison with Alex Cherniak's English translation highlights how the constraints of English syntax can obscure these cognitive effects, raising broader questions about the limits of translation when it comes to rendering construal and viewpoint.

Keywords *Mahābhārata*, cognitive linguistics, translation studies, orality, construal, viewpoint, iconicity, Sanskrit syntax, word order, imagination

1 *Mahābhārata*

The *Mahābhārata*, 'The Great Tale of the Bharata Dynasty', is a Sanskrit epic and the largest epic in human history, consisting of one hundred thousand verses according to the critical edition (Sukthankar et al. 1927–1959). The *Mahābhārata* is a collective work, yet its unknown authors attribute its composition to the sage Vyāsa. Scholars debate both the time of its creation and whether it was originally composed orally or as a written work (Brockington 1997; Fitzgerald 2002; 2003; Hiltebeitel 2001a–e; see also Adluri 2013; Adluri and Bagchee 2016; 2018).

The dating of the epic is generally placed between the 4th century BCE and the 4th century CE. In addition to the critical edition, there are also various recensions of

the *Mahābhārata*, some longer than the critical version, compiled in different regions of India and at different times. The central narrative of the *Mahābhārata* and various motifs derived from it have been extensively used in classical Sanskrit literature and art. In contemporary times, the epic has been adapted into multi-episode television series. The *Mahābhārata* has also permeated Hinduism and is known wherever this religion is practiced (Geertz 1973).

The central plot revolves around the history of two related dynasties, the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, and their ongoing rivalry—first for dominance within the family, and later for control over a vast kingdom. This conflict ultimately culminates in a brutal, fratricidal war that lasts for 18 days and leads to the near-total destruction of both lineages.[1] The war narrative constitutes about one-third of the entire *Mahābhārata* (Books VI to X), while the remaining books depict the events leading up to the war and its aftermath. The main storyline is interwoven with additional narratives (*upakhyana*), and many scholars argue that, despite their apparent lack of connection to the central plot, these supplementary tales are not introduced randomly. Instead, their content enriches and deepens the overall meaning of the *Mahābhārata* (Adluri 2013).

When it comes to European languages, the *Mahābhārata* has been fully translated only into English (Milewska 2012). The most frequently translated part of the epic is the *Bhagavadgītā*, or 'The Song of the Lord'. This is the only section that has been rendered into numerous languages, including several Polish translations (e.g. Sachse 1988; 2019; Kudelska 1995; Rucińska 2002).[2] The *Bhagavadgītā* consists of the teachings of Kṛṣṇa, the human incarnation (*avatāra*) of the god Vishnu, given to the warrior Arjuna (a member of the Pāṇḍava lineage, with Kṛṣṇa serving as his charioteer) just before the war begins. As the armies stand ready for battle, Arjuna realises that in this fratricidal conflict, he will have to kill his own relatives. Overcome by moral and emotional turmoil, he decides to renounce the fight. The battle books of the *Mahābhārata*, from which I will discuss a passage here, narrate what happens next—after Kṛṣṇa persuades Arjuna that, as a warrior by birth, he must fight.

Currently, a team of Polish Indologists from the University of Warsaw, the University of Wrocław, and Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań is working on a project funded by the National Program for the Development of the Humanities.[3] Their goal is to produce the first complete Polish translation of all the battle books of the *Mahābhārata*. The following analysis presents insights that emerged during my translation of Book VI.

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[1] Twelve warriors survived the *Mahabharata* war: the five Pāṇḍava brothers, Kṛṣṇa—their ally, Satyaki—a supporter of the Pāṇḍavas, Yuyutsu—the only son of King Dhritarashtra (see below), Aśvatthāman, Kṛpa, Kṛtavarman, and Vṛṣaketu (supporters of the Kauravas).

[2] See 'Tłumaczenia BhG'. Accessed 8 August 2025. http://www.bhagavadgita.eu/?page_id=94.

[3] Joanna Jurewicz (coordinator of the project), Andrzej Babkiewicz, Monika Nowakowska, Sven Sellmer, Przemysław Szczurek, Anna Trynkowska.

Until recently, Indology maintained the belief that battle descriptions, being subject to the constraints of oral transmission, were highly conventionalised and generally did not contribute anything new to the main plot. Indeed, the repetitive conventions of describing duels, for example, are noticeable: heroes wield the same weapons and fight in similar ways. However, this does not mean that such passages were lifeless or meaningless to Sanskrit audiences.

Regardless of whether the *Mahābhārata* was originally composed in written form or remained an oral tradition for some time, it undoubtedly emerged from an oral tradition. Its audience consisted of people who could not read and could only listen to the epic as it was recited by bards. A detailed discussion of the differences between understanding spoken and written texts goes beyond the scope of this analysis, but I must emphasise one crucial feature of a mind accustomed to oral transmission: imagination. This faculty allows listeners to construct vivid, detailed mental images from relatively concise verbal narration. In my view, it was precisely this ability that made it possible to listen to the *Mahābhārata* endlessly—each time, the imagination could engage with the story in a new and unique way.

Moreover, the main heroes of the *Mahābhārata*—of whom there are many—are described in great detail throughout the epic, including their physical appearance, family and geographical origins, and the specific adventures or events associated with them. Many of them were well-established figures in tradition. Likewise, the types of weapons used in battle must have been well known to the audience. It can therefore be assumed that simply hearing a hero's name evoked in the listener's imagination the entire history of that character, along with details of their appearance, making the audience emotionally engaged. They not only understood the narrative but also experienced it on a deeper level.

The war described in the epic takes place on the Field of Kuru, involving hundreds of thousands of warriors on both sides. The narrator of the war's events is Sañjaya who possesses extraordinary abilities: he can see everything, read minds, and be omnipresent on the battlefield without any risk to himself (*Mahābhārata* 6.2.9–12). Sañjaya is the minister and charioteer of the blind King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the father of the Kaurava lineage.

The Mahābhārata is organised in a nested narrative structure, whereby successive layers of embedded narratives function as frames for further stories. In case of the Battle Books, the repeated vocatives directed at the king constantly remind the audience that the war is being conveyed through Sañjaya's oral narration. These vocatives vary in form but appear in almost every verse, producing a significant emotional impact on the listener. The Kauravas ultimately loses the war, which is a profound tragedy for the king—he loses all his sons except one (having had a hundred of them). If the listener identifies with him as the primary recipient of this war account, they will grieve alongside him. At the same time, the *Mahābhārata*'s narrator aligns himself with the victorious Pāṇḍavas. Despite the various deceptions they employ to secure victory, the audience, while mourning with Dhṛtarāṣṭra, comes

to feel that this destruction was inevitable. This, in turn, opens a space for deeper metaphysical reflection.

2 War is a show

War is described in the *Mahābhārata* as a spectacle, as a show the recipients of which are firstly Sañjaya and Dhrtarastra who listens to the story, and then—the recipients of the epic. The spectators of this story also include superhuman beings.

> *atha devāḥ sagandharvāḥ pitaraś ca janeśvara*
> *siddhacāraṇasaṃghāś ca samīyus te didṛkṣayā*
> *ṛṣayaś ca mahābhāgāḥ puraskṛtya śatakratum*
> *samīyus tatra sahitā draṣṭuṃ tad vaiśasaṃ mahat* || (6.43.9–10)

> Then the gods, *gandhárva*s, Manes, and multitudes of *siddha*s and *chárana*s gathered there, lord of the people, wanting to witness the combat.
> The highly fortunate *rishi*s, led by Indra the lord of a hundred sacrifices, assembled there to observe that great slaughter. (Cherniak's translation)

> *tatra devarṣayaḥ siddhāś cāraṇāś ca samāgatāḥ*
> *praikṣanta tad raṇaṃ ghoraṃ devāsurasamaṃ bhuvi* || (6.45.85)

> The divine *rishi*s, *siddha*s and *chárana*s assembled to watch the fierce encounter there on earth that resembled the war between the gods and demons. (Cherniak's translation)

The war is a spectacle also for those who participate in it. Here is an example in which the war is admired by both supernatural beings and the warriors participating in it:

> *tad avekṣya kṛtaṃ karma rākṣasena balīyasā*
> *divi devāḥ sagandharvā munayaś cāpi vismitāḥ*
> *pāṇḍavāś ca maheṣvāsā bhīmasenapurogamāḥ*
> *sādhu sādhv iti nādena pṛthivīm anvanādayan* || (6.95.67–68)

> Watching that feat that that immensely powerful demon performed, even the gods, *gandhárva*s, and sages in heaven were filled with amazement. And the Pándavas, led by Bhimasena, great king, made the earth resound with their shouts: 'Superb! Superb!' (Cherniak's translation)

Admiration for the great appearance of warriors or the dexterity shown by them in duels is expressed, for example, when a warrior heavily wounded by arrows looks as beautiful as a tree covered with red flowers (e.g. 6.46.46, 53.24, 101.17).

3 The aim of the paper and methodology

I believe that the orality of the *Mahābhārata*, both in its creation process and in its presentation and reception, influenced the way it was created aiming at the maximum

stimulation of the recipient's imagination. The Composers of the *Mahābhārata* achieve this goal not only at the semantic level, through the careful selection of words and expressions, but also at the syntactic level, for example, through the proper word order. Every translator is aware that translating the semantics of the source text poses many challenges, but translating syntactic strategies that allow the author of the source text to convey meaning in this way is even more difficult, and in many cases impossible, especially if the target language has a rather rigid syntax, as is the case with English. I am a translator of Sanskrit into Polish, and in this article, I will discuss how the translator of Volume 6 of the *Mahābhārata*, Alex Cherniak, attempts to tackle this issue. I wish to stress that my intention is not to criticize Cherniak's translation in this regard, but to point to the broader issue of how the viewpoint of the original is to be rendered in a target language characterised by a comparatively rigid word order, unlike inflected languages such as Sanskrit.[4]

The methodological approach accepted in this study is cognitive linguistics. According to it, language is an integral part of cognitive processes and expresses them. Human cognition is not objective, but always takes place from some perspective, which is reflected not only in the choice of words, but also in the grammatical and syntactic aspects of a sentence.[5] This ability 'to conceive and portray the same situation in alternate ways' (Langacker 2008: 43) is called construal. An important aspect of construal is vantage point (or viewpoint) which influences how we organise our thinking in relation to a given phenomenon. Another aspect influencing construal, often dependent on viewpoint, is prominence—that is, the aspect that determines which elements in the scene are key for the audience (Langacker 2008).

For example, two sentences: 'The lamp is above the table' and 'The table is under the lamp' refer to the same situation, i.e. the relationship of two objects to each other on the vertical axis, but these sentences are not synonymous, because the prepositions 'above' and 'under' have different meanings. But not only their opposed meanings are responsible for the non-synonymity of these sentences. What also distinguishes these sentences is the viewpoint from which we construe a sentence: we emphasise a different part of the spatial relationship, although the relationship itself remains the same. In the first case, the sentence is constructed from the viewpoint of the lamp, while in the second, it is from the viewpoint of the table. However, the difference between the sentences 'There is a lamp above the table' and 'Above the table, there is a lamp' results from a difference in prominence within the same viewpoint: in the first case, our attention is focused on the lamp, while in the second, it is on the table. Langacker (2008) calls an expression of greater prominence 'a figure', the others constitute the 'background'.

For the analysis of the change of prominence in the descriptions of the battle in *Mahābhārata*, which will be the subject of this analysis, another aspect of construal

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[4] I discussed the issue of translating the *Mahabharata* into Polish in Jurewicz (2022).

[5] The issue of how a sentence describing a given event (or object) is structured depending on the narrator's viewpoint has been analysed by researchers within the field of cognitive linguistics by Tabakowska (1995), Langacker (2005; 2008), Wiraszka (2015), Dancygier, Lu, and Verhagen (2016).

(dependent on viewpoint) is still important, namely the categories of zooming-in and out (Langacker 2008). As an example of zooming-in, researchers usually give sentences describing the position of the object, e.g. the sentence 'Your camera is upstairs, in the bedroom, in the cupboard, on the top shelf' is an example of zooming-in, while the sentence 'Your camera is on the top shelf, in the cupboard in the bedroom, upstairs' is an example of zooming-out (Langacker 2008: 81). During this process of conceptualisation, the figure becomes the background for the next figure and the prominence changes accordingly to what the conceptualiser sees. The categories of zooming-in and out influence our experience of time which slows down during zooming in and speeds up when zoom-out begins. Time acceleration is greatest when the ultimate zoom-out occurs immediately after the zoom-in. Hence, the meaning of a linguistic expression conveys not only conceptual content but also construal, with its various aspects (viewpoint, prominence, zooming in and out). Depending on all these factors, a given scene can be mentally visualised and expressed in various ways.

As mentioned above, I will analyse the shift in viewpoint which is linguistically expressed through word order and which iconically represents it, thereby reflecting the chronological sequence of events. Nils Enkvist (1990), as cited by Tabakowska (2003), distinguishes three types of iconicity: action-oriented, location-oriented, and time-oriented. In the case of the battle descriptions of the *Mahabharata*, one can speak of action-oriented iconicity,[6] which reflects the movement of the *conceptualiser* as they alternately approach and move away.[7] Zoom-in occurs when the narrator moves closer to the scene of the described event, while zoom-out happens when the narrator withdraws. I also assume that the use of expanding insight reflects the perspective of a narrator who is not directly engaged in the battle, whereas narrowing insight allows the audience to grasp and experience the horrors of war through detailed descriptions of the wounded or dead—both humans and animals—as well as the destruction of valuable objects.

In my interpretation of the descriptions of the war in the *Mahābhārata*, I will use a metaphor of camera also adopted in the studies of European epics. For example, Bonifazi (2016: 133), in her analysis of Serbo-Croatian and early Greek epics, writes:

> it is as if the singer in the structuring of the song moves his 'camera-in-the-mind' to redirect the visual focus by means of ad hoc narrative discourse acts, with closeup and zooming-in effects. In those cases metacommunication relies on visualisation.[8]

In the analysis I follow the version of the original adopted by Alex Cherniak (2008–2009). Translations of analysed stanzas are provided in interlinear format in accordance

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[6] As a typical example of such iconicity, Enkvist provides an instruction manual for a device (cited in Tabakowska 1993: 108).

[7] Enkvist refers to this type of iconicity as experiential iconicity (cited in Tabakowska 1993: 108).

[8] The camera metaphor is also used in studies of European epics, including Bakker (2005), Minchin (2001), Bonifazi (2008; 2012), Elmer (2009), Bonifazi and Elmer (2012a; 2012b).

with the Leipzig Glossing Rules, together with a literal rendering that preserves the original word order as far as possible. In the footnotes I cite Cherniak's translation, occasionally with my own remarks.

So let us follow with the eyes of our mind the camera of Sanjaya.

4 Analysis

I will analyse one fragment that might seem boring at first sight, namely *Mahābhārata* 6.96.44–62. In this analysis, I will focus on word order as a means of expressing shifts in the construal of scenes. In verses representing a neutral viewpoint, I will cite Cherniak's translation. However, in verses where word order is crucial for scene construction or in cases where a word or phrase has been retranslated, Cherniak's translation will be provided in the footnotes. In the main text, I will analyse the stanzas preserving the order of words in Sanskrit original to show how change of prominence together with the change of the viewpoint are gained in this way. Thanks to that, we will see how the grammar of the target language constrains the translator.

After the death of Irāvat (one of the heroes fighting on the side of the Pāṇḍavas), a cruel fight begins between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas. Let me quote the stanzas which settle the closest context:

> *tatrākrando mahān āsīt tava teṣāṃ ca bhārata |*
> *nighnatāṃ dṛḍham anyonyaṃ kurvatāṃ karma duṣkaram ||* (6.96.44)

A great combat ensued between your warriors and those of the enemy, descendant of Bhārata, as they smashed each other up severely, doing deeds that were difficult to do.

> *anyonyaṃ hi raṇe śūrāḥ keśeṣv ākṣipya māninaḥ |*
> *nakhair dantair ayudhyanta muṣṭibhir jānubhis tathā ||* (6.96.45)

The proud heroes fought dragging one another by the hair and using their fingernails, teeth, fists, knees,

> *bāhubhiś ca talaiś caiva nistriṃśaiś ca susaṃsthitaiḥ |*
> *vivaraṃ prāpya cānyonyam anayan yamasādanam ||* (6.96.46)

palms, swords, and handsome arms. Finding each other's weak spots, they sent one another to the realm of Yama.

> *nyahanac ca pitā putraṃ putraś ca pitaraṃ tathā |*
> *vyākulīkṛtasarvāṅgā yuyudhus tatra mānavāḥ ||* (6.96.47)

Father struck down son, and son father. Men stunned in their every limb fought on there.

As we can see, the fight is really fierce but is described from the neutral point of view. Now Sañjaya comes closer to see the weapons lying down on the battlefield (**zoom-in, 48ac**):

raṇa-e	*cāru-ūṇi*	*cāpa-āni*	*hema-pṛṣṭha-āni*	*mārisaØ* |
battle	beautiful	bow	gold-backed	O-noble-lord
-LOC.SG	-NOM.PL.N	-NOM.PL.N	-NOM.PL.N	-VOC.SG.M

'On the battlefield, beautiful bows with golden staves, my lord,'

hata-ānām	*apa-viddha-āni*
slain-GEN.PL.M	dropped-away-PPP.NOM.PL.N

'by those who are slain—dropped away'

The order of words in the stanza reflects the scenario of Sañjaya's perception. He looks at the battlefield the concept of which is syntactically the most prominent (48a), but then prominence is placed on the bows (48a) and their golden staves (48b). Then Sañjaya sees that they belong to the slain warriors (48c: *hatānām*) who dropped them (48c: *apaviddhāni*).

But he as if does not want to look at these slain warriors more and, in last verse (48d), he leads us back to the weapons and he contemplates them one by one with all their details (48d–53):

6.96.48d

kalāpa-āś	*ca*	*mahā-dhana-āḥ* ||
quiver-NOM.PL.M	and	great-wealth-NOM.PL.M

'and costly quivers.'[9]

6.96.49

jāta-rūpa-maya-aiḥ	*puṅkha-aiḥ*	*rājata-aiḥ*	*ca*	*śita-āḥ*	*śara-āḥ* |
born-gold-made	feather	silver	and	sharp	arrow
-INS.PL.F	-INS.PL.F	-INS.PL.F		-NOM.PL.M	-NOM.PL.M

'with golden-made and silver feathers—sharp arrows'

taila-dhauta-āḥ	*vy-a-rāj-anta*	*nir-mukta-bhuja-ga-upamā-āḥ* ||
oil-washed-NOM.PL.M	shine-3PL.IMPF.ACT	released-snake-similar-NOM.PL.M

'cleansed with oil, gleamed like released serpents.'[10]

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[9] 6.96.48: 'Dropped by the slain warriors, my lord, beautiful bows with golden staves, valuable quivers.' In Cherniak's translation, the prominence is placed at the fact that the weapons are dropped by the warriors.

[10] 6.96.49: 'and sharpened arrows finished with nocks of gold and silver and cleansed with oil looked radiant on the battlefield, like snakes that had cast off their sloughs.'

6.96.50

hasti-danta-tsaru-ūn	*khaḍga-ān*	*jāta-rūpa-pariṣkṛt-ān* |
elephant-tooth-scabbard-ACC.PL.M	sword-ACC.PL.M	born-gold-adorned-ACC.PL.M

'Swords with ivory hilts, adorned with gold,'

carma-āṇi	*cāpa-viddha-āṇi*	*rukma-pṛṣṭha-āṇi*	*dhanvin-ām* ||
shield	bow-pierced	gold-surfaced	archer
-ACC.PL.N	-ACC.PL.N	-ACC.PL.N	-GEN.PL.M

'Shields, pierced by bows, with golden surfaces—of the archers.'[11]

6.96.51

suvarṇa-vikṛta-prāsa-ān	*paṭṭiśa-ān*	*hema-bhūṣita-ān* |
gold-fashioned-javelins-ACC.PL.M	spears-ACC.PL.M	gold-adorned-ACC.PL.M

'Gold-furnished javelins, spears fashioned of gold,'

jāta-rūpa-maya-āḥ	*carṣṭī-ḥ*	*śakti-āḥ*	*ca*	*kanaka-ujjvala-āḥ* ||
born-gold-made	darts	lances	and	gold-shining
-ACC.PL.F	-ACC.PL.F	-ACC.PL.F		-ACC.PL.F

'Golden darts, lances of gold-like shine.'[12]

6.96.52

su-saṃnāha-āḥ	*ca*	*pat-itā*	*musala-āni*	*gurūṇi*	*ca* |
well-armored	and	fallen	clubs	heavy	also
-ACC.PL.N		-ACC.PL.N	-ACC.PL.N	-ACC.PL.N	

'Well-prepared—fallen—heavy clubs,'

parigha-ān	*paṭṭiśa-ān*	*ca-eva*	*bhiṇḍipāla-ān*	*ca*	*māriṣaØ* ||
iron-club	spear	and-indeed	maces	and	O-noble-lord
-ACC.PL.M	-ACC.PL.M		-ACC.PL.M		-VOC.SG.M

'iron clubs, spears, maces, my lord,'[13]

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[11] 6.96.50: 'Fallen warriors dropped their gold-adorned swords with ivory hilts, pierced shields glistening with gold.' To preserve prominence on the agent, Cherniak adds a phrase 'Fallen warriors dropped' at the beginning of the description which in original appears at its end (54ab: *visṛjya patitā narāḥ*), vide note 17.

[12] 6.96.51: 'gold-furnished javelins, golddecked spears, golden darts, lances of gold-like shine,'

[13] 6.96.52: 'glittering armor, heavy maces, iron clubs,'

6.96.53

pat-it-ān	*tomara-ān*	*ca-api*	*citra-āḥ*	*hema-pariṣkṛta-āḥ* |
fallen	javelin|	and-also	splendid	gold-adorned
-ACC.PL.M	-ACC.PL.M		-ACC.PL.F	-ACC.PL.F

'Fallen spears too, splendid and adorned with gold'

kuthā-āḥ	*ca*	*bahu-dhā-ākāra-āḥ*	*cāmara-vyajana-āṇi*	*ca* ||
elephant-housing	and	many-kind-shape	yak-tail-fan	and
-ACC.PL.F		-ACC.PL.F	-ACC.PL.N	

'elephants' housings of different shapes, yak tails and fans'[14]

We get an impression that Sañjaya walks around the battle-field and looks at the scattered valuable weapons—perhaps with regret that so much fine weaponry is wasted, perhaps with admiration for its beauty, and the recipient is supposed to do the same.[15] Time seems to slow down and each item seems to be within 'a boxing ring with clear boundaries' (de Kreij 2016: 161). The recipient may stay within it with his mind's eye as long as he wishes. To ensure that the observer does not feel it is merely a catalogue of arms, the composers of the *Mahābhārata* remind us that it is the battlefield that matters: the weapons belong to the archers (*dhanvinām*) (6.96.50d) and lie dropped (*patitā*) on the ground (53a). It is as if Sanjaya's handheld camera occasionally pulls back just slightly from the objects to reveal their immediate context. But generally, this description follows a neutral description of the battle, there is not much terror in it. The terror is to come.

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[14] 6.96.53: 'sharp-edged spears and small darts, various bows resplendent and adorned with gold, elephants' housings of different shapes, yak tails and fans, my lord.' I quote the whole description in Cherniak's translation to show how the prominence is changed: **Fallen warriors dropped** their gold-adorned swords with ivory hilts, pierced shields glistening with gold, gold-furnished javelins, golddecked spears, golden darts, lances of gold-like shine, glittering armor, heavy maces, iron clubs, sharp-edged spears and small darts, various bows resplendent and adorned with gold, elephants' housings of different shapes, yak tails and fans, my lord.' The prominence is also altered by the use of the active voice of the verb ('dropped'), which removes the temporal sequence (in the original version, thanks to use the absolutive form visṛjya, the loss of their weapons precedes their death), but also changes the very character of the loss of the weapons: in the original, the weapons rather fall from their hands, rather than being deliberately abandoned by them.

[15] The same zooming-in strategy is also attested in Homeric epic. In his analysis of the use of particle *de* in descriptions of battle and its role in delimiting the field of vision of the mental eye, Bakker (1997: 59–70) uses the metaphor of the camera: 'The catalogue of nine killings that follows is thus a selection on the part of a consciousness that is watching the scene, zooming in as if it were a camera lens on items of particular salience and interest. Transitions from one selection to the next are marked by *de*, as is the movement from detail to detail within a selected catalogue item. The movement of story time is halted throughout to make possible the movement through performance time, in which "first" (*prōtos*) typically has the processual, nonreferential meaning "first in my account," rather than "first in the reality depicted."'

In the next stanza, the **zooming-out** begins and Sañjaya once again realises the context in which these items find themselves. He sees that the diverse weapons (**54a**) are dropped by warriors who now lie on the ground (**54b**):

nānā-vidha-āni	śastra-āṇi	vi-sṛj-ya	pat-ita-ā	nara-āḥ ||
various-kind	weapon	having-dropped-away	fallen	man
-ACC.PL.N	-ACC.PL.N	-ABS	-NOM.PL.M	-NOM.PL.M

'Various kinds of weapons having dropped away—the men fell'

The description begins with the weapons, then Sañjaya sees what happened to them (they were dropped—*visṛjya*) and finally we are informed who is the agent (*patitā narāḥ*). Although syntactically the prominence is placed at the weapons, while the viewpoint changes, the prominence changes too to be placed at the concept of the warriors at whom Sañjaya begins to look. One gets an impression that only now did he truly realise that those who dropped their weapons were killed died in the battle. He still hopes that maybe they are alive (**54c**):

jīvanta	iva	dṛśyante
living-NOM.PL.M	as.if	appear-3PL.PRS.MID

'As if living they appear—'

but he immediately realises that they are dead (**54d**):

gata-sattvā	mahā-rathāḥ ||
departed-life-NOM.PL.M	great-chariot-warrior NOM.PL.M

'lifeless, the great warriors.'[16]

They are dead because they are awfully wounded. Now Sañjaya sees their wounds (**55ac**):

gadā-vimathit-āiḥ	gātr-āiḥ	musala-īḥ	bhinna-mastak-āḥ |
mace-crushed-INS.PL.N	limb-INS.PL.N	club-INS.PL.M	smashed-skull-NOM.PL.M

'With limbs crushed by maces, and with heads smashed with clubs'

gaja-vāji-ratha-kṣuṇṇ-āḥ
elephant-horse-chariot-crushed-nom.pl.m

'By elephants, horses, and chariots—squashed.'

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[16] 6.96.54: 'Having dropped their diverse weapons, those mighty men were lying on the ground lifeless, looking as if alive.' The prominence is again placed at the fact that the weapons are dropped by the warriors. The word order in last two verses (54cd) is reversed, thus the order of Sañjaya's thinking is lost.

The prominence is placed on the causes of wounds (maces, clubs, elephants, horses, chariots) probably to make the recipient realise how terrible wounds a certain kind of weapon, animal or vehicle can inflict. In the linguistic description, we simply have a series of passive participles—'crushed', 'smashed', 'squashed' (*vimathita*, *bhinna*, *kṣuṇṇa*)—but these are the triggers for imagination.

The **zoom-out** continues. Sañjaya sees where the warriors lie (**55d**):

śī-erate	*sma*	*nar-āḥ*	*kṣiti-au* ||
lie.down-3PL.PRS.MID	EMPH	man-NOM.PL.M	earth-LOC.SG.F

'—the men lay upon the earth.'[17]

Thus, he comes back to the starting point of his description, i.e. to the battlefield (in 47a: *raṇe cārūṇi cāpāni*), but now he sees that the dead bodies of horses, men and elephants cover the whole earth (**ultimate zoom-out**, **56**):

6.96.56

tathā	*eva*	*aśva-nṛ-nāg-ānām*	*śarīra-aiḥ*	*vi-ba-bhau*	*tadā* |
thus	indeed	horse-man-elephant	body	shine	then
		-GEN.PL.M	-INS.PL.N	-3PL.PERF.ACT	

'Thus indeed, with the bodies of horses, men, and elephants the earth shone then,'

saṃ-channa-ā	*vasudhāØ*	*rājanØ*	*parvata-aiḥ*	*iva*	*sarva-taḥ* ||
covered	earth	O-king	mountain	as.if	everywhere
-NOM.SG.F	-NOM.SG.F	-VOC.SG.M	-INS.PL.M		

'The earth was covered, O king, as if with mountains, everywhere.'[18]

The order of sentence reflects the order of moving away from the earth. We see the dead bodies, then their multitude covering the earth. The comparison of the bodies to the hills that cover the earth implies that now Sañjaya is so far away from it that he can no longer perceive differences between these bodies. It should be noted that time seems to speed up between the zoom-out and the ultimate-zoom out.

Now it seems to slow again. Sañjaya comes very close to the ground and begins to look at the weapons (**zoom-in**, **57–58ab**):

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[17] 6.96.55: 'Men were lying on the ground, squashed by elephants, horses and chariots, with their bodies crushed with maces and their heads smashed with clubs.' The prominence is again on agent.

[18] 6.96.55: 'And the earth, covered with the bodies of horses, men and elephants, appeared, Your Majesty, as if it was covered with hills.' In the translation the description once again begins with the subject, namely the earth, which results in the loss of the dynamism present in the original, where the sequence reflects the order in which Sañjaya perceives the battlefield.

6.96.57

samare	*patita-aiḥ*	*ca-eva*	*śakti-ṛṣṭi-śara-tomara-aiḥ*	
battle-LOC.SG.M	fallen-INS.PL.M	and-indeed	spear-javelin-arrow-lance-INS.PL.M

'On the battlefield, with fallen spears, javelins, arrows, and lances'

nistriṃśa-aiḥ	*paṭṭiśa-aiḥ*	*prāsa-aiḥ*	*ayas-kunta-aiḥ*	*paraśvadha-aiḥ* ||
sword	spear	dart	iron-lance	battle-axe
-INS.PL.M	-INS.PL.M	-INS.PL.M	-INS.PL.M	-INS.PL.M

'with swords, sharp-edged spears, iron lances, and battle-axes'

6.96.58ab

parigha-aiḥ	*bhiṇḍipāla-aiḥ*	*ca*	*śataghnī-bhiḥ*	*ca*	*mārisa* ||
iron-club	small javelin	and	hundred-slayer	and	O-noble-lord
-ins.pl.M	-ins.pl.M		-iNS.PL.F		VOC.SG.M

'with iron club, small javelins, and śataghni missiles, my lord'

He also sees the bodies of the dead warriors (**zoom-out**, **58c**)

śarīra-aiḥ	*śastra-bhinna-aiḥ*	*ca*
body-INS.PL.N	weapon-lacerated-INS.PL.N	and

'and with bodies lacerated by weapons'

And again, gets the global vision of the whole earth (**ultimate zoom-out**, **58d**)

sam-ā-stīr-y-ata	*medinī*Ø
completely-covered-3SG.IMPF.MID	earth-NOM.SG.F

'the earth was strewn'

Time speeds up. Let me note that now, in these two stanzas (57–58), Sañjaya just enumerates the kinds of weapons, he neither describes them, nor the lacerated bodies of the warriors. It is a more neutral description of the battlefield than the previous one (55–56) and situation is just described from two points of view: of someone who stands on the earth and of someone who is high above it. It is as if Sañjaya comes back to his role of the cameraman and psychological balance, well, war is war, and he has his job to do.

Now the next **zoom-in** begins (time again slows). Sañjaya comes back to look at dying and suffering warriors (**59ac**):

6.92.59ac

vi-śabda-aiḥ	*alpa-śabda-aiḥ*	*ca*	*śoṇita-ogha-pari-pluta-aiḥ*
loud-noise/without noise	small-noise	and	blood-flood-overflowed
-INS.PL.M	-INS.PL.M		-INS.PL.M

'With loud cries/In the silence and faint sounds, and bathed in floods of blood'

gata-asu-bhiḥ	*amitra-ghnaØ*
departed-life-INS.PL.M	enemy-slayer-VOC.SG.M

'With the lifeless [bodies], O slayers of enemies,'

And now, as if immediately, he zooms-out and sees the whole earth (**ultimate zoom-out**, **59d**)

vi-ba-bhau	*nicitā*	*mahī*
was-3SG.PERF.ACT	heaped up-NOM.SG.F	earth-NOM.SG.F

'the was heaped up.'[19]

It is as if Sañjaya could not believe what he sees. As if he wanted to run away and get a more soothing view. But he cannot do that. The story must go on.

So Sañjaya again comes closer (**zoom-in**) to see the lacerated bodies in more detail. The prominence is firstly placed on their hands and of arms:

6.96.60ab

sa-talattra-aiḥ	*sa-keyūra-aiḥ*	*bāhu-bhiḥ*	*candana-ukṣita-aiḥ* ǀ
with-leather fence	with-bracelet	arm	sandalwood-anointed
-INS.PL.M	-INS.PL.M	-INS.PL.M	-INS.PL.M

'With arms adorned with armlets and bracelets, smeared with sandal paste'

Then he sees something that resembles severed elephant trunks, only to realize that these are in fact the severed legs of the warriors:

6.96.60cd

hasti-hasta-upama-aiḥ	*chinna-aiḥ*	*ūru-bhiḥ*	*ca*	*tarasvin-ām*
elephant-hand-similar	cut	thigh	and	mighty
-INS.PL.M	-INS.PL.M	-INS.PL.M		-GEN.PL.M

'and with thighs like elephant-trunks—severed—of the mighty [warriors],'

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[19] 6.96.58: 'The earth was covered with warriors bathed in blood, some in the silence of their death, others feebly moaning, slayer of enemies.' The word order is reversed, and the prominence is placed of the earth.

Next, Sañjaya's attention turns to their heads, beautifully adorned, lying on the ground: (**61a–c**):

6.96.61a

baddha-cūḍāmaṇi-dhara-aiḥ	*śiro-bhiḥ*	*ca*	*sa-kuṇḍala-aiḥ*
bound-diadem-bearing-INS.PL.N	head-INS.PL.N	and	with-earring-INS.PL.N

'with heads bearing crest-jewels, and with earrings'

pātita-aiḥ […]
fallen-INS.PL.N

'fallen'

and looks into their their eyes (**61c**) (**ultimate zoom-in**):

vṛṣabha-ākṣa-āṇām
bull-eyed-GEN.PL.M

'of bull-eyed [warriors],'

It is enough to recall the large, beautiful eyes of a cow or a bull, fringed by eyelashes, now motionless and bulging, to feel the dread of the situation in which Sañjaya and his audience find themselves. If we realise that these are the eyes of our loved ones, the terror will increase even more.

So Sañjaya again uses his supernatural power of flying to see the whole earth (**ultimate zoom-out**, **61d**):

ba-bhau	*bhārataØ*	*medinīØ* ||
shine-3SG.PERF.ACT	O-Bhārata-VOC.SG.M	earth-NOM.SG.F

'shone, O Bhārata, the earth!'[20]

Now times speeds up even more quickly than it has been in the previous cases, the ultimate zoom-out takes place immediately after the ultimate zoom-in.

Is it because the view is so painful and terrifying?

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[20] 6.96.59–60: 'Strewn with the arms of mighty the bull-eyed combatants, smeared with sandal paste, furnished with leather fences and bracelets, with their thighs like elephant trunks, and with their severed heads adorned with earrings and crest-jewels, the field of action presented a beautiful sight, descendant of Bhārata.' The prominence is partly preserved here in that the sentence begins with the concept of arms of the warriors, but the order Sañjaya looks at the warriors (arms, thighs, heads, eyes) that most probably frightens him is lost.

Then, we can imagine Sañjaya taking a deep breath and going back to earth, time slows down again. Sañjaya comes back to see the armour of the warriors (**zoom-in**, **62ab**):

6.92.62ab

kavaca-aiḥ	*śoṇita-ā-digdha-aiḥ*	*viprakīrṇa-aiḥ*	*ca*	*kāñcana-aiḥ* |
armor	blood-with-smeared	scattered	and	golden
-INS.PL.M	-INS.PL.M	-INS.PL.M		-INS.PL.M

'With armors, smeared with blood and scattered all around, golden'

and again immediately zooms-out (**ultimate zoom-out**, **62cd**):

6.92.62cd

ra-rāj-a	*su-bhṛśaṃ*	*bhūmi-ḥ*	*śānta-arci-bhiḥ*	*iva*	*anala-aiḥ* ||
shine	very	earth	extinguished-flame	as.if	fire
-3SG.PERF.ACT	-intensely	-NOM.SG.F	-INS.PL.M		-INS.PL.M

'The earth glistened brightly, as with fires whose flames had died down.'[21]

The order of sentence again reflects the order in which Sañjaya sees each item: the armour smeared with the blood, the fact that it is scattered around, then he sees its golden colour, and we can imagine that the glow of gold blinds so that he sees that all the earth is shining with it. Ultimate zoom-out takes place immediately after zoom-in. Time again speeds up.

In the last verse, the armour is compared to dying out flames of fires. Glow of the embers of fire moves and flickers, and in these terms the blood of the warriors is conceived which flows from their bodies and which floods their armours. And just as the glow of the embers will go out after some time, the warriors will eventually become dead, inert bodies and the earth will become dark and cold. This image evokes the concept of cremation, and the recipient is prompted to identify[22] the earth with universal cremation pyre. Such an image is really fearful. There is, however, another, totally opposite, feature of this image: it is beautiful, as beautiful are glowing embers.

In this way, the recipient is triggered to experience simultaneously opposing emotions: horror and delight. War may be conceptualised as a paradigmatic liminal phenomenon: situated at the threshold between life and death, order and chaos, it is

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[21] 6.92.61: 'Covered with blood-smeared golden armor scattered all around, the earth glistened brightly as if it was overspread with fires whose flames had died down.' Here the prominence is preserved, except from that the recipient is informed about what happens to the armour (it covers something) immediately in the beginning of the sentence. Another difference is that in Sanskrit original, prominence is firstly placed on the armour itself, only then Sañjaya sees how it looks like and what happens to it.

[22] Such a conceptual identification is called blending (Fauconnier and Turner 2002).

marked by a fundamental ambivalence, being at once terrifying and enthralling. This duality—of evoking fear and repulsion while simultaneously exerting an irresistible fascination—exemplifies the very essence of liminal experience. These contradictory emotions are not conveyed through the description of Sanjaya's mental and psychical state but through shifts in prominence expressed in sentence structure and achieved through a change in viewpoint.

5 Conclusion

The above analysis of a short fragment of the *Mahābhārata* shows how the description is carefully construed in order to trigger imagination. The fact that its main recipient, king Dhṛtarāṣṭra, is blind has a significant impact on the way the war is told and allows for meeting the requirements of oral creativity. Sañjaya tries to describe it not only to report the war to the king (and to any other audience, us included, who is as blind as the king and must rely on the Sañjaya report), but also to make him see it happening: Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and all of us, can imagine it if we follow his gaze with our mental eye. In the narrated text, the linguistic layer is rather concise, and it is the sentence structure which is one of the most important means of expressing construal. When listening to the text, one cannot rewind to an earlier fragment or jump ahead; the words unfold sequentially, gradually building a comprehensive understanding of the scene.

Emotions which accompany listening are evoked not only by the terrible content of the description, but also by the change in prominence thanks to zoom-in and zoom-out strategies causing a change in prominence and the pace of time which in the zoom-in perspective slows down until the view becomes unbearable, so it accelerates rapidly to free us from these unbearable emotions.

A comparison of the Sanskrit original with the English translation (given in the footnotes) shows that in many cases the translation does not maintain Sanskrit order of words. I am aware that this is prevented by the requirements of the English syntax. However, the ramifications of this are significant. In most cases, the English translation builds scenes from the point of view of an external observer, not involved in the course of events depicted in them. In this way, the dynamics of the description is lost, and the descriptions of various objects begin to resemble a dispassionate list of human and material losses. Moreover, the emotional component is lost too. I am not a native English speaker, but I wonder if there are perhaps ways of expressing the dynamics of the original other than through word order. This issue raises more general questions about translation and what is its subject is it only the content of a given work, or also the way in which it is profiled (Tabakowska 1990; 1995; 2017).

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Abbreviations

3	3rd person	M	masculine
ABS	absolutivus	mid	middle
ACC	accusative	N	neuter
ACT	active	NOM	nominative
EMP	hemphatic	PERF	perfect
F	feminine	PL	plural
GEN	genitive	PPP	past passive participle
IMPF	imperfect	PRS	present tense
INS	instrumental	SG	present
LOC	locative	VOC	vocative

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