

Lying and Fiction*

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Abstract

Lying and fiction both involve the deliberate production of statements that fail to obey Grice's first Maxim of Quality ("do not say what you believe to be false"). The question thus arises if we can provide a uniform analysis for fiction and lies. In this chapter I discuss the similarities, but also some fundamental differences between lying and fiction. I argue that there's little hope for a satisfying account within a traditional truth conditional semantic framework. Rather than immediately moving to a fully pragmatic analysis involving distinct speech acts of fiction-making and lying, I will first explore how far we get with the assumption that both are simply assertions, analyzed in a Stalnakerian framework, i.e. as proposals to update the common ground.

1 Fiction and lies

Lies and fictional statements¹ share an important characteristic that sets them apart from more pedestrian forms of communication: what they express is false, or rather, believed by the author to be false. When I utter (1a) I know this can't

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¹What I call fictional statements here includes statements taken directly from a work of fiction, e.g. the actual opening lines of *Lord of The Rings*, as well as statements like (1a) that are not lifted word-for-word from some canonical work of fiction, but nonetheless describe events or facts holding in some fictional world, i.e. they express things that are true in the fiction.

literally be true, because Frodo, Sam, and Mount Doom are all made up, they never existed. Similarly, when I say (1b) to impress my colleagues at lunch, I am well aware that what I'm saying is false.

- (1) a. Sam carried Frodo from Mount Doom.
- b. I read *Sein und Zeit* last week.

Assuming that, as their surface form suggests, lies and fictional statements are simply instances of the speech act of assertion, we get that they are assertions of propositions believed to be false by the author. In section 3 I discuss some refinements of the traditional notion of assertion needed to work out this simple, uniform account.

Despite this crucial similarity, I want to highlight in the remainder of this section some essential differences between fiction and lies. A first, salient *prima facie* difference concerns the intended effects on the addressee. When I said (1b) I wanted to deceive my addressee: I knew that I did not read *Sein und Zeit*, yet I wanted my audience to believe that I did. The whole point of lying seems to be to create such an asymmetry between speaker's and hearer's belief. By contrast, when you read Tolkien's work, or listen to me talk about it, there is no deception – in fact, the fictionality of the statements is presumed common knowledge in these cases. Whatever the intended effect of my utterance of (1a) is exactly, it is not that you come to believe stuff about hobbits that I don't believe.

We can bring out this difference in Gricean terms as follows.² If we analyze both lying and fiction as assertions, they would both constitute violations of the Maxim of Quality. In the case of lying, the violation is necessarily covert, which explains why no implicatures are generated. But in the case of fiction the violation is overt – every reader is aware that dragons or hobbits don't exist. Since overt violations normally trigger implicatures (e.g. leading to ironic, metaphorical, or otherwise non-literal interpretations), it seems that upholding the claim that fiction involves assertion will require some careful maneuvering. We return to this task in section 4.

The seemingly clear distinction that emerges from the discussion above is somewhat blurred again by cases of so-called bald-faced lies, i.e. lies that do not involve deception. Carson's (2006) famous example involves a witness who, for fear of repercussions, testifies in court that he did not see a certain criminal commit a certain crime, knowing full well that the jury has just seen video evidence

²Thanks to Andreas Stokke for pointing out this angle. Cf. Stokke (2016) for details on the relation between lying and the Maxim of Quality.

that puts him at the scene. The witness knows he's not going to convince anyone that he didn't see the crime. His assertions is therefore not meant to deceive the members of the jury that he's addressing, but to demonstrate to relevant members of the criminal organization that he's no snitch. If we want to count the witness as lying, then deception cannot be a defining difference between fiction and lying.³

A clearer difference between fictional statements like (1a) and lies like (1b) is the fact that although (1b) is just plain false, many philosophers have argued that (1a) is not really false, or even that it is in some sense true – e.g., true relative to *The Lord of the Rings* saga, or fictionally true. If your high school English teacher discusses Tolkien's writings and asks who carried Frodo from Mount Doom, the only right answer will be Sam. To bring out this intuition of fictional truth consider also the negation of (1a), *Sam did not carry Frodo*, which is quite clearly false. In sum, while neither fiction nor lies are intended as expressing facts about the real world, in many contexts we're inclined to count some fictional statements as true (*Harry Potter is a wizard*), or at least fictionally true, or more true than some others (*Sherlock Holmes is a hobbit*).

Another difference between fiction and lies that has received a lot of attention, this time from the side of philosophy of art and fiction, is known as the paradox of (the emotional response to) fiction (Radford, 1975). The paradox starts from the observation that we can be moved by stories – whether fact or fiction. For instance, when I meet you in bar and tell you in some detail about my dog Hector dying after he saves a child from a burning house, you may be moved to tears. When I then proceed to tell you that in fact I never had a dog, that I made the whole thing up, your sadness will quickly evaporate (and make way for anger or embarrassment, perhaps). Yet, as Radford puts it, we weep for Anna Karenina, even though we know quite well, even in advance, that Tolstoy's novel is a fiction and Anna Karenina never existed. Somehow, fiction allows us to “suspend disbelief” and be emotionally engaged with known falsehoods. Lies, according to Radford, lack this property: once it comes out that the lie is a lie, suspension of disbelief and emotional engagement in accordance with the story's content become impossible.⁴

Summing up, at first sight lies and fiction seem rather similar, with bald-faced

³Unless we say that bald-faced lies aren't really lies (Meibauer, 2014), or are in fact deceptive (Meibauer, 2016). Cf. chapter 19 “Bald-faced lies” in this handbook.

⁴It would follow that one cannot be emotionally engaged (in accordance with the content of the lie) with a bald-faced lie at all, since by definition it is common ground at the outset that such a lie is a lie.

lies straddling the divide. On closer inspection, we find important differences. Only fiction has the peculiar property that it generates ‘fictional truths’, whose known literal falsity, with respect to the real world, does not hinder emotional involvement or judgments of truth. I conclude that, despite initial similarities, fiction and lies are distinct phenomena.⁵ Still, rather than just defining two new primitive speech act types, in addition to assertions, commands, etc., it is worth investigating if we can specify a linguistic framework to describe both their similarities and differences, to each other and to factual assertions.

2 A semantic analysis of fiction and lies?

When we’re trying to characterize the nature of fiction and lies, it is fairly obvious that syntax will not help us much. Depending on the context, a single sentence, say (2) (based on the above illustration of Radford’s paradox of fiction), can be an instance of a truthful assertion, a lie, or part of a fictional narrative.⁶

(2) Hector ran into the burning house

Since the peculiarities of lies and fiction seem intimately related to semantic notions like truth and falsity, we might want to turn to semantics next. In this section I discuss whether semantics, more specifically formal, or truth-conditional semantics (as opposed to cognitive semantics, cf. Fauconnier 1994), indeed constitutes the right level of analysis. The answer will be negative.

2.1 Truth conditional semantics

Semantics starts from the idea that knowing the meaning of a sentence consists in knowing its truth conditions. In order to count as knowing the meaning of ‘methane is poisonous’ I don’t need to know whether methane is in fact poisonous, but I’d need to know what kind of states of affairs would make the sentence true. In terms of possible worlds, a familiar tool from modal logic: when presented with an arbitrary (complete description of a) possible world, I need to be able, in principle, to figure out whether in that world the sentence is true or

⁵See the chapter “Lying and the Arts” in this handbook for more on the history of the debate about the relationship between lying and fiction.

⁶This is not to say that there are no syntactic differences whatsoever between fictional and non-fictional assertions, for instance. It may well be that certain syntactic constructions (‘once upon a time’, free indirect discourse) are characteristic of fiction.

false. This epistemological idea is cashed out semantically by equating sentence meaning with truth conditions, and then often further equating a sentence's truth conditions with the set of worlds that make it true, also known as the proposition expressed by the sentence.

At this point let me dispel a common confusion about the use of the term 'possible world' in formal semantics, as opposed to its use in literary studies. When talking about fiction we often talk more or less informally⁷ about 'fictional worlds', like 'the world of *Harry Potter*'. However, in the context of formal semantics, there is no single possible world of *Harry Potter*. Rather, like individual sentences, the Harry Potter books express propositions, and hence correspond to *sets of worlds*. Thus, we can talk about 'the worlds of *Harry Potter*', which – to a first approximation, see 4.2 below – are all possible worlds compatible with all the information written in the books. Since, the books don't mention, say, the exact time of Dumbledore's birth, this set will include possible worlds where Dumbledore was born at noon, worlds where he was born at 12:34, at 17:30, etc..

Back to the task at hand. Truth-conditional semantics is ill-suited to distinguish between fact, fiction, and lies. Take our ambiguous example (2). The truth conditions of this sentence will correspond to the set of worlds in which there was a point in time before the utterance time where some Hector ran into some contextually salient burning house. This proposition is expressed independently of whether or not the sentence is intended or assumed to be true, false, or fictionally true. The aim of semantics is to specify a systematic theory that derives truth conditions (in the form of possible worlds propositions) from the syntactic structure of sentences and the lexical meanings of the words in it. What speaker and hearer *do* with this set of worlds once it's derived is not part of the semantics proper. That is, whether the actual world is believed to be among those worlds, or whether the proposition is intended to update the hearer's beliefs, or to constrain her imagination, and/or to trigger some action or emotional response – all of this falls outside the scope of semantics proper and belongs to pragmatics.

2.2 Empty names and the limits of semantics

As a matter of fact, not only does semantics fail to usefully distinguish between fiction, lies, and factual assertions, it fails to even assign any meaning to some typical instances of lying and fiction (including (2)). Frege (1892), arguably the founder of modern semantics, already noted that the use of empty names in fic-

⁷Cf. Werth's (1999) Text World Theory for a formal version of this usage.

tional statements could cause trouble. He considers the following fictional statement:

- (3) Odysseus was set ashore in Ithaca while fast asleep.

Since Odysseus never existed, the name *Odysseus* has no reference. By the principle of compositionality (roughly, the reference of a statement depends on the references of its constituents – a principle constitutive of most forms of truth-conditional semantics), it follows that the statement as whole has no reference. This is problematic for semantic systems that equate meaning with reference.

Frege solves the problem of empty names by invoking the notion of *Sinn* ('sense') as a separate level of meaning. Although *Odysseus* has no reference, it does have a *Sinn*, a mode of presentation, so the sentence as a whole can have a well-defined meaning at the level of *Sinn*. However, Kripke (1980) has since convincingly argued that proper names do not actually have a *Sinn*, they just refer directly to the individual that bears the name. If Kripke is right, (3) can't have either a truth value or a *Sinn*. Since lies and fiction are natural habitats for empty names, cf. the name *Hector* for my made up dog in (2), they pose severe challenges for semantics.⁸

I conclude that traditional, truth-conditional semantics is the wrong place to look for an informative analysis of fiction. Even if we can somehow get around the problems surrounding empty names, symptomatic of fiction and lies, we're not likely to capture the difference between uses of (2) as a lie, a sincere assertion, or a fictional statement merely in terms of truth conditions or propositions expressed. It follows that we'll have to turn to pragmatics – what do we do with the meanings that syntax and semantics give us?

3 The pragmatics of lying

Pragmatics, the study of how humans use language to communicate, is a vast, heterogeneous field. In this chapter I want to stay close to the semantic side of pragmatics. More precisely, I'll stick with the well-known analysis of the semantics/pragmatics interface pioneered by Robert Stalnaker (1970, 1978).

⁸Sure enough, logicians and philosophers of language have devised many work-arounds to solve the puzzle of empty names, like using 'free logics', giving up direct reference for some or all names, or enriching our ontology with non-existent entities. See, for instance, Braun (2005) or Sainsbury (2005) and references therein.

In this section I introduce Stalnaker’s framework and present Stokke’s (2013) application of it to lying.

3.1 Assertion as common ground update

In brief, on Stalnaker’s analysis what we do with assertions is to update the common ground, where the common ground is the shared body of information that the speaker and hearer take for granted. On the one hand, the common ground is useful for modeling linguistic context dependence. Speaker and hearer rely on the common ground to choose efficient modes of expression, such as pronouns, names, and indexicals, to refer to salient entities already established in the common ground (rather than just using descriptions that uniquely identify their referents independent of context). On the other hand, the common ground is in turn affected by what is said. Every time a speaker makes an assertion (and no one objects) its informational content becomes part of the evolving common ground.

Stalnaker works out this general picture of context dependence and context change in a traditional possible worlds semantics. In the following I’ll skip over the context dependence part (i.e., the theory of presupposition satisfaction Beaver & Geurts 2011) and focus on context change, i.e. the way assertions shape the common ground. First of all, the common ground at each point in time is a set of possible worlds – roughly, the worlds compatible with the shared beliefs of speaker and hearer, or, put differently, the information that the speaker and hearer together take for granted. Statements express propositions,⁹ which are likewise modeled as sets of worlds. The central definition of Stalnaker’s pragmatics says that updating a common ground C with an assertion of proposition p means removing all non- p worlds from C . Let me illustrate this with an example.

I’m talking to you over the phone. We start with a common ground C_0 where we both know for instance that my name is Emar, that the Earth is round, that we’re both academics etc, but let’s say you don’t know where I am calling from. C_0 then contains worlds where I’m in Groningen on February 22, 2017, and worlds where I’m in Göttingen, Leiden, Nijmegen, etc.. C_0 does not contain worlds where the Earth is flat, or I’m on Jupiter. Then I say, “I’m at a conference in Leiden”, thereby expressing the proposition that Emar is at a conference in Leiden

⁹The context-dependence part that we skipped over would add that statements only express propositions if their presuppositions are satisfied by the common ground in which they occur

on February 22, 2017. Updating C_0 with this information means we remove from C_0 all the worlds where I am not in Leiden at that time. The result will be a new common ground, C_1 , which is more informative in the sense that it excludes some possibilities that were not yet excluded before my announcement. C_1 then serves as background for the interpretation of the next utterance, which will again remove some worlds, and thereby become more informative, and so on.

There are a number of refinements of this basic propositional update idea that feature prominently in recent debates. The first is that updating the common ground is not something that the speaker can accomplish single-handedly. As Stalnaker (2002) himself stresses, all that the speaker can realistically do is *propose* an update.¹⁰ The proposal only becomes an actual update once it's accepted by all interlocutors. In a totally cooperative discourse, perhaps acceptance may be the default, i.e. proposals automatically become updates unless someone objects. But when we move to less ideal situations, involving potentially mendacious speakers, it becomes essential to distinguish proposal and update, so that we can model a hearer's rejection of a proposed update. I won't pursue this issue further here (cf. Asher & Lascarides 2013 on dealing with non-cooperative discourse).

The second refinement relevant to the current endeavor concerns the exact definition of the common ground. Typically, the common ground is thought of as common knowledge or common belief, notions that are well-studied in epistemic logic (Fagin et al., 1995). A proposition p is a common belief among a group of agents iff all agents believe that p , all agents believe that all agents believe that p , all agents believe that all agents believe etc. The common ground in a two person conversation is then the intersection of all propositions that are commonly believed by speaker and hearer. We'll see below that lying and fiction necessitate further refinement of this notion.

3.2 Lying, acceptance, and the common ground

Now that we have an analysis of the speech act of assertion, the question arises if we can perhaps apply it to lying and fiction. In the remainder of this section I present Stokke's (2013) analysis of lying within Stalnaker's pragmatic framework of assertion.

The null hypothesis is that lying is a form of asserting, viz. asserting some-

¹⁰This insight is part and parcel of more finegrained discourse models developed on the basis of Stalnaker's (e.g., Roberts 2012; Farkas & Bruce 2009).

thing one believes to be false. In Stalnakerian terms, a lie is a proposal to update the common ground with a proposition that one believes to be false. On our reconstruction of the notion of common ground in terms of common beliefs this is a non-starter. If the speaker's proposal to add p to the common ground is successful, p will be commonly believed, so then both she and the hearer believe p . But surely, telling a successful lie shouldn't affect the speaker's belief that p is false.

As Stokke observes, some of Stalnaker's more cautious remarks about the notion of common ground offer a potential solution. Stalnaker observes that when we communicate successfully we don't always believe what our interlocutor says. In some cases, my disbelief will be grounds for an objection, thereby blocking the information growth in our common ground. But in other cases, I might want to just go along, perhaps just to see where my interlocutor is going, or out of politeness or fear. In such cases we'd be interpreting the discourse just like we would otherwise, by accepting the propositions expressed, and modifying the common ground accordingly, following the usual rules of presupposition satisfaction and information update. If indeed we want to model such cases as cases of genuine communication and common ground update, we have to weaken our definition of common ground as common belief. Stalnaker proposes to define the common ground in terms of an attitude of 'acceptance for the purpose of conversation', which he further characterizes by saying that "to accept a proposition is to treat it as a true proposition in one way or another – to ignore, for the moment at least, the possibility that it is false." (Stalnaker 1984:79). Stokke then extracts the following precise acceptance-based definition from Stalnaker 2002: a proposition p is common ground iff both speaker and hearer accept p , and believe that they accept p , and believe that they believe that they accept p , etc. (more compactly: common ground is common knowledge of universal acceptance).

With this weakened notion of common ground we can now maintain our null hypothesis, viz. that lying is simply the assertion of some proposition that the speaker believes to be false. By uttering the lie, the speaker indicates that she herself accepts its truth – in the Stalnakerian sense of 'treating it as true' – and wants the hearer to do the same. Neither interlocutor needs to believe what was said, either before or after the assertion, but by accepting it, both are able to continue interpreting subsequent sentences in the usual way. Both would become committed to treating it as if it were true, at least temporarily, for the purposes of the current conversation.

4 The pragmatics of fiction

Following the reasoning above, we run into the same problems when we treat fiction as assertion in a belief-based common ground model. The successful assertion of *Frodo is a hobbit* should not lead to an updated common ground that entails that speaker and hearer believe in the existence of hobbits. We should be able to interpret a fictional statement without either hearer or speaker being committed to believing it to be true. In 4.1 – 4.3 I explore how to adapt the basic Stalnakerian common ground conception so as to circumvent problems with fictional assertions. In 4.4 I sketch some more radical pragmatic proposals that go beyond common ground updating and involve notions like pretense and imagination.

4.1 Fiction and the common ground

Sainsbury (2011), like Stokke also crediting some remarks from Stalnaker, argues that the key to making sense of fiction is to replace belief with acceptance. So-called fictional truths, like *Harry Potter lived under the stairs* are true relative to the acceptance of the content of the Harry Potter novels. When we read these novels we choose to accept – but probably not believe – what the fiction tells us, thereby constructing an ever more informative common ground of shared acceptance between writer and reader who each treat the Harry Potter propositions as true, exactly as in other forms of assertion.

One of the problems with this approach is that it doesn't separate a fiction-based common ground from other, truth-oriented common grounds. For instance, J.K. Rowling and I both know that the Earth is round, humans are mortal, brooms don't fly, and wizards don't exist. This type of information will be part of our common ground in any communicative exchange between us. But then how can we maintain consistency in our common ground when I start adding the propositions that make up *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*? And in the other direction, when we have somehow updated the common ground with all the information from these novels, how come we can still confidently and sincerely assert that Harry Potter is a fictional character and wizards don't exist? Somehow, we need to keep the fictional common ground separate from other common grounds.

Eckardt (2014) takes the idea of quarantining the fictional common ground as the core of her semantics of narrative discourse. When I pick up my first Harry Potter book, I start a fresh common ground in which to keep track of just what's

going on in the Harry Potter universe. When I close the book and talk to J.K. Rowling about the weather I somehow close the fictional common ground and start (or continue) updating a more realistic common ground, one in which we both accept that wizards don't exist, among other things. In this discussion of lying, Stokke (2013) explores a similar idea: fictional statements function like *assumptions* in mathematical proofs or philosophical thought experiments in that they are used to create a temporary "unofficial" common ground. A crucial difference between fiction and lying is then that a lie is a proposal to update the official common ground, while a fictional statement is a proposal to update or create an unofficial common ground.¹¹

4.2 Importing world knowledge into fictional common grounds

However the isolation of fictional or unofficial common grounds is formalized, total isolation is too strong. If we start our fictional common ground from scratch we effectively sever all ties with the world as we know it. When in our reading we then encounter a name like 'France' or 'Napoleon' we might accept that there are entities by these names,¹² and continue updating the fictional common ground with information about those. But this way we can never account for the obvious fact that the author is referring to France – a large European country, capital Paris, populated by French-speaking people – and Napoleon, the 19th century French Emperor. Can we really say that I understood *War and Peace* if I failed to connect it to any familiar historical facts, people and places? And, more generally, how much are we even going to be able to understand of any novel if we start with a *tabula rasa* and can't assume even some basic principles of physics and human nature.

Theories of fiction interpretation thus look for a middle ground: we need to separate fictional common grounds from non-fictional ones, but we still want to have access to at least some basic world-knowledge when constructing fictional common grounds. For instance, when I first picked up *War and Peace* I automati-

¹¹As an anonymous referee points out, lies and fictions can also be iterated and embedded in each other. This shouldn't cause any trouble here: if we're reading about a fictional character lying to another fictional character we're creating (or updating) an unofficial/fictional common ground containing the information that the two characters are having a conversation and thereby updating the official common ground between them. A special case of lying in fiction is that of the so-called unreliable narrator, cf. Zipfel (2011).

¹²By a process that Lewis (1979) has called accommodation of the presuppositions triggered by the use of these names.

cally included in the new fictional common ground the information that humans breathe oxygen, the earth is round, and Napoleon was that French Emperor who failed to conquer Russia – I did not need the book to explicitly inform me of these facts. Although not directly formulated in terms of common grounds and updates, Lewis’s (1978) influential ‘Truth in Fiction’ is the *locus classicus* for this issue. For Lewis, roughly, a statement is true in a fiction iff it is true in those worlds compatible with the text that are maximally close to the actual world (or, more precisely, to the author’s overtly expressed beliefs about the actual world). In effect, knowledge of the actual world thus enters into our representation of a fictional world, unless the text explicitly contradicts it. Applied to our example, when constructing a possible worlds representation of *War and Peace* we might be led to include worlds where Napoleon utters certain phrases we know he in fact did not utter, but we exclude outlandish possible worlds where gravitational acceleration at sea-level is $11m/s^2$ or Napoleon secretly has a robotic arm grafted on by aliens, even though the text itself doesn’t explicitly exclude these possibilities. See Bonomi & Zucchi (2003) for an adaptation of Lewis’s ideas into the Stalnakerian framework.

4.3 ... and the other way around

Arguably, there is also a kind of knowledge transfer in the opposite direction, from the fictional to the non-fictional domain. We’ve seen how reading Sherlock Holmes stories leads to a fictional common ground in which there is a flesh and blood detective named Sherlock. But when I’m no longer consuming or otherwise engaging with the fiction directly, I can still talk about the fictional people and events described in it.

- (4) a. Sherlock is just a fictional character, invented by Conan Doyle. He never really existed.
- b. I prefer the BBC’s Sherlock, played by Benedict Cumberbatch, to Conan Doyle’s original character.

Such so-called metafictional statements can be literally true (but not fictionally true, because in the novels Sherlock is not fictional but real). I may sincerely assert these statements and thereby express facts about the actual world, i.e. propose to update the official common ground between me and my interlocutor. This suggests that, while the fictional, or unofficial, common ground contains a real-life Sherlock, the official common ground contains a corresponding fictional

entity, that serves as the referent of the name *Sherlock* in (4). The ontological and semantic issues raised by such talk about fictional characters is a topic of much philosophical debate, which I can't go into here (cf., e.g. Zalta 1983; Kripke 2011; Thomasson 1999; Walton 1990; Friend 2007).

Another case of information flowing from the fictional to the non-fictional domain involves the observation that reading literary fiction offers us not just an entertaining glimpse of a different world, but also contributes to our understanding of the actual world, the 'human condition', applicable in real-life.¹³ For an exploration of this idea, exploiting the tools of possible worlds semantics, I refer to Bauer & Beck (2014).

4.4 More radical pragmatic accounts of fiction

I end by sketching a more radical pragmatic approach to fiction interpretation, one where we let go of the assumption that a work of fiction can be understood as a series of assertions, in the sense of proposing to update the common ground. A large subclass of such pragmatic approaches is sometimes grouped together as 'pretense theories'. There are two main flavors. First, according to Searle (1975) or Kripke (2011) a typical fictional statement is not an assertion but a 'pretend assertion' – Tolkien and his readers merely pretend to refer to Frodo, whom they pretend to exist. Second, according to Walton (1990) or Currie (1990) we're dealing with a *sui generis* speech act type. Since the latter approach is highly influential – at least in contemporary philosophy¹⁴ – let me end this section, and this chapter, with a brief sketch.

In the terminology of Walton, assertions are prescriptions for the hearer to believe. By asserting that chlorine is dangerous, I intend for you to believe that it is. Note that this is really just a simplified version of the Stalnakerian definition above in which by asserting something I propose to make it common ground. In the same traditional terminology, Walton then characterizes fictional statements as prescriptions for the reader to imagine. The intended effect of reading a fictional text, say, is not that I believe the text to be true or common ground (official or unofficial); it is that I engage in a certain type of act of imagining. In this characterization, imagination is typically thought of as an individual, psychological

¹³The relationship between fiction and literature is a thorny issue that I can't go into here. Cf. e.g. Hempfer (2004).

¹⁴Narratologists meanwhile have developed different 'radical pragmatic accounts', like e.g. Walsh's (2007) rhetorical approach, which is inspired by Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986).

attitude, rather than a shared group attitude, as in the Stalnakerian framework for assertion. Fiction interpretation thus lends itself to a more fine-grained type of semantic/pragmatic analysis where we consider the effects of interpretation on the complex mental states of individual speech act participants rather than just lump everything together in a single, intersubjective common ground. See Maier (2017) for a formal semantic proposal along these lines, and García-Carpintero (2015) for a more Stalnakerian analysis in terms of shared commitments.

5 Conclusion

Lies and fictional statements are similar in that neither obeys Grice's first Maxim of Quality: do not say that which you believe to be false. They are also essentially dissimilar, in that only fiction allows for a suspension of disbelief that lets us express seemingly true(-ish) propositions about creatures like Sherlock Holmes or Harry Potter that both speaker and hearer know never existed. Although the characteristic properties of lies and fiction are at least partly semantic in nature, I've shown that there is little to no hope for an insightful analysis within a traditional truth-conditional semantic framework; we need to turn to pragmatics.

My main aim in this chapter has been to show how Stalnaker's influential pragmasemantic account of assertions as proposals to update the common ground may be adjusted to incorporate both lies and fiction.

For lying, we first explored the idea of basing the definition of common ground on a notion of acceptance rather than belief and saw that with this rather minimal adjustment lies could be treated as genuine assertions.

For fiction we saw that more is required, we need to somehow isolate information gained by reading the fictional work from information gained through other types of discourse – but not too strictly, because information must be allowed to flow back and forth between these distinct information repositories. Much contemporary work in the semantics and philosophy of fiction can be understood as concerned with these information flows.

The general conclusion one may draw from this chapter is that the Stalnaker model of assertion as common ground updates is a powerful and flexible formal tool that can be used to shed new light on the seemingly idiosyncratic speech acts involved in lies and fiction. And in the other direction, studying lies and fiction leads us to the very boundaries of truth-conditional semantics, and has prompted important refinements of the highly influential Stalnakerian notion of common ground.

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