

# Indexicals in Fiction

Richard Vallée

University of Moncton

doi: 10.2478/disp-2022-0015

BIBLID: [0873-626X (2022) 66; pp. 305–26]

## Abstract

Both the semantics of fictional discourse and the semantics of indexicality are canonical topics in the philosophy of language, on which there exists well-known significant literature. However, the same cannot be said for the terrain where they overlap. That is, the distinctive issues raised by fictive uses of indexicals and demonstratives have not been extensively studied *per se*. The aim of the present essay is to shed some light on this terrain, and to advance our understanding of some of these issues. As it happens, accounting for indexicals in fiction requires the use of innovative new tools. In particular, the standard, familiar taxonomy of types / tokens / utterances is not sufficient to account for the complex cognitive significance and truth-conditions, unique to these kinds of case. For instance: it is widely recognized that, with indexicals generally, semantic properties attach to utterances, not to types or to tokens. But in fiction there are no utterances (in the relevant sense). An innovative notion is required, which I call an “indexed token”. This account of indexicals in fiction, based on the notion of an indexed token, is developed within a Perry (2012)-inspired pluri-propositionalist framework. As such, the present essay constitutes an original application of that framework, extending its already impressive reach.

## Keywords

cognitive significance; fiction; indexicals; pluri-propositionalism

## 1 Introduction

Referring expressions, like proper names and indexicals, are designed to talk about the world. The name ‘Donald Trump’ is used to designate the former president of the US, and

'I' is used to refer to the speaker of the utterance. Language is a very flexible tool, allowing the legitimate use of referring expressions when there is nothing they refer to, as is arguably the case with fictional names like 'Batman' and 'Sherlock Holmes'. Moreover, genuinely fictional names are to be used only when there is no real, tridimensional objects they refer to. 'Batman' and 'Sherlock Holmes' would not be fictional names were these names used to refer to real, flesh-and-blood, "tridimensional" individuals. There is important literature on fictional names.<sup>1</sup> Indexicals ('I', 'you', 'here', 'now') and demonstratives ('this', 'that', 'he') are referring expressions commonly used in ordinary conversations. There is also important literature on these terms.<sup>2</sup>

Things are different with indexicals, demonstratives, and coreference in fiction,<sup>3</sup> like '*Sherlock Holmes is a detective. He also smokes a pipe.*' Such categories of terms are clearly used in fiction. For example, one can read a sentence like:

(1) I was wearing my light blue suit

where 'I' is used by Philip Marlowe, a fictive character created by Raymond Chandler, to refer to himself. Clearly, there are no fictive indexicals and fictive demonstratives, neither is there a fictive co-referential 'he' or 'she'. Yet there is not much literature on these categories of expressions used within fiction ; and these referring expressions, so used, have not been adequately examined in philosophy of language. In what follows, we will see that accounting for indexicals, demonstratives and co-reference within fiction requires the use of tools different from those used to account for genuinely fictional names.

Perry (2012) introduces pluri-propositionalism to account for indexicals. One of Perry's main motivations for pluri-propositionalism is the clear distinction between what is introduced in content by linguistic meaning only, and what in content depends on contextual facts. Suppose that I say 'I am a philosopher'. A linguistically competent interlocutor hearing my utterance understands, thanks to their linguistic competence only, that *the speaker of this utterance is a philosopher*. Call this the cognitive significance of my utterance. According to Perry, and according to me, the latter contains the utterance itself as a con-

---

<sup>1</sup> See Adams 2011, Braun 2008, Currie 1990, Everett 2003, García-Carpintero & Martí (eds.) 2014, Kripke 2013, Lihoreau (ed.) 2011, Predelli 2020, Thomasson 1990.

<sup>2</sup> See Kaplan 1989, Lewis 1979, Perry 1977, 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Co-reference is rarely addressed in the literature on fiction. But, see Pagin 2014.

stituent. As part of cognitive significance, it can be accepted as true, or rejected as false. Cognitive significance is crucial in my account of indexicals as they appear within fiction. Adding facts about the utterance, the hearer understands that *RV is a philosopher*. *RV* is the speaker himself. Call this the official content of my utterance. Such content is a singular proposition, containing me as a constituent, and it too is true or false. The hearer can understand the cognitive significance of the utterance without knowing its official content if they do not know who makes the utterance. To introduce some terminology, they can also *accept the utterance as true*, without *being committed to the utterance being true*, thanks to the cognitive attitude of acceptance-as-true of the cognitive significance of the utterance.

This framework can be exploited, with some modifications, to account for indexicals in fiction. I contend that, used within a fictional text, these expressions do not introduce components into official contents. To account for indexicals, demonstrative and co-referential pronouns in fiction, I use the notion of *indexed token*: that is, a token assigned an index, a notion built using Perry-style pluri-propositionalist concepts.

Before beginning, I hasten to concede that I am initiating a discussion, mostly highlighting a question and a strategy for approaching it. This is not an attempt at a wholly original nor a comprehensive story about stories. This limits the scope of my discussion. I will not be addressing the uses of indexicals in all genres. My focus are written cases, as opposed to plays and spoken stories; and fairly canonical fiction as opposed to metafiction, autofiction, and even historical fiction. Historical fictions in particular are interesting to me because they use famous (and not so famous) figures who speak indexically. Is Stalin in a novel the real Stalin, e.g., or a fictional character based on the real Stalin? Is ‘Los Angeles’ in Chandler’s novel the name of a real city or the name of a fictional city based on the real Los Angeles? Nonetheless, I will not try to answer these questions. I set aside too various ontological issues. I do not address, for example, the issues of whether Sherlock Holmes in Doyle’s books and Holmes in a recent television series are identical. Nor do I examine the notion of a “fictive character” who exists in the “real world”, such as when we say about the character that Holmes is the most famous of the fictional detectives. My reasons for limiting the discussion are these. Many of these issues are not specific to indexicals, which is my concern here. Also, I am interested in the psychological aspects of understanding fiction, as opposed to metaphysical ones. I am thus content to offer a purely cognitive perspective on indexicals and demonstratives in fiction, which sets aside ontological issues. What’s more, my point is that certain tools beyond the usual are *necessary* if we are to capture the use of indexicals in fiction; my point is not that those tools are sufficient for all fictional uses. Finally, though this is a position to be argued for in another paper, I fear that certain of

the ontological issues, however interesting, raise unanswerable questions. In sum, I will merely draw attention to a certain specific range of underappreciated problems, pertaining to indexicals in fiction, and sketch how a certain friendly amendment to Perry (2012) can account for them.

The next section quickly introduces Frege and mock thoughts. This is something of an aside, but Frege is a pillar in the philosophy of language, and failing entirely to engage with what he wrote about fiction would be a disservice. In section three, I examine indexicals, demonstratives and co-reference in fiction. Section four introduces two puzzles about fiction. The first is about truth, and the second is about cognition. Section five introduces the famous distinction between types, tokens and utterances.<sup>4</sup> This distinction clears the ground for the introduction of my notion of an indexed token. Section six explains the latter, the main notion I use to account for indexicals, demonstratives and co-reference in fiction. I also then analyze some examples to illustrate my view. Section seven examines demonstratives and co-reference in fiction. It is followed by a short conclusion.

## 2 Mock thoughts

Frege writes:

Instead of speaking of ‘fiction’, we could be speaking of ‘mock thoughts’. Thus, if the sense of an assertoric sentence is not true, it is either false or fictitious, and it will generally be the latter if it contains a mock proper name. The writer, in common with for example, the painter, has his eyes on appearances. (Frege 1897: 130)

Frege would call the thought expressed by a fictional sentence like ‘*Sherlock Homes smokes a pipe*’ a ‘mock thought’. Whether false or fictitious, for him they are unfit for inferences, which are designed to be truth-preserving.

Unfortunately, Frege does not explain his idea of a ‘mock thought’. Neither does he explore which features of such thoughts make them mock thoughts. Still less does Frege address the problems raised by indexicals, demonstratives and co-reference in fiction. However, his ‘mock thoughts’ presumably include assertion of sentences like ‘*I am Philip Marlowe*’, by Marlowe, ‘*You are a private detective*’, when addressing Marlowe, or ‘*This is my car*’, used by Marlowe to designate his car.

---

<sup>4</sup> See Weizel 2009 for an excellent, groundbreaking discussion of types and tokens.

The idea of a mock thought is flexible enough, however, and it can be generalized to thoughts expressed by sentences containing indexicals in fiction. I will come back to this at the end of the paper.

### 3 Indexicals, demonstratives and co-reference in fiction

My first observation is that, *prima facie*, indexicals in fiction have their usual reference-fixing ordinary linguistic meaning. Take ‘I’. Of course, ‘I’ can be used by me to refer to myself, or used by you to refer to yourself. But ‘I’ can also be used by a fictive character to designate his- or herself in a novel: for example, once to designate Philip Marlowe, and elsewhere to designate Sam Spade, a fictive character created by Dashiell Hammett, in a different novel. Whether used in a novel or in the pub, its meaning is something like *the speaker of the utterance*, despite the fact that Marlowe and Spade are creatures of fiction. In a novel, the indexical ‘I’ then has its usual referent-fixing meaning. (Though ontology isn’t my focus, it does merit stressing that ‘I’ in the fiction does not refer to a regular, real tridimensional individual. Arguing that a fictive character is in some way real because we talk about it is question begging. Notice that we talk about witches and, still, witches do not exist.) Similarly, ‘you’ has the same linguistic meaning, something like *the addressee of the utterance* when used by me to say that you are a philosopher or used by a fictive character to designate another fictive character. In fiction, at least in the cases that are my focus here, the speaker and the addressee are both fictional characters. The reader understands, thanks to their linguistic competence, the sentence:

(2) You are cute

used by Carmen Sternwood, a fictive character in *The Big Sleep* when she addresses another fictive character, Philip Marlowe.

It won’t do, then, to treat ‘I’ and ‘you’ as somehow lexically ambiguous. One might do this with ‘Lord Jim’, where there is a real person, not inside a fiction, who resides in Sechelt, BC. One would then have the genuinely fictional name and another name, for the Canadian person, with another meaning. But ‘I’ and ‘you’ are not like that.

The same holds for ‘now’ and ‘here’. In ordinary conversation they designate, respectively, a moment of time and a location. The time can be longer than an instant, and the location need not be a small, well-defined specific location. These indexicals can be used in fiction. Bruce Wayne can say, about Gotham City, ‘*It is dangerous here now*,’, where ‘here’ is intended

to designate Gotham City, and ‘now’ is intended to designate a period of time stretching from the arrival of the Joker to the present time in the story. Just as with non-fictional cases, the size of space that ‘here’ designates in fiction, and the stretch of time that ‘now’ captures, depends on the intention of the narrator. Readers, furthermore, standardly attribute appropriately specific intentions to the narrator.

Demonstratives, including personal pronouns, used in fiction, raise another issue, precisely because the very same meaning carries over. Demonstratives in general lack referent-determining linguistic meaning. They need a referring intention, or a demonstration. This is so whether used by a real individual, or by a fictive character—i.e., whether to designate either a real individual or a fictive character. A speaker can, of course, use ‘*He is a detective*’ with the intention to refer to a real detective. But consider also:

(3) He was an inch, perhaps two, under six feet, powerfully built

(3) is from Conrad’s *Lord Jim*. Even if ‘he’ means something like *the human male*, such meaning is too poor to designate a specific individual, or draw attention to, for example, a fictive character in a crowd, namely Lord Jim.

My second observation, then, is that in reading fiction, we commonly assume a background, for example a crowd in the case of Lord Jim, and sometimes a background is clearly made explicit in a novel. A demonstration or an intention to designate a fictive object in that background by the narrator (for example, in *Lord Jim*, also a fictive individual, Charles Marlow) is not uncommon. This second observation, like the first, raises a question I’ll try to answer below: How can such attribution to a fictive character reach a fictive, “unreal”, individual? Wherein lies the parallel to a real-world attribution of a demonstration, or an intention to demonstrate—but now, attributed to a fictive character, to identify the intended, yet fictive individual?

In fiction, there are also co-referential expressions. Co-referential expressions raise a third problem because, in the use I am interested in, they are co-referential with a name, but a fictional name, designating a fictional character, if designating something at all. I can read:

(4) Holmes is a detective. He also smokes a pipe

in a fiction, where Watson is the narrator and Holmes a fictive individual. ‘He’ then refers to what ‘Holmes’ refers to, that is, to a fictive individual, Holmes. Co-reference raises puzzles

in fiction because it is not a matter of back-reference to a flesh and blood person. (This issue is strongly reminiscent of Geach's intentional identity puzzle, where "a number of people, or one person on different occasions, have attitudes with a common focus, whether or not there actually is something at that focus" (Geach 1967, in Geach 1972: 147. See Pagin 2014 for a recent paper on intentional identity.) In the relevant cases in fiction, there exists nothing at that focus. I will come back to that puzzle later on.

## 4 Two puzzles

Any view on fiction should deal with two well-known puzzles. The first, already evoked implicitly, is about truth.<sup>5</sup> If I make an utterance of (1), '*I was wearing my light blue suit*', I am talking about myself, RV, and I can say something true. The truth of my utterance is easy to account for: it is true because I am wearing my light blue suit. If I read (1) in Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, I know that the speaker is Philip Marlowe, and I know that he is talking about himself. Yet Marlowe is a fictive character. Assignment of a truth-value to (1) in fiction is controversial. Frege, as we briefly canvassed, would say that it is false or fictitious, and does not justify the position that it is false. Yet intuitions would back the idea that (1) is true. As any reader of *The Big Sleep* knows, Marlowe was wearing his light blue suit! But if it is true, what makes it true? Clearly, not run-of-the-mill facts. Is it made true because in the first pages of *The Big Sleep* Chandler writes that he was wearing his light blue suit? Let's continue to sidestep the weighty metaphysics and simply agree on this: at least so far as psychological understanding goes, 'I' in (1) does not designate a real individual, not to mention a real individual wearing a light blue suit.

The second puzzle is about cognition. Suppose that you hear a voice saying '*I am rich*.' You understand the linguistic meaning of the sentence, and you want to make sure who the speaker is. Is your daughter really rich? You look in the room where that voice comes from. It is not your daughter, but a character in a comedy on television. An utterance of a sentence in ordinary life, and the use of the same sentence in fiction, like Marlowe's or the comedy's character, somehow differ in their cognitive impact, even if it is an utterance of the same indexical sentence. It makes a difference if my daughter, as opposed to a fictive

---

<sup>5</sup> It should be clear that truth is what Lihoreau calls "'internal' to the relevant fictions" (Lihoreau 2011: 8). Internal truth to the relevant fiction is opposed to external truth about fiction as in 'Sherlock Holmes is more clever than any real-life detective', which issue I have set aside.

character, is rich. And yet, as per my first observation, it is plausible to assume that these expressions, both in fiction and in ordinary utterances, have the same linguistic meaning. The linguistic meaning of 'I' is the same in my utterance of 'I', in Marlowe's when written, and in the fictive character on television. To repeat, it would be implausible to claim that there's homophony hereabouts. If this is so, how does one decide that an utterance of (1) is fictional, as opposed to an ordinary, literal use of (1)? The word is the same, the meaning is the same. Finally, what explains my change in attitude when realizing that an utterance is fictional? Note too that, even if it is not true given worldly, non-fictional facts, and known not to be true given those facts, because I am reading a detective novel, it can provoke much pleasure, sometimes more so because it does not describe real facts.

So far, I have made three observations about indexicals in fiction:

- There is no ambiguity at work. 'I', 'you', 'now', 'here', etc., have the same standing, type meaning in fictional works as they do in ordinary speech;
- Partly because of this, there is an important role for speakers' intentions, even within a novel;
- There can also be co-reference, and it is not a matter of an ordinary tridimensional thing being referred to anaphorically.

I have also noted twin puzzling questions:

- Where do our intuitions of truth value come from when an indexical appears in fiction?
- Wherein lies the cognitive difference between understanding an indexical-involving claim within a fiction and a claim using the same indexicals, with the very same meaning, but now outside of fiction?

Having drawn attention to this much already contributes, I hope, to our understanding of some issues about indexicals in fiction. I now hope to make at least a little progress on some answers. In particular, I will suggest that a novel tool is required to address even these questions, let alone ones about context-sensitivity in storytelling more generally.

## 5 Types, tokens and utterances

I am building up to the introduction of a new tool, necessary for the philosophical analysis of fictional texts, namely the indexed token. To that end, we need to revisit a very familiar distinction, and my Perry-inspired spin on it: 'type' versus 'token' versus 'utterance'.

In my usage, and simplifying, a sentence type is an abstract entity. A token, in contrast, is the sequence of sounds produced by a speaker, or the written linguistic marks, a two-dimensional concrete object, left by the use of a sentence. At any given moment, a token has just one location in space and time. Now, much has been written on these notions and on how they interrelate. For present purposes, it will be enough, in contrasting these two, to revert to the usual example: I write 'Jane runs', four times on a blackboard. How many "sentences", do we have? If you say one sentence, you are talking about a type, and in some way, you abstracted it from what you saw. If you say four, you are talking about the tokens. A third notion is the utterance. Where both types and tokens are objects, an utterance is an event *occurring* at a place and time. Utterances create tokens. In the simple example above, there were four utterances, one corresponding to each token created. Then again, as Perry and I use the expressions, the very same token object can be used in multiple utterances. For instance, consider a post-it on which '*I will be back in 15 minutes*' is written. That token object can be used in different utterances, individuated by a sentence, a speaker, and by both the location and the time of the utterance. An event, on the other hand, including an utterance, is singular: it occurs only once, and it cannot be reproduced.

Expanding further on features of tokens as I intend the term, and on their contrast with utterances, as objects, tokens don't cause things. It is utterances which have effects. Thus, what may cause a bartender to bring me a beer is my utterance of '*Can you bring me a beer?*' Also, a token may leave no trace of the speaker, the time and the location of the utterance it originates from. Not so with an utterance. And what participants in ordinary conversational interaction are first and foremost in contact with are utterances, not tokens. Finally, and related to all this, in Perry's framework it is not tokens but utterances which have truth conditions. The post-it, for instance, does not have a truth-condition: only the use of it, by the individual, does so. Thus, the common reaction is always to try to identify the utterance a token originates from, though this isn't always possible.

In light of this, it won't be a surprise that it is utterances which are centrestage in Perry's framework. In particular, indexicals and demonstratives designate via utterances. 'I' designates the speaker of the utterance, and 'you' designates the addressee of the utterance. And Perry is right to focus on them over tokens. And yet, not only tokens, but also utterances, leave us a bit at a loss when trying to understand how indexicals work in fiction.

Tokens are not a category fit to address most philosophical problems arising in fiction. Fiction is not constituted by mere sequences of tokens; fictions are stories told by narrators, as different from authors. (The *author* must clearly be distinguished from the *fictive narrator*, or narrator for short. For instance, the narrator, Marlowe, differs from the author, Chandler,

a tridimensional human person; and readers know that ‘you’ refers to Marlowe, as spoken by Carmen Sternwood in ‘*You are cute*’, and not to Chandler. Similarly, Sam Spade, the fictive detective created by Dashiell Hammett should be distinguished from Hammett, a real individual.) The notion of a narrator plays a key role in my project. This distinction is a commonplace in literary theory, and philosophers should take it into consideration. The fictional use of (1) and (2) have truth conditions not containing any tridimensional object, like authors, referred to by ‘I’ and by ‘you’. One then wonders how indexical sentences, like (1) and (2), used in ordinary life, and occurring in fiction, can differ, and how speakers and hearers can detect that difference, something they usually do, as well as assign the fictive sentences a truth value.

Adopting a token focussed, theory of ‘I’ or ‘you’ sentences in fiction would capture the truth conditions and the logical relations between tokens, but it would miss a major aspect of fiction sentences and especially of ‘I’ sentences—they are produced by a narrator telling a coherent, sometimes very complex, story. They also have a causal impact in the fiction. Marlowe, the user of ‘I’ in *The Big Sleep*, can ask a barman to bring him a beer, and the barman will bring him a beer because he was asked to. There is nothing special here. Except that neither Marlowe nor the barman exist in the real world! In fiction, events, including what the narrator says, entertain causal relationships, albeit causal-relationship-in-fiction, and readers assume such a relationship.<sup>6</sup> That does not fit tokens, since tokens are tied neither to speakers nor to narrators. Moreover, in contrast with a list of tokens, tokens in fiction cohere to form a story told by a narrator. Sentences in fiction are relevant relative to the stage of the story at which they are introduced. Mere tokens do not obey criteria of coherence and relevance, and they are not appropriate for fiction.

Let’s go back to utterances. The meaning, or rule, of ‘I’ is complex. In Perry’s framework, it is something like ‘*the speaker of the utterance*’. This is the expression I used earlier. But it is very questionable as applied in the present context. First, let me set aside its first part, *the speaker of*, when addressing fiction, as there is arguably no real speaker in fiction, only a narrator. In the case of Carmen Sternwood or Philip Marlowe when they are using sentences, one can say that they are both *speakers in fiction*, not the narrators, and I will use speakers in fiction when appropriate. The narrator is the fictive speaker telling the story. Let me replace *the speaker of* by *the narrator of*, and focus on the second part, *the utterance*. The sentence we are concerned with in *The Big Sleep* for example, does not provide an utterance.

---

<sup>6</sup> I will not address the problem of causation in fiction in this paper.

If there is an event of an utterance of 'You are cute' by a fictive speaker, in fiction, that event is not unique, occurring in every copy of the book, and the indexicals have all the same addressee, all originating from Carmen Sternwood. One does not want to say that these are different utterances. Finally, there is no event of an utterance of a sentence in fiction really causally related to other events. Marlowe's asking, and the barman serving a beer, occurs in fiction, and these are not events in space and time. If they were real events, they would occur many times, in different copies of the book. Moreover, if you read some given fiction many times, 'I', 'you', 'here' and 'now' in that fiction designate the same narrator, the same addressee, the same place and the same time every time you read it. This is in sharp contrast with the common use of indexicals, which designate different individuals in different utterances. One could suggest using *the narrator of the utterance*. Mentioning *the narrator of the utterance* is at best misleading. The narrator, a fictive character, does not make utterances located in space and time because he is not located in real space and time. At the same time, the sentences we are interested in are, arguably, not mere tokens. Tokens have no speaker or narrator, time and place attached to them and individuating them. For example, the sentence '*I do not like spinach*' written on a rock gives no clues on the speaker and the time of the token. (1) is not a mere token, because 'I' in that sentence is used by Marlowe to designate himself and to set the stage for the novel. If the linguistic meaning of 'I', 'you', 'here' and 'now' refer via an utterance, indexicals in fiction cannot be understood, as we commonly and effortlessly do, since there is arguably no utterance, as philosophers understand that notion, in fiction. These expressions cannot then exploit utterances to designate or to refer to individuals. In this case, the message in fiction mimics an utterance. Yet, the latter is reproduced in every copy of a book. Let us say that it is a proxy for an utterance.

The question of the truth, or falsity, of Marlowe's self-description is also a matter of contention. Is it true? My use of 'I' and Marlowe's use of 'I' are similar, but they differ in some respects, as is shown by the issue of the referent of 'I' and the truth of my utterance compared to the use of an 'I' sentence by Marlowe and the truth of what he says. Still 'I', in fiction, has no referent located in space and time. The self-description (1) can then hardly be true given facts. The semantic issues and the ontological problem are here connected. Who is the speaker or, better, the narrator, of 'I', and who does 'I', then refer to? No doubt, Marlowe. But these two questions concern the narrator as much as the relation of self-reference in fiction. It is plausible to assume that these expressions, both in fiction and in ordinary utterances, have the same linguistic meaning. The linguistic meaning of 'I' is the same in my utterance of 'I' and in Marlowe's. A different assumption, namely that 'I', and

'you', do not then have the same linguistic meaning in fiction, would need strong arguments. Indexicals, like 'I', in contrast with names like 'Sherlock Holmes', have linguistic meaning as type and, in addition, they are not assigned a referent once and for all. My utterance of 'I' refers to myself, your utterance of 'I' refers to yourself and Marlowe's to himself. The linguistic meaning of indexicals cannot be ignored in the semantics of fiction, and neither can we ignore their referential variability. The indexical 'you' designates a person, the addressee of the utterance. In fiction, the addressee is usually a fictional character, like Marlowe. You understand (2) as used by Carmen Sternwood, a fictive character in *The Big Sleep*, and reported by the narrator in *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe, and you know that 'you' then refers to Marlowe himself. (1) and (2) have truth conditions not containing any real object referred to by 'I' and by 'you'. In the case of indexicals in fiction, rather than the referent, the semantic relationship to the presumed referent should be focussed on. A view on such expressions, because they have meaning in fiction, will arguably differ from a view on fictional names, which lack linguistic meaning. Again, one wonders how two identical indexical sentences, like (1), one used in real life and one occurring in fiction, can differ, and how speakers and hearers can detect that difference.

## 6 Cognitive significance and indexed tokens

Let us go back to cognitive significance and official content. The cognitive significance of an utterance needs an utterance, since the latter is part of it. On the other hand, the official content of an utterance is true or false, and it can exist whether or not there is an utterance. For your utterance of '*You are a philosopher*', the cognitive significance is *the addressee of this utterance is a philosopher*. It can also be accepted as true without being true. When addressing me, the utterance expresses a singular proposition containing me: *RV is a philosopher*. The latter is the official content of your utterance. It is also true. The distinction between cognitive significance and official content accounts for the fact that my 'I' utterance and your utterance of 'you' when referring to me differ in cognitive significance, yet they have the same official content. The distinction between cognitive significance and official content is particularly useful in the case of fiction. I contend that indexical sentences in fiction have a cognitive significance, but lack official content.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Frege's distinction between the many roles of propositions, including cognitive significance and truth assessability given facts, proves very useful here.

Consider (1) found in Chandler's fiction. Assume again that these expressions have their regular, usual linguistic meaning as type. Their occurrences in every copy of that book exclude sentences in fiction from being utterances. Moreover, they entertain no causal relationship with real events. The sentence can be understood as a token indexed by a speaker, here Marlowe, a location, here Los Angeles, and a time, here, say 1937. Call the index, Marlowe, Los Angeles, 1937, a *fictional index* and call a token and its fictional index an *indexed token*. I represent a token and its index in the following way:

I was wearing my light blue suit

<Philip Marlowe, Los Angeles, 1937>

The notion of an indexed token individuates a token in fiction. The tokens of that sentence are associated with a fictional index. In every copy of the book, that sentence token has the same fictional index, and, hence determines the same indexed token. It is tempting to go from *I was wearing my light blue suit*, use the first element of the fictional index, *Philip Marlowe*, and obtain *Philip Marlowe was wearing his light blue suit*. Such a move should be resisted. One cannot use an element from the fictional index and plug it into a content or proposition as if it was a real name, and not an element from the fictional index only. The same principle applies for location - Los Angeles—and time—1937. All tokens in fiction are assigned a fictional index. If the specific index is not given (or known) for a token in fiction, we can have, thanks to fictional index, for example:

I am wearing a black T-shirt

<narrator of **t**, location of **t**, time of **t**>

where ‘**t**’ is the token. The fictional index of a sentence does not change the linguistic meaning of the terms. The same indexed token of ‘I was wearing my light blue suit’ is to be found in different copies of a fiction—it is a different token, yet it has the same fictional index. We have what is needed to replace utterances in section 5, an indexed token: *the narrator of the indexed token*. A fictional name can also be individuated by the fictional index: ‘Philip Marlowe’ <Philip Marlowe, Los Angeles, 1937> where Marlowe is the narrator. (See Vallée 2018)

Suppose that I make an utterance of (1). For simplification, setting aside tense, that utterance of (1) can be assigned the following truth conditions:

Given meaning only, the utterance *u* of (1) is true iff the speaker of the utterance of (1) was wearing his light blue suit

I am the speaker of the utterance, so:

Given facts about the utterance, the utterance *u* of (1) is true iff **RV** was wearing his light blue suit

The notion of truth given facts is introduced to account for official content. Your utterance of '*you were wearing your light blue suit*' would differ in cognitive significance from (1)'s, but it would have the same official content.

The linguistic meaning of 'I', 'you', 'here' and 'now' does not change in fiction, and fiction readers use their semantic competence in understanding these expressions in fiction. There is no special language in fiction. However, fiction readers know that they are reading fiction. They know that they are not in contact with speakers and utterances, but with narrators and indexed tokens. They do not expect when they read, '*Bring me a beer!*' for instance, to have causal relationship with events in real life. 'I' in a fiction sentence keeps its linguistic meaning, but it contributes a different component to the cognitive significance of an indexed token: the narrator of the indexed token. The same goes for all indexicals in fiction—the addressee of the indexed token, and so on. Such cognitive significance is not part of semantics. It is a fiction convention, that is, a convention used by fiction authors, and assumed by fiction readers. If authors do not assume that convention, they do not write fiction. If readers do not assume such a convention, then they are confused about fiction and fiction conventions. We obtain, for an indexed token *t* of 'I am a private detective' said by Marlowe in 1937 in Los Angeles, the following truth conditions as cognitive significance:

Given meaning and fiction conventions, the indexed token *t* of 'I am a private detective' is true if and only if the narrator of *t* is a private detective at <Marlowe, Los Angeles, 1937>

Remember that an indexed token is a complex entity. The indexed token is true at the index, <Marlowe, Los Angeles, 1937>. The fictional index, containing the narrator, the location and time, can be used to account for indexicals in fiction and truth conditions of fictional tokens. As mentioned earlier, *Marlowe* is part of the fictional index and it cannot replace *the narrator of t*.

In case the fictional index is not known, we just obtain what is determined by the meaning of the indexical expressions. The cognitive significance of the indexed token can be accepted as true. Acceptance as true gives the solution of the first puzzle, about truth. The intuitions grounding the first puzzle are intuitions about acceptance as true of indexed tokens, not intuitions about the truth of utterances given facts. Of course, indexed tokens are not events, since they are not singular, and can be found in different copies of a book. Moreover, they entertain no causal relationship with events. Notice however that indexed tokens, in contrast with tokens, are relevant, or not, at the stage at which they are introduced in fiction. Finally, indexed tokens determine no official content since the narrator, a fictive character, is not a speaker, and nothing in indexed tokens introduces an object into truth conditions. It should be clear that indexed tokens are different from tokens at an index. A token, once assigned an index, ‘carries it’ with it. If separated from its index, we obtain a mere token. That token can also be assigned a different fictional index. The truth conditions of that indexed token, with a new fictional index will be different:

Given meaning and fiction conventions, the indexed token  $\mathbf{t}'$  of ‘I am a private detective’ is true if and only if the narrator of  $\mathbf{t}'$  is a private detective at  $\langle \text{Spade, San Francisco, 1937} \rangle$

The indexed token  $\mathbf{t}'$  is true at the index. The narrator of  $\mathbf{t}$  and the narrator of  $\mathbf{t}'$  can differ depending on the novel you read. Of course, that indexed token determines no official content containing a real individual.

The cognitive significance of an utterance and the cognitive significance of an indexed token have much in common, but they differ in major respects. In fiction, there is no speaker, and only a narrator. In addition, as we saw, neither tokens nor utterances are relevant when examining fiction, while indexed tokens are. For indexicals in fiction sentences we have, as cognitive significance for ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘now’ and ‘here’, the narrator of the indexed token  $\mathbf{t}$  the addressee of the indexed token  $\mathbf{t}$ , the time of the indexed token  $\mathbf{t}$ , and the location of the indexed token  $\mathbf{t}$ . Such cognitive significance is distinct from meaning. The fiction reader first considers the linguistic meaning of the expression as type, and then considers the cognitive significance of the indexed token to fit fiction. Remember that cognitive significance classifies a thinking episode, here, a thinking episode of a fictive character.

Let us go back to (1) in fiction. The fictional (1) is assigned the following truth conditions, as fictive content:

Given meaning and fiction conventions, the indexed token *t* of (1) is true iff the narrator of the indexed token (1) was wearing his light blue suit at <Marlowe, Los Angeles, 1937>

Due to the nature of the indexed token, it has a particular cognitive significance and classifies the thinking episode of the narrator in a specific way: *the narrator of the indexed token t of (1) was wearing his light blue suit*. This meaning and the cognitive significance does not introduce any component into an official content. The narrator is just what indexes that token of (1), in Chandler's book. The indexed token is not an utterance, and it is not true given facts about the utterance.

Notice however that the indexed token is relevant, or not, considering the story. There is no speaker and, hence, no official content containing the speaker in fiction. Therein lies the difference between an utterance of (1) and the same sentence found in fiction. The cognitive significance of the token of (1) in fiction is altered, and there is no referent of 'I'. We have the solution to the second puzzle, concerning the cognitive difference between a literal and a fictive sentence: the cognitive significance of the token of (1) in fiction is modified to obtain the cognitive significance of the indexed token, and there is no referent of 'I'. These truth conditions are indexed token dependent, they are accepted as true only, and there is no object, referred to by 'I' in (1), in an official content. Accepting as true is just a cognitive attitude of the reader or the listener. The sentence '*the narrator of the indexed token t of (1) was wearing his light blue suit*' also classifies the thought content of the fictive narrator. What does Philip Marlow think when saying (1)? He thinks that the narrator of the indexed token *t* of (1) was wearing his light blue suit. Of course, this thought is not connected to facts. Compare with my utterance of (1), and both its cognitive significance and its official content given earlier. There is a major cognitive difference between an indexed token *t* of (1), and an utterance of (1). Another major difference is that an indexed token *t* of (1) has no official content, while an utterance of (1) does. Such features account for my change of attitude when I realized that a fictive character, and not my daughter, was saying 'I am rich'. What the fictive character says has no official content. Indexicals in fiction do not have reference in fiction, not for deep metaphysical reasons, but for the simple reason that they are expressions in fiction. Fiction readers know what an utterance is, and know that there are no utterances or similar events in fiction and no official content. That explains the change of attitude when reading a sentence thinking that it is part of a real utterance, and then being told that it is part of fiction. Readers of fiction know that these are indexed tokens, and have a fictional index, even if they would not be able to

articulate it easily.

Following that view, 'you' in fiction designates the addressee of the indexed token. It is usually a fictional character. So, for an indexed token of (2) where the addressee is Marlowe for instance, we have the following truth conditions:

Given meaning and fiction conventions, the indexed token *t* of (2) is true iff the addressee of the indexed token *t* of (2) is cute at <Marlowe, Los Angeles, 1937>

I replaced *the narrator* with *the addressee* in the first parameter of what indexes the token. The truth-condition classifies the thought content of the narrator. What does the fictive character saying (2), Carmen Sternwood, think? She thinks that the addressee of the indexed token *t* of (2) is cute. In this case, once again, there is no official content. 'Here' and 'now' in fiction are easy to deal with. They just need the appropriate intentions, concerning location and time, of the fictive speaker.

## 7 Demonstratives and co-reference in fiction

Things are different with demonstratives in fiction. Consider:

(5) He was an inch, perhaps two, under six feet, powerfully built, and he advanced straight at you with a slight stoop of the shoulders, head forward, and a fixed from-under stare which made you think of a charging bull.

This is the complete first sentence of Conrad's *Lord Jim*. Assume that 'he' is a demonstrative, requiring a demonstration or speakers intentions to refer to an object. I assume that only intentions are relevant in fiction. Given the semantics of 'he', that individual is a male human, and can only be an individual in fiction. In the actual case, we have to attribute intentions to a narrator to refer to a fictive male human. Fiction readers easily and regularly do it. The linguistic meaning of demonstratives is elusive, and yet it is required for cognitive significance. And clearly, no doubt the indexed token of (5) has cognitive significance, the latter being obtained from the meaning of the sentence when the latter is adjusted to obtain the cognitive significance of the indexed token.

The cognitive significance of the indexed token of demonstrative of 'he' in fiction is plausibly something like the human male the narrator of *t* draws attention to. So, for the fictive 'he' in (5), we have the following truth conditions, giving both the cognitive

significance of the indexed token, and the determined thought content:

Given meaning and fiction conventions, the indexed token  $\mathbf{t}$  of (5) is true iff the human male the narrator of  $\mathbf{t}$  draws attention to was an inch, perhaps two, under six feet ... at <Marlow, London, 1902>

Marlow is the narrator telling his story in London. What does that fictional character think? That the human male the narrator of  $\mathbf{t}$  draws attention to was an inch, perhaps two, under six feet ...

What about the anaphoric 'he'? 'Philip Marlowe' is a fictional name (Vallée 2018) possessing a fictional index. A speaker's knowledge of the name is also echoed in their understanding of the truth conditions of an indexed token of (6):

(6) Philip Marlowe is a detective.

In the case of (6), and given simplification concerning the name, we may have something like:

Given meaning and fiction conventions, the indexed token  $\mathbf{t}$  of (6) is true if and only if Philip Marlowe is a detective at <Marlowe, Los Angeles, 1937>

The fictional index of the name indicates that it is a fictional name. I know that 'Philip Marlowe' in (6) is a fictional name, and that the truth conditions mentioned give the truth conditions of the indexed token of (6). Let us move to:

(7) He also drinks scotch.

'He' in (7) is co-referential with 'Marlowe' in (6). Here, we can preserve the co-reference relation between the pronoun and the noun, ignore the reference of the noun and focus on the co-reference relation. 'He' then co-refers with whatever, fictional or not, name, even if that name does not refer to anything:

Given meaning and fiction convention, the indexed token  $\mathbf{t}$  of (7) is true if and only if the object the name this indexed token  $\mathbf{t}$  of 'he' co-refers with also drinks scotch

The reader of (7) thinks that the object with which the name this indexed token of 'he'

co-refers also drinks scotch. The reader understands the cognitive significance of the second indexed token, and that Philip Marlowe also drinks scotch. The truth conditions of the indexed token also determine the thought content of the latter. There is no official content containing an object, because there is no object the name refers to, and introduces into an official content. In a sense, Geach is right in that two speakers focus on the same words. However, he is wrong when suggesting that they focus on something outside of words. Each could focus on what his imagination gives him. But they would plausibly imagine different things.

## 8 Conclusion

To sum up, the aim of this essay has been to draw out some unappreciated complications pertaining to indexicals, demonstratives and co-reference in fiction, and to show how a friendly amendment to Perry's (2012) pluri-propositionalist semantic framework can handle them. Specifically, the standard, familiar taxonomy of *types* / *tokens* / *utterances* is not sufficient to account for certain distinctive considerations pertaining to the cognitive significance and truth-conditions that are unique to these kinds of case. Not only types, but also tokens, are too impoverished; and utterances do not occur. The innovation developed herein to deal with these complications is the *indexed token*.

Perry's (2012) approach involves distinguishing the three levels of *type meaning*, *reflexive contents* and *official truth-conditions*. At the level of type meaning, there is no difference between fictional and non-fictional indexicals (there are no fictional pronouns, as there are fictional names). At the level of official truth-conditions, it has long been recognized that there is a world of difference between fictional and non-fictional discourse.<sup>8</sup> What is original here is the exploration of the ways in which reflexive contents operate in the realm of fiction. This intermediate level of reflexive content, supplemented with the notion of an indexed token, provides considerable resources for accommodating the rich and complex cognitive significance of fictional discourse.

If I am right, reading fiction is a purely cognitive endeavor. The indexed token, replacing the utterance in the cognitive significance of utterance, blocks the introduction of objects referred to by indexicals and demonstratives in fiction, and it pushes aside truth given worldly, flesh-and-blood facts. Acceptance as true of fiction-indexed tokens is the best we

---

<sup>8</sup> See footnote 1.

can hope for. Let us go back to the utterance of '*I am rich*'. The cognitive significance of an utterance is modified when you realize that it is not an utterance, but an indexed token in fiction. Each reader has a different picture of the narrator. But this is just part of its imaginative power and goes beyond truth and philosophy of language.

Let me conclude by revisiting Frege's 'mock thoughts'. The cognitive significance of an utterance classifies a thinking episode. The cognitive significance of an indexed token provides a thinking episode, in the Marlowe's example, of Marlowe himself, a fictive character being the narrator. It can also classify a thinking episode of a fictive character, Carmen Sternwood. The cognitive significance of an indexed token, in contrast with the cognitive significance of an utterance, does not classify a thinking episode of a real individual, but a thinking episode of a fictional character. Frege would call it a 'mock thought'. In my view, a mock thought follows from an indexed token. Moreover, my view explains what mock thoughts of fictive characters could be.

Richard Vallée  
University of Moncton  
218 Boulevard  
J.D. Gauthier,  
Shippagan, New Brunswick,  
E8S 1P6, Canada  
richard.vallee@umoncton.ca

## References

- Adams, Fred. 2011. "Sweet nothings: The semantics, pragmatics and ontology of diction". In *Truth in Fiction*. Lihoreau, F. (ed.). Ontos Verlag: 119-135.
- Braun, David. 2008. "Names, fictional names, and mythical names". *Nous* 39: 596-631.
- Chandler, Raymond. 1975. *The Big Sleep*. Ballantine Books.
- Conrad, Joseph. 2000. *Lord Jim*. Broadview Press.
- Currie, Gregory. 1990. *The Nature of Fiction*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Everett, Anthony. 2003. "Empty names and 'gappy' propositions". *Philosophical Studies* 116: 1-36.
- Frege, Gottlob. 1987. 'Logic'. In *Posthumous Writings*. Translation by P. Long and R. White. Hermes, H., Kambartel, F., and Kaulbach, F. (eds.). Chicago: University of Chicago

- Press: 126–51.
- García-Carpintero, Manuel and Martí, Genoveva (eds.) 2014. *Empty Representation. Reference and Non-Existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Geach, Peter. 1972. *Logic Matters*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Kaplan, David. 1989. “Demonstratives”. In *Themes from Kaplan*. Almog, J. and al (eds.). New York, Oxford University Press: 481–563.
- Korta, Kepa and John, Perry. 2011. *Critical Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kripke, Saul. 2013. *Reference and Existence. The John Locke Lectures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lihoreau, Franck. 2011. “Introduction”. In *Truth in Fiction*. Ontos Verlag.
- Lihoreau, Franck (ed.). 2011. *Truth in Fiction*. Ontos Verlag.
- Lewis, David. 1979. “Attitudes de dicto and de se”. *Philosophical Review* 88: 513–43.
- Pagin, Peter. 2014. “Intersubjective intentional identity”. In *Empty Representation. Reference and Non-Existence*. García-Carpintero, M. & G. Martí, (eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press: 91–116.
- Perry, John. 1977. “Frege on demonstratives”. *The Philosophical Review* 86: 474–97.
- Perry, John, 1979. ‘The problem of the essential indexical’, *Noûs* 13: 3–21.
- Perry, John. 2012. *Reference and Reflexivity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Stanford: CSLI Publication
- Predelli, Stefano. 2020. *Fictional Discourse. A Radical Fictionalist Semantics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thomasson, L. Amie. 1999. *Fiction and Metaphysics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Vallée, Richard. 2018. “Fictional names and truth” *Organon F* 25: 74–99.
- Wetzel, Linda. 2009. *Types and Tokens. On Abstract Objects*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.