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A contextual theory of fictional names

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Abstract: We review some of the most prominent challenges in the semantics and pragmatics of fictional names and propose a pragmatic theory of fictional names whereby understanding a fictional name requires imagining possible contexts of interpretation of the name. Similarly to other pragmatic approaches to fiction and fictional contexts, we maintain that fictional texts require that the interpreter engages in a game of pretense of sort and are, therefore, prescriptions to imagine a state of affairs that is not the real one. In contrast to these approaches, however, we propose that interpreting a fictional text does not require imagining a set of possible state of affairs where the text would be true but, rather, requires imagining a set of possible contexts where the text would be meaningful. In order to apply this framework to fictional names, we adopt a contextual theory of proper names, which we have proposed and defended in previous work.

Keywords: proper names; fictional names; imagining; context; negative existential statements

Well, on reading all these authors, I did not find much fault with them for their lying, as I saw that this was already a common practice even among men who profess philosophy. I did wonder, though, that they thought that they could write untruths and not get caught at it. Therefore, as I myself, thanks to my vanity, was eager to hand something down to posterity, that I might not be the only one excluded from the privileges of poetic license, and as I had nothing true to tell, not having had any adventures of significance, I took to lying. But my lying is far more honest than theirs, for though I tell the truth in nothing else, I shall at least be truthful in saying that I am a liar. I think I can escape the censure of the world by my own admission that I am not telling a word of truth. Be it understood, then, that I am writing about things which I have neither seen nor had to do with nor learned from others – which, in fact, do not exist at all and, in the nature of things, cannot exist. Therefore my readers should on no account believe in them.

Lucian of Samosata, *A True Story* (tr. A.M. Harmon)

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1 Introduction

A True Story by Lucian of Samosata (second century AD) is often cited as one of the oldest examples of science-fiction. It tells the story of Lucian's imaginary voyage beyond the Pillars of Heracles. It is a tremendously imaginative text, populated by all sorts of impossible creatures and places. In fact, it is responsible for a number of literary tropes that would influence much of the literature to come (Dante's *Comedy* being a most notable example).

The text is conceived as a satire, starting from its title. Lucian begins by observing that most of the great writers he knows of write about invented stories. Hence, technically speaking, they are telling lies. Yet, they never really admit to that. Lucian decides to break with this habit by admitting, right from the beginning, that his story is a lie. From the very first lines, readers are warned that nothing of what they are about to read will be true. As Lucian candidly admits, he is going to talk “about things which I have neither seen nor had to do with nor learned from others – which, in fact, do not exist at all and, in the nature of things, cannot exist.” His story is, henceforth, a *true* story in the measure that it is absolutely truthful in saying that everything it says is absolutely false.

Later in the story, towards the end of the second book, Lucian visits an island that has much in common with Dante's inferno. There, in an atmosphere of asphalt and sulfur, those who have committed crimes during their life undergo awful tortures. Lucian's guide to the island tells him that “the severest punishment of all fell to those who told lies while in life and those who had written what was not true, among whom were Ctesias of Cnidos, Herodotus and many more.”

Few texts are as paradigmatic as Lucian's *A True Story* in exemplifying the problem of fiction and its relation to truth. In what follows, we will discuss a particularly difficult issue in the context of fiction, that of fictional names, that is, those names such as “Anna Karenina” and “Sherlock Holmes”, which are used in fictional contexts to refer to objects that, in fact, do not exist and readers know not to exist. After a review of the debate on fictional names in the philosophy of language, we will advance the proposal that comprehending the content of a fictional text and, with it, the fictional names in it, corresponds to an exercise in imagining possible contexts of interpretations of the text.

2 Descriptivism

One thing all scholars working on the semantics of fictional names clearly agree upon is how little agreement there is on the semantics of fictional names. In the context of

modern analytic philosophy, fictional names make their first appearance as one of the positive predictions of descriptivism. In a Fregean analysis of proper names that distinguishes between sense (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*), fictional names are treated as names that have sense but no reference (Frege 1892). In a Russellian analysis that regards names as concealed definite descriptions they are treated as descriptions that fail to identify a reference (Russell 1905). In both theories, fictional names are intelligible for as long as they have a sense or a descriptive content. Of course, the two approaches make different predictions concerning the truth of statements with a fictional name. In a Fregean semantics, a statement of the form “ ϕ is P ”, where ϕ is a fictional name and P a predicate, is intelligible but has no truth-value – it is neither true nor false. In a Russellian semantics, the same statement is intelligible but false because, being ϕ fictional, there is no unique object o such that, if o satisfies the description associated with the name ϕ , it also satisfies property P .

Undoubtedly, descriptivism captures some central characteristics of fiction and fictional names. In fact, as we shall see, descriptivism plays a role, in one form or the other, in most current theories of fictional names, although this is not always immediately evident. For one thing, descriptivism captures the intuition that fictional statements with fictional names are not true. While there may be disagreement on whether fictional statements are false or devoid of truth-value, either version of descriptivism squares nicely with the notion that fictional names do not refer to existing objects and fiction is not about describing the facts as they are.

Furthermore, descriptivism captures the crucial function that, intuitively, descriptive content plays in the interpretation of fiction. To some extent, we may say that appreciating a work of fiction consists in using the descriptive material provided by the fiction itself to outline the circumstances in which the fiction would be true. Similarly, we may say that appreciating the semantic significance of a fictional name is, intuitively, an equivalent exercise in identifying how the referent of the name would be like if the name had a referent. For example, as we read *A Study in Scarlet* by Conan Doyle, we learn about Sherlock Holmes: we learn that he lives in London, we learn that he is a private detective, we learn that he smokes the pipe, we learn that his best friend is Doctor Watson, and so on. As we proceed with the reading, we accumulate more and more descriptive content about this imaginary character and get to know better and better who it would be if it were an actual individual.

3 Referentialism

Kripke's (1980) modal arguments decisively undermine the descriptive theory of proper names by demonstrating that proper names refer directly (their reference is not established via descriptive content) and rigidly (they refer to the same object

across different possible worlds, irrespectively of the properties that are true of them in those different possible worlds). Relevant to the current discussion, is the observation that fictional names are not immune to Kripke's arguments. As observed by Thomasson (1999; see also Friend 2007), the object-directedness of fictional discourse suggests that fictional names act as genuine singular terms and have thus (in some sense to be made precise) a referent, *contra* the received wisdom. It is possible to reason counter-fictionally about a fictional character. For example, we may wonder what would have been of Gregor Samsa had he not been transformed into an insect or how his life would go on after what is described in Kafka's original novel (in fact, the latter option is exemplified by Marc Estrin's novel *Insect Dreams*). It is also possible to have disagreements about the properties of a fictional character. For example, Friend (2011) reports the debate around what type of insect Gregor Samsa was transformed into. In fact, Kafka is not explicit about this, he only suggests that Gregor was transformed into some sort of "vermin". Some critics believe, from the descriptions provided by Kafka, that Gregor was transformed into a cockroach, others (most notably, Nabokov) into a beetle. The disagreement appears to be about one and the same object, inter-subjectively identified.

If correct, these observations lead us to a puzzling conclusion. On the one hand, referentialism argues that the meaning of a proper name is its reference and, as it turns out, this argument applies to fictional names too. On the other hand, the most definitory characteristic of fictional names is that they do not refer: This is, in fact, what makes them fictional. We are led to the conclusion that fictional names, having no reference, have no meaning and, consequently, do not contribute any meaning to the fictional statements in which they occur. Obviously, this conclusion contradicts the observation that people read and enjoy fiction, empathize with it, and entertain a variety of propositional attitudes concerning its non-existing characters.

4 Reference to fictional entities

One way out of this conundrum consists in committing to an ontology that includes abstract (hence, immaterial) fictional objects (Currie 1990; van Inwagen 1977, 2003; Kripke 2011; Lamarque 2003; Salmon 1998, 2002; Thomasson 1999; Wolterstorff 1980; Zalta 1988). According to this view, the names "Rishi Sunak" and "Sherlock Holmes" are both directly and rigidly referential. The only difference is that the former refers to a real individual, whereas the latter refers to a fictional one.

Indeed, the explanatory value of this approach depends on the exact ontological characterization that is assigned to fictional entities. There is an intuitive sense in which fictional entities do exist, demonstrated by so-called *metafictional statements* such as "Sherlock Holmes is a fictional detective created by Conan Doyle". A

statement such as this, in contrast with the genuine fictional statements we have considered so far, is contingently true. This is because it reports the facts from a perspective external to the fiction. The sentence, in other words, does not describe the fictional world of Sherlock Holmes and what he, as a character living in that world, does in it. Rather, it tells us something about Sherlock Holmes as the abstract cultural artifact that resulted from Doyle's writing in the real world. It is an abstract object in the same way as symphonies, countries, and mathematical theorems are and, therefore, can be the subject of truthful predication.

It is less obvious how fictional characters can be characterized ontologically from the inner perspective of the fictional worlds they inhabit. Certainly, the Sherlock Holmes that lives in London, is a private detective, smokes the pipe, and is friend with Doctor Watson is not intended as the cultural product that came out of Doyle's pen. When appreciating the inner perspective of the fiction, we think of Sherlock Holmes as a person in flesh and blood, even though imaginary, who happens to satisfy all the aforementioned properties.

Addressing this issue is pivotal to correctly characterizing the truth-conditions of genuine fictional statements, as they appear in works of fiction. Consider, as an example, the sentence "Sherlock Holmes rose and hit his pipe", as we find it in Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*. According to the realist view, the name "Sherlock Holmes" refers to an abstract fictional object. Does this mean that the sentence is true just in case this object satisfies the property of having risen and hit the pipe? And if so, what are the circumstances under which an abstract fictional object can be said to satisfy or not satisfy such property?

One strategy to address this issue contends that, in genuine fictional statements, the properties predicated of fictional objects are interpreted in a special abstract sense. So, whereas it is patently false of the abstract object Sherlock Holmes that he satisfies the property of having risen and hit his pipe, given that such properties can only be true of concrete objects, not of cultural artifacts, it is true that Sherlock Holmes satisfies the same property intended in some special abstract sense. But what could this special abstract interpretation of properties be? As pointed out by Friend (2007, p. 11), "this sounds rather like asking us to imagine, of the number Three, that it visits Lisbon; or that the Constitution is stubborn."

A different strategy contends that interpreting genuinely fictional statements from the inner perspective of the fiction requires participating in a game of pretense (Currie 1990; Kripke 2011; Lamarque and Olsen 1994). We pretend that there is such a real object as Sherlock Holmes, even though there is none. It is only when we take an external meta-fictional perspective that we refer to Sherlock Holmes as the abstract fictional object it actually is.

Adopting this view, however, amounts to renouncing to the possibility of providing a semantic theory of fictional names as they are used in fiction.

Interpreting fiction becomes rather a pragmatic matter, akin to a linguistic game of pretense. As we will see later, this is in fact a fruitful theoretical perspective but notice, for the time being, that it still fails to capture statements such as “Sherlock Holmes is taller than Rishi Sunak” in which a fictional entity is referred to from a perspective external to the fiction (not as an abstract entity but as a real one). A statement such as this is neither fictional nor metafictional; it reports a comparison between Rishi Sunak’s height and that of Sherlock Holmes, intended as the London based, pipe-smoking detective, not the cultural artifact.

A related problem regards negative existential statements, which are typically judged as true of fictional entities. A statement such as “Sherlock Holmes does not exist” is true from an external perspective, yet not of the abstract fictional entity. Sherlock Holmes does exist indeed as a cultural artifact but does not exist as a man in flesh and blood.

The fact that fictional names can combine with predicates of non-existence to express true propositions is a *prima facie* contradiction of the realist’s claim that fictional entities do exist and are, in fact, the referents of fictional names. In fact, whereas it seems rather natural to judge the sentence “Sherlock Holmes does not exist” as true, it is less natural to do so for sentences such as “the constitution does not exist”, “Beethoven’s 5th symphony does not exist”, or “the number three does not exist”, even though the constitution, Beethoven’s 5th symphony, and the number three are all abstract entities. An obvious reaction to this is that, in the case of “Sherlock Holmes”, the predicate “does not exist” is more naturally understood as applying to the non-existing fictional entity than the abstract cultural artifact. If this is so, however, negative existentials further demonstrate the possibility of mixed uses of fictional names, where a property that belongs to the external perspective toward a fiction is predicated of a fictional name understood from a perspective internal to the fiction.

Negative existentials play an important role in the discussion of fictional names. Yet, the issues they raise may be related to their troubled relationship with referentialism in a more general sense (Braun 1993, 2005). Assume, for the sake of the argument, a quantificational semantics of existence such that a statement “*n* does not exist”, with *n* a proper name, is true iff $\neg\exists x(x = ||n||)$, where $||n||$ is the meaning of *n* (but notice that the following argument could be as effective even assuming a predicational semantics of existence). According to the referentialist analysis of proper names, the meaning of *n* is its reference. Hence, if *n* refers, the sentence “*n* does not exist” is false. If *n* does not refer, then it has no meaning, and the sentence has no truth-value. Strictly speaking, a referentialist analysis of proper names predicts that negative existentials of this sort can never be true; they can only be false, in case the proper name has a referent, or meaningless, in case the proper name has no referent. Obviously, a Russellian semantics of proper names scores

better in this respect: The sentence “*n* does not exist” is true iff $\neg\exists x(Dx)$, where *D* is the description univocally associated with the name *n*. The sentence is therefore true for as long as there is no object *x* that satisfies *D*.

Is it possible to make sense of true negative existentials in a referentialist framework? A way out of this conundrum requires a meta-semantic formulation of the truth-conditions of negative existentials, whereby the sentence “*n* does not exist” expresses the same proposition as the sentence “*n* does not refer” (Braun 1993, p. 454). As is well known, this approach requires supplementing the referentialist analysis of proper names with a meta-linguistic dimension, representing the relationship between a name and its referent. How to properly characterize this dimension, however, is no easy matter. One option is to assimilate it to a descriptive character akin to the character that Kaplan attributes to pure indexicals (Haas-Spohn 1995). This option, however, brings descriptions back into the picture and, with them, some of the shortcomings of descriptivism (in fact, Kaplan himself strongly opposed this possibility; Kaplan 1989). A different option associates the contextual dimension of proper names with the historical causal chain that connects them to their reference (Kripke 1980). This is the so-called causal theory of proper names. This option obviously fails in the case of fictional names, as they have no referent, but has found some applications in the context of para-fictional discourse (Friend 2011, discussed below).

Independently of the theoretical choice one eventually makes, it is useful to observe that the meta-linguistic dimension that negative existentials call for overlaps with the one that is required to explain the necessary *a posteriori* of identity statements such as “Hesperus is Phosphorus” under Kripke’s assumption that these names are directly referential. The crucial difference is that, whereas identities make a claim that two names with different contextual backgrounds share a common referent, negative existentials deny that a name has a contextual background. It seems to us that a referential theory of fictional names cast in a two-dimensional framework that distinguishes between a linguistic and a meta-linguistic dimension and has a meta-linguistic negation would be hardly distinguishable from a Fregean theory of proper names. What is, after all, the difference between conceiving of a fictional name as a name with empty identity conditions for identifying its referent and conceiving it as a name with a sense that delivers no reference? The differences may be of a metaphysical sort, concerning the way in which the meta-linguistic dimension that ascribes meaning to names is properly characterized, but it is difficult to see how the two frameworks would differ in terms of the truth-conditions they predict.

The conclusion we wish to draw from these considerations (a conclusion that we will further substantiate later) is that a purely referential theory of fictional names is simply unachievable, even when complementing it with an ontology of fictional

entities. What is needed is a two-dimensional framework capable of encompassing the contextual relation between a name and its reference as an independent logical primitive.

5 Semantics of fiction

There is an intuition, invoked even by some referentialists, that genuine (non-metaphorical) fictional statements are neither true nor false but are part of a *pretense* of sort. A notable implementation of this intuition as a semantic framework for the interpretation of fictional statements is Lewis (1978). Lewis's framework is grounded on the idea that fictional statements are interpreted within the scope of a fictional operator, which may be overt but most of the times is implicit. According to this approach, the truth-conditions of a fictional statement "S" are equivalent to the truth conditions of the statement "in fiction *f*, S", where "in fiction *f*" is treated by Lewis as a universal quantifier over the fictional possible worlds of the fiction *f*. According to this analysis, when we read "Sherlock Holmes rose and hit his pipe" in Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*, we are in fact reading "In all the possible worlds that are consistent with the fiction *A Study in Scarlet* by Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes rose and hit his pipe."

Let us say that, according to this approach, a fictional statement S in fiction *f* has the following truth-conditions: $\Box_f ||S||$, where $||S||$ is the proposition denoted by S and \Box_f is true of a proposition *p* iff *p* is true in all the possible worlds that are consistent with the fiction *f*.

In this theory, the burden of the explanation resides in the way the set quantified over by \Box_f is qualified. This is a complex task that meets several well-known challenges. To begin with, this set cannot be assimilated with what the fiction *f* says: "this produces the thesis that [S] is true in fiction *f* iff [S] is true in every world in which everything true in fiction *f* is true. This is viciously circular. A semantical theory making use of this membership condition presupposes the very concept that we are hoping the possible worlds semantics will explicate: truth in fiction" (Proudfoot 2006: 13). This problem is evaded by including in the set all information that is either implicit to the novel (for example, we assume, even though it is never explicitly mentioned, that Sherlock Holmes breath oxygens and does not have three nostrils) or part of the fiction's cultural background (for example, we assume that the England where Sherlock Holmes lives is a constitutional monarchy). However, it has also been pointed out that this strategy runs the risk of including too many words in the relevant set. For example (Proudfoot 2006: 21), we know that it was part of the cultural background in which *A Study in Scarlet* was written and published that

Conan Doyle was a best-selling writer of fiction. This, however, is not a proposition readers of Conan Doyle assume to be true in the set against which they interpret *A Study in Scarlet*. Similarly, a well-known fact about the same cultural background was that there was no detective called Sherlock Holmes living in London. Clearly, this is a proposition we want to exclude from the set. These few examples are sufficient to illustrate the more general challenge met by Lewis's framework: Defining a set of possible worlds that is both consistent and complete with respect to the fiction, its cultural background, and the implicit knowledge that enables the reader to interpret it – a set, that is, that makes true all the propositions that a reader would judge as true when reading the fiction, and only those.

Other, related challenges concern impossible fictions – that is, fictions where impossible or contradictory things happen (think of *Alice in Wonderland*) and therefore run the risk of delivering an empty set of possible worlds (at least for as long as we wish to restrict the set to metaphysically possible worlds) – and fictions that report statements that are to be judged as patently false – an example is Huck in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* who reports Hamlet's famous soliloquy incorrectly; readers are expected to recognize it as such, that is, not as an indication that the world of *Huckleberry Finn* is a world where Shakespeare wrote a different soliloquy for Hamlet but one where Huck remembers it incorrectly (Bonomi and Zucchi 2003; Byrne 1993). As already noticed by Lewis, however, the latter is a case in which the fiction is a first-personal report made by Huck in the first person. Hence, the relevant set of possible worlds does not need to be compatible with *what* Huck says but with *the fact that* he says it.

On the one hand, these challenges are useful heuristics for uncovering the complexity of the contextual strategies at work in the interpretation of fiction. In fact, these are challenges any theory of fiction must face, quite irrespectively of its semantic format. On the other hand, they demonstrate the difficulty of modeling such complexity in rigid semantic terms, that is, as metaphysical constraints defining an entirely complete and consistent set of possible worlds. It is for this reason that it has been proposed to recast Lewis's framework in pragmatic terms. We will consider this option in the following section.

Before moving on, however, it is important to consider how Lewis's framework addresses the issues raised by empty fictional names. Lewis adopts a possibilist analysis of fictional names. Possibilism is the theory whereby fictional names refer to possible objects, that is, objects that do not exist in the real world but do exist in other possible worlds (see especially Lewis 1978, discussed below). Several objections have been raised against possibilism (which we will not discuss in detail here, but see Panizza 2017: Ch. 4, for an overview). One of the most relevant is the particularity problem, as formulated by Kripke in the quote below:

I hold the metaphysical view that, granted that there is not Sherlock Holmes, one cannot say of any possible person that he would have been Sherlock Holmes, had he existed. Several distinct possible people, and even actual ones such as Darwin or Jack the Ripper, might have performed the exploits of Holmes, but there is none of whom we can say that he would have been Holmes had he performed these exploits. For, if so, which one? (Kripke 1980: 157–158)

This is a problem of ontological indeterminacy: There seem to be no way of defining the identity conditions of possible objects in a principled way.

Other objections concern how possible objects may exist in impossible fictional worlds and how possibilism applies to fictional names in meta-fictional statements (such as “Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character who was invented by Conan Doyle”) and mixed statements (such as “Sherlock Holmes is taller than Rishi Sunak”). As Panizza (2017) observes, “what rules out possibilism as a candidate for a theory of fiction is the fact that we have no satisfactory explanation of *how* reference to a particular non-actual object is achieved” (Panizza 2017: 67) – an observation that becomes even more cogent when we consider the object-directedness of fictional names (discussed above).

6 Pragmatics of fiction

The intuition at the basis of Lewis’s framework is that the interpretation of fiction is relativized to an interpretative domain different from that of regular assertions. However, as we have seen, it is especially challenging to characterize this domain in explicit semantic terms, that is, as a consistent and coherent modal base.

An alternative hypothesis, which partially maintains the spirit of Lewis’s original proposal, is that the shift of interpretative domain we witness in fiction is not semantic but pragmatic. We have already encountered the informal notion that fictional statements are part of a game of pretense. A more formal declination of the pragmatic view is Walton (1990) who proposes that fictional statements are *prescriptions to imagine*. Regular assertions are understood as descriptions of the world and are judged as true or false depending on whether the proposition they express describes the world correctly or incorrectly. Fictional statements, conversely, do not describe the world as it is but invite the addressee to imagine the state of affairs that would make them true.

A pragmatic framework such as Walton’s allows a greater degree of flexibility in accommodating the variety of conventional, contextual, cultural, and historical factors that play a role in imagining the world prescribed by the fiction. However, it does not differ substantially from Lewis’s semantic framework when it comes to fictional names. In fact, Walton assumes that fictional statements do not refer and,

consequently, fictional statements express incomplete (“gappy”) propositions. Part of the prescription to imagine associated with a fictional statement is a prescription to imagine that the fictional names occurring in the statement do have a referent.

As pointed out by Friend (2011), this approach raises the question of how to make sense of the difference between fictional statements that assign equivalent properties to different fictional characters. Consider, for example, two fictional statements “Sherlock Holmes is P” and “Gregor Samsa is P” predicating the same property P to two distinct fictional characters. Since the two fictional names “Sherlock Holmes” and “Gregor Samsa” are empty, both sentences express the same gappy proposition. What, then, determines the difference between reading of Sherlock Holmes that it is P and of Gregor Samsa that it is P? This approach clearly misses the object directedness of fictional names discussed previously (as demonstrated by the possibility of counterfactual reasoning about fictional entities and intersubjective co-identification). Also in this case, the most immediate solution resides in attributing a descriptive content to fictional names (Adams and Stecker 1994; Adams and Dietrich 2004; Taylor 2000). The idea, in a nutshell, is that the sentences “Sherlock Holmes is P” and “Gregor Samsa is P” do have equivalent semantic content (they denote the same gappy proposition) but trigger different pragmatic implicatures and presuppositions because the names “Sherlock Holmes” and “Gregor Samsa” are associated with different descriptions.

An attempt to overcome descriptivism within a pragmatic framework is Friend (2011). Friend discusses the interesting case of Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* in which the reader, addressed in the second person, is invited to read the first chapter of a fictive novel aptly called *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* but then finds out that, because of a binding error, the book you are reading has only the first chapter, repeated over and over. The rest of the novel takes the reader, again addressed in the second person, through a compulsive search of the missing chapters. Friend focuses on the use of the second person in the novel as, for example, in the very first line of the novel: “You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*”. In Walton’s framework, the sentence prescribes the reader to imagine a state of affairs in which a certain object has the property of reading Italo Calvino’s novel. However, the object of which this property is predicated is identified by the pronoun “you”, which, because of its indexical nature, delivers different objects in different contexts. Read by Gaetano, the sentence prescribes the reader to imagine that Gaetano is about to read the novel. Read by Denis, it prescribes the reader to imagine that Denis is about to read the book. This means that we cannot specify *a priori* what the sentence prescribes. The only thing we can specify *a priori* is a gappy proposition waiting for its subject to be assigned a referent. Yet, this is a different type of gappy proposition compared to the gappy propositions provided by fictional names because “you” is a pure indexical and has a Kaplanian character which, Friend proposes, can be used to specify *a priori* the

specifically self-directed mode of presentation of its referent.¹ So, whereas the gappy proposition associated with the sentence does not give us an object of predication, its character provides us with a mode of presentation of such object. Intuitively, the sentence invites readers, irrespectively of who they are, to identify *themselves*, subjectively, with the protagonist of the story.

On the basis of the parallel with indexicals in fiction, Friend proposes a framework where fictional statements produce gappy propositions but are complemented by an indication of how they are to be imagined. Hence, although neither “Sherlock Holmes” nor “Gregor Samsa” refer, they are associated with different modes of presentation. The challenge, then, is identifying the mode of presentation of proper names. As already mentioned, there are reasons to oppose the idea that proper names have a descriptive character. To avoid resorting to characters, Friend introduces the concept of *notion network* which is the shared network of information that connects causally a name to its *root*, that is, “the thing that has the right relation (whatever that is) to the notion network to be the referent of a name” (Friend 2011: 199).

This approach works especially well with para-fictional statements, that is, statements that describe a fictional world but are not part of the fiction. We saw above the case of the debate around what type of insect Gregor Samsa was transformed into. Friend’s idea is that, when Nabokov declares that “Gregor Samsa was transformed into a beetle”, he is participating in a notion network, the practice of using the name “Gregor Samsa”, that finds its root in Kafka’s writing. This approach applies equally well to mixed statements such as “Sherlock Holmes is taller than Rishi Sunak”. It falls short, however, in explaining genuine fictional statements such as “Sherlock Holmes rose and hit his pipe” as we find them in Doyle’s novel. In this case, we cannot say that understanding the name “Sherlock Holmes” amounts to participating in a notion network that connects the name to its root in Doyle’s writing. Doing so would be, again, circular. Friend acknowledges this limitation but also observes that “Psychologists studying reading comprehension and object-directed mental representations aim to tell a causal story about how this happens, and we should be able to appeal to this story in explaining the Gregor-directedness of our imaginings” (Friend 2011: 204).

Another recent implementation of Walton’s framework is Maier (2017). His theory is framed in the dynamic model of Discourse Representation Theory (DRT; Kamp et al. 2003) and, in a nutshell, assumes that fictional statements are interpreted in the context of an imagination attitudinal component. The model of DRT assumed

¹ In particular, Friend proposes that: “The character also corresponds to a psychological role: the thoughts that one would express in the first person are thoughts that involve what Perry calls one’s self-notion (Perry 1990), the essentially indexical way one thinks of oneself” (Friend 2011: 195).

by Maier is characterized by an attitude description set which characterizes the epistemic assumptions of the interpreter and encompasses a set of discourse referents and properties of these referents. This attitude description provides the objects of reference of the statements that are interpreted, as well as the beliefs of the interpreter about those objects. Interpreting an incoming statement means dynamically updating this belief description with the new information. To account for fictional names, Maier proposes that, next to this belief attitude description, there is also an *imagination* attitude description, which has an equivalent logical structure but, instead of expressing the beliefs of the interpreter, expresses their imagination. This attitude component, in particular, provides a set of discourse referents that do not exist but are imagined to exist. In this framework, interpreting a fictional statement amounts to updating the imagination description. In the same vein, interpreting a fictional name amounts to anchoring it anaphorically to one of the discourse referents in the imagination description.

In evaluating his proposal, Maier (2017) observes that “the representations for fictional names that we end up with are akin to those postulated by the classic descriptivist approaches to fictional names (Currie 1990; Quine 1948; Russell 1905) that analyze ‘Frodo is a hobbit’ as, roughly, ‘(in the fiction) there exists someone named <<Frodo>> who is a hobbit’. Friend’s counterfactual imagination argument explicitly targets such descriptive approaches, and therefore, potentially, the current approach” (Maier 2017: 31).

The solution put forward by Maier is based on the notion that there is no constraint against entertaining a *de re* attitude about an object that has been introduced as part of a *de dicto* attitude: “For instance, I may want to buy a new smartphone in 2018 and imagine it having a flexible transparent screen – an imagination dependent on a *de dicto* desire” (Maier 2017: 32). The possibility of having referential dependencies across different attitudinal components is also exploited by Maier to account for meta-fictional uses of fictional names. These, according to Maier, are uses in which a name whose referent is introduced by the imagination component is part of a proposition that updates the belief component.

This formal setting allows Maier to explain counterfactual reasoning about fictional entities as well as metafictional uses of fictional names. However, it is less clear how it can be extended to account for inter-subjective identification. Maier’s framework is explicitly psychologistic in that it offers a formalization of the inner psychological state (expressed in terms of attitude components) of the interpreter. The fact that we observe inter-subjective identification, however, demonstrates that fictional names also have a public semantic value: Different interpreters are able to use the same fictional name while being perfectly aware that they are talking about the same thing, to the point that, as we saw, they can write different novels about one and the same character. This suggests that the singular nature of fictional names goes

beyond the private attitudes of individual interpreters. Inevitably, each reader of Doyle's novels constructs a different descriptive profile of who Sherlock Holmes may be. Yet, these differences in descriptive content do not stop different readers from sharing attitudes that are recognized, on public grounds, as being about the same object, even in the extreme cases in which they hold contradictory beliefs or imaginations about the descriptions that hold true of such imaginary objects. This suggests that the *de re* nature of fictional names begins with how their referents are imagined.

7 On the ambiguity and polysemy of fictional names

As we saw, one of the arguments presented by Maier (2017) in support to his approach is that it provides a common semantics to fictional and meta-fictional uses of fictional names and, therefore, does not need to introduce any form of ambiguity. As mentioned above, this result is achieved by allowing the anchoring of fictional names across different attitude components. In our view, however, the solution provided by Maier is not entirely satisfactory.

To begin with, it is important to observe that the paradigm of uses of fictional names extends significantly beyond the distinction between fictional and meta-fictional uses. Consider the examples in (1).

- (1)
 - a. Sherlock Holmes rose and hit his pipe
 - b. Sherlock Holmes is a private detective who lives in London, smokes the pipe, and is friend with Doctor Watson
 - c. Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character who was invented by Conan Doyle
 - d. Sherlock Holmes is taller than Rishi Sunak
 - e. Sherlock Holmes does not exist

Sentence (1a) is a genuine fictional statement, taken directly from Doyle's novel, where the name is used to talk about the person named "Sherlock Holmes" as it is presented by Doyle in the inner world of the fiction, that is, as a man in flesh and blood who does things such as rising and hitting his pipe. This statement may be said to either have no truth-value, as it describes an imaginary world, or be false as it describes objects and circumstances that do not obtain in the real world. Sentence (1b) is an example of a *parafictional* statement, that is, a statement that does not belong to the fiction (the sentence in question, for example, does not appear in Doyle's novel) but is still judged as true or false relatively to the fiction. In fact, it can

be prefixed *salva veritate* by phrases such as “in the fiction...” or “according to the fiction...”. Parafictional statements are external to the fiction, as they do not belong to the fictional text and their truth-value depends on whether they are consistent with the original fiction as an existing cultural artifact. Yet, they use fictional names to refer to characters (or other sorts of objects) as they are in the inner world of the fiction, in the same way as fictional statements. Sentence (1c) is a *metafictional* statement whose truth-value depends on facts external to the fiction. In it, the proper name “Sherlock Holmes” is not used to refer to the character from the internal perspective of the story but as a real-world abstract object, a cultural artifact produced by the pen of Conan Doyle. Sentence (1d) is yet a different case. In it, Sherlock Holmes is referred to as the character in flesh and blood (someone who has height). The sentence’s truth value (if any) depends on facts that belong both to the fictional world (Sherlock Holmes’s height) and the actual world (Rishi Sunak’s height).² Finally, sentence (1e) is a negative existential. As we saw, it is typically judged as true, and this judgment is taken as evidence that the object whose existence is negated is not the abstract cultural artifact (which exists) but the flesh and blood character of the novel. Henceforth, the sentence expresses a real-world feature of an imaginary character, its lack of existence. Interestingly, we could add to this list the case of genuinely fictional statements that refer to fictional characters or other fictional objects as cultural artifacts (see, for example, the case of “Hamlet” as it is used in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*).

The diversity we see across the statements in (1) appears to be the product of two main axes of variation. On the one hand, there is a distinction between uses of fictional names where they are interpreted as the objects they are inside the world of the fiction and uses where they are interpreted as real world cultural artifacts. On the other hand, there is a distinction of domain of interpretation that has to do with whether the names are interpreted as contributing to the world of the fiction or as describing the actual world. Interestingly, these two axes do not overlap. Irrespectively of one’s theoretical stance, there is an intuitive sense in which the first dimension is ontological, it has to do with the basic ontological features of the referent (whether it is a cultural artifact or a person in flesh and blood, in the examples at hand), whereas the second has to do with the interpretive perspective (internal to the fiction or external).

2 A reviewer asks what would prevent us from saying that a speaker who uses (1d) would likely mean “Sherlock Holmes as described in the fiction is taller than Sunak is in real life”. Notice that a potential operator corresponding to the formula “as described in the fiction” would be different from Lewis’s (1978) operator in that it would apply to individuals rather than propositions. However this operator is construed, it provides an analysis of the name that associates the meaning of the name with either a description or a possible non-actual object. Above, we have discussed some of the most cogent drawbacks of possibilism.

Importantly, Maier's distinction captures the latter dimension but not the former. It is only able to capture whether a statement about an object introduced by the imagination component is to be interpreted as an update of the imagination component itself or as an update of the belief component. This means that, for example, the theory is not able to express the semantic difference between (1c) and (1d).

Recanati (2018) observes that the ontological dimension of variation does not require admitting an ambiguity in the semantics of fictional names but rather corresponds to a form of *polysemy* that is independently attested in different lexical categories. Recanati mentions examples such as "Lunch was delicious but it took forever" (Asher 2011: 11) or "John's Mom burned the book on magic before he could master it", in which the common noun "lunch" refers at once (as demonstrated by the anaphoric dependency) to the food that was served and the social event and the noun "book" refers at once to the book as a physical object and as a content.

In the framework of the Generative Lexicon (Asher 2011; Pustejovsky 1995), these cases are treated as forms of polysemy (so called dot-objects). The referent of "book", for example, is regarded as the combination of two different *qualia*, one expressing the material dimension of the referent, the other related to its informational content. Recanati proposes that fictional names can be regarded, on a similar vein, as polysemic words whose meaning is constituted of two different, yet related *qualia*, one related to the object as we find it in the fiction, the other to the same object as the cultural artifact.

8 A contextual theory of proper names

The lesson we wish to draw from the critical discussion above is that most of the problems raised by fictional names would find a solution if there was a satisfactory way to express their meta-linguistic dimension. This, however, cannot be achieved by resorting to a Kaplanian notion of character because, as discussed, such a notion does not apply to proper names without raising significant problems. Resorting to the causal theory of proper names does not help either, because fictional names do not have a causal history that can be traced back to their referent. In what follows we wish to demonstrate that the contextual theory of proper names developed in Delfitto and Fiorin (2023) offers a logical framework that may just fit the bill.

Delfitto and Fiorin's framework is grounded on observations concerning the logicity of language. There is an original perspective on the ungrammaticality of sentences such as those in (2) arguing that they are not morpho-syntactically deviant but contradictory (Chierchia 2021; Del Pinal 2019; Gajewski 2002, 2008).

- (2) a. ??Some students but John passed the exam
 b. ??John saw any book

This raises the question of why the sentences in (3) are not ungrammatical as well, as they also express contradictions.

- (3) a. It's raining and not raining
 b. John is a student and not a student

An influential answer to this problem (Del Pinal 2019) is that the contradictory nature of the sentences in (2) results solely from the logical properties of the functional lexicon whereas the contradictions in (3) are due to the substantive lexicon. An essential feature of the substantive lexicon, in contrast to the functional one, is that it is always amenable to contextual modulation. Hence, the contradictions potentially expressed by the examples in (3) can be avoided by giving the different occurrences of the substantive lexicon different interpretations. For example, (3b) may be successfully used to describe a situation in which John is a professor teaching at a university but, at the same time, he is enrolled as a student in a course.

Technically, the pervasive contextual dependency of non-logical lexical terms is implemented by assuming that every occurrence of a lexical category is combined syntactically with an operator \mathfrak{R} that modulates the content of the lexical category to the relevant contextual information. According to this view, the underlying structure of a sentence such as (3b) is as in (3c), which would then deliver a contradiction only in case both occurrences of the operator \mathfrak{R} are interpreted vacuously.

- (3) c. John is a [\mathfrak{R} student] and not a [\mathfrak{R} student]

What exact function is assigned to the \mathfrak{R} operator whenever it occurs is a matter of complex, and potentially unconstrained, cognitive strategies that have to do with the specificity of the context at hand, the cognitive stand of its participants, and the communicative goals of the broader conversational setting to which they contribute.

Delfitto and Fiorin (2023) discuss the hypothesis that the same mechanism applies to proper names. Names too, according to this view, result from syntactically merging a lexical category with an \mathfrak{R} operator. What gives proper names their distinctive semantic features is not the lexical category but the type of contextual restriction imposed by the \mathfrak{R} operator, which, in the case of proper names, is formalized as \mathfrak{R}^* :

$\mathfrak{R}^*(N) = \{c: \exists!x\forall s(s \text{ agrees that } N \text{ is instantiated as } x \text{ in } c)\}$, where N is a name, c is a variable ranging over contexts of utterance, and s is a variable ranging over the cognitive agents involved in c .³

According to this definition, the successful use of a name N in a context c requires that all the cognitive agents involved in c agree on the existence of a unique object x as the referent of the name. The reference of N will then be the unique object x toward which all cognitive agents involved in c unanimously converge (possibly as the result of complex negotiation processes).

This approach has a number of advantages. First, it applies straightforwardly to the problems raised by homonymy. The same name may refer to different objects in different contexts for as long as the contextual condition \mathfrak{R}^* is satisfied. On the other hand, failure to satisfy \mathfrak{R}^* when using a name in a context where there is more than one object with that name, will result in a pragmatically infelicitous use of the name.

Furthermore, the approach applies successfully to some of the classical logical puzzles concerning names in identity statements and opaque contexts. To see an example, the sentence “Hesperus is Phosphorus” is predicted to be necessarily false in all possible worlds w^1 where, when taken as contexts of utterance, the referents (provisionally) agreed upon for the two names by the agents involved are different; it

³ A reviewer suggests that this definition might have unpleasant consequences. One of them is that the sentence “Mars is the fourth planet from the sun” is false or truth-valueless in any context in which the agents in c do not know that “Mars” is the name of Mars. Another would be that “Mars is the fifth planet from the sun” is true in contexts where the agents all agree that “Mars” is the name of Jupiter. Finally, “Mars is a planet” might come out as false or truth-valueless in a context in which the agents are astronomers who believe “Mars” refers to the planet except for one agent who believes it refers to the Roman god of war. However, our definition has none of these consequences. All \mathfrak{R}^* requires is that there be agreement, in the context of utterance of a sentence containing a proper name, on the fact that that name uniquely refers. It is thus not required that all cognitive agents in a context know that “Mars” refers to a specific planet. All is required for the sentence “Mars is the fourth planet from the sun” to be felicitous in the relevant context is that they agree that there is only one entity labelled “Mars”: they would then seek agreement in determining the precise referent of “Mars” and whether this referent satisfies the property of being “the fourth planet from the sun”. In a context where the agents reach a consensus that the name “Mars” refers to the planet Jupiter, the sentence “Mars is the fifth planet from the sun” is thus correctly predicted to be true. Finally, the sentence “Mars is a planet” is correctly predicted to be felicitous in a context in which some speakers believe that the name “Mars” only refers to some planet and some believe that it only refers to the god of war. In such a context, the sentence would be true for some speakers and false for others. In fact, our approach predicts that social negotiation is likely to lead to the unanimous recognition that “Mars” refers to a planet and not to a god (see Delfitto and Fiorin 2023 for a detailed discussion). The situation is different in a context where there is at least one cognitive agent for which “Mars” may refer both to a planet and to the god of war. In this context, the sentence would be infelicitous because this would not be a context suitable for the use of the name “Mars” according to our definition. These consequences seem entirely correct from the perspective of a “pragmatics” of proper names.

is predicted to be necessarily true in all possible worlds w^2 where, when taken as contexts of utterance, the referents agreed upon for the two names are one and the same. As expected, the Stalnakerian diagonal of the matrix resulting from these two sets of possible worlds corresponds to the proposition that is true in w^1 but false in w^2 . As demonstrated in detail in Delfitto and Fiorin (2023), this strategy can be extended straightforwardly to contexts of propositional attitude and provides a successful account of semantic puzzles such as Kripke's *Pierre*, Quine's *double-vision*, and Putnam's *Twin-Earth thought experiment*.

Finally, the proposal offers a model for the syntax and semantics of complex names such as "Attila the Hun". The predicational component of these names can be justified as a lexicalization of \mathfrak{R}^* and interpreted as expressing (part of) the descriptive content that is used in context to identify the reference of the name. In fact, Delfitto and Fiorin (2023) observe that these predicational components have no truth-conditional value, as demonstrated by the acceptability of sentences such as "Attila the Hun was in fact not a Hun" (in contrast to "The Hun Attila was in fact not a Hun").

For the purposes of the current enterprise, it is important to observe that the model proposed achieves its goals by complementing the referential dimension of proper names with a contextual one. It is, therefore, a *two-dimensional semantics* that distinguishes between a truth-conditional dimension, where names refer directly and rigidly and contribute singular, *de re* propositions, and a contextual dimension, which models the contextual parameters that are relevant to the identification of the name's referent. Indeed, the contextual restriction imposed by \mathfrak{R}^* parallels a Kaplanian character in the measure that it expresses a property of contexts. However, it differs from the type of character that Kaplan assigns to pure indexicals in that it has no lexically defined descriptive content. A Kaplanian indexical character is a function from contexts to objects whereas \mathfrak{R}^* is a condition (expressed as an existential statement) on the felicitous use of a name. As Delfitto and Fiorin (2023, p. 160) explain, "[i]n the case of a first-person pronoun, determining its reference in the context of utterance c only requires the activation of the context parameter 'speaker-in- c '. In the case of a name, determining its reference in the context of utterance c requires the activation of a full series of potentially unconstrained cognitive strategies, based on the use of a full set of properties/descriptions." Establishing the reference of a name may invoke a plurality of descriptions and corresponding modes of presentation. These descriptions and modes of presentation, however, are not a meaningful part of the character of the name which, instead, requires only that there is agreement amongst the participants in the conversational exchange about the existence of a unique referent for name, irrespectively of how this agreement is achieved.

This characterization of the contextual dimension of proper names differs also from that provided by the causal theory of proper names, although it is not entirely incompatible with it. Delfitto and Fiorin observe that, whereas the causal theory has valuable implications concerning the metaphysics of proper names, it is poorly suited to capturing the cognitive processes and social practices that lead to the identification of a name's reference in the here and now of a conversational exchange. The involvement of cognitive processes to achieve a shared interpretation becomes crucial in explaining classic puzzles concerning proper names in the context of propositional attitudes. Indeed, historical factors may play a role in such practices. A relevant example is "Attila the Hun": "Attila" is not a Hunnic name but has gothic origins; the appellative "Hun" was likely added, sometime after Attila's time, to distinguish him from other historical Attila's of different origins. In this case, the appellative "Hun" clearly reflects a fragment of the historical chain that connects the name to its referent. The model proposed is, therefore, able to accommodate the value of historical factors in determining the referent of a name but also leaves room for more immediate processes of contextual accommodation, private and public, cognitive and social.

In the end, the model offers a novel characterization of the contextual dimension of proper names. As we saw, some of the challenges raised by fictional names call for a two-dimensional framework. However, both the Kaplanian/descriptive characterization and the historical/causal characterization have proven inadequate. In what follows, we will apply the framework of Delfitto and Fiorin's (2023) to fictional names and demonstrate its main explanatory advantages.

9 Fictions as possible contexts

Consider the following scenario. In an historical archive we discover a postcard that says:

- (4) a. I am well now and I like it here

The sentence hosts several indexicals ("I", "now", and "here"). For this reason, it is not interpretable unless we have access to its context of utterance. Let us suppose that we do not know the exact material circumstances in which the statement was written but that we can observe that the letter was signed by "John Smith" and dated "Venice, May 21st, 1957". This information does not allow us to map the sentence into a singular proposition, but it does allow us to take some steps towards it.

Consider how we can make sense of this process in a Kaplanian semantics of pure indexicals. The character of (4) corresponds to the set of contexts of utterance c such that the speaker in c is well at the time of c and likes it at the location of c :

- (4) b. { c : the speaker in c is well at the of time c and likes the place of c }

The signature and date we find on the letter allows us to further restrict this set of contexts, by excluding from the set (4b) all the contexts in which the speaker is not John Smith, the place of utterance is outside the boundaries of the city of Venice, and the time of utterance is outside the temporal boundaries of May 21st, 1957.

This process can be formalized by making use of Stalnaker’s (1978) notion of propositional concept (a matrix of possible worlds taken as possible contexts of utterance on one axis and as possible worlds of evaluation on the other) and the process of *diagonalization*. The table in (5) represents the propositional concept of the proposition “I am well”. The possible worlds on the vertical axis are possible contexts: worlds 1 to 4 are worlds in which the speaker is John Smith (Speaker = j) whereas worlds 5 to 8 are worlds in which someone other than John Smith is the speaker (Speaker = o). The possible worlds on the horizontal axis are possible worlds of evaluation representing all combinations of truth value between the propositions W_j (John Smith is well) and W_o (someone other than John Smith is well). As expected, the diagonal of this matrix is the proposition that is true in all worlds w such that the speaker in w is well in w , false otherwise.

(5)

		w^1	w^2	w^3	w^4	w^5	w^6	w^7	w^8
		$W_j \ \& \ W_o$	$W_j \ \& \ \neg W_o$	$\neg W_j \ \& \ W_o$	$\neg W_j \ \& \ \neg W_o$	$W_j \ \& \ W_o$	$W_j \ \& \ \neg W_o$	$\neg W_j \ \& \ W_o$	$\neg W_j \ \& \ \neg W_o$
w^1	Speaker = j	T	T	F	F	T	T	F	F
w^2	Speaker = j	T	T	F	F	T	T	F	F
w^3	Speaker = j	T	T	F	F	T	T	F	F
w^4	Speaker = j	T	T	F	F	T	T	F	F
w^5	Speaker = o	T	F	T	F	T	F	T	F
w^6	Speaker = o	T	F	T	F	T	F	T	F
w^7	Speaker = o	T	F	T	F	T	F	T	F
w^8	Speaker = o	T	F	T	F	T	F	T	F

In the scenario we are considering, we do not have access to the material context in which the statement was uttered, hence, we cannot identify the worlds in the matrix

that correspond to the actual context of utterance. However, we know from circumstantial evidence that the speaker is John Smith, not someone else. This information allows us to exclude all possible contexts in which someone other than John Smith is the speaker. In the matrix, this leaves us with the first four possible contexts and the diagonal proposition that is true in all possible worlds w where John Smith is well, and false in all the worlds where he is not.

In what follows, we shall propose that fictional statements with fictional names are interpreted by means of an equivalent process.

Walton (1990) made the influential suggestion that fictional statements are prescriptions to imagine. But what does it mean to imagine something on the basis of a statement? And more precisely, what does it mean to imagine something on the basis of a statement containing a fictional name? Consider a fictional statement $\Phi = \text{“}\phi \text{ is } P\text{”}$, where ϕ is a fictional name and P a predicate. What does it mean to imagine something on the basis of Φ ? We cannot simply imagine a world where $\|\Phi\|$ (the proposition expressed by Φ) is true, because ϕ is a fictional name with no reference and, therefore, Φ does not express a proposition and does not individuate a set of possible worlds.

To address this issue, we must draw a distinction between imagining what the world would be like if a proposition were true (call this *propositional imagining*) and imagining what the world would be like if a statement were meaningful (call this *contextual imagining*). Propositional imagining has to do with contemplating possible worlds of evaluation of a proposition. For example, imagining that the Eiffel Tower is in Rome means imagining what the world would be like if the Eiffel Tower happened to be in Rome instead of Paris. In contrast, contextual meaning has to do with contemplating possible contexts of interpretation of a statement. Returning to the postcard scenario, when we read the sentence “I am well now and I like it here”, we cannot simply imagine what the world would be like if the sentence were true, because we have no access to the sentence’s truth-conditions. We do not know what the world should be like for the sentence to be true, because we do not know the semantic value of the indexical terms in the sentence. However, we can imagine what the world would have to be like for the sentence to have truth-conditions. Doing so requires imagining possible contexts of utterance of the sentence, a process that is guided by the character of the indexical expressions in the sentence and by any relevant circumstantial evidence (such as the signature on the post-card or its letterhead).

We submit that the interpretation of fictional statements with fictional names requires a similar process. More precisely, we propose that interpreting a fictional statement Φ corresponds to contemplating the smallest set of possible contexts c that assign a semantic value to all the context-dependent terms in Φ and are consistent with (a) the characters of the context-dependent terms in Φ and (b) any

circumstantial evidence that is relevant to further restricting the characters of the context-dependent terms in Φ . In order for this proposal to apply to fictional names, we shall assume with Delfitto and Fiorin (2023) that the reference of fictional names, like that of all proper names, is context-dependent and mediated by a character. This makes proper names akin to indexicals in that also proper names have a character. Yet, the character of proper names is substantially different from that of indexicals in that it is neither a lexically defined description nor the causal relation that connects the name to its reference. It is, rather, a restriction over contexts of utterance of the proper name where all linguistic agents involved agree that there is a unique referent for the name.

Hence, according to the strategy we are proposing, interpreting a fictional statement $\Phi = \text{“}\phi \text{ is } P\text{”}$, where ϕ is a fictional name, corresponds to *imagining* the smallest set of possible contexts c that assign a semantic value to ϕ and are consistent with (a) the character of ϕ , as described above, and (b) any circumstantial evidence that is relevant to further restricting the character of ϕ .

As an example, let us apply this strategy to the fictional statement “Sherlock Holmes rose and hit his pipe”. According to our proposal, interpreting this statement requires imagining the possible contexts c that assign a semantic value to the proper name “Sherlock Holmes” and, with it, truth-conditions to the whole statement. The contexts in the set must satisfy the following conditions: (a) they must be consistent with the character of the name; that is, in interpreting the sentence we must *imagine* contexts in which all cognitive agents involved in the use and interpretation of the name agree on a unique object as the referent of the name; and (b) they must be consistent with any available circumstantial evidence that is relevant to establishing this agreement. More particularly, at the point in the novel where we read the sentence in question, we have been made aware, among other things, that Sherlock Holmes is a male adult, that he is a detective, and that he lives in London. When interpreting the fictional statement we can, therefore, restrict the relevant set of possible contexts to those contexts where the referent that is agreed upon for the name “Sherlock Holmes” is a male adult, a detective, and lives in London. A fictional statement with a fictional name is, ultimately, a prescription to imagine what the context of utterance of such a statement should be like for the name to have a referent that is accepted as such by all who use it.

This proposal has a number of merits. To begin with, it gives content to the notion of pretense, which is often invoked in the literature yet demonstrably difficult to apply to fictional statements with fictional names. According to our proposal, the pretense stimulated by a text of fiction corresponds to the exercise of imagining the possible contexts that would make the otherwise meaningless fictional text a meaningful one.

Importantly, at its root, this is not an exercise in truth. It is not, that is, an exercise in imagining what the world would be like if a fictional text was true. Consider again the example of the postcard. The available circumstantial evidence helps us restricting the range of potential contexts of utterance of the sentence written in the postcard but, for as long as we do not have access to the original context, we cannot associate the sentence with a singular proposition and a corresponding set of truth-conditions. Similarly, while we can imagine possible contexts of utterance for the sentence “Sherlock Holmes rose and hit his pipe”, we cannot assign a singular proposition to the sentence. In this case, the reason is not that we do not have access to the actual context of utterance but that there is no actual context of utterance to start with: The context of utterance is admittedly fictional from its very inception. Hence, in our framework, fictional statements with fictional names do not express propositions and, therefore, cannot be assigned a truth-value.

A first consequence of this view is that it accounts for fictional statements that are patently false, such as Huck’s incorrect report of Hamlet’s monologue. As we saw, Lewis’s solution to this issue within his semantic framework is that a fictional statement must not be evaluated as true within the relevant modal base but as *being told as fact* within that base. Our proposal addresses the problem in a parallel way: imagining a fictional statement is not imagining its truth but imagining it being stated meaningfully. The crucial difference with Lewis is that our proposal does not apply this strategy at the level of content (hence as a matter of truth) but at the level of character and, therefore, does not need to define the conditions of interpretation of fictional statements truth-conditionally.

This said, it is also true that restricting the range of possible contexts of a fictional statement also means restricting the corresponding diagonal proposition. So, for example, the statement “Sherlock Holmes rose and hit his pipe” can be understood as expressing the diagonal proposition that (i) includes all and only those possible worlds in which the name “Sherlock Holmes” has a referent (agreed by all agents involved) that is an adult male, a detective, and someone who lives in London and (ii) is true iff this referent rose and hit his pipe. In fact, we submit that phrases such as “in the fiction” or “according to the fiction”, select as their argument the diagonal proposition of the fictional statement they combine with.

This strategy also allows us to account for the para-fictional uses of fictional names. For example, the statement “(In the fiction) Sherlock Holmes is a detective” expresses the diagonal proposition that is true of all possible worlds w where the referent agreed upon for the fictional name “Sherlock Holmes” in w satisfies the property of being a detective in w and false of all possible worlds w' where the referent agreed upon for the fictional name “Sherlock Holmes” in w' does not satisfy the property of being a detective in w' .

Importantly, at the semantic level, fictional names are rigid designators, as all proper names. Technically, this corresponds to the restriction that, in the propositional matrix associated with the sentence “Sherlock Holmes rose and hit his pipe” the name “Sherlock Holmes” responds to the same assignment in each horizontal line. That is, each possible context assigns a referent to the name and this referent remains the same across the different worlds of evaluation.

Hence, fictional names do not require a different semantic treatment with respect to non-fictional proper names. This dispenses us from the need to resort to a descriptive analysis of fictional names or to any form of special ontology for fictional names as they are used in fiction. At the same time, the semantics adopted from Delfitto and Fiorin (2023) allows us to do justice to the role that descriptive content plays at the level of contextual negotiation of the referent of a name, even when negotiating this referent is but a hypothetical exercise. The discussion of whether Gregor Samsa was transformed into a cockroach or a beetle is a good example of this type of negotiation. Within the framework we are proposing, it can be regarded as a discussion concerning which set of contexts of interpretation of the name “Gregor Samsa” is most compatible with the character of the name and the relevant circumstantial evidence.

The contextualist analysis of fictional names also offers the logical groundwork for providing a meta-linguistic analysis of the truth of negative existentials. In a nutshell, these are meta-assertions that the actual context of utterance does not belong to the set of possible contexts of interpretation of the statement. More precisely, we propose that a statement of the form “N exists”, N a proper name, is true iff c_A , the actual context of utterance, belongs to the character of N. Hence:

- (6) a. “N exists” is true iff $c_A \in \{c: \exists!x\forall s(s \text{ agrees that } N \text{ is instantiated as } x \text{ in } c)\}$

By the same token, a sentence of the form “N does not exist” is true iff c_A does not belong to the character of N. Hence:

- (6) b. “N does not exist” is true iff $c_A \notin \{c: \exists!x\forall s(s \text{ agrees that } N \text{ is instantiated as } x \text{ in } c)\}$

According to this proposal, the statement “Sherlock Holmes does not exist” is true as a meta-assertion that the actual context does not belong to the set of possible contexts in which the character of “Sherlock Holmes” is satisfied. In fact, the condition that the actual context of utterance does not belong to the set of possible contexts of interpretation of fictional names is generally hard-wired in the interpretation of fictional names. This condition is sometimes made explicit, as in those modern works of fiction that are accompanied by an “all persons fictitious disclaimer” stating that the persons portrayed in them are not “real” people. We will refer to this condition as

“Lucian’s principle” (in honor, of course, of Lucian of Samosata’s famous admission of speciousness at the onset of his *A True Story*). Technically, *Lucian’s principle* corresponds to the requirement that the sets of possible contexts of interpretation of a fictional name must not include the actual context of utterance. Negative existentials are, henceforth, assertions of this condition.

It is important to observe that Lucian’s principle does not exclude the possibility that the contexts of interpretation of a fictional statement may share commonalities with the actual context of utterance. From a more general perspective, it has been observed above how interpreting fiction requires a balanced blend of background assumptions, some of which are grounded in the actual world. For example, when reading the stories of Sherlock Holmes, we assume much of the culture background of the London of the times. More particularly, the fact that the contexts entertained when interpreting a fictional name may share commonalities with the actual context of utterance is demonstrated by those statements featuring mixed uses of fictional and non-fictional names. According to the framework we are proposing, a statement such as (1d), repeated below, has no truth-value in the actual context of utterance because, given Lucian’s principle, the fictional name “Sherlock Holmes” has no reference in the actual context of utterance.

(1) d. Sherlock Holmes is taller than Rishi Sunak

We submit that this prediction is correct: In a strict truth-conditional sense, Sherlock Holmes is not taller than Rishi Sunak because, even though the actual context of utterance assigns a referent to the real name “Rishi Sunak”, “Sherlock Holmes” is a fictional name, subject to Lucian’s principle. As there is no Sherlock Holmes in the actual context of utterance, the sentence fails to express a proposition. Yet, this does not prevent us from imagining a set of possible contexts, different from the actual context, in which both “Sherlock Holmes” and “Rishi Sunak” receive a reference that is compatible with their characters and the relevant circumstantial evidence and, eventually, its corresponding diagonal proposition.

10 Hypothetical names

As we saw, fictional names are generally subject to Lucian’s principle, that is, they do not have a reference in the actual context of utterance, and admittedly so. A related class of names is that of hypothetical names, that is, names of objects whose existence is hypothesized although not verified empirically. Hypothetical names play an important role in many domains of scientific inquiry. An often discussed example is that of “Vulcan”, a planet whose existence was hypothesized in the 19th century to

account for some peculiarities in the motion of Mercury. The hypothesis was rejected by the scientific community at the beginning of the 20th century, after several efforts devoted to observing Vulcan had failed to provide results, and when the motion of Mercury could be predicted by Einstein's theory of relativity. Today, physicists debate the existence of entities such as "q-balls" and "nuclearites". These names refer to objects whose existence is only hypothetical, yet they play a fundamental role in scientific discussion. Deciding whether these names refer to existent or non-existent objects is an activity with recognized scientific value and whose outcomes are relevant to scientific progress.

How is this possible? How are we to make sense of a scientific discourse that makes reference to potentially non-existent entities? The framework we have proposed for fictional names suggests that hypothetical names are interpreted by means of a similar process, that is, by conceiving possible contexts of assignment of a semantic value. They differ from fictional names in that they are not subject to Lucian's principle and, therefore, the possibility that they may have a referent in the actual context of utterance (agreed upon by all relevant cognitive agents) is not excluded. Discussing the existence of the referent of a hypothetical name corresponds, then, to discussing whether the actual context of utterance belongs to the set of contexts of utterance that assign a reference to the name.

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