In Search of the Narrator
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Abstract: The paper proposes a semantic analysis of narrators in fiction. It addresses three main issues: (a) In fiction, we cannot rely on actual facts to determine the identity of the narrator, (b) there are linguistic items beyond pronouns to introduce a narrator, (c) narrators can be unreliable. I argue that dynamic frameworks such as discourse representation theory (DRT) are necessary to capture the intuition that the narrator is at the same time unique (as a referent) and unknown (as a person). We discuss different classes of expressions that are capable to introduce a speaker discourse referent. To account for unreliable narrators, I introduce the notion of subjective story content. The reader R interprets the story on basis of FC_R, the set of all contexts c that R conceives as possible contexts in which the story could be told. Expectations about these contexts conspire with the content of sentences to detect unreliable narrators.

Key words: DRT, speaker, narrator, speaker oriented items, fiction, subjective interpretation, context, unreliable narrator, discourse, text

1. Aims and questions

Does every story of fiction have a narrator?

Two major answers have been proposed in the literature. Defendants of the pan-narrator view point out that every tensed clause in a story refers to an utterance context via tense. Where there is an utterance context, there must be an utterance, hence a speaker. This speaker is the narrator (Friedemann 1910, Kayser 1961, Stanzl 1989, Zipfel 2015; Zucchi, pres. vol.). Others argue that relating a story presupposes that someone chose particular words to report on particular events in a specific way. While the actual word choice is, of course, the author’s it is epistemically untenable to assume that the author is telling the story “as if it were known facts” (Lewis, 1978). Hence there must be an abstract narrator even if we know nothing about this person.

Defendants of the optional-narrator view point out that the presence of a narrator should be assumed only if the story indeed creates the fiction that someone is telling it. This fiction is obvious in the case of first person narrations but is also supported by other features of text. Whenever a story does not support the narrator fiction, we should abstain from stipulating a narrator the presence of which is not part of the fiction created (Hamburger 1977, Kania 2005, Wartenberg 2007, Köppe+Stühring 2011, 2015).

Still missing so far is the semantic answer to the question. Discourse representation theory (DRT) maintains that to be part of a story is to be represented by a discourse referent in the story’s discourse representation structure DRS (Heim 1982, Kamp 1981, Groendijk+Stokhof 1990). The present paper aims to elaborate this
position. It proposes a dynamic version of Kaplan’s and Stalnaker’s context theory that allows us to integrate narrator and story content (Kaplan 1989, Stalnaker 1999, 2002, 2014). The paper addresses the following issues:

- The fiction of a narrator: The narrator can be introduced by first person pronouns, but other expressions can likewise create the fiction of a narrator. Which ones do, and how do they introduce or refer to the narrator?
- The unknown narrator: Some stories introduce a narrator but leave his identity unresolved – many persons could figure as the possible narrator. How can we capture this fact?
- The unreliable narrator: In some fiction, we don’t simply equate the story told by the narrator with the content of the story. How can we account for this observation?

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a small and non-exhaustive sample of story types to illustrate the phenomena listed above. Section 3 develops a theory of subjective story interpretation that predicts how the reader integrates the literal content of the story and the set of possible utterance contexts into a semantic representation of the story. The representation is couched in dynamic semantics and allows us to maintain a discourse referent for the narrator. Section 4 discusses in more detail how the narrator DR is established and which items can refer back to the narrator DR. Section 5 tackles the case of unreliable narrators and offers first thoughts about stories told about humanless worlds. Section 6 concludes.

2. A typology of stories

The most obvious case of a narrator is presented by first person narrators who also figure as protagonist in the story. Robinson Crusoe is a textbook case of this type.

I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York, of a good family, though not of that country, my father being a foreigner of Bremen, who settled first at Hull. He got a good estate by merchandise, and leaving off his trade, lived afterwards at York, from whence he had married my mother, whose relations were named Robinson, a very good family in that country, and from whom I was called Robinson Kreutznaer; but, by the usual corruption of words in England, we are now called - nay we call ourselves and write our name - Crusoe; and so my companions always called me.
(Daniel Defoe: Robinson Crusoe. Chapter 1)

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1 The present paper builds on ideas that were first presented for an interdisciplinary readership in Eckardt 2015. The former paper lacks the formal analysis that is spelled out here.
A slightly different constellation is exemplified in Erich Kästner’s *Lisa and Lottie*. A first person narrator introduces himself at the very beginning, yet is not part of the story.

*Do you know Seebühl, incidentally? The mountain village Seebühl? Seebühl on-the-lake? No? Strange – nobody you ask happens to know Seebühl! Possibly, Seebühl is one of the places just only those people know you don’t ever ask? I wouldn’t be surprised. Such things happen.*
(Erich Kästner: *Lisa and Lottie*, transl. RE. Chapter 1)

The narrator takes a journalist stance, offering detailed reports of cotemporal events in different locations. While he reports reliably, there are also passages of poetic content that are obviously not supposed to be literally true in the world of fiction.

*The moon glimpses into the dormitory through its big window and is staggered. Two little girls lie next to each other and do not dare look at each other, and the one who has just been crying is now shyly reaching for the caressing hand of the other. “Oh well,” says the moon, “looks like I can set in peace.” Which he then does.*
(Erich Kästner, *Lisa and Lottie*, transl. RE. Chapter 2)

A much less prominent narrator is exhibited in Knut Hamsun’s *Growth of the Soil*. While no first person pronouns refer to the narrator, many passages reveal a commenting narrator and attitudes about the content told.

*The long, long road over the moors and up into the forest — who trod it into being first of all? Man, a human being, the first that came here. There was no path before he came. Afterward, some beast or other, following the faint tracks over marsh and moorland, wearing them deeper; after these some Lapp gained scent of the path, and took that way from field to field, looking into his reindeer.*
(Knut Hamsun: *Growth of the Soil*. Chapter 1)

(Isak has settled with Inger. After a small quarrel he wants to impress her.)

*Isak came home in the evening, hauling a huge trunk by a rope. Oh that simple and innocent Isak, he made all the noise he could with his tree-trunk, and coughed and hemmed, all for her to come out and wonder at him. And sure enough: “Why, you’re out of your senses,” said Inger when she came out.*
(Knut Hamsun: *Growth of the Soil*. Chapter 1)

Finally, there are stories that never show any trace of a narrating persona. While the complete absence of cues cannot be proved by a small passage, Evelyn Waugh’s *The loved one* illustrates how protagonists and events are reported on almost like in a screenplay.
Sir Francis, in prime middel-age, was then the only knight in Hollywood, the
doyen of English society, chief script-writer in Megalopolitan Pictures and
President of the Cricket Club.
(Evelyn Waugh: *The loved one*. Chapter 1)

The present paper investigates the semantic contribution of first person pronouns and
other narrator cues to the meaning of assertive discourse and fiction.
3. DRT with context

3.1 Context in static semantics

Our point of departure is Kaplan’s two-dimensional account of context-dependent meaning (Kaplan 1989, Zimmermann 2011, Schlenker 2011, 2018). We assume a set $C$ of utterance contexts and functions $sp, ad, loc, time, world$ from $C$ into $D_s, D_{time}, D_w$ respectively. For all $c \in C$

\[
\begin{align*}
sp(c) &= \text{the speaker in } c \\
ad(c) &= \text{the addressee in } c \\
loc(c) &= \text{the place of } c \\
time(c) &= \text{the time of } c \\
world(c) &= \text{the world in which } c \text{ is situated}
\end{align*}
\]

I leave it open for now whether contexts are situations and as such parts of worlds (Stalnaker 2014: 14), whether they are centered worlds (Lewis 1980) or whether contexts should be equated with speech events (Eckardt 2015a). The next sections take a closer look at the relation between context and world.

Kaplan proposes that sentences S denote a character, a function that maps each given context $c$ to the proposition expressed by S as uttered in $c$. In order to understand the interpretation of fiction, we must understand how hearers interpret sentences in a context that is not fully specified. Of particular interest are contexts where the speaker is unknown. Consider a situation where hearer R receives a phone call and hears a voice utter (1).

\[
\text{(1) } I \text{ am the father or the brother of Peter.}
\]

This is the character of (1), where $P$ = Peter.

\[
\text{(2) } \lambda c \lambda w \left[ \text{FATHER}(sp(c), P, w) \lor \text{BROTHER}(sp(c), P, w) \right]
\]

If R knew the utterance context, she could derive the proposition expressed. In context $c_5$, say, (1) would convey the following proposition.

\[
\text{(3) } \lambda w \left[ \text{FATHER}(sp(c_5), P, w) \lor \text{BROTHER}(sp(c_5), P, w) \right]
\]

In the described situation, however, R is ignorant as to who is calling. It might be the father of Peter, the brother of Peter or yet someone entirely different. R hence cannot derive the proposition expressed.

In order to compute the information conveyed by S in this case, Kaplan resorts to diagonalization: By equating the context with the world about which the sentence is asserted, the information of (1) in unknown context $c$ can be rendered as in (4) (Zimmermann 1991, 2012).

\[
\text{(4) } \lambda c \left[ \text{FATHER}(sp(c), P, c) \lor \text{BROTHER}(sp(c), P, c) \right]
\]
This can be paraphrased as “we are in a context/world where the speaker is the father of Peter in that context/world or the brother of Peter in that context/world”. The parameter \( c \) plays a double role; it both serves as context (and thus defines the speaker) as well as a possible world (and thus defines a proposition).

Diagonalization can explain the trivial readings of utterances like ‘I am here now’, in the sense of “the speaker is at the place of utterance at the time of utterance”. It is however open whether diagonals are a suitable means to capture the content of extended texts, be it assertive or fictional. The next section raises some issues that need to be addressed if we want a viable way to represent information about narrators in fiction.

### 3.2 Worries about diagonalization

Kaplan’s two-dimensional semantics allowed us to keep the domain of contexts \( C \) distinct from the domain of possible worlds \( D_s \). Once we use diagonalization we have to assume that the set of contexts is part of the set of worlds, i.e., \( C \subseteq D_s \). If we want to use diagonals like (4) routinely to model the meaning of sentences we need to clarify what this means. There are two ways to go, which I will discuss in turn.

For one, we could adopt a situation-based notion of propositions (Barwise & Perry 1983, Kratzer 1989, 2002, Muyskens 1989, Fine 2017). According to this view, the domain \( D_s \) not only includes full worlds but also smaller chunks of the world where some, but not necessarily all facts of the world are settled. With this background we could maintain that sentence meanings sometimes are total functions from \( D_s \) to \{1,0\} but sometimes can be partial, as well. In particular, sentence meanings like (4) denote functions from \( D_s \) to \{1,0\} that are restricted to situations that qualify as contexts.

This assumption, however, leaves open to what extent (small) situations are sufficient to capture the content of narratives situated in large parts of the (real or fictitious) world. In what sense, for example, does the entire content of Robinson Crusoe take place within the confines of the (small) situation of Robinson telling the story of his life? Certainly, the Island of Despair should not count as a mereological part of the utterance context \( c \) — if only because too many speakers and hearers would be around. In what sense, then, is the world of Robinson Crusoe reflected in the narration’s utterance context? I thus dismiss the situation semantic view as a viable basis for the semantics of fiction.\(^2\)

Alternatively we could view contexts as centered worlds, i.e. worlds \( w+c \) where world \( w \) is combined with an indexed point of utterance \( c \). While this offers an answer to the Robinson problem, we will now have to address the question whether a diagonal like (4) should be a total function on the domain of all centered worlds. Let

\(^2\)This is not to say that an analysis along these lines is necessarily impossible. I simply state that situation semantics does not offer an off-the-shelf solution for our problem.
us consider some possible scenarios. Assume that the addressee R in (1) knows that \( m \) is the father of Peter and \( z \) is the brother of Peter. With this background, R still does not know who the speaker is but she can limit the choice to two possible kinds of centered worlds \( w+c \): those where \( \text{sp}(c)=m \) and those where \( \text{sp}(c)=z \). R will not consider centered worlds \( w+c \) where someone altogether different from \( m \) is the father of Peter and the speaker in \( c \), even though such centered worlds exist. Thus, sentence (1) means the following for R:

(5) \[
\lambda w+c[ ( \text{FATHER}(\text{sp}(w+c), P, w+c) \land m=\text{sp}(w+c) ) \\
\lor ( \text{BROTHER}(\text{sp}(w+c), P, w+c) \land z=\text{sp}(w+c) ) ]
\]

Whatever the speaker in (1) will go on telling R about the world at large, the information will always restrict this initial set of possible centered worlds.

If we assume that R does not know the father or brother of Peter, the meaning of (1) will be broader for R. It will include any centered world \( w+c \) where someone is the father or brother of Peter (no matter whether they are so in the real world) and is speaking. But still, R will not assume that “anybody could be the speaker” — in a local sense R is still certain that the speaker is one of two possible persons. Thus, there are two ways in which the speaker can be uncertain about the identity of the speaker, and we have to keep these apart.

If we consider further parameters of context \( w+c \), the problem deepens. Whenever R hears (1) she assumes a centered world \( w+c \) in which R is the addressee. Whenever another person X hears (1), X assumes a centered world \( w+c \) in which X is the addressee. In Kaplan’s two-dimensional analysis, different hearers did not change the content of the utterance. If we however rest our analysis on diagonals, we predict that the content of a sentence is never the same for any two hearers. This is a radical deviation from the standard assumptions of truth conditional semantics and reiterates that we cannot simply rely on diagonals as sentence meanings. We must find a way to separate the knowledge of the hearer/reader R, the subjective meaning of an utterance for R and the intersubjective content of sentences and texts.

Before moving on, let me highlight another aspect of Kaplan’s context theory. The simple character-to-proposition mapping is based on the myth that interlocutors normally know their utterance context. This is plausible as far as \( \text{sp}(c) \), \( \text{ad}(c) \), \( \text{time}(c) \) and \( \text{loc}(c) \) are concerned, but the assumption is problematic if we consider the context parameter \( \text{world}(c) \). Assume that R observes a context with speaker A, addressee B, time t and place p. In this case, R is still left with many choices for \( c \) because R can never know \( \text{world}(c) \). The best R can ever know about this utterance context is the following set of contexts (where \( \text{EpiAlt}(R) \) are the epistemic alternatives maintained by R).

(6) \[
\text{C}_R = \{ c_o \mid \text{sp}(c_o)=A \land \text{ad}(c_o)=B \land \text{time}(c_o)=t \land \text{loc}(c_o)=p \land \\
\text{world}(c_o) \in \text{EpiAlt}(R) \}
\]

“the set of contexts that are compatible with R’s beliefs/knowledge about the world”
The hearer in example (1) knows less about the context and thus bases interpretation on a larger set $C_R$. Less knowledge means more choice. The set $C_R$ is crucial in interpreting fiction because, unlike in real communication, there is no chance to decide by hard fact who the speaker is.

The present section argued that the meanings of sentence, uttered in unknown utterance contexts, should not be routinely modelled by diagonals. Different dimensions of uncertainty have to be kept apart. The hearer/reader $R$ knows that there is at most one speaker or narrator but at the same time is uncertain about his identity. Dynamic semantics offers a framework that can potentially capture this mix of uncertainty and information. It thus seems promising to couch the analysis of narrators in dynamic semantics.

### 3.3. Dynamic Semantics in a nutshell

In dynamic semantics, the meaning of a sentence $S$ reflects discourse referents in addition to truth conditional meaning. Various implementations have been proposed, each with its own merits. For the present purpose I define a minimal version of dynamic semantics that allows to focus on our main theme without burdening notation unnecessarily. The meaning of sentences and discourse is represented by sets of assignments.

Let $Var_c = \{x_i; i = 1, 2, \ldots \}$ be the variables that range over $D_c$.

Let $Var_s = \{w_i; i = 1, 2, \ldots \}$ be variables over $D_s$.

Let $f, g, h, \ldots$ be variable assignments that map $Var_c \cup Var_s$ into the respective domains.\(^3\)

At each point of the discourse, some variables $x_i$ are “active”, coding a discourse referent $DR_i$. Each new DR activates a new variable. The discourse tells us (a) which protagonists and entities are part of the story and (b) which properties they have. Correspondingly, variable assignments are limited to those where $f(x_i)$ has the respective properties in $f(w)$. The more we learn about protagonist $DR_i$, the more restricted our choice of $f(x_i)$, $f(w)$ will be. Indefinites are interpreted as open variables. A sentence like (7) thus corresponds to the open formula in (7).

\[(7) \quad [[ A \text{ man}_1 \text{ loves a woman}_2 ]] \approx \text{MAN}(x_1, w) \& \text{WOMAN}(x_2, w) \& \text{LOVE}(x_1, x_2, w)\]

Truth of (7) relative to variable assignment $f$ is defined as follows.

\[(8) \quad [[ A \text{ man}_1 \text{ loves a woman}_2 ]]^{f,c} = 1 \text{ iff } \text{MAN}(f(x_1), f(w)) \& \text{WOMAN}(f(x_2), f(w)) \& \text{LOVE}(f(x_1), f(x_2), f(w)) \text{ holds true.}\]

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\(^3\) I use total assignments in this paper, leaving the use of partial assignments as an option to implement dynamic semantics.
The meaning of (7) is represented by the set of assignment functions that render the formula true. Summing up all assignments in (8) brings us to the following set of assignments.

\[
(9) \quad [[ A \text{ man}_1 \text{ loves a woman}_2 ]]^c = \\
\{ f \mid (\text{MAN}(f(x_1), f(w)) \& \text{WOMAN}(f(x_2), f(w)) \& \text{LOVE}(f(x_1), f(x_2), f(w)) \text{ is true} \}
\]

The assignments include variables for possible worlds. I adopt the standard assumption that one designated world variable \( w \) is shared by all parts of meaning of sentences (Heim & von Fintel, 2008). The same variable is maintained over the entire text. In a text of fiction, we thus have a discourse referent for the world of fiction.

Dynamic update, in the present version of DRT, is captured as the intersection of two sets of variable assignments.

\[
(10) \quad A \text{ man}_1 \text{ loves a woman}_2. \text{ He}_1 \text{ sends her}_2 \text{ a bottle of whiskey}_3.
\]

The dynamic denotation of the first sentence was given in (9). The second sentence offers new information about \( x_1 \) and \( x_2 \) and moreover introduces a new DR \( x_3 \).

\[
(11) \quad [[ \text{He}_1 \text{ sends her}_2 \text{ a bottle of whiskey}_3 ]]^c = \\
\{ f \mid (\text{SEND}(f(x_1), f(x_2), f(x_3), f(w)) \& \text{BOTTLE-O-WHISK}(x_3, w)) \text{ is true} \}
\]

The meaning of (10) is provided by the intersection of (9) and (11). We thus get (12).

\[
(12) \quad [[ (10) ]]^c = [[ (9) ]]^c \cap [[ (11) ]]^c \\
= \{ f \mid (\text{MAN}(f(x_1), f(w)) \& \text{WOMAN}(f(x_2), f(w)) \& \text{LOVE}(f(x_1), f(x_2), f(w) \\
\& \text{SEND}(f(x_1), f(x_2), f(x_3), f(w)) \& \text{BOTTLE-O-WHISK}(x_3, w)) \text{ is true} \}
\]

The second sentence in the text refers back to DRs of the first sentence, offers new information about them and can also introduce new DRs. Both sentences are about the world \( w \).

The present version of dynamic semantic simplifies several aspects. For instance, DRT requires to track DRs and resolve anaphora in texts — illustrated in the present example as the decision that the first pronoun in sentence two is \( \text{he}_1 \) rather than \( \text{he}_9 \) or any other index. I take such reference tracking as given and refer to other work where the process is spelled out in detail (Kamp + Reyle 1993). We also gloss over complications entailed by negation, disjunction, conditionals and quantification (Groendijk + Stokhof 1990, Heim 1982, Kamp 1981, Kamp + Reyle 1993). The present version can be conservatively extended to cover these phenomena. I refrain from using DRT as in (Kamp + Reyle 1993) as they leave the intensional dimension implicit, whereas tracking worlds and context is at the core of the present paper. My treatment of possible worlds follows (Heim 1982, Frank + Kamp 1997) but leaves their discussion of modal embedding aside. Van Leusen + Muskens (2003) propose an elegant type logical implementation for dynamic semantics that can host future more detailed investigations into the topic.

\[4\] This reconciles two seemingly conflicting views about the meaning of sentences. While intensional semantics maintains that propositions are sets of possible worlds (and we thus never know which world we are in), there is a strong intuition that stories are about the world of fiction. The DRT account of fiction predicts that we think about the world we’re being told about and still do not know the identity of this world. To my knowledge, this synthesis of two conflicting views has not been proposed so far.
3.4 Dynamic context and radical diagonalization

The proposed dynamic meaning of discourse refers to a possible world parameter \( w \), as we have it in static semantics. The possible values for \( w \) reflect that the content of sentences and texts hold true in more than one world. Thinking in terms of fiction, the discourse referent \( w \) reflects that we are concerned with the world of fiction. The possible values \( f(w) \) reflect that the identity of the world of fiction is unknown. Dynamic meanings bracket many unknown identities — of persons, things, times and more. As a consequence, diagonalization no longer forces us to choose between sets of contexts and sets of worlds (3.2). The present section spells out what a sentence \( S \) means for hearer/reader \( R \) in context \( c \), based on the following principles.\(^5\)

- **Universal context dependence**: The meaning of sentence \( S \) is context dependent not only in indexicals but also in the world parameter.
- **Possible contexts**: The meaning of the sentence depends on the set of possible contexts \( C_R \) of the addressee/hearer/reader \( R \).
- **Summation over contexts**: The meaning of sentence \( S \) for \( R \) is the union of all context dependent meanings for all contexts in \( C_R \).

Let me illustrate these principles on basis of an example.

(13) \( I_1 \) love \( you_2 \).

As we saw in (7), the content of sentences corresponds to a formula with open variables. (13) is context dependent in that the first DR \( x_1 \) is the speaker in \( c \) and \( x_2 \) is the addressee in \( c \). I also require that the world talked about is the world of context: \( w = world(c) \). We hence compute the following — context-dependent — meaning of (13).

\[
\begin{align*}
([[ I_1 \ text{ love } you_2 ]]^c & = \{ f \mid [[ sp(c) = x_1 \land ad(c) = x_2 \land world(c)=w \land \text{LOVE}(x_1,x_2,w) ]]^{f,c} = 1 \} \\
& = \{ f \mid f(x_1)=sp(c) \land f(x_2)=ad(c) \land f(w)=world(c) \land \text{LOVE}(f(x_1),f(x_2),f(w)) \}
\end{align*}
\]

As Kaplan would have it, \( x_1 \) is the speaker and \( x_2 \) is the addressee of \( c \). We moreover assume that the world talked about is the world of \( c \).

For the sake of illustration, assume that on Friday, 12.00 \( R \) finds a piece of paper with the note (13) slipped under the door of her office. These are \( R \)’s possible contexts.

\[
C_R = \{ c \mid ad(c)=R \land time(t)=12.00 \land loc(c)=R\text{’s office} \land world(c) \in \text{EpiAlt}(R) \}
\]

This is how \( R \) interprets (13).

\(^5\) The account generalizes Ninan’s (2010) sentence meanings as centered propositions (sets of pairs of worlds and speakers).
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(15) \[ [I_1 \text{ love you}_2] \text{ in } C_R = \bigcup_{c \in C_R} \{ f | [[\text{ sp}(c) = x_1 \land \text{ R} = x_2 \land \text{ world}(c)=w \land \text{ LOVE}(x_1,x_2,w) ]]^{f,c} = 1 \} \]

“all assignments with \(x_2=\text{R}, x_1=\text{someone}, w = \text{a world that R holds possible and } x_1 \text{ loves R in } w\)”

This is roughly the same as the DRS content of “someone loves me (and has told me this here and now)”. The final part – someone has uttered (13) – is part of the message if we furthermore assume that all c are consistent contexts.

**Consistent context:** A context c is called consistent iff world(c) contains an event of sp(c) making an utterance to ad(c) at time(c) and loc(c). The context is thus part of world(c).

**Inconsistent context:** A context c is called inconsistent iff c is not part of world(c).

Inconsistent contexts will be necessary when we consider fiction that supposedly takes place in worlds without humans or before the advent of humans (see §5).

Let us narrow down the case. Consider a scenario where the note (13) is handwritten. R knows that her secret admirer Sam writes differently and thus concludes that he is not the author of the message. Hence she interprets (13) more narrowly.

(16) \[ [I_1 \text{ love you}_2] \text{ in } C_R = \bigcup_{c \in C_R} \{ f | [[\text{ sp}(c) = x_1 \land \text{ ad}(c) = x_2 \land \text{ world}(c)=w \land \text{ LOVE}(x_1,x_2,w) ]]^{f,c} = 1 \} \]

= \{ f | f(x_1) \neq \text{Sam} \land f(x_2) = \text{R} \land f(w) \in \text{Epi.Alt(} \text{R)} \land \text{ LOVE}(f(x_1), f(x_2), f(w)) \} \]

“all assignments f with \(x_2=\text{R}, x_1 \neq \text{Sam}, w = \text{a world that R holds possible where } x_1 \text{ loves R in } w\)”

R narrows down \(C_R\) by taking into account world knowledge about how different people write. This is just one of many ways in which hearers narrow down the range of possible speakers by identifying voices, faces or knowing who is sitting next door. Ideally R knows the identity of sp(c) and thus can interpret S in a maximally specific way.

In reading fiction, we can not resort to facts in the real world to identify the narrator. We rely on linguistic cues for his/her identity. A model of interpreting fiction thus requires a detailed account of how we interpret such cues. Let us take (17) as a final illustration of the content of sentence S for R.

(17) \[ I_1 \text{ am a sister}_2 \text{ or a brother}_3 \text{ of Peter}_4. \]
By lexical content, indexicals make reference to \( c \). By dynamic interpretation, pronouns introduce DRs. We thus get the following context-dependent meaning. Note that the world parameter is also context-dependent (universal context dependence).\(^6\)

\[
(18) \quad \{ f \mid sp(c) = f(x_1) \land \text{world}(c) = w_1 \land f(x_4) = \text{Peter} \land \\
\quad \quad [x_2, x_3 ; (\text{SISTER}(f(x_2), f(x_4), f(w_1)) \land f(x_1) = f(x_2)) \lor \\
\quad \quad (\text{BROTHER}(f(x_3), f(x_4), f(w_1)) \land f(x_1) = f(x_3))] \}
\]

(17) states that
- DR \( x_1 \) is identical to some Sister-or-Brother of DR \( x_4 \) in \( w_1 \)
- and DR \( x_1 \) is the speaker \( sp(c) \)
- and DR \( w_1 \) = the world of the utterance context.

Reader \( R \) computes the following content for (17).

\[
(19) \quad \bigcup_{c \in CR} \{ f \mid f(x_1) = sp(c) \land f(w_1) = \text{world}(c) \land f(x_4) = \text{Peter} \land \\
\quad \quad [x_2, x_3 ; (\text{SISTER}(f(x_2), f(x_4), f(w_1)) \land f(x_1) = f(x_2)) \lor \\
\quad \quad (\text{BROTHER}(f(x_3), f(x_4), f(w_1)) \land f(x_1) = f(x_3))] \}
\]

If \( R \) reads (17) as a piece of fiction, she puts herself in a – fictitious – utterance context \( c \) where someone utters (17) who is a brother or a sister of Peter in the world of the context, i.e., the world the speaker is talking about. Let us take a closer look at this kind of make-believe.

### 3.5 Reading Fiction

Following Lewis’ (1978) proposal, the content of fiction is interpreted as if it were told as known fact in \( c \). (19) illustrates the link between \( c \) and counterfactual worlds. DR \( w_1 \) is the world of the storytelling context \( c \) and keeps track of all worlds that fit the content of (17). The content of the story is computed incrementally, combining the content of subsequent sentences by intersection. If reader \( R \) has interpreted the story \( S \) up to sentence \( S_n \), the content of the next sentence \( S_{n+1} \) is updated as follows.

\[
(20) \quad [[S_1 \ldots S_{n+1}]] = [[S_1 \ldots S_n]] \cap [[S_{n+1}]]
\]

At each point, the story content is reflected by the set of assignments that observe everything that the story has conveyed so far. As Lewis argued, \( R \) assumes that the value \( f(w_1) \) is never the actual world \( @ \) even if the real world incidentally makes the story true.\(^7\)

\(^6\) The dynamic representation of (17) should account for the observation that the disjunction “a sister or a brother of Peter” does not globally introduce referents for brother and sister of Peter, which the local Sub-DRS \([x_2, x_3, \ldots] \) is supposed to capture. I leave the notion of local DRs undefined.

\(^7\) This is where fiction and assertive discourse diverge. See (Matravers 2014) for the relation between fiction and assertive report.
We will also assume that R hardly ever starts with the empty information state. She transfers plausible background knowledge about the real world. For instance, R will usually assume that the laws of physics hold in world(c) as they do in the real world, that the physical built of humans in world(c) is the same as in the real world and so on.\footnote{Needless to say that any of these assumptions can be overwritten in suitably situated fiction.} Formally, the story content \([S_1 \ldots S_n]\) is updated with further sets of assignments that reflect assumptions of R about the world of fiction and the discourse referents. Maier+Semeijn (this vol.) investigate in detail how story content and world knowledge give rise to such assumptions.

Just as the world of fiction is not the same as the real world, the (reading) context of a story of fiction is not a real utterance context. In real-world communication \(C_R\) includes all contexts compatible with what R knows about the real world. In reading fiction, the possible utterance contexts are restrained by R’s current beliefs about the world of fiction and its protagonists. We will use \(FC_R\) for the latter set, to remind ourselves of the different epistemic status of possible fictitious utterance contexts in contrast to possible real utterance contexts.\footnote{It should be understood that both \(C_R\) and \(FC_R\) change as the reader R learns more about the real world, or the world of fiction respectively.}

This view entails that the only person who engages in play-acting or make-believe in written fiction is, in fact, the reader R. According to our account, the author is not involved as pretending to tell a story as if it were known fact. It will be an interesting project for future research to compare written fiction to the case of oral story-telling where both, narrator and listener jointly engage in pretense.

4. Introducing vs. referring to speaker

4.1 Speaker pronouns are anaphors

Our analysis so far does not distinguish between mentioning the speaker and introducing a speaker DR. This section fills in the details. I assume that all reference to the speaker is anaphoric. First person pronouns must be resolved to a discourse referent that counts as speaker. The same holds true for other speaker parameters in other expressions. This is captured by the notion of “designated speaker”.

\textbf{(21)} \textit{The designated speaker:} The relation \(DSP(x,w)\) holds true iff in the utterance context c, \(w=world(c)\) and \(x=sp(c)\). Unlike other speaking individuals, \(x\) is special in \(w\) in that \(w\) is centered on utterance context \(c\) and \(x=sp(c)\).\footnote{The condition \(x=sp(c)\) does not suffice because, as soon as we instantiate the context parameter, \(sp(c)\) is the value of function \(sp\), i.e. some individual in \(D_c\), which no longer reflects that it was introduced qua being the speaker.}

First person pronouns are anaphors that must resolve to a DR \(x\) which is designated speaker: \(DSP(x,w)\). As a consequence, the first use of \(I\), \textit{ich}, \textit{jag} ... triggers the
accommodation of a speaker DR. A new DR $x_j$ gets selected at the global level, and the global DRS is updated with the information $x_j = \text{sp}(c) \& \text{DSP}(x_j, w)$. If the analysis is to be extended to direct speech in text, we need locally accessible designated speakers and have to resolve DSP($x, w$) to the next locally accessible designated speaker. I will leave the details for future research.

First person pronouns are however not the only triggers. As we saw in the Hamsun example, speaker-oriented items can likewise trigger the introduction of a speaker DR. These include emotives, evidentials, exclamatives, modal particles and more (Anand + Nevins 2004, Eckardt 2012, 2015, Harris + Potts 2009, Maier 2017, Maier and Bary 2018). I assume that speaker-oriented items also have an anaphoric speaker parameter that has to be resolved to $x$: DSP($x, w$). Their use can trigger the accommodation of a speaker DR. In fiction, this leads readers R to perceive a narrator.\footnote{I disregard the FID interpretation as an alternative to satisfy the speaker requirement of speaker-oriented items.}

Section 2 illustrated different means to establish $x_j$ with DSP($x_j, w$). While Robinson Crusoe is introduced by first person I, Kästner’s narrator is established with the first question act Do you know Seebühl, incidentally? We can thus diagnose that information-seeking questions also establish a speaker. Non-assertive speech acts in general can introduce a speaker DR. The first line of Jane Austin’s Pride and Prejudice „It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife,” has been argued to be ironic and therefore reveal a narrator. The fact that non-assertive speech acts introduce speakers is to date beyond formal analysis and should be taken seriously in future research.\footnote{I thank Manuel García-Carpintero for drawing my attention to this example.}

Growth of the Soil leaves more room for readers’ interpretation. The initial question The long, long road over the moors and up into the forest — who trod it into being first of all? could still be interpreted as a theme-setting question (and thus not necessarily evoking a narrator). However, the exclamative Oh that simple and innocent Isak, ... expresses anaphoric reference to $x_j$: DSP($x_j, w$) and thus triggers accommodation of a speaker DR.

The semantic answer to the search for Narrator can hence be stated as follows: A text has a narrator iff there is a DR $x_i$ with DSP($x_i, w$) (i.e., if $x_i=\text{sp}(c)$ for the global utterance context). Items beyond first person pronouns can introduce a speaker DR. Any text that supplies such items with sufficient frequency will be read and interpreted as a text with a narrator. Conversely, a text that lacks such items doesn’t introduce a speaker DR and doesn’t create the fiction of a narrator.

4.2. Items that can be speaker-oriented but don’t have to be
While speaker-oriented items always trigger the accommodation of a speaker, there is a range of predicates that can refer to a speaker but do not have to. I take predicates of personal taste (PPT), like disgusting, as an example.

(22) *When I came into the room, Eliza put the muffin on a plate. It was disgusting.*

(Kaiser 2019) offers experimental evidence that the predicate disgusting in (21) can express a judgement by the speaker, by Eliza or by “everybody”. The study includes other predicates like taste, look, smell. Subjects were asked to rate the truth of subsequent assertions like

a. I think that the muffin is disgusting.

b. Eliza thinks that the muffin is disgusting.

Kaiser’s results are confirmed when we consider PPT in fictional texts. PPT do not by themselves force upon the reader the presence of a narrator. To my intuition, a sentence like (23) can be part of a narratorless story.

(23) *Baker Baxter was known for his tasty chocolate cake.*

The absence of a narrator in (23) becomes particularly obvious when we compare the example to (24) where the exclamative forcefully evokes the presence of a narrator.

(24) *Oh, this Baker Baxter. He was well-known for his tasty chocolate cake.*

The evidence converges with Laserson’s (2005) diagnosis that the judge parameter of PPT can be instantiated generically: “everybody believes”. Taking the evidence together, we find that PPT can be anaphorically linked to the speaker (Kaiser 2019) but do not have to be. PPT do not by themselves trigger the accommodation of a speaker DR. PPT are thus unreliable predictors for the presence of a narrator.

A similar distinction can be found in the realm of evidential expressions. The German evidential wohl creates the strong impression that a speaker is voicing a subjective inference (Eckardt 2019, Zimmermann 2008 a.o.). The passage in (25) conveys that the speaker is guessing that Isak was glad.

(25) *Isak war wohl froh, als er endlich glücklich aus dem Hause draußen war.*

‘Isak was -evid- relieved as he finally …

‘Isak may well have been glad to get safely out of the house at last.’

*(Growth of the Soil, chapter 8)*

Other expressions could arguably be evidentials but do not give rise to the impression that a narrator is speaking (27 translates 26 into German).

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13 Kaiser managed to show that if a sense allows for shared experiences more readily („look“, „smell“) then subjects are more likely to allow orientation to the speaker, i.e. the a. answer.
(26) **Allegedly**, Baker Baxter had earned a fortune by selling cakes.
(27) **Angeblich** war Bäcker Baxter mit dem Verkauf von Kuchen steinreich geworden.

The examples evidence a generic hearsay reading of allegedly/angeblich as “everybody has heard rumours that…”. This echoes Bary + Maier’s (2018) finding that such expressions are non-eventive evidential markers.

The present account provides a new criterion to profile the semantics of PPT, hearsay evidentials or epistemic modals. While some of them necessarily refer to a speaker DR, other expressions allow for a generic interpretation as well. The present project highlights this difference in that the former, but not the latter, trigger the fiction of a narrator.

5. Unreliable narrators and other challenges

So far we assumed that the content of the story is the content of the sequence of sentences told by the narrator. The unreliable narrator challenges this simple view. A classical case in question is Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. For the sake of our study, I will discuss the following made-up passage (inspired by the Widow mumbling over her victuals).

(28) *(Huck Finn reports:) The priest was wearing a cozie. He waved at me.*

This is what the reader will understand: The first person narrator in (28) is mistaken. Huck believes that priests wear cozies. Huck does not know what a “mitra” is. The priest wore a mitra.

The present account predicts that something “goes wrong” when R reads (28). R interprets each sentence as $\bigcup_{c \in FCR} \{ S \}^c$. Reading *Huckleberry Finn*, R has computed the set $\text{FictAlt}(R)$, the set of worlds that R considers possible worlds where the story takes place. $\text{FictAlt}(R)$ can be restricted in several ways (Lewis 1978, Bonomi + Zucchi 2003):

- by the previous content of the story,
- by world knowledge as far as it is transferred to the worlds of the story.
- and informed by plausibility inferences of R.

Hence, the contexts $c$ in $FC_R$ are restricted by R’s expectations about $\text{world}(c)$.

$$FC_R = \{ c \mid \text{ad}(c)=R \land \text{sp}(c)=\text{Huck-Finn} \land \text{world}(c) \in \text{FictAlt}(R) \land \ldots\}$$

We can reasonably assume that R believes that priests in the worlds of fiction in (28) do not wear cozies, as little as they do in the actual world. The subjective meaning of (28) for R is as follows.
(29) \[ \bigcup_{c \in F_{CR}} \{ f \mid f(x_i) = \text{sp}(c) = \text{HUCK-FINN} \& f(w_1) = \text{world}(c) \]
& \text{PRIEST}(f(x_3), f(w))
& \text{WEAR}(f(x_3), f(x_4), f(w)) \& \text{COZIE}(f(x_4), f(w))
& \text{WAVE}(f(x_3), f(x_j), f(w)) \} = \emptyset \]

As R does not believe that priests wear cozies, something “goes wrong”: (29) = \emptyset. R will not assume that the narrative is meant to be contradictory. Instead, R can choose to interpret the content of (29) relative to the hypothesized \( C_{\text{Huck}} \), the set of contexts \( c \) that Huck considers possible. Given that Huck adheres to the maxim of quality, R infers that Huck believes to be in a world possible where priests wear cozies.

Reader R will then make plausible assumptions about the “real fictive” state of affairs that triggers Huck’s report. She could infer that Huck saw priests with mitras and believed that these were cozies. R will thus update the story content not with (29), but with (30) which in turn entails (31).

(30) \[ \text{Believe}_{\text{Huck}, w} \left( \{ f \mid f(x_i) = \text{sp}(c) = \text{HUCK-FINN} \& f(w_1) = \text{world}(c) \]
& \text{PRIEST}(f(x_3), f(w))
& \text{WEAR}(f(x_3), f(x_4), f(w)) \& \text{COZIE}(f(x_4), f(w))
& \text{WAVE}(f(x_3), f(x_j), f(w)) \} \) \]

(31) \[ \{ f \mid f(x_i) = \text{sp}(c) = \text{HUCK-FINN} \& f(w_1) = \text{world}(c) \]
& \text{PRIEST}(f(x_3), f(w))
& \text{WEAR}(f(x_3), f(x_4), f(w)) \& \text{MITRA}(f(x_4), f(w))
& \text{WAVE}(f(x_3), f(x_j), f(w)) \} \]

Maier + Semijn (this vol.) discuss in more detail how the belief states of R lead to inferences like (31). The present analysis triggers their reanalysis mechanisms by making the prediction that (29), the content of Huck’s assertion, produces a contradictory story content for R.

As a final piece of application, consider stories in a humanless world.

(32) \text{The world is in its early Eons. The sun rises over a virgin forest. Hey, there’s a dinosaur stomping by! ...}

While the story takes place in a humanless world, this doesn’t exclude the presence of a narrator. This is in conflict with R’s make-believe to be in a context \( c \) in the world of fiction. This contradiction can be resolved if the reader R can include inconsistent contexts in \( F_{CR} \). A context \( c \) is called inconsistent iff \( c \) is not part of \( \text{world}(c) \). In other words, the world of \( c \) does not include an event of \( \text{sp}(c) \) talking to \( \text{ad}(c) \). The reader R evaluates (32) against the following \( F_{CR} \).

\[ F_{CR} = \{ c \mid c \text{ is a context with } \text{ad}(c) = R \text{ and } \text{world}(c) \in F_{\text{Fict Alt}}(R) \} \]

where for all \( w \) in \( F_{\text{Fict Alt}}(R) \), \( w \) does not include \( c \) as a part.
Inconsistent contexts c in this case seem to work like a reporter’s booth in a stadium which can oversee, but is not really part of the world reported on.

Beyond such stories, inconsistent contexts could have more interesting applications in thinking about context dependence. They allow to extend the denotation of sentences to worlds beyond those where the sentence is being uttered. Inconsistent contexts might thus be a regular part of CR even without fiction – which brings the present analysis close towards Kaplan’s original definition of a character.

6. Summary

Stories can create the fiction of a narrator as part of a story. If we want to analyse the narrator as part of the story, we have to spell out how context parameters and story content interleave and how we can model a unique but unknown narrator. I propose an analysis in terms of dynamic semantics, which is designed to capture unique but unknown protagonists. The reader R interprets fiction S relative to FC_R, the set of contexts in which—as far as R knows—the story could be told. These contexts are restricted by the information that the story conveys about the narrator (=speaker). Taking the union \( \bigcup_{c \in FC_R} [S]^c \) of these allows us to integrate unknown speakers and other protagonists in S in a uniform semantic format.

In dynamic semantics, to be part of a story is to be the value of a discourse referent. 1st / 2nd person pronouns add discourse referents (DRs) for speaker and addressee to the story’s DRS. The story-telling situation is part of the fiction told and the (real) reader mock-acts to be the (fictitious) addressee in the story-telling situation. More items than 1st / 2nd person pronouns can add speaker DR to the DRS and hence, stories can create the impression of a narrator without using a 1st person pronoun. Among such items are emotives, exclamatives, questions and other non-assertive speech acts, (certain) evidentials, (certain) epistemic adverbs and modals.

Some items, however, can refer to sp(c) without triggering the accommodation of a speaker DR to the story. We discussed the case of taste predicates and (some) evidentials; 3rd person pronouns likewise presuppose difference from sp(c) without introducing a DR for the speaker.

Finally, a story without a DR for the speaker is a narratorless story. Some stories do not use any item that introduces a speaker DR and hence, not every story has a narrator. Which is the Semantic Answer to the initial question.

References


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