

The varieties of metafictional reference

Bochum Language Colloquium (RUB)

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Plan

Inside and outside the fiction

Charting the metafictional realm

Toward a systematic taxonomy

The metafictional in real life: a glimpse

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Puzzling fact

Why I 'married' a cartoon character

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There is a word in Japanese for people who are obsessed with video games and anime - *otaku*. An increasing number of otaku now say they have fallen in love with anime characters and given up on the idea of real-world romance, reports the BBC's Stephanie Hegarty.

Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-49343280>

Puzzling facts

- ▶ This phenomenon is not isolated:
 - ▶ It is a trend in Japan which is now studied by anthropologists (Giard 2021)
- ▶ The motivations for this “augmented love” are not so clear:
 - ▶ Psycho-social disorders?
 - ▶ Economic interests?¹
 - ▶ Political statement?²
- ▶ The phenomenon echoes the story of Pygmalion (cf. book 10 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*)
 - ▶ Interpreting this myth is not so clear either.

¹See the development of **otome games** whose goals “is to develop a romantic relationship between the female player/main character and one of the second-lead male characters”.

²Some people claim the right to legally marry non-human creatures, including fictional characters.

Why is this puzzling?

▶ *Intuition:*

- ▶ Marrying someone presupposes that that someone exists.
- ▶ But fictional characters do not exist!
- ▶ So how are we supposed to marry them?

▶ *A distinction:*

- ▶ Either one looks at fictional characters “from the inside”, i.e. by imagining what the story they originate from “invites us to imagine” (Friend 2016);
- ▶ or one looks at them “from the outside”, i.e. “*qua* fictional characters” (Récanati 2018).

▶ See (Lamarque and Olsen 1994: 144):

Who created Frankenstein’s monster? One answer, from the internal perspective, is of course: Frankenstein. Only from the external point of view must the reply be: Mary Shelley.

A simple argument

- ▶ We thus have two kinds of statements:
 - ▶ *Fictional statements* (typically displaying an *internal* perspective):
 - (1) Frankenstein's Monster was created by Frankenstein.
 - ▶ *Metafictional statements* (typically displaying an *external* perspective):
 - (2) Frankenstein's Monster was created by Mary Shelley.
- ▶ **The metafictional argument:**³
 - (i) Metafictional statements are truth-evaluable statements containing a fictional name in the subject place.
 - (ii) The principle of compositionality requires that a name in the subject place of a truth-conditional statement refers.
 - (iii) Therefore, fictional names refer.

³First presented in (Kripke 1973/2013) and (Van Inwagen 1977). Note that the argument is an instance of Quine's indispensability argument schema, as (Thomasson 2003) rightly remarks. See also (Récanati 2021) for a recent, more specific formal rendering of this argument. I have called it "the realist guns" and reviewed possible answers to it in (Rouillé 2021).

A debate about the metafictional statements

- ▶ The metafictional argument concludes that *fictional characters do exist* in some sense.⁴
 - ▶ This view is called “realism about fictional characters”.
 - ▶ The most popular view is *artefactualism*, according to which fictional characters are abstract artifacts.⁵
- ▶ Anti-realists hold that *fictional characters do not exist* and thus try to resist the metafictional argument.
 - ▶ They usually deny (i);
 - ▶ They argue that metafictional statements are sophisticated fictional statements which “continue the pretence” in some technical sense.⁶


⁴**Note:** this much assumes that reference is a standard relation, i.e. it presupposes the existence of its relata.

⁵cf. (Kripke 1973/2013), (Salmon 1998), (Thomasson 1999).

⁶See (Evans 1982), (Walton 1990), and especially (Everett 2013)

Focus on the external perspective

- ▶ Do fictional characters exist?
 - ▶ This question has led to a focus on the metafictional linguistic data.
 - ▶ If fictional characters travel outside their fiction of origin, then they must exist in some sense...
 - ▶ Displaying an external perspective contributes to the idea that they exist in our world!
- ▶ The burden of proof is thus on the anti-realist:⁷
 - ▶ They need to explain how the external perspective actually works...
 - ▶ (using this intuitive idea that one *continues* the original pretence)
 - ▶ ... at the level of truth-conditions for metafictional statements.
- ▶ However, the metafictional data is *messy*...
 - ▶ ... and challenging for everyone!

⁷So the field is deeply counter-intuitive: one has to *prove* that fictional characters do not exist. 

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Some examples of external perspective statements I

- (3) Frankenstein's monster does not (really) exist.
- (4) Frankenstein's monster is a (purely) fictional character.
- (5) Mary Shelley created Frankenstein's monster.
- (6) Emma Woodhouse is the protagonist of Jane Austen's 1815 novel *Emma*.
- (7) Watson is the homodiegetic narrator in the Sherlock Holmes stories.
- (8) Humbert Humbert is an unreliable narrator.
- (9) Holmes was killed off by Conan Doyle, but later resurrected. (Lewis 1978: 38).
- (10) Austen might have made her character Emma less attractive by giving her a worse temper. (Everett 2013: 195).

Some examples of external perspective statements II

- (11) Emma Woodhouse is happier than Emma Bovary.
- (12) My neighbour is in love with Emma Woodhouse.
- (13) Agatha Christie admired Sherlock Holmes.
- (14) Colin Radford pities Anna Karenina. (Radford and Weston 1975)
- (15) David Copperfield is widely thought to be based on Dickens himself, incorporating many elements of his own life. “**David Copperfield (character)**”, *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia* (accessed February 13, 2022).
- (16) In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, “Bertha Mason” is portrayed as being a false name for Antoinette Cosway. “**Bertha Mason**”, *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia* (accessed February 13, 2022).
- (17) Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern in Stoppard’s play are the same characters as in Hamlet’s play.

Some examples of external perspective statements III

- (18) Sherlock Holmes, Inspector Clouseau and Hercule Poirot are all fictional detectives.
- (19) Holmes is more famous than any real detective.
- (20) Mickey Mouse is a pop culture icon. Kroon, Fred and Alberto Voltolini, “**Fictional Entities**”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).
- (21) Darth Vader is in the top 15 most famous fictional characters of all time.⁸
- (22) The relentless failure of Bouvard and Pécuchet to learn anything from their adventures raises the question of what is knowable. “**Bouvard et Pécuchet**”, *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia* (accessed February 13, 2022).
- (23) Holmes symbolizes mankind’s ceaseless striving for truth. (Lewis 1978: 38).

⁸<https://www.scrolldoll.com/most-famous-fictional-characters-of-all-time/> ↻ 🔍 🔗

The problem of mixed-perspective statements

- (24) Sherlock Holmes is a fictional detective created by British author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.⁹
 - (25) Watson's best friend was created by Conan Doyle.
 - (26) The King of the Mountain Trolls is one of Ibsen's most colorful characters.
- As (Everett 2013: 164) puts it:

We cannot reasonably take utterances of (26) simply to be pieces of internal discourse since, in the world of Peer Gynt, the King of the Mountain Trolls is a real creature rather than a fictional object of Ibsen's creation. But we cannot straightforwardly take them to be pieces of external discourse either. For in reality there are no Mountain Trolls, so the description in (26) fails to genuinely denote anything. At the very least, utterances of (26) seem to require us to mix our perspectives, adopting an internal perspective when evaluating the description and an external perspective otherwise.

⁹Wikipedia, *The Free Encyclopedia*, “[Sherlock Holmes](#)” (accessed February 13, 2022). ▶

The parafictional: a third category?

(27) In Jane Austen's *Emma*, Emma Woodhouse is a handsome, clever and rich young woman.

► Puzzling observations:

1. (27) is a genuine assertion: this is a typical feature of the metafictional.
2. “Emma” in (27) clearly pretends to refer to the flesh-and-blood individual: this is a typical feature of the fictional.


► This suggests a third kind of use for fictional names (Récanati 2018):¹⁰

	<i>Genuine assertion</i>	<i>Pretend assertion</i>
<i>Pretend reference</i>	Parafictional	Fictional
<i>Genuine reference</i>	Metafictional	

¹⁰Note that there is 4th possible use, which corresponds to talking about a fictional character, *qua* fictiona, within the fiction. This corresponds to what is usually called *literary metafiction*, or “reflexive fictions” (Friend 2007).

Taking stock

- ▶ In some clear sense, mixed perspectives are *complex* because they presuppose the internal and external perspective as *basic*.
 - ▶ **Csq:** one needs to have a theory of the internal and external independently and before theorising about mixed cases.
 - ▶ i.e. we should start focusing on the *purely* metafictional.
- ▶ But in some other clear sense, once the pretence is shared in the right way, metafictional reference becomes possible and so the metafictional *derives* from the fictional.
 - ▶ **Csq:** mixed cases stand half-way in the metafictional process.
 - ▶ i.e. we should start focusing on *mixed* metafictional.¹¹

¹¹That is (Récanati 2018)'s proposal to look into parafictional statements. 

Questioning the distinction

- ▶ Commenting on the pervasiveness of mixed-perspective, (Everett 2013: 177-8) sees a good reason to drop the distinction between the fictional and the metafictional altogether.

If one actually reads works of literary criticism one doesn't find clean and clear distinctions between the passages in which the critic adopts a so-called "internal" perspective, talking about the characters solely as they are portrayed in the fiction, and passages where she adopts a so-called "external" perspective, talking of the characters in ways that acknowledge or betray their fictional status. [...] Consequently I think the purported distinction between fictional character discourse made from an internal and an external perspective is at best unhelpful.

- ▶ *Dialectics*: there is no purely metafictional statements in (non-philosophic) natural language.
 - ▶ And therefore no purely metafictional statement to run the metafictional argument.

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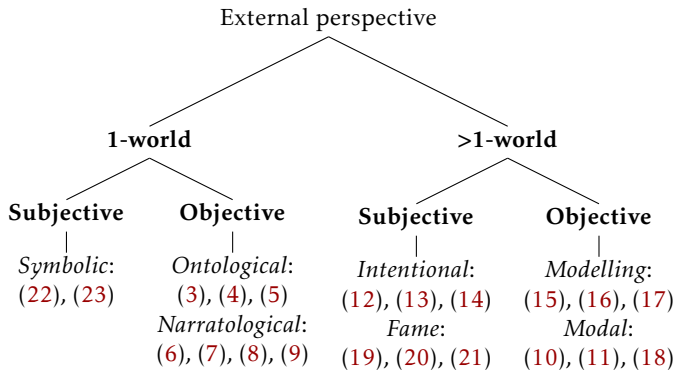
Two orthogonal distinctions

- ▶ I think putting some order in this messy data is urgent!
 - ▶ So that we can better characterise the linguistic features encoding the intuitive notion of “perspective”;
 - ▶ so as to qualify the metafictional argument and assess the antirealist strategy.
- ▶ To do so, I propose two orthogonal distinctions:¹²
 - ▶ The evaluation requires either *one world* or *more than one world*;
 - ▶ The evaluation requires either a specific reader’s viewpoint (*subjective*) or no specific reader (*objective*).

¹²Based on some personal thinking and a review of the present literature, especially (Parsons 1980), (Currie 1990), (Walton 1990), (Thomasson 2017), and (Woods 2018).

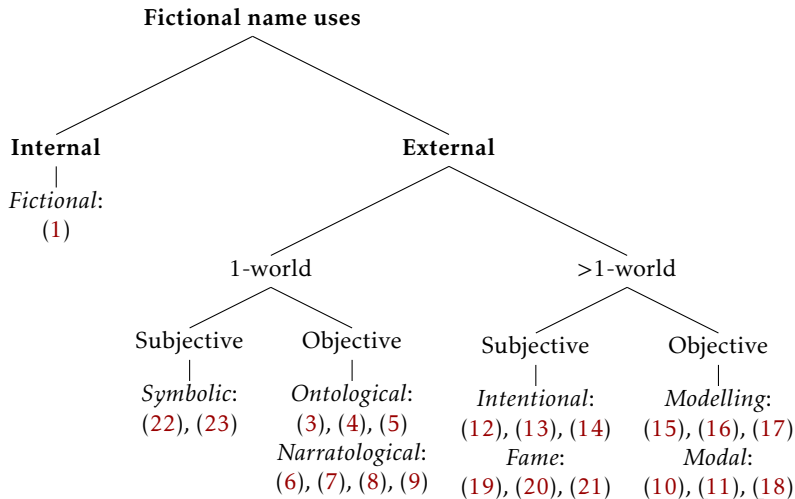
Tidying up the logical space

- ▶ We thus have a tree of possible external perspective statements:



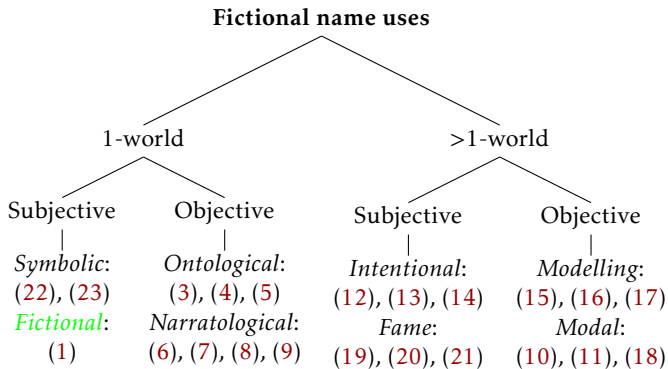
Mixing perspectives

And this is a sub-tree of possible statements containing a fictional name:



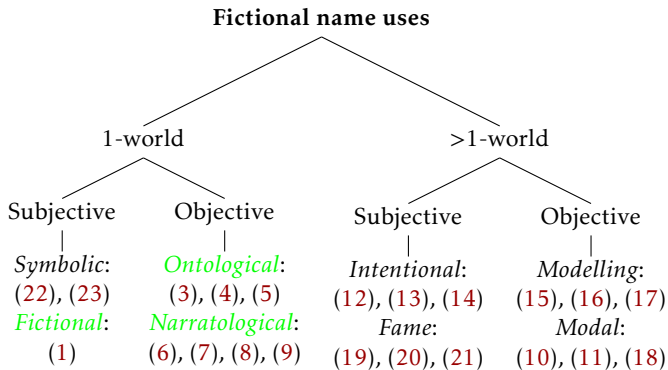
Really mixing perspectives

- Revisiting the fictional without prejudicing the internal/external distinction:



Co-predication

- Co-predication statements like (24) and (26) are very natural:

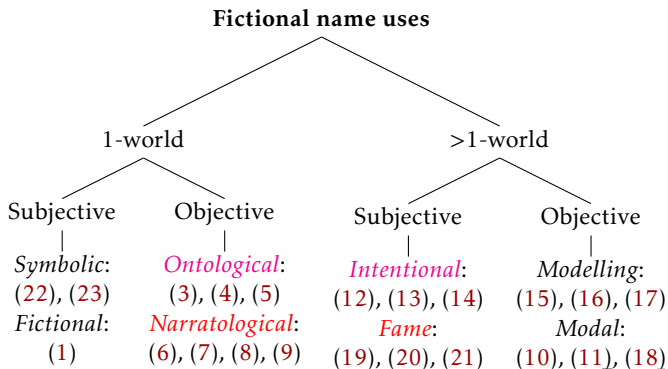


Co-predication

- By contrast, are there “non-natural” co-predication statements?

(28) [?] My little cousin fears Mary Shelley’s creation.

(29) [?] Watson is probably the most famous homodiegetic narrator.



Testing the taxonomy

- ▶ The next step consists in testing the taxonomy on a corpus, in order to both quantify and qualify it.
 - ▶ Do people actually produce a quantitatively significant amount of metafictional statements?
 - ▶ Do all actual uses fit into my taxonomy?
 - ▶ Are there other actual uses which fall outside this taxonomy?
 - ▶ How much of each? How much of mixed-perspective vs. purely external perspective?
- ▶ *Unfortunately*, there is no existing corpora that fits my research. So I need to build one up. I can see three major sources of linguistic data which should contain metafictional statements:
 - ▶ Wikipedia pages (+ discussion)
 - ▶ Fan fiction websites
 - ▶ Book reviews and film reviews.

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► A flavour of Wikipedia's discussions:

- *Did Holmes try cannabis as well as cocaine? -Adrian.*

- *No direct evidence for this. [...] Dandrake 08:52, Feb 8, 2004 (UTC)*¹³

- *A survey found that 58% of Britons believe that Sherlock Holmes really existed. Z1perlster 04:56, 4 February 2008 (UTC)*

- *If you rely on a survey conducted on behalf of TV station of that ilk whose audience is unlikely to reflect the Norm forthe Uk population what do you expect the answer to be. Tmol42 17:32, 4 February 2008 (UTC)*¹⁴

- *So seeing as he came up with alot of crime scene techniques isnt he a bit of a genius? Or did he research new techniques before writing the book?*

- *Do you mean Arthur Conan Doyle? Because Sherlock Holmes wasn't a real person and he certainly didn't write his own books! [...] Raccooneyes55 21:17, 2 August 2011 (UTC)*

- *Raccooneyes55, with all respect, the assertion that Holmes was a fiction is debatable; There are many good arguments made both for Holmes as a real person poorly hidden, and for Holmes as a fiction. His existence as a fictional character ONLY is far from provable. [...] 96.54.72.207 02:24, 14 August 2011 (UTC)*¹⁵

¹³https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Sherlock_Holmes/Archive_1#Untitled

¹⁴https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Sherlock_Holmes/Archive_2#OK,_this_might_not_be_encylopedia_material,_but_it's_both_funny_and_disturbing.

¹⁵https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:Sherlock_Holmes/Archive_2#Genius

► There's a “**Manual of Style/Writing about fiction**”. Excerpts:

Articles about fiction, like all Wikipedia articles, should use the real world as their primary frame of reference. As such, the subject should be described from the perspective of the real world, in which the work of fiction (work for short) and its publication are embedded. To achieve this, editors must use both primary and secondary information. [...] Real-world perspective is not an optional criterion for quality, but rather a basic requirement for all articles.

The problem with in-universe perspective: *An in-universe perspective describes the narrative (or a fictional element of the narrative, such as characters, places, groups, and lore) from the vantage of characters within the fictional universe, treating it as if it were real and ignoring real-world context and sourced analysis. Many fan wikis and fan websites (see below) take this approach, but it should not be used for Wikipedia articles. An in-universe perspective can be misleading to the reader, who may have trouble differentiating between fact and fiction within the article. Furthermore, articles with an in-universe perspective are more likely to include unverifiable original research due to reliance on the primary source. Most importantly, in-universe perspective defies community consensus as to what we do not want Wikipedia to be.*

Characters and other fictional elements: *When characters or other elements from fictional works are notable for their own standalone article, it is acceptable and often necessary to include a narration of that element's role in the events of the work(s) they are a part of. However, such narration must employ out-of-universe style and include real-world descriptors. Characters should not be presented as if they are real persons, fictional settings should not be treated as a real place, and so forth. Since such articles are presented with a mix of elements related to the fictional narrative alongside elements related to conception, development, and reception, editors must be sure these articles clearly define the fictional aspects with out-of-universe language to avoid confusion. Often, using section labels such as "Fictional description", "Fictional biography", or "Appearances" can help to segregate the narrative elements from the real-world elements in the rest of the article.*

The notion of “canon” in Harry Potter Wiki

Canon is a term used to describe a fixed collection of material that is considered part of the Harry Potter world. The Harry Potter Wiki uses a three tier system which determines what sources are true and what sources are not.

► The “three tier system”:

1. Tier One: J. K. Rowling

These sources come from J. K. Rowling herself. She either wrote them herself, or was involved in writing/developing them. Texts in their original language, J. K. Rowling’s British English and corrected editions are the most valuable. When J. K. Rowling contradicts herself, the newest source is to be taken as the “most” canon.







2. Tier Two: JKR Involved

These sources do not contain information directly from the “mouth” of J. K. Rowling, but they are projects based on works by her, and in which she was involved in some capacity at some point.






3. Tier Three: Licensed

These sources are where J. K. Rowling or Warner Bros. (the makers of the Harry Potter films and her primary licensee) licensed the use of elements of the Harry Potter universe to a third-party.

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