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# Games of Make-Believe and Factual Information

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## 1 Two views about metafictional discourse

Sentence (1) is taken from Tolkien's novel *The Lord of the Rings*, sentence (2) is not:

- (1) Frodo had a very trying time that afternoon.
- (2) Frodo is a hobbit born in the Shire.

According to Maier, both (1), written by Tolkien, and (2), uttered by me, should be interpreted as prescriptions to imagine certain states of affairs, respectively Frodo's having a very trying afternoon at some past time and Frodo's being a hobbit born in the Shire. According to this view, a reader who understands correctly these utterances and complies with the prescription imagines that Frodo had a very trying time on a certain afternoon and that Frodo is a hobbit born in the Shire.

The idea that fictional utterances, like (1), should be understood as requests that the addressee imagine, *make-believe*, that the content of the utterance is true is taken by many (Walton 1990; Currie 1990, among others) to be what distinguishes fictional utterances from assertions, which require the addressee to add the content of the utterance to her set of beliefs. On the other hand, the idea that (2), as uttered by me in recollecting the story told by Tolkien, is a prescription to imagine is disputed also by authors that accept the just mentioned characterization of the distinction between fictional discourse and assertion. For example, Currie claims:

While you and I are recollecting the Holmes story, I might say "Holmes was a pipe smoker." My utterance differs in important ways from Doyle's original utterance of the same sentence. In my mouth it's an assertion: something I intend to get you to believe is true, something I probably believe to be true, and which, in some sense or other, is true. (Currie 1990: 158)

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Currie calls this use of (2) *metafictive*.<sup>1</sup> Now, to say that sentence (2) has a metafictional use in Currie's sense is not to deny that (2) could be used to play a game of make-believe, thus to prescribe imaginings. For example, I might utter (2) to initiate a game parasitic on the game Tolkien invites us to play, in which I spin my own tale about Frodo and other characters of Tolkien's saga. Currie's claim here is simply that there is a use of (2) which is not reducible to its use to invite the reader to make-believe a certain content and which is meant to convey factual information about Tolkien's story. As is well-known, Lewis (1978) suggests that, when (2) is used in this way, it is an abbreviation of (3):

(3) In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo is a hobbit born in the Shire.

Evans (1983), on the other hand, argues that "discourse 'about what went on in the novel' (or 'in the film' or 'in the play') involves a continuation of the pretense in which these creations originated."<sup>2</sup> Thus, Evans would regard Tolkien's utterance of (1) and an utterance of (2) to talk about Tolkien's story as both being instances of make-believe. As I understand it, Maier shares this view about (1) and (2).<sup>3</sup>

## 2 Why metafictional discourse is not fictional discourse

Before I discuss the reason Maier gives for analyzing (2) as a prescription to imagine, I'll mention two reasons that seem to me to indicate that assimilating metafictional discourse (in Currie's sense) to fictional discourse is not correct. One is already given by Currie in the passage reported above. When (2) is used to talk about *The Lord of the Rings*, it makes sense to say that (2) is true, and indeed we

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<sup>1</sup> There is a terminological clash here: some, like Maier and Friend (2007), apply the term "metafictional" to sentences like "Frodo is a fictional character" or "Frodo does not exist" and not sentences like (2). Here, I'll be following Currie in using the term "metafictional" for the use of sentences like (2) to talk about the story and the term "fictional" to talk about sentences like (1) that occur in texts of fiction.

<sup>2</sup> Evans (1983, p. 365).

<sup>3</sup> Maier also attributes to Searle (1975) and Walton (1990) the view that (2) is not an assertion. However, this is not a view Searle and Walton hold about the use of sentences like (2) to talk about fictions. Searle explicitly says that utterances about fiction like the claim that Holmes never got married "conform to the rule of statement-making" (p. 329). Walton claims that "Tom Sawyer attended his own funeral" may be uttered to make a genuine assertion, without engaging in pretence (p. 404).

are disposed to regard it as true. On the other hand, if I consider fictional utterances like (1) or (4), which are prescriptions to imagine, it hardly make sense to say that they are true or false, indeed it seems that, if we say something of the kind, we are simply misinterpreting what their authors meant for us to do when they uttered them:

(4) Once upon a time there was a dragon called Puff. He lived by the sea...

The second reason why I think it is wrong to regard utterances about what goes on in the story on a par with fictional utterances has to do with the use of indexicals. Consider the ending of *The Butterfly*, a short story by James M. Cain:

(5) [...] It's still raining out, but it's daylight now, and I've been listening to the water run off the roof and I've figured out what that was in the mine. It wasn't Moke. It was water dripping. Now I know what it is, I won't mind it any more, and tonight I'll get out of here.  
I'm cut off. Ed Blue is out there and

In this passage, the indexicals *here* and *now* do not refer to the utterance time and place. One may wonder whether they refer to points on an imaginary time line or not, but what's clear is that their reference is not anchored to the context in which Cain's text was produced. Now, let's compare this use of indexicals in fictional discourse with the occurrence of indexicals in metafictional discourse. While talking about *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* to the passenger next to me, I may point at London from the airplane window, as the city comes into view, and say truthfully:

(6) Holmes lives here.

On the other hand, in the same context I cannot truthfully say:

(7) Holmes lives here now.

My utterance of (6), in the context at hand, conveys the true information that Holmes lives in London, while my utterance of (7) states falsely that Holmes lives in London at the time when I am speaking.<sup>4</sup>

Similar facts also hold for other indexicals. Consider the *incipit* of Proust's *In Remembrance of Things Past* reported in (8):

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<sup>4</sup> The contrast was noted by Frank Veltman (p. c.) and is discussed in Zucchi (2001).

(8) For a long time I went to bed early.

Here the indexical “I” refers to the fictional character Marcel. In talking about the novel, I can convey the information about Marcel’s sleeping habit by saying (9), but, obviously, I cannot convey the same information by uttering (10):

(9) Marcel goes to bed early.

(10) I go to bed early.

What examples (6)–(10) show is that the reference of indexicals in metafictional discourse (discourse about fictional texts), unlike the reference of indexicals in fictional discourse, must be fixed by the context of utterance.<sup>5</sup>

Notice that the same anchoring of indexicals to the utterance context also obtains if we make it explicit that (6), (7) and (10) are metafictional. Indeed, the indexicals “here”, “now” and “I” in (11), (12) and (13) can only refer to the place, time and agent of the utterance:

(11) In *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, Holmes lives here.

(12) In *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, Holmes lives here now.

(13) In *Remembrance of Things Past*, I go to bed early.

Intuitively, the reason why fictional discourse and metafictional discourse differ as they do with respect to the anchoring of indexicals may be explained as follows. Fictional discourse invites us to pretend that there is someone who tells the story as something she or he is informed of.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, the indexicals contained in the discourse are taken to be uttered by the fictional author, and this is why their reference in (5) is not fixed by the actual context in which Cain’s novel was produced (as Cain is the real author, not the fictional author). Thus, in the absence of textual clues in the fiction indicating that the indexicals refer to some

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<sup>5</sup> Some caution is needed here. My claim is *not* that in fictional discourse indexicals cannot refer to actual entities. A fiction in which the action is taking place in Naples may begin by saying “Naples is a strange city. Anybody who moves here must learn its ways ...” In this case, the indexical “here” refers to Naples. All I’m claiming is that in metafictional discourse, but not in fictional discourse, indexicals *must* refer to features of the actual context of utterance.

<sup>6</sup> This feature of fictional discourse is presupposed by Lewis’s account, but is also shared by other accounts. For example, Currie claims that “To make-believe a fictional story is not merely to make-believe that the story is true, but that it is told as known fact” (p. 71).

real entity imported in the novel, they simply fail to refer to anything actual. On the other hand, metafictional utterances, like (6), (7) and (10), assert that the content they express *in the context in which one utters them* is part of the content of the novel. Similarly, an utterance of (11)–(13) asserts that the content expressed by their unprefixated parts in the actual context of utterance is part of the content of the fictional work referred to in the prefix. Thus, the reference of the indexicals occurring in (6)–(7), (10) and (11)–(13) must be fixed by the actual context in which they are uttered.

If this informal account is on the right track, metafictional discourse differs from fictional discourse, since, *contra* Evans, the former is not a continuation of the pretence initiated by the latter: in uttering (2) to talk about *The Lord of the Rings*, one is not inviting the hearer to make-believe a content, one is making a factual assertion about the content of Tolkien's fiction.

### 3 Proper names in metafictional discourse

One of Maier's goals is to give a unified semantic account of proper names in (1), (2), (14) and (15):

- (1) Frodo had a very trying time that afternoon.
- (2) Frodo is a hobbit born in the Shire.
- (14) Tolkien is the author of *The Lord of the Rings*.
- (15) Frodo is a fictional character made up by Tolkien.

Sentence (14) is a standard assertion, sentence (1) is part of a work of fiction, sentence (2) is about the content a work of fiction and sentence (15), although it contains the name "Frodo," is neither part nor about the content of a work of fiction. One limitation of accounts, like Lewis's and Currie's, which assimilate sentences like (2) to prefixed sentences of the form "in fiction  $f$ ,  $\varphi$ " is that they cannot be extended to (15), since (15) is true, but it is false that in *The Lord of the Rings* Frodo is a fictional character made up by Tolkien. Indeed, Lewis gives no account of (15), and Currie analyzes "Frodo" as a disguised definite description in (2) and as referring to a *role* in (15) (where the Frodo role is a partial function from worlds to individuals that picks out in each world the individual which has the properties attributed to Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*).

Maier's theory provides a uniform analysis of proper names as presupposition triggers by (a) analyzing both (1) and (2) as prescriptions to imagine and (b) analyzing (15), like (14), as an assertion, the difference with respect to (14) being that the belief that the hearer adds to his belief stock upon accepting (15) is a belief which is dependent on his imagining, for instance, that there is an individual named Frodo who is a hobbit born in the Shire.

The goal of providing a unified semantic account of proper names is clearly a desirable one. For one thing, as Jubien (2009: 160) observes, "writers of fiction almost never build into their stories principles about the functioning of names that might differ from those that actually prevail." Thus, whatever difference there is between the functioning of the name "Frodo" in (1) and the functioning of the name "Tolkien" in (14), it should depend on the difference between the speech act of asserting and the speech act of prescribing to imagine, and not on different stipulations about the semantics of names. On the other hand, if I am right, point (a) of Maier's theory is not correct and (2) is best treated as an assertion, an invitation for the hearer to update his belief component. So, one open question, if one rejects (a), is whether the insight concerning the role of proper names as presupposition triggers can be maintained for sentences like (2) when they are used to talk about the novel.

Here are some considerations suggesting that it can. Lewis argued that there is a relation between metafactive sentences like (16) and counterfactuals:

(16) In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo is a hobbit born in the Shire.

In particular, according to Lewis, what (3) says may be spelled out in counterfactual terms by saying<sup>7</sup>:

(17) If *The Lord of the Rings* were told as known fact, Frodo would be a hobbit born in the Shire.

While (17) spells out the relation between counterfactuals and prefixed sentences in accord with (one version of) Lewis's analysis, one might agree that there is such a relation while subscribing to a different view of the content of (16). For example, (18) reflects a way of counterfactually spelling out an analysis of prefixed sentences closer to Currie's:

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<sup>7</sup> This way of spelling out Lewis's analysis in counterfactual terms corresponds to one version of his theory (what he calls "Analysis 1"). For sake of simplicity, I do not consider other versions Lewis discusses.

- (18) If *The Lord of the Rings* were told as known fact, it would be reasonable to infer that the teller believes that Frodo is a hobbit born in the Shire.

Now, in the worlds closer to the actual world in which *The Lord of the Rings* is told as known fact, there is an individual called “Frodo.” So, the existential presupposition carried by the use of the name “Frodo” in the consequent of (17)–(18) (i.e. that there is someone called Frodo) would be locally met in these worlds, without generating the inference that Frodo exists in the real world. Thus, if we follow Lewis and Currie’s view that (2) should be interpreted on a par with assertion (16) and embrace the counterfactual analysis of (2), an utterance of (1) would invite the hearer to update her beliefs by adding the content of a conditional such as (17) or (18), where the name “Frodo” could still function as a presupposition trigger. How exactly this suggestion should be spelled out in ADT is not something I can pursue here, but, if these considerations are correct, an analysis of (2) compatible with the Lewis–Currie view that (2) is best treated as an assertion on a par with (16) might be consistent with Maier’s treatment of proper names of fictional characters.

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