

# Truth and Reference in Fiction, I

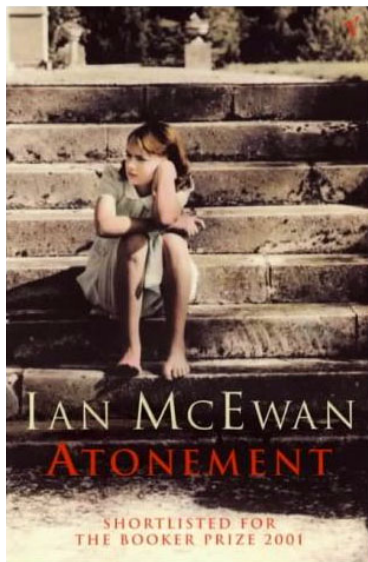
## Mini-Course LANCOG, Lisbon

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## Can a Fiction Serve for Atonement?



## McEwan's on Aiming for Atonement through Fiction

*The problem these fifty-nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheist.*

I will advance an interpretation of the claim McEwan appears to be implicating here, assuming a theory of truth and reference in fiction, and I will present a partial justification for it.

## The Supporting Theory

From Michael Rifaterre's (1990) *Fictional Truth*,

*... readers need not be familiar with the reality that the text is about in order to believe it true. The only reference against which they need to test the narrative's truth is language.*

My not-so-wild version ...

- Only the general capacity to understand a natural language is required to interpret fictions; no **knowledge by acquaintance** of particular matters of fact is needed.
- To interpret referential expressions, both vacuous and non-vacuous, it is enough to know their *characters*, and general presuppositions which are common knowledge.

# Outline

## (1) Stage-Setting

- (i) Varieties of Fictional Discourse
- (ii) Two Notions of 'Semantics'
- (iii) Genuine Reference

## (2) Millian Theories of Names in Fictional Discourse

- (i) Realism about Fictional Characters
- (ii) The Pretense Theory

## (3) A Descriptivist Account

- (i) Empty Names
- (ii) Non-empty Names

## Three Types of Fictional Discourse

It is important to distinguish three **uses** of fictional discourse; in Andrea Bonomi's terms, *textual*, *paratextual* and *metatextual* discourses, which I will illustrate with these examples:

- (1) Desde la puerta de **La Crónica**, **Santiago** mira **la avenida Tacna**, sin amor
- (2) (*Conversación en La Catedral* has it that) from the door of **La Crónica**, **Santiago** looks at **Tacna's Avenue** without love
- (3) **Santiago**, a.k.a. *Zavalita*, is an *alter ego* of himself created by Mario Vargas Llosa in one of his best novels, *Conversación en La Catedral*

## Textual Fictional Discourse

- Desde la puerta de **La Crónica**, **Santiago** mira **la avenida Tacna**, sin amor

This is the discourse constituting a work of fiction, whose correctness or otherwise we intuitively do not classify in terms of *truth* and *falsehood* – even when it consists of declarative sentences.

## Paratextual Fictional Discourse

- (*Conversación en La Catedral* has it that) from the door of **La Crónica**, **Santiago** looks at **Tacna's Avenue** without love.

This is the discourse employed to describe the content of a fiction; it produces speech that we intuitively do classify as true or false.



## Metatextual Fictional Discourse

- **Santiago**, a.k.a. *Zavalita*, is an *alter ego* of himself created by Mario Vargas Llosa in one of his best novels, *Conversación en La Catedral*.

This is discourse about fictions that also produces speech that we intuitively classify as true or false, but differs from paratextual discourse in that it intuitively does not primarily describe their contents.

## Our Focus

- Desde la puerta de **La Crónica**, **Santiago** mira **la avenida Tacna**, sin amor.
- (*Conversación en La Catedral* has it that) from the door of **La Crónica**, **Santiago** looks at **Tacna's Avenue** without love.
- **Santiago**, a.k.a. *Zavalita*, is an *alter ego* of himself created by Mario Vargas Llosa in one of his best novels, *Conversación en La Catedral*.

Here I will focus on the semantics of the highlighted referential expressions in *textual* discourse, heavily relying for my critical and constructive claims on views about the semantics of *paratextual* discourse. I will only make side remarks about the semantics of *metatextual* discourse.

# Structure

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## Narrow and Wide Semantics

We need to distinguish two equally legitimate conceptions of a semantic endeavor, a *narrow* and a *wide* one.

- In the **narrow** sense, semantics purports to account for the *systematicity* and *productivity* of natural language production and understanding, by providing psychologically plausible compositional theories.
- In the **wide** sense, semantics purports to account for the satisfaction conditions of different kinds of speech acts in general, the proper truth-conditions of assertions in particular.

## An Illustration

- The debate about the *referential* and *attributive* uses of definite descriptions illustrates the distinction.
- To use a Donnellan-like example, imagine that, in the context of a biography of Federico Martín Bahamontes, I utter (1):
  - (1) And so it came about that *the first Spaniard ever to win the Tour de France* was born in Toledo.
- Even if, unbeknownst to everybody in the conversation, some obscure Spaniard born in Barcelona as a matter of fact won a *Tour de France* that took place in the XIXth century and whose records have been lost to history, intuitively what I want to communicate with (1) **is true**.

# Semantics and Pragmatics

- Does the example refute Russell's *Theory of Descriptions*?
- The debate concerns whether or not semantics **in the narrow sense** should countenance the referential uses.
- But semantics **in the wide sense** should certainly countenance them.
- Because it is **for semantics as a distinctive philosophical undertaking** to tell us whether referentially used descriptions induce *singular* truth-conditions, as opposed to the *general* ones induced by attributively used descriptions, what this distinction comes to, and how it comes about.

## Application to Our Case

- (1) Desde la puerta de **La Crónica**, **Santiago** mira **la avenida Tacna**, sin amor.
- Arguably, the semantics *in the narrow sense* of (a textual use of) (1) is simple: (1) is untrue, for lack of reference of one of its terms.
  - But there is still the issue of its semantics *in the wide sense*, which arguably differs from this (I in fact will argue for this).
  - I will assume here, following Currie and Walton, that in its textual use utterances have a representational role, related to the imagination.
  - They are uttered with the communicative intention of producing propositional imaginings in virtue of its recognition (Currie), or perhaps instead they have the social function of authorizing propositional imaginings (Walton).
  - Hence, the semantics *in the wide sense* of (1) should tell us which propositions one is supposed to imagine in understanding it.

## Other Uses

What about *paratextual* uses as in (2) and *metatextual* uses as in (3)?

- (2) (*Conversación en La Catedral* has it that) from the door of **La Crónica**, **Santiago** looks at **Tacna's Avenue** without love.
- (3) **Santiago**, a.k.a. *Zavalita*, is an *alter ego* of himself created by Mario Vargas Llosa in one of his best novels, *Conversación en La Catedral*.
- Arguably, not only the semantics in the wide sense, but also the semantics *in the narrow sense* of (2) and (3) cannot simply dismiss them as untrue for lack of reference of 'Santiago'.
  - We will come back to this later, but, in any case, a semantics *in the wide sense* that limit itself to decree that would be very implausible.



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## The Attributional *De Re*

Consider an assertion by me of (1), made on the basis of general evidence and with the universal quantifier taking *wide* scope:

- (1) The father of every black student of Peter voted for Obama.
- This is a clear example of a non-referential description.
  - Suppose that Joseph is the father of a black student of Peter. Our attributional practices manifest that, in a weak sense, we can take (1) to *refer* or *be about* Joseph.
  - For someone can truly report (1) to Joseph thus:
- (2) Manuel said that you voted for Obama.

## Two Marks of Genuine Reference

- (i) The *irrelevance of descriptive material*, as illustrated in this dialogue (cf. Kripke "Semantic Argument"):
  - ▶ A utters 'The younger cat is black' in a perceptual setting. B replies: It is indeed black, but in fact it is not a cat, it is a small panther // in fact it is not a cat or any other animal, it is just an hologram.
- (ii) The *rigidity* of the expression's truth-conditional contribution, as illustrated by the previous example (1):
  - (1) *The first Spaniard ever to win the Tour de France was born in Toledo.*

# Millian neo-Fregeanism, I

- For the specific case of reference made with proper names, *Millians* account for the marks of genuine reference by claiming that the referent is the only semantic feature of a proper name.
- This view fits badly with the fact that our two marks are present in cases of reference made with indexicals and referentially used descriptions, and in both cases descriptive features play some (wide?/narrow?) semantic role.
- On a better account, *Millian neo-Fregeanism*, descriptive material plays a merely **presuppositional** role.

# Presuppositions

Both (1) and (2) entail (3):

(1) Jones stole the car.

(2) It was Jones who stole the car.

(3) Someone stole the car.

- Unlike (1), (4) – the negation of (2) –, (5) – a question with the same content –, (6) – its embedding as the antecedent of a conditional, or in a modal, as in (7) –, all entail (3):

(4) It was not Jones who stole the car.

(5) Was it Jones who stole the car?

(6) If it was Jones who stole the car, his father will be upset.

(7) It might have been Jones who stole the car.

## Millian neo-Fregeanism, II

This is a specification of the content of a referential utterance:

A: The younger cat is black.

▶ Presupposing that  $x$  was the most salient younger cat prompting his uttering that token of 'the younger cat', A said that  $x$  is black.

- Specifications like this assume a **free logic**.
- They allow an explanation of **rigidity** along Millian lines.
- An appeal to well-known features of presuppositions such as *accommodation* and *cancellation* would account for **descriptive irrelevance**:

**Cancell:** B's utterance *cancels* the presupposition that there is a most salient younger cat prompting A's utterance of that token of 'the younger cat'.

**Accom:** B's utterance *accommodates* A's presupposition that there is something prompting A's utterance of that token of 'the younger cat'.

## Millian neo-Fregeanism, III

Two more illustrative specifications of the content of utterances:

A: That cat is black.

- ▶ Presupposing that  $x$  was the most salient cat prompting his uttering that token of 'that cat', A said that  $x$  is black.

A: Sophie is black.

- ▶ Presupposing that  $x$  was the entity called 'Sophie' in the naming practice on which his uttering that token of 'Sophie' relied, A said that  $x$  is black.

That's all for today!!

