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### Fiction and common ground

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 The goal

Generally, I trust people to tell me the truth. When I ask a stranger at a bus stop whether line 4 stops there, I expect the stranger to (unconsciously) follow Grice's (1989) maxim of Quality, i.e., my conversational partner will try to make their contribution to our conversation one that is true. This trust is essential; if a society lacks the trust that most people will engage in cooperative information exchange, the merit of its entire linguistic practice is in jeopardy. Why would I even try asking the stranger about the bus if I cannot trust that they will try to say something true?

At the same time people simply *love* to watch others break the maxim of Quality or even to break it themselves. We love reading or watching obviously false reports about unlikely romances in nineteenth century England, fire-breathing dragons, talking animals, heroic aliens and futuristic societies. Not only do we fill our bookcases, bedroom walls and minds with stories and images that we know to report false 'facts', we also love to extensively discuss these falsities. High schools oblige their students to rehearse and study their society's most famous false stories (e.g., *Hamlet* or *Van den Vos Reynaerde*) and people collectively create extensive online encyclopedias reporting on their favourite sets of falsities (e.g., *One Wiki to Rule Them All* or *Wookieepedia*).

People can only enjoy this blatant breaking of the maxim of Quality precisely because it is out in the open for everyone that the relevant stories are false. It is usually clear from the context that they are untrue and hence can be kept separate from other discourse. This is one of the hallmarks of our fiction telling practices (and what distinguishes it from its cousin 'lying' that, I hope, fewer people enjoy). Nobody is deceived into believing something false, nobody is harmed and we can maintain the general trust that we have in conversational partners.

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### 1.1.1 The puzzles

This dissertation focuses on modelling the different ways we use language to engage with fiction and how these uses relate to non-fictional but related language uses such as assertion and lying. This general challenge subdivides itself into several puzzles involving different kinds of statements. The aim of the present dissertation is to engage in the existing debates on these puzzles by developing a coherent semantic analysis that deals with these distinct statements in a systematic way.

The central conundrum (and the starting point of the study of the semantics of fiction in general) is to distinguish regular non-fictional talk from fictional talk (see chapters 3 and 4). Whereas non-fictional discourse is typically about real world objects (e.g., Trump, the Eiffeltower, my aunt), fictional discourse typically features fictional names, i.e., names of fictional characters or objects such as 'Frodo', 'The Toothfairy' or 'the Fountain of Youth'. To illustrate, suppose Tolkien told me that his friend C.S. Lewis was born in Belfast by stating (1). Compare this to Tolkien's written statement (2) in his novel *The Hobbit*:

- (1) C.S. Lewis was born in Belfast.
- (2) In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.

By uttering (1) Tolkien engaged in non-fictional discourse, by writing down (2) Tolkien engages in fictional discourse. The aim here is to explain why, whereas statements such as (1) are considered to be true or false, statements such as (2) are not *really* true or false, but rather determine what is true in a fictional world separate from the actual world; (2) makes it true in the world of the *The Lord of the Rings* saga that a hobbit lived in a hole in the ground.

A complication here is that many things will be true in a fiction that were never actually stated in the fictional narrative. For instance, it is true in the world of *The Lord of the Rings* that water is H<sub>2</sub>O, that the sun rises in the east and that handkerchiefs are squares of thin fabric used for personal hygiene. What's more, sometimes statements found in a fictional story do *not* determine what is true in the fictional world in this way. Consider Kesey's written statements in his novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*:

- (3) Then, just as she's rolling along at her biggest and meanest, McMurphy steps out of the latrine door right in front of her, holding that towel around his hips – stops her *dead!* She shrinks to about

head-high to where that towel covers him, and he's grinning down on her.

Although these statements express that nurse Ratched (who previously grew to the size of a truck) shrinks to the size of a hobbit, they cannot be taken at face value. The narrator is schizophrenic and hence unreliable; it is not true in the world of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* that Ratched shrinks in size. Rather it is probably true that she was taken aback and that the narrator perceived this as shrinking in size. Such cases of unreliable narration pose an additional puzzle for an account of fictional discourse (see chapter 8).

Moreover, sometimes people talk about fiction and use fictional names in statements that are not part of a fictional story. For instance, I may utter (4) or (5):

(4) In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo was born in the Shire.

(5) According to *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo was born in the Shire.

(4) and (5), like fictional statement (2), tell us something about a fictional world. However, like the non-fictional statement (1), (4) and (5) seem to be really true! But do statements (4) and (5) really mean the same thing (see chapter 7)? To complicate things, I can also utter a statement such as (6):

(6) Frodo was invented by Tolkien.

Arguably, (6) expresses something that is really true. But, assuming the name 'Frodo' refers uniformly to one object, how can we make sense of the apparent truth of both (4) and (6)? If Frodo is the kind of thing that was 'born' in a certain region, how can he have been 'invented' by someone (see chapter 6)?

Conversely, sometimes we may find a statement *within* a fictional story that is really true about non-fictional objects (see section 4.6.2). For instance, in Fleming's fictional novel *Thunderball* we come across the following statement:

(7) New Providence, the island containing Nassau, the capital of the Bahamas, is a drab sandy slab of land fringed with some of the most beautiful beaches in the world. (Friend (2008))

(7) expresses information that is simply true. New Providence *does* indeed contain Nassau and is fringed with beaches. Does this then mean that it is not part of the fictional story? And if it is part of the story, how can we

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explain that I may learn topographical facts about the Bahamas from reading (7) in the fictional novel *Thunderball*?

Finally, whenever one attempts to model our fiction-telling practices, it is important to keep fictional discourse separate from lies (see chapter 5). Suppose I am invited to a party that I do not want to attend. I could utter (8) while I am feeling perfectly fine and hence lie:

(8) [Cough, cough] Sorry, I have a cold.

Although both lie (8) and fictional statement (2) are strictly false, we want to maintain a distinction between these two types of utterances; a semantic definition of fiction should not also apply to lies and vice versa. Intuitively, we may want to appeal to the notion of an intention to deceive; whereas I had an intention to deceive my addressee with my utterance of (8), Tolkien never intended to deceive anyone into believing that a hobbit lived in a hole by writing down (2). However, sometimes it seems like we can lie without any intention to deceive. Suppose a student accused of plagiarism is called to the dean's office. The student knows he plagiarized, the dean knows he did, the student knows that the dean knows, etc. However, it is also well known that the dean will not punish anyone who explicitly denies their guilt. When asked the student therefore says:

(9) I didn't cheat on the exam. (adapted from Carson (2006))

If (9) is a real lie, then lies apparently do not necessarily involve an intention to deceive. But then how can we distinguish lying from fiction telling?

### 1.1.2 Theoretical ingredients

This dissertation introduces and explores a coherent semantic theory of the different types of statements described above called the 'workspace account'. It is an extension of Stalnaker's (1970, 1978, 1984, 2002) widely adopted pragmatic common ground framework. In this framework assertions are modelled as proposals to update the 'common ground' of a conversation (i.e., the set of propositions that are mutually presupposed by speaker and hearer). The Stalnakerian common ground framework is based on cooperative information exchanges: Conversations in which interlocutors gradually add more and more information to their common ground because more and more propositions are asserted and accepted. Since the workspace account is aimed at modelling fictional discourse (e.g., Tolkien's production

## 1.2 Overview of dissertation

of his fiction novel *The Lord of the Rings*) and fiction authors do not, strictly speaking, engage in cooperative information exchange (e.g., the communicated information in *The Lord of the Rings* is strictly false), I will need to extend this basic Stalnakerian notion of common ground. In developing the present extension of the common ground framework I have taken inspiration from (amongst other things) Eckardt's (2014) and Stokke's (2013; 2018) 'unofficial common ground accounts' (that separate the common ground for non-fictional discourse from common grounds for fictional discourse), Matravets' (2014) theory of narrative interpretation (according to which our primary engagement with narratives – entertaining its content – is the same whether the narrative is fictional or not) and Lewis' (1978) widely adopted possible world analysis of statements of the form 'In story  $s$ ,  $\phi$ '.

The notion of common ground will be represented in different formal ways in the dissertation. Familiarity with basic set theory and propositional logic is assumed. Familiarity with Kamp's (1981) Discourse Representation Theory will be useful in reading the dissertation but not strictly necessary because the formalism is specified and explained where introduced. The DRT notation is the most frequently used notation in this dissertation because this formalism allows me to illustrate the different kinds of common ground updates and the anaphoric dependencies that are involved in the example sentences in a visually efficient manner.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.2 Overview of dissertation

### 1.2.1 Summary of each chapter

#### Chapter 2: Common ground: *In sensu composito* or *in sensu diviso*

In chapter 2 I introduce the notion of common ground and its role in Stalnaker's pragmatic framework. I briefly discuss previous challenges that have been posed to traditional common ground definitions and spell out a novel challenge posed by non face-to-face communication using a relational analysis of de re beliefs. Basically, standard common ground definitions are in terms of iterative de re attitudes but surely Tolkien never had any de re beliefs about me (one of his readers). But then how can we talk about the

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<sup>1</sup>As will become clear there is also a theoretical incentive to opt for a formalism that gives a structured representation of the common ground. See chapter 4.

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conversation or common ground between Tolkien and his readers? I propose and compare two potential refinements of standard common ground definitions based on Abelard's distinction between generality *in sensu composito* and *in sensu diviso*.

### Chapter 3: Unofficial common grounds

In chapter 3 I turn to fiction. I introduce the basic puzzle in the semantics of fiction of modelling the quarantining of fictional discourse from non-fictional discourse. I discuss and formalise existing Stalnakerian accounts that model fictional discourse, i.e., Stokke's and Eckardt's unofficial common ground accounts where fictional statements update an unofficial common ground that is kept separate from the official common ground used for assertions. I critique both accounts on how they deal with two *prima facie* conflicting intuitions concerning fictional content. First, that fictional truths are only accepted temporarily. Second, that we do retain information about fictional truth even after engaging with the fiction somehow.

### Chapter 4: The workspace account

In chapter 4 I introduce a novel Stalnakerian approach to model fictional and non-fictional discourse, i.e., the workspace account. I first discuss two theoretical ingredients of the account: Matravvers' theory of fiction interpretation and Lewis' analysis of the fiction operator. I then discuss the basic ideas of the workspace account and formalise them. Assertions and fictional statements both uniformly update a temporary common ground (the workspace) during the ongoing discourse. What distinguishes the speech acts is how they update the stable common ground, i.e., with information of the form 'In story  $s$ ,  $\phi$ ' or with plain  $\phi$ . I will argue that the workspace account avoids the difficulties associated with the unofficial common grounds described in chapter 3. I briefly discuss two possible extensions of the workspace account: a version of the account where fiction that mentions real world entities is *de re* about these entities and an analysis of export of fictional truth as based on analogical reasoning with parafictional information.

The chapters that follow deal with possible applications and refinements of this basic account. Sometimes these adjustments can easily be translated to the unofficial common ground accounts. I will discuss this when relevant.

### Chapter 5. Lies, bald-faced lies and parafictional updates

In chapter 5 I explore the challenges posed by modelling lying in a common ground framework and discuss two possible strategies (open to unofficial common ground accounts and the workspace account) to deal with these. I argue that bald-faced lies (i.e., statements that are called “lies” but that do not involve an intention to deceive) are best analysed as fictional statements rather than as actual lies. I briefly introduce and counter five objections to this view.

### Chapter 6: The challenge of metafictional anaphora

In chapter 6 I introduce metafictional discourse (i.e., statements about fictional entities *as fictional entities*) and the different variants of the problem of the wrong kind of object, i.e., if Frodo is a flesh and blood hobbit, how can he also have been invented by Tolkien? I specify the challenge posed by the possibility of co-predication and anaphoric dependencies across metafictional and parafictional discourse for dynamic semantic approaches. I focus on pronominal anaphora across mixed parafictional/metafictional discourse or ‘metafictional anaphora’. I evaluate four different possible solutions in the workspace account.

### Chapter 7: The ‘In’ and ‘According to’ operators

In chapter 7 I argue, contra common practice, that there is a relevant semantic difference between the ‘In story *s*’ and ‘According to story *s*’ operators. I explore three novel observations concerning the diverging linguistic behaviour of these operators and propose two distinct semantic analyses to account for these. Sentences of the form ‘In story *s*,  $\phi$ ’ receive the widely adopted Lewisian analysis of parafictional statements. Sentences of the form ‘According to *s*,  $\phi$ ’ are analysed as indirect speech reports.

### Chapter 8: Unreliable narration and imaginative resistance

In chapter 8 I discuss the need for some kind of revision operation for workspace updates and how this relates to the overall project of a Matraver-sian ‘uniform’ analysis of fictional and non-fictional discourse. The rest of chapter 8 is based on a co-authored paper with Dr. Emar Maier. We present an extension of the workspace account that takes into account the role of



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(unreliable) narrators and the phenomenon of imaginative resistance by incorporating insights from belief revision.

### 1.2.2 How to read this dissertation

The most straightforward way of reading this dissertation is to read all chapters in consecutive order. This way the reader will obtain a comprehensive overview of the workspace account and its different applications. If the reader is interested in a particular topic they may choose to skip chapter 2 (and rely on an intuitive understanding of what it is to have a common ground with someone who is not acquainted with you) and start with chapters 3 and 4 to familiarize themselves with the basics of the workspace account and the motivations behind it. After reading chapters 3 and 4 the reader can move on to any of the subsequent chapters 5, 6, 7 or 8. The text may at some points include references to ideas, analyses or examples in earlier and later chapters (other than chapters 3 and 4) but these may be skipped. Chapter 7 may also be read completely independently if one has read section 4.2.2.

## 1.3 Previous publications

Most of the research presented in this dissertation is based on (parts of) papers that have been presented at conferences. Some research is based on previously published papers. Every chapter starts with a short description of what parts of the text are taken from what publication and what has been added or changed. Below is an overview of which papers formed the basis for which chapters:

### **Chapter 2: Common ground: *In sensu composito or in sensu diviso***

Semeijn, M. (2019). Common ground: In sensu composito or in sensu diviso. In *Proceedings of 22nd Amsterdam Colloquium*. ILLC.

### **Chapter 3: Unofficial common grounds**

Semeijn, M. (2017). A Stalnakerian analysis of metafictional statements. In *Proceedings of the 21st Amsterdam Colloquium*. ILLC.

**Chapter 4: The workspace account**

Semeijn, M. (2017). A Stalnakerian analysis of metafictional statements. In *Proceedings of the 21st Amsterdam Colloquium*. ILLC.

Semeijn, M. (2019). Interacting with fictions: The role of pretend play in Theory of Mind acquisition. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 10(1):113-132.

**Chapter 5: Lies, bald-faced lies and parafictional updates**

Semeijn, M. (2020) Bald-faced lies and parafictional updates. unpublished manuscript.

**Chapter 6: The challenge of metafictional anaphora**

Semeijn, M. (2019) The challenge of metafictional anaphora. In Sikos, J. and Pacuit, E., editors, *At the Intersection of Language, Logic, and Information*, 124-143. Springer, Berlin.

Semeijn, M., Zalta, E. N. (2021). Revisiting the ‘wrong kind of object’ problem. *Organon F*, 28(1):168-197.

**Chapter 7: The ‘In’ and ‘According to’ operators**

Semeijn, M. (2020). The ‘In’ and ‘According to’ operators. In *Proceedings of the ESSLLI & WeSSLLI Student Session 2020*.

**Chapter 8: Unreliable narration and imaginative resistance**

Maier, E., Semeijn, M. (forthcoming). Extracting fictional truth from unreliable sources. In Maier, E. and Stokke, A., editors, *The Language of Fiction*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

