

Truth and Reference in Fiction, III

Mini-Course LANCOG, Lisbon

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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

Millian Proposals

Last time we discussed the two most promising accounts of fictional discourse provided by Millians, **Fictional Realism** and **Pretense Theory**.

- Realism is motivated (e.g., by Van Inwagen) by Quinean considerations on metatextual discourse such as (1), and extended to textual discourse such as (2) (and corresponding paratextual discourse).
 - (1) **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*
 - (2) Desde la puerta de **La Crónica**, **Santiago** mira **la avenida Tacna**, sin amor.
- Pretense Theory proceeds in the opposite direction, from plausible pretense accounts of textual discourse.
- We should keep in mind that both are theories of the **wide-semantics** of fictional names, in particular in textual discourse – not just of their narrow-semantics.

Millian Realism Rejected

Problems for the Millian Realism account of textual discourse:

- (i) Textual discourse appears to be intelligible right away, but, when are fictional characters available as referents?
- (ii) Reference is usually determined by the communicative intentions of speakers, but most speakers do not have the required intentions.
- (iii) (A generalization of the previous problem.) Realism requires a distinction between senses of predication (*encoding, exemplifying*) not underwritten by the attitudes of language-users:
 - (1) Desde la puerta de La Crónica, **Santiago** mira la avenida Tacna, sin amor
 - (2) **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*

These to me are symptoms that references to fictional characters have merely a **figurative** or metaphorical role (a very much **dead** metaphor).

The Object-Dependent Pretense Theory Rejected

The object-dependent view of content assumed by Walton and Evans poses a problem for this form of the Pretense view. (1) and (2) lack content; hence, the theory does not help specifying the imaginings they authorize.

- (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



The Gappy-Proposition Pretense Theory Rejected

- A Millian alternative is Braun's gappy proposition theory, on which sentences with empty names do have contents – "gappy" ones –, and thereby truth-conditions.
- This view provides an intuitively wrong account of textual and paratextual fictive discourse. Given that Zavalita and Ambrosio are different characters in CLC, (1) and (2), as much as the textual sentences they correspond to, authorize *different* imaginings:
 - (1) (*Conversación en La Catedral* has it that) **Santiago** had a beer in **La Catedral** while talking to **Ambrosio**.
 - (2) (*Conversación en La Catedral* has it that) **Ambrosio** had a beer in **La Catedral** while talking to **Santiago** .

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The Semantic Contribution of Empty Names

- (1) Desde la puerta de La Crónica, **Santiago** mira la avenida Tacna, sin amor.
- Put forward for the default use of indicative sentences – making an act of *saying* or *asserting*, to be evaluated in terms of truth or informativeness – (1) is untrue.
 - Because whether or not the assertion is true depends on how things are with the referent of ‘Santiago’, independently of how we take its reference to be fixed; this is what the **rigidity** and **irrelevance of descriptive material** intuitions establish.
 - On account of this, it is accurate to characterize it as having a **gappy** singular content.

(Core Premise) The Functional Role of Fictions

- In establishing the semantics of expressions, we should consider the norms or rules applying to the speech acts to which it contributes, which depend on their function.
- (1) and perhaps (2), in the uses we are interested in – the one by Vargas Llosa “uttering” CLC, or by anyone “reporting its content” – help to perform acts of **authorizing imaginings** (fiction-making).
 - (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
- As a privileged dimension of evaluation for such acts I suggest to consider appraisals such as whether or not they are *worth indulging in*.

(Main Argument) The (Wide-)Semantics of Fictional Names

- Whether those acts can be positively appraised on that dimension **very much depends** on the descriptive information we are intended to associate with 'Santiago' in correctly interpreting the fiction.
- A clear indication of this is that we lack **rigidity** and **irrelevance of descriptive material** intuitions with respect to the contents which make such imaginings interesting or otherwise: just try to apply Kripke's Modal and Semantic arguments to them.
- Thus, it **does not at all depend** on how things are with any alleged referent of 'Santiago', nor therefore on the gappy singular content.

Referential Fancies

- On David Lewis' view – acceptable for realistic fictions such as CLC – the primary content that the fiction-maker uttering (1) authorizes us to imagine is that *a fictional asserter is thereby transmitting us* the information constituting its semantic content under those circumstances:
 - (1) Desde la puerta de La Crónica, **Santiago** mira la avenida Tacna, sin amor.
- On the Millian neo-Fregean view, Vargas Llosa engages in the (ancillary) pretending (i.e., authorizing us to imagine) of the presupposition that there is a 'Santiago Zavala' naming-practise for him to rely on in uttering the relevant token of 'Santiago', fixing a referent of whom he and his audience know.

Imaginings: (Sub-)Type and Content

- Currie & Ravenscroft have argued that imagining-desiring, imagining-believing, imagining-seeing, imagining-feeling, etc, are different sub-types of mental acts, determining the determinable type *acts of imagining*; the -desiring, -seeing, -believing and -feeling parts do not specify the content, but rather sub-categorize the act.
- On the present view, we can analogously say that the use of referential expressions by a fiction-maker authorizes imaginings-presupposing.
- Imagining-presupposing primarily the semantic content of the associated presupposition, and then all the information that the fiction provides about the character, in the same way we would seriously do if the narrative consisted of serious assertions.

The (Wide-) Descriptivist Semantics of Empty Names

- This gives a supporting psychological underpinning to the descriptivist answer to our question, What is the (wide-)semantic contribution of the highlighted expression in textual uses of (1)?

(1) Desde la puerta de La Crónica, **Santiago** mira la avenida Tacna, sin amor.

- The proposal is that the primary contribution of 'Santiago' is: **the person called 'Santiago' in (that part of) CLC.**
- The *motivation* for the proposal is that we know in these cases that the presupposition is merely a pretense – for we know that, strictly speaking, it is wrong. It is a means that the fiction-maker uses to convey the content he intends his audience to imagine.
- The *justification* for the proposal lies in the **Main Argument** above.
- Similar claims, similarly motivated and justified, apply to other referential expressions, indexicals, natural kinds terms, referentially used descriptions – all expressions with **two "dimensions"** of content.

The Charge of *Idealism*

- Alex Byrne criticizes Lewis-inspired accounts of truth-in-fiction for their “**idealism**”: the implication that in all fictional worlds speech-acts are made, stories are told, expressions are used, etc.
- I have also criticized those accounts on related charges: they have difficulties to properly capture the content of Kafka’s stories.
- The present proposal applies only to what we might call the *prima facie* content of textual utterances. The *prima facie* content of an utterance by an unreliable narrator will not end up being part of the content of the fiction.
- The same applies to the metalinguistic contents primarily produced by the present account, in fictions requiring us to exclude them, all things considered.

Friend's Objections I

- Stacie Friend has interesting objections to descriptivist theories such as the one defended here.
- She imagines a debate between Nabokov and another critic about the nature of the “vermin” that Kafka’s Gregor Samsa is changed into in *The Metamorphosis*; Nabokov asserts (1), while the critic denies it:
(1) **Gregor Samsa** has been changed into a beetle.
- On the present view, the only real singularity in the content conveyed by (1) – an example of paratextual fictional discourse – concerns the concrete discourse produced by Kafka; but this is enough to account for the “intentional identity” in the imagined debate.

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The Descriptive Contribution of Non-empty names

- Given the **Main Argument**, the present proposal does not distinguish empty and non-empty names:
 - (1) Desde la puerta de **La Crónica**, Santiago mira **la avenida Tacna**, sin amor.
- On the present proposal, the primary contribution of 'la avenida Tacna' to the content whose imagining (1) authorizes is, roughly, **the avenue called 'Tacna' in (that part of) CLC**.
- This is what I take the (tamed) post-modern view to contend; 'Napoleon' and 'London' *are not* genuinely referential expressions in *War and Peace* and *1984*; knowledge of *character* is enough to understand a fiction.

Reasons for The (Tamed) Postmodern View, I

The justification is the same as before; on the one hand:

- Whether or not an assertion made with (1) meets its constitutive norms *does not* depend on how things are with some entity satisfying the descriptions we associate throughout the discourse with 'Tacna Avenue'.

(1) Desde la puerta de **La Crónica**, Santiago mira **la avenida Tacna**, sin amor.

- They serve to help fixing which entity, if any, is being referred to, and such entity may not satisfy them.
- Whether the assertion is true or does provide information *rigidly depends* on how things are with that entity.

Reasons for The (Tamed) Postmodern View, II

- The opposite applies to whether the fiction-making to which (1) contributes is to be positively appraised as *worth imagining*:
 - (1) Desde la puerta de **La Crónica**, Santiago mira **la avenida Tacna**, sin amor.
- It *does not* (rigidly) depend on how things are with the referent of ‘Tacna Avenue’.
- It *does very much* depend on the descriptions we may associate throughout the discourse with it.

The Kroon Argument, I

The present proposal deals adequately with the semantics of metatextual claims such as (1), which Kroon invokes against Millians who take non-empty names to make their ordinary contributions to textual utterances:

(1) Mario likes **Tacna Avenue**, because it is very green and quiet.

This is supposed to state the reader's attitude about the fictional avenue in Vargas Llosa's *CLC*, and its rational basis – which, for the sake of the example, we will suppose correct.

The Kroon Argument, II

- (1) Mario likes **Tacna Avenue**, because it is very green and quiet.
 - The problem for the Millian view comes when, as it happens, the real Tacna Avenue has few trees, and is always crammed with noisy traffic, as Mario very well knows.



- Kroon's own examples:
 - (i) Garrison admires O'Keefe (in Stone's *JFK*), because (in Stone's *JFK*) Garrison despises O'Keefe.
 - (ii) Garrison admires Garrison (in Stone's *JFK*), because (in Stone's *JFK*) Garrison doesn't admire himself.

Friend's Objections II

- Stacie Friend has two more objections to descriptivism, elaborating on the intuitive notion that a fiction like *CLC* is **about** Tacna Avenue, the newspaper *La Crónica*, or, in general, Perú under Odría's dictatorship.
- The first is that we incorporate into the content of fictions such as *War and Peace* and *1984* – invoking the *Reality Generation Principle* – well-known facts about, respectively, Napoleon and London, if they are consistent with their more explicit contents.
- In reply, it suffices to appeal to the distinction between **genuine** and merely **attributional** reference: in the (weak) sense, contents involving quantificational definite descriptions **are about** their *denotata*.

Searle's Criterion

- Friend's criticism is related to a criterion that Searle proposed to justify the claim that non-empty names preserve their ordinary reference in fiction.
- The criterion is that we would count as a mistake that, in the fiction, the distance between Baker Street and Waterloo Station is not the real distance.
- People do invoke Searle's criterion (cf. Rushdie on *Slumdog Millionaire*).
- Properly understood, these criticisms are based on the *defeasible* application for **exportation** of Lewis' and Walton's *Reality Generation Principle*, derivative from its more fundamental application for **importation**.

Friend's Objections III

- Friend's final objection is that authors of fictions usually “want to say” things about the referents of the non-empty names they use.
- In writing *CLC*, Vargas Llosa surely wanted to make claims about the actual referent of ‘Perú’ at the actual time referred to by the temporal expressions he used there.
- This misses the fact that **we can indirectly make** singular claims by making speech acts with general contents.
- If referential uses of descriptions are **pragmatically conveyed implicatures**, this is what accounts for them.

So, Can a Fiction Serve for Atonement?

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.

- This is why I after all disagree with McEwan, even if I accept the “postmodern” semantics of fictional discourse from which I take him to derive it.
- His Briony **could** atone for her wrongs through her fiction, even granting that (i) the postmodern view is correct, and (ii) expiating involves attitudes with singular contents.
- She might do it **indirectly** – the same way I take McEwan to make with his fiction the *metafictional assertion* I am here disputing.

Thanks for Your Attention!!!

