

Cognitive and formal semantics

A case study about fictional names

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Maier argues that what he dubs the ‘paradox of fictional names’ forces us to switch to a psychologistic interpretation of DRT. I show that it faces a challenge accounting for fictional name introduction in parafictional and metafictional statements. I argue that a workspace account solves the paradox and avoids the challenge while sticking to a common ground interpretation of DRT.

1 The paradox of fictional names

There is a long-standing debate between cognitive and formal semanticists on whether meaning is a mental construct or about our relation to the world. Even within the dynamic framework of DRT (Discourse Representation Theory) there is split between those that interpret DRS’s (Discourse Representation Structures) as representations of a Stalnakerian common ground (e.g. Heim, 1982; Groenendijk & Stokhof, 1991; van der Sandt, 1992) and those that interpret DRS’s as representations of an agent’s mental state (e.g. Geurts, 1999; Kamp, 2015. But see Hamm, Kamp & Van Lambalgen, 2006).

Maier (2017) argues that what he dubs the ‘paradox of fictional names’ forces us to switch to a psychologistic interpretation of DRT. The paradox arises in our use of fictional names (e.g. ‘Frodo’) across (in Recanati’s (2018) terminology) ‘fictional’, ‘parafictional’ and ‘metafictional’ statements. Fictional statements are statements taken directly from some fictional work (e.g. (1) from *The Lord of the Rings*). Parafictional statements are statements about the content of some fictional work. These can be ‘explicit’ (e.g. (2)) or ‘implicit’ (e.g. (3)) depending on whether the ‘In fiction x ’-operator is overt or covert. Metafictional statements are statements about fictional entities *as fictional entities* (e.g. (4)):

- (1) Frodo had a very trying time that afternoon
- (2) In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo is a hobbit
- (3) Frodo is a hobbit
- (4) Frodo is a famous fictional character

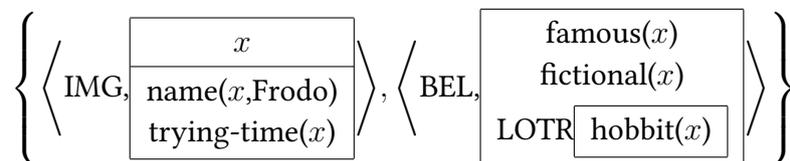
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Intuitively, the name ‘Frodo’ refers uniformly across statements (1), (2), (3) and (4) which are all true in some sense. But how can we consistently accept for instance (1) in which the name ‘Frodo’ refers to a living creature, and (4) which denies Frodo’s existence?

In this paper I briefly discuss Maier’s psychologicistic solution to the paradox of fictional names and argue that it faces a challenge accounting for fictional name introduction in parafictional and metafictional statements. I show that a workspace account solves the paradox and avoids the challenge while sticking to a common ground interpretation of DRT. In general, such an approach is preferable because if DRS’s are interpreted as representations of mental states, we are committed to the psychological assumption that mental states have similar structure as DRS’s. Preferably, our linguistic theory does not force us into making psychological assumptions about the structures of agents’ mental representations. A common ground interpretation of DRT only commits us to assumptions concerning the structure of the abstract concept of common ground. How that concept is implemented mentally is left unspecified.

2 Psychologicistic DRT

Following Walton (1990), Maier analyses regular assertions (including parafictional and metafictional statements) as prescriptions to *believe* and fictional statements as prescriptions to *imagine*. To represent the distinction between belief and imagination, Maier develops an extension of DRT based primarily on Kamp (1990; 2015), in which DRS’s are linked to attitudes. As a test case, let’s assume an agent reads fictional statement (1) in *The Lord of the Rings* and subsequently hears a reliable source say parafictional statement (2) and metafictional statement (4). In Maier’s framework, a simplified representation of this agent’s mental state after the resulting updates looks as follows:



The agent is represented as *imagining* the existence of an entity named Frodo (having a trying time some afternoon). The agent *believes* (relative to that imagination) that the imagined entity is a famous fictional character (and that *The Lord of the Rings* is such that the imagined entity is a hobbit). Because the agent has different attitudes towards these propositions, the tension between ‘accepting’ both (1) and (4) is resolved.

Proper names are analysed as presupposition triggers (See Geurts, 1997); The name ‘Frodo’ in (2) and (4) triggers the presupposition that there is an y named ‘Frodo’. Assuming the name ‘Frodo’ refers uniformly, the discourse referents x and y need to be unified. However, following standard DRT-rules, the discourse referent x for Frodo is not accessible outside of the imagination-box where it is introduced. Hence, Maier assumes that doxastic attitudes can be referentially dependent on attitudes like imagination so that the name presuppositions in (2) and (4) can take x as their discourse referent.

2.1 The parafictional and metafictional challenge

Because Maier assumes fictional names in parafictional and metafictional statements are referentially dependent on some existential imagination induced by fictional statements, he only

considers discourse in which the interpretation of parafictional and metafictional statements comes *after* the interpretation of fictional statements. In other words, in order to talk about a fictional character, we first have to have imagined it. However, fictional names can also be introduced in parafictional statements (and only later used in metafictional or fictional statements) or similarly in metafictional statements. For instance, I can felicitously introduce the fictional names ‘Frodo’ and ‘Sherlock Holmes’ with the following statements:

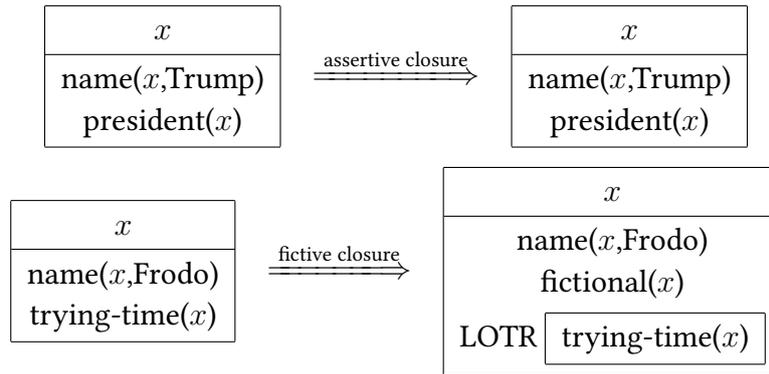
- (5) In *The Lord of the Rings*, a hobbit named Frodo travels to a dark and far away land
- (6) Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character created by Arthur Conan Doyle

Here, the fictional names ‘Frodo’ and ‘Sherlock Holmes’ (introduced in respectively a parafictional and metafictional statement) cannot be referentially dependent on some previous act of imagination (induced by a fictional statement). As it is, Maier’s theory does not explain our interpretation of this type of discourse. In order to do so, Maier would have to assume we accommodate a kind of contentless or minimal imagination (e.g. imagining that there is a person named Sherlock Holmes) when interpreting (5) and (6). Although this is a possible strategy, I will not further explore it here because, as I show in the next section, we can solve the paradox of fictional names without resorting to a psychologistic interpretation of DRT.

3 The workspace account

I present an alternative approach to modelling fictional, parafictional and metafictional statements that sticks to a Stalnakerian common ground interpretation of DRT: The ‘workspace account’ (Semeijn, 2017). The workspace account is compatible with Matravers’ (2014) theory of fiction. Matravers argues (against the consensus view of fiction interpretation also advocated by Maier) that there is in fact no special cognitive attitude of imagination involved in fiction. He proposes a two-stage model in which our primary engagement with a narrative (i.e. entertaining its content) involves the same cognitive processes whether the narrative is fictional or not; What goes on in the head of the reader of a fictional story does not differ from what goes on in the head of the reader of a non-fictional story. The difference between fiction and non-fiction is only apparent in the second stage of narrative interpretation where we decide on whether to actually adopt as belief the propositions that we have entertained. A similar idea is developed in Kamp’s (2016) mentalistic framework. Kamp introduces a compartment (K_{dis}) for the neutral place where we build representations of the content of the current discourse before forming judgements about the truth of the propositions expressed by K_{dis} .

Likewise, in the workspace account, common ground updates are formalized as a two-step algorithm where the first step – updating a temporal common ground (i.e. the workspace) – is uniform for non-fiction and fiction. What differentiates non-fiction from fiction is whether, at the end of the (possibly multi-sentence) discourse, ‘assertive’ or ‘fictive closure’ is performed: Whether the content of the updated workspace (i.e. the propositions entertained during the discourse) is added to the common ground as actual belief (for non-fiction) or as parafictional belief (for fiction) under the relevant fiction-operator. I present a simplified representation of assertive closure of the assertion *Trump is the president of the U.S.* and of fictive closure of fictional statement (1). I assume in both cases that the common ground and workspace are empty before the first update:



So, whether I am reading *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Times*, I update the workspace with the content of the narrative. As soon as I stop entertaining the propositions of a non-fictional narrative (e.g. some article in *The Times*) I stop updating the workspace (with e.g. *Trump is the president of the U.S.*), and instead update the common ground with the propositions in the workspace: I adopt the entertained propositions as belief. As soon as I stop entertaining the propositions of a fictional narrative (e.g. *The Lord of the Rings*), I stop updating the workspace (with e.g. *Frodo had a very trying time that afternoon*) and instead update the common ground with parafictional propositions concerning *The Lord of the Rings* that are based on the propositions in the workspace (e.g. *In The Lord of the Rings, Frodo had a very trying time that afternoon*): I adopt parafictional beliefs based on the entertained propositions.

As the formalism shows, fictive closure also involves global accommodation of a discourse referent x for any fictional entity that is newly introduced in a fictional statement. Thus, assuming (1) introduced the name 'Frodo', fictive closure of (1) also involves accommodation of a discourse referent for 'Frodo' in the main box. I hence incorporate the realist assumption that there exist fictional characters. Proper name conditions (e.g. ' $\text{name}(x, \text{Frodo})$ ') are separated from the other conditions in the workspace and placed in the main box. This represents the fact that the fictional character Frodo is also named 'Frodo' outside of *The Lord of the Rings*. Parafictional and metafictional statements (i.e. the statements that make up the content of the common ground) are about these fictional characters.

The ontological status of fictional characters is still a matter of debate.¹ They can be interpreted as abstract objects (e.g. Zalta, 1983; 1988) that allow for two kinds of predication: They encode certain properties (e.g. 'being a hobbit') and exemplify others (e.g. 'being fictional'). In this account, metafictional and parafictional statements are about respectively what properties fictional characters exemplify and what properties they encode.² Alternatively, as Recanati (2018) suggests, fictional characters can be analysed as so-called 'dot-objects' (See e.g. Pustejovsky, 1995; Asher, 2011) which are complex entities involving several facets. In such an account, metafictional and parafictional statements predicate over different facets of the fictional character (respectively the abstract object facet and the flesh and blood facet).

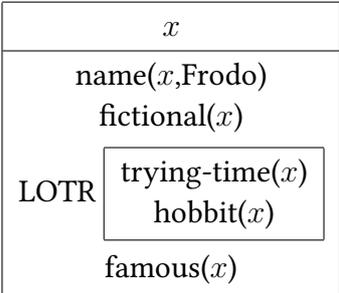
3.1 Solving the paradox of fictional names

So, how does the workspace account solve the paradox of fictional names? Fictional statement (1) triggers fictive closure. Parafictional statement (2) and metafictional statement (4) are as-

¹See Semeijn (forthcoming) for an overview of how different theories of fictional characters can account for anaphoric links across mixed parafictional/metafictional discourse.

²Actually, Zalta analyses *implicit* parafictional statements as being about what properties fictional characters encode. Explicit parafictional statements are about what propositional properties (e.g. 'being such that p is true') stories encode.

sertions and hence trigger assertive closure. Returning to our previous test case (i.e. the agent that reads (1) in *The Lord of the Rings* and subsequently hears a reliable source say (2) and (4)), a simplified representation of the common ground that results from fictive closure of (1) and assertive closure of (2) and (4) looks as follows:



Because the discourse referent x for the fictional character Frodo is globally accessible, the name presuppositions in (2) and (4) can take x as their discourse referent. There is no tension between accepting both (1) and (4) because we ‘accept’ (1) only temporarily; We update the workspace with (1) and hence entertain (1) only for the purpose and duration of reading *The Lord of the Rings*. (4) and a parafictional belief based on (1) are accepted more permanently (as part of the common ground) but are not in conflict with each other; Both are about Frodo as a fictional character.

3.2 A closer look at parafictional and metafictional statements

In section 2.1, I discussed a challenge for Maier’s theory concerning fictional name introduction in parafictional and metafictional statements. In the workspace account, this type of discourse poses no challenge. Parafictional and metafictional statements are about fictional characters (rather than being referentially dependent on an existential imagination). Fictional characters really exist (i.e. as abstract objects or dot-objects). Hence the introduction of a fictional name in a parafictional or metafictional statement (as in (5) and (6)) is just like the introduction of a regular name (e.g. ‘Trump’) in a regular assertion; It involves global accommodation of a discourse referent for respectively a fictional character or for a flesh and blood individual. Hence, the workspace account avoids Maier’s difficulties with statements such as (5) and (6). We globally accommodate a discourse referent at the first introduction of a fictional name whether in a fictional, parafictional or metafictional statement.

4 Conclusion

I have argued that Maier’s psychologicistic interpretation of DRT solves the paradox of fictional names but runs into difficulties with the parafictional and metafictional challenge. I have shown that the workspace account sticks to a common ground interpretation of DRT while solving the paradox and avoiding the challenge. In conclusion, whatever independent reasons there may be for a move to a psychologicistic interpretation of DRT, modelling fiction interpretation does not force us to switch to it.

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