

# Fictional Content

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## Abstract

It is usually taken for granted that a necessary condition for knowing that  $P$  is the truth of  $P$ . It may therefore be claimed that if we assume that we gain some kind of knowledge through fiction (let us call it fictional knowledge) of  $P^*$ , then  $P^*$  should be true—in at least a certain sense. My hypothesis is that this assumption grounds the different ways adopted by philosophers for attributing truth-conditions to fictional sentences. My claim in this work is that fictional sentences do not have truth-values and truth-conditions, but I want to maintain that we gain some kind of knowledge through fiction: to this aim, I will characterize the objective content of fictional sentences not in terms of truth-conditions (which are usually described by appealing to rules of the language or rules of interpretation of language independent of the actual users), but in dispositional terms and I will define a necessary condition for fictional knowledge accordingly.

## Keywords

Truth in fiction, non-truth-conditional content in fiction, propositions, objectivity, dispositions.

## 1 Introduction

There is a long tradition in the philosophy of fiction of distinguishing between true and false fictional assertions. For example, the fictional assertion “Sherlock Holmes is a detective” is considered—at least in a certain sense—to be true, while the fictional assertion “Sherlock Holmes is a carpenter” is considered—at least in a certain sense—to be false.

The competent reader may object that Gottlob Frege (1892) would consider neither true nor false any sentence constituted by an empty name (i.e. a name without denotation in our world) and an expression denoting a first-level concept; he would therefore

judge neither true nor false both “Sherlock Holmes is a detective” and “Sherlock Holmes is a carpenter.” Moreover, it may be observed that Bertrand Russell (1905) would consider a name such as “Sherlock Holmes” to be used as an abbreviated description and therefore would judge the two sentences (“Sherlock Holmes is a detective” and “Sherlock Holmes is a carpenter”) equally false because the description associated with the name “Sherlock Holmes” is not satisfied by any person existing in our world. It may also be added that Kripke (2013: 24–5) himself excludes that fictional assertions express propositions and have truth-values.

The competent reader is obviously correct, and she may add other philosophers, claiming that the two sentences above (and similar others) cannot be distinguished either as true or false. This notwithstanding, there has been a long tradition of philosophers who claimed that the two sentences above (and fictional sentences in general) should be distinguished in truth-value (at least in a certain sense of truth-value).<sup>1</sup>

Let us consider why so many philosophers were so worried about giving truth-values and truth-conditions to fictional sentences. Let us consider for example the following passage from Terence Parsons

the [major] motivation [for endorsing non-existent entities] should come from a host of particular propositions which *we believe* and which seem to commit us to unreal objects. (Parsons 1980: 32—my emphasis)

or the following passage from David Lewis

We can *truly say* that Sherlock Holmes lived in Baker Street, and that he liked to show off his mental powers. We cannot *truly say* that he was a devoted family man, or that he worked in close cooperation with the police. (Lewis 1978: 37—my emphasis)

or the following passage from Kendall Walton

What is fictionality? We understand intuitively what it is for something to be “true in a fictional world”: if we didn’t, criticism as we *know* it would be impossible. (Walton 1990: 36—my emphasis)

<sup>1</sup> Among them, see: Lewis 1978, Rapaport 1978, Parsons 1980, Routley 1980, Zalta 1983, Walton 1990, Brock 2002, Thomasson 2003, Priest 2005, Sainsbury 2010, Berto 2011.

From Parsons, we may infer that we acquire beliefs through fiction and it is usually taken for granted that we adopt a belief attitude only towards what we expect to be true content. Lewis, in turn, appeals to what we can truly say when we talk about fiction and we usually say something in order to share information and knowledge. Walton appeals explicitly to knowledge as a crucial reason to introduce the notion of truth in fiction.

It seems to me that the general idea behind these observations and the characterization of truth-conditions for sentences concerning fiction is that we suppose we may acquire some kind of knowledge through fiction (let us call it fictional knowledge) and it is taken for granted that a necessary condition for knowledge is truth. To put it in schematic terms, the following necessary condition for knowledge is usually taken for granted:

(NCK) If S knows P, then P is true

and my hypothesis is that it is taken for granted that the knowledge we acquire through fiction (i.e. fictional knowledge) should satisfy a similar necessary condition:

(NCFK) If S fictionally knows P, then P is fictionally true

The general supposition seems to be that we acquire a specific kind of knowledge (fictional knowledge, let us say) when we are in contact with fiction and this kind of knowledge is granted by some kind of truth that we may come in contact with through fiction. There is a well-known divergence on the way fictional truth has been defended, but I suppose there is a general supposition that some kind of truth should be the aim of fictional beliefs and should account for fictional knowledge.

Now, I want to argue that fictional sentences do not express propositions and do not have a truth-value. My claim is in line with Frege's (1982) and Kripke's (2013) contention that fictional sentences do not express propositions and do not have truth-values.

This claim may be challenged by observing that if it is accepted that fictional sentences do not have truth values together with (NCFK), by *modus tollens* we have to conclude that we do not have fictional knowledge, i.e. that we do not acquire knowledge through fiction. But it is quite evident that we acquire a certain kind of knowledge through

fiction and therefore the above conclusion is unacceptable. My aim in this paper is to claim that the objectivity of the fictional content cannot be accounted for in terms of truth-conditions (even special kinds of truth-conditions), but in dispositional terms. In the last part of my work, I will briefly outline how a dispositional account of fictional content can be a necessary condition for fictional knowledge.

Let me just present how my work is organized, I will first of all consider how fictional truth-conditions have been characterized for fictional sentences (§1). Then, I will explain why two specific and paradigmatic ways to characterize such truth-conditions are not adequate (§2 and §3). In conclusion, I will explain how my different characterization of fictional content is connected to fictional knowledge (§4).

## 2 Truth and fictional truth

How to establish truth-conditions for fictional sentences? Some neo-*Meinongian* philosophers have claimed that any fictional sentence has truth-conditions comparable to those of extensional sentences concerning objects in our world; these philosophers accept literalism (to use Kit Fine 1982's expression), i.e. the thesis that fictional language has the same semantics as non-fictional language. According to them, as the sentence "Spike Lee is a film director" is true in English if the person denoted by the name "Spike Lee" has the property of being a film director and is false if this person does not have the property; "Sherlock Holmes is a detective" is true if the *Meinongian* object denoted by the name "Sherlock Holmes" instantiates or codifies the property of being a detective and is false if the object does not instantiate or codify this property.<sup>2</sup>

The problems with this strategy are well known; among them, let us just mention the problem of the duplicate (raised by Saul Kripke 2013) and the problem of logical inferences (considered by David Lewis 1978). The problem of the duplicate is the following: if, unbeknown to the author of fiction, there is a person or an object having all the properties attributed to her or to it in the fiction, she or it will be the referent of the fictional names or descriptions used in fiction,

<sup>2</sup> See for example: Rapaport 1978, Parsons 1980, Routley 1980 and Zalta 1983.

contrary to the intention of the author and to the expectations of the consumers of the fiction.

The problem of logical inferences is that, as long as the semantics for fiction and non-fiction are equally extensional according to the proposal, combining information we gain through fiction with information we have of our world, we may obtain unacceptable conclusions. Lewis' well-known example is that if we combine the fictional information that Sherlock Holmes lives at 221b Baker Street with the actual information that there is a bank at 221b Baker Street, we have to conclude—contrary to our intuitions—that Sherlock Holmes lives in a bank.

In order to avoid these problems, it has been broadly accepted nowadays that fictional discourse should not be interpreted literally—but contextually instead (the terminology is again Kit Fine 1982's). The general idea is that whenever we use the sentence *P* in fiction, we have to interpret it as “Within the fictional context *F*, *P*”. In other words, the fictional sentence “*P*” does not have to be considered as literally true or false, but it should be interpreted as being prefixed with an intensional operator, as for example “within the fictional context *F*”, and only when considered in the range of the intensional operator may the sentence have a truth-value. As long as the fictional sentence is considered to be in the range of an intensional operator, the singular terms in it cannot be taken to refer to objects in the actual world and therefore the problem of the duplicate is avoided. Moreover, if a fictional sentence is to be interpreted within the scope of an intensional operator, it cannot be combined with sentences to be interpreted literally in order to obtain conclusions about the actual world or about the fiction, so even the problem of logical inferences is avoided.

Now, once the fictional assertions are contextually interpreted, truth-conditions have been offered for sentences of the form: “Within the fictional context *F*, *P*”. Even though differences may be found in the literature on different ways to attribute truth-conditions to fictional sentences so interpreted, I want to consider two of them which I consider paradigmatically relevant—one proposed by David Lewis and the other proposed by Kendall Walton—and explain why I think they are inadequate.

### 3 Lewis's truth-conditions for fictional assertions

With some approximation, we may say that, according to David Lewis (1978),

(DL) "In the fiction *F*, *P*" is (nontrivially) true if and only if *P* is true in every possible-world closest to the actual one in which the collective beliefs of the community where the fiction originated are correct and in which *F* is told as a known fact.

I wrote that the definition I am proposing is approximate, as Lewis would introduce some refinements and some specifications. But what is relevant for my observation is quite independent of any improvement in the definition; it concerns the general Lewisian strategy for characterizing truth-conditions for fictional sentences. In order to accept such truth-conditions it is presupposed that there is a language with certain words and rules, and a specific text in this language is used by the author of the fiction in the actual world and by well-informed speakers in any relevantly close possible-world.

The supposition of there being a language with specific rules presupposed by the actual author of fiction and the informed speakers in the other possible worlds is challenged by the fact that some authors of fiction do not limit themselves to using a preexisting language, but modify language while creating fiction.

Among writers who actually introduce new syntactic structures and new linguistic expressions, James Joyce can be mentioned and, among the Italians, Carlo Emilio Gadda is worth remembering. If we read their fictional texts, we discover new expressions, new syntactic structures and words used in unusual ways. These characteristics do not prevent the receiver from understanding and appreciating what the author is presenting. But, according to Lewis' definition, any sentence constituted by new expressions or new syntactic structures cannot be used in order to express something true in fiction, making the above truth-conditions inadequate to characterize the content of fictional discourse.

It may be objected to the above consideration that language is constantly changing even in non-fictional texts and therefore that new expressions, new syntactic structures and words used in unusual ways are found even in journalistic reports which, by definition,

are not intended to be fictional.<sup>3</sup> We may therefore wonder whether we need to abolish truth-conditions for these sentences as well. It is not my intention to call into question the truth-conditions for such sentences. The reason is that for these sentences, we may want to distinguish between literal meaning and pragmatic meaning. We may want to distinguish between the literal meaning of what a journalist reports and something she wants readers to understand, by making use of some background information shared by the author of non-fiction and the receivers, which allows the latter to understand what the author has in mind and the particular perspective she adopts towards what she is reporting. So, new expressions and new syntactic structures simply do not allow for sentences to have truth-conditions even if they may allow the receivers to understand what the author has in mind.

In the case of fiction, such a distinction between literal meaning and pragmatic meaning does not seem to be adequate if we adopt Lewis' definition of fictional assertions: even if we distinguish between a certain kind of information given by the truth-conditions of a sentence and what the author wants the reader to understand besides this information, Lewis' definition concerns the first aspect, while what is pragmatically communicated is what is relevant for fictional content.

We may therefore observe that the distinction between semantic and pragmatic content makes sense when we consider a journalistic report, because we want to distinguish between what is literally expressed and the particular perspective of the author; in the case of fiction, such a distinction does not seem to be adequate because the fictional content is exhausted by what the author of fiction communicates to the reader.

The above considerations are intended to show that rules of language independent of the actual users cannot be presupposed in order to account for the objective content of a fictional assertion: an author of fiction may want to adopt not only consolidated language rules, but also a certain amount of background information shared by the author and receivers of fiction in order to communicate a certain content, and the distinction between semantic and pragmatic

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted for this objection to Andrea Raimondi and Aldo Frigerio.

content, which is adopted in the case of non-fictional reports, cannot be adequately accounted for by Lewis' definition. We may conclude that Lewis's truth-conditions are not completely adequate in order to characterize fictional content if we acknowledge that a fictional author may want to communicate not only by using a language with already established rules, but also by adopting new lexical and syntactic structures.

#### 4 Walton's fictional truth-conditions

The inadequacy of the above definition for giving truth-conditions to fictional sentences may be used in support of a different theory of fictional truth-conditions: Walton's theory. According to Walton, in order to establish truth-conditions for fictional sentences we should not consider rules of language independent of the actual users and see how they work in relevant worlds where the fictional text is used to express known facts, but we should appeal instead to "games of make-believe"—in a certain sense, rules of interpretation of the fictional text.

The main reason Walton wants to establish fictional truth-conditions for fictional sentences<sup>4</sup> is that he wants fictionality to be objective and independent of the actual users of fiction in order to account for the knowledge we may acquire or fail to acquire through it.<sup>5</sup> He explicitly claims that props (i.e. in the case of written fiction, fictional texts) and principles of generation (or games of make-belief) are objective and grant fictional truth-values.

Let us consider the following passage concerning how the independence of props from cognizers and their experiences determine objective truth values:

<sup>4</sup> Walton is explicit in saying that "truth in a fictional world" must be distinguished from "truth in the real world" (Walton 1990: 41) and to avoid the temptation to consider them as "species of the same genus" (Walton 1990: 41). The reason for the distinction is that "truth in the real world" is the literal truth of certain sentences, while fictional truth is contextual, it depends on interpreting any fictional sentence within the scope of an intensional operator (the operator "it is fictional that...") (Walton 1990: 42).

<sup>5</sup> See for example Walton's quotation in the introductory part of this paper.

The role of props in generating fictional truth is enormously important. They give fictional words and their contents a kind of objectivity, an *independence from cognizers and their experiences*. [...] We can be unaware of fictional truth or mistaken about them as easily as we can about those aspects of the real world on which they depend. [...] Fictional worlds, like reality, are “*out there*,” *to be investigated and explored if we choose and to the extent that we are able*. To dismiss them as “figments of people’s imaginations” would be to insult and underestimate them. (Walton 1990: 42—my emphasis).

Let us, moreover, consider the following passage concerning principles of generation:

Principles of generation, whether or not we call them rules, constitute conditional prescriptions about what is to be imagined in what circumstances. (Walton 1990: 41)

And the following concerning their independence from the actual users:

Briefly, a fictional truth consists in there being a prescription or mandate in some context to imagine something. Fictional propositions are propositions that *are to be imagined—whether or not they are in fact imagined*. [...] A proposition is fictional, let’s say, if it is to be imagined (in the relevant context), *should the question arise*, it being understood that *often the question shouldn’t arise*. In normal cases the qualification can be understood thus: If p is fictional, then *should one be forced to choose* between imagining p and imagining not-p, one is to do the former. (Walton 1990: 39–40—my emphasis)

The truth-conditions for a fictional assertion are therefore presented by Walton in the following way:

(KW) An assertion of “P” is true in a certain fiction if and only if there is an authorized game of make-belief for that fiction such that the assertion of P is true in that game.<sup>6</sup>

My concern is with the assumption that the principles of generation (or principles of make-believe) determine a certain rule imposed on the actual users of the fiction. The idea that the principles of generation determine what is truth in fiction does not seem to allow for

<sup>6</sup> See Walton (1990: 399): “What makes Sally’s assertion true, I suggest, is simply the fact that it is fictional in her (authorized) game that she speaks truly”

the fact that certain fictional texts are jointly considered by different communities in different ways. For example, according to certain critical studies, tales of chivalry were considered in the Middle Ages and at the beginning of the Renaissance as stories with a hidden, religious meaning, later on they were simply read as the adventurous stories of heroic knights at the courtly service of the women they loved and more recently (after Cervantes) as rather grotesque stories of knights unaware of what they were doing.

From these considerations, it follows that we cannot expect fictional texts to come with rules of generation that dictate how to interpret them, should the relevant question arise, because historically different interpretations of what is true in fiction may be given.

Walton's supporter may reply to my considerations by saying that according to Walton any principle of generation depends on the actual dispositions of the actual users in a specific context, let us consider for example the following passage:

what principles of generation there are depends on which ones people accept in various contexts. The principles that are in force are those that are understood, at least implicitly, to be in force. (Walton 1990: 38)

Walton's supporter may therefore claim that, in different contexts, what is implicitly acknowledged by people to be fictional may vary and therefore fictional truth may vary from context to context. But this consideration, far from supporting Walton's theory, seems to call into question the previous definition of objectivity in truth, interpreted as independence of truth from the actual users.

Walton wants fictional truths to be, on the one hand, "out there", to be discovered if we want and if we are able to, and on the other hand, dependent on the actual dispositions of the users (what the actual users would recognize, should the relevant question arise, in a specific context).

There is a tension in Walton's definition between two notions of objective fictional truth: (i) according to one of them, fictional truth is *independent of the users*, who may be unable to discover it, and, (ii) according to the other, fictional truth is—at least implicitly—*dependent on the dispositions of the actual users*. I propose that fictional truth, interpreted as independence from the users and their abilities, should be abandoned and, with it, the notion of truth for fiction. The

reason is that the notion of truth is historically connected with rules of language or rules of interpretation of language which are independent of the actual users.

I believe instead that objectivity of the content transmitted through fiction cannot be called into question and, in order to characterize this notion, more attention should be given to the actual dispositions of receivers of fiction in order to characterize an objective fictional content: I am going to make this proposal in the following section.

## 5 Knowledge in fiction

Let me try to sum up what I have been trying to do until now. On the one side, I presented my hypothesis according to which fictional sentences have been attributed truth values and truth-conditions in order to account for fictional knowledge (i.e. the knowledge we acquire through fiction). On the other side I claimed that truth-conditions for fictional sentences are usually characterized in terms of rules of language or rules of interpretation of the fiction that are independent of the actual users, but I have argued that fictional content cannot be coherently characterized independently of the actual language use and dispositions of the users and therefore the notion of truth seems to be inadequate for fiction.

Now, I want to consider a way to characterize fictional content (i.e. the content of fictional assertions) in an objective way, without claiming that fictional sentences have truth values or truth-conditions (i.e. without claiming that the content can be characterized independently of the actual users of fiction). And once fictional content is so characterized, I will propose to specifying a necessary condition for fictional knowledge in terms of it.

Let us start to consider fictional content. I propose to characterize the objectivity of fictional content in dispositional terms, but my characterization of the role of dispositions is quite different from Walton's appeal to them. According to Walton, given a fictional text and a certain context, there is an—at least implicit—disposition of its receivers to recognize what they are forced to imagine. This is an optimistic and unrealistic assumption. In order to acknowledge this fact, it may be useful to consider fictional texts with incoherent

descriptions (for example, something of the form “P and not P”), or with reports of indeterminate identity or vague existence. With such kinds of texts, receivers may be unable to figure out what they are invited to imagine, or even if they may claim to be able to do so, a closer examination of their imaginings may show that they adopt incompatible ones.

Consider for example a fictional description of indeterminate identity: if we distribute it among philosophers (a small group of potential readers), we may discover that some (maybe most) of them judge it unintelligible, others would claim that it is intelligible requiring the refusal of the truth of indiscernibility of identicals, some others would claim that it is intelligible and does not require the discussion of indiscernibility of identicals.<sup>7</sup> It may be deduced that the assumption that, given a fictional text and a context, there is a disposition to recognize what one is forced to imagine is therefore to be abandoned.

Instead of saying—as Walton proposes—that, given a fictional text and a certain context, there is a disposition to establish what is to be imagined, I propose that it is when there is a *common* disposition among people in a certain context to establish what is to be imagined according to a certain fictional text, that the fictional text has a content and the content is objective. The difference can be expressed in the following way: while Walton claims that there are objective contextual factors determining the dispositions people have, I maintain instead that contextual factors alone cannot determine implicit dispositions, because in some contexts different people may have different reactions without there being any reason to suppose that the context allows for one and not the other.

The objectivity of fictional content—according to my proposal—is not to be interpreted as a rule of interpretation determined by the context for the receivers, it is instead when the receivers have a common disposition to attribute a common content to a certain fictional text that the fictional text has a shared content and its objectivity

<sup>7</sup> For example, in order to account for indeterminate identity some philosophers accept that the indiscernibility of identicals is not perfectly true, without being completely false (e.g. Parsons and Woodruff 1995: 181); others claim that discussing the indiscernibility of identicals is the last resort of the defender of ontic indeterminate identity (e.g. Lowe 1994: 113).

does not depend on rules existing independently of the actual users but is, instead, determined by the disposition to acknowledge a certain content shared by both author and receivers.

It may be interesting to consider what allows for an *objective* fictional content to be shared by the receivers of a particular fiction, because I deny that an objective context determines their disposition to share content. According to my proposal, on certain occasions people may share an objective fictional content when confronted with a certain fiction, in others they don't. So, the problem may be posed in the following way: how can it happen that a fictional content is objectively shared by a group of people?

I propose to characterize the objective fictional content in terms of a common disposition of the people involved. People actually share an objective fictional content when they are disposed to acknowledge certain situations (i.e. fragments of possible worlds) as adequately described by the fiction itself. The objectivity of the fictional content is therefore not determined—according to my proposal—by a context determining dispositions, but by the set of possible situations which a group of people is disposed to acknowledge as adequately described by the fiction. It is the existence of this set of possible situations (i.e. fragments of possible worlds) which grants the objectivity of fictional content.

Now that the objective fictional content has been characterized in dispositional terms, it is worth considering how fictional knowledge can be accounted for in terms of such fictional content.

Let me first reconsider the hypothesis I offered according to which it has been taken for granted that some kind of truth is a necessary condition for fictional knowledge, i.e. it has been assumed that

(NCFK) If S fictionally knows that P, then P is fictionally true

As long as I claim that there cannot be a truth-value for fictional sentences, if we accept (NCFK), we have to conclude that we cannot have fictional knowledge. I do not accept this conclusion. I propose instead to abandon (NCFK) but to adopt its spirit. (NCFK) assumes that a necessary condition for fictional knowledge is the objectivity of the content in terms of truth. My claim is that a necessary condition for fictional knowledge is a different characterization of the objectivity of the content in dispositional terms.

In particular, according to my proposal, a necessary condition for fictional knowledge is that a common content be shared by both author and some receivers adopting a common disposition. My proposal is therefore the following one:

(FK) If S fictionally knows that P, then there is a common fictional content P attributed by a group of people including S to a certain fiction.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I presented some of the ideas developed in this work at the conference “III Blasco Disputatio: Singular Terms in Fiction” in Valencia; I thank Jordi Valor and Josep E. Corbi for organizing the conference and for inviting me to submit my paper to the Disputatio special issue, and I am grateful to all participants for the discussions. I presented some more detailed versions of this work at the SIFA conference in Novara and at the workshop “Philosophy of Language: Semantics of Fictional Discourse II” in Bratislava, I appreciated the helpful observations I received on both occasions. I am moreover indebted to an anonymous referee for insightful advice. This research was funded by the Department of Philosophy “Piero Martinetti” of the University of Milan under the Project “Departments of Excellence 2018–2022” awarded by the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR).

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