



Fictional force

Andreas Stokke¹

Accepted: 25 August 2023 / Published online: 7 September 2023
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Abstract

This paper argues for an account of fictional force, the central characteristic of the kind of non-assertoric speech act that authors of fictions are engaged in. A distinction is drawn between what is true in a fiction and the *fictional record* comprising what the audience has been told. The papers argues that to utter a sentence with fictional force is to intend that its content be added to a fictional record. It is shown that this view accounts for phenomena such as conversational implicatures in fictional discourse. Moreover, the view is seen to provide an attractive way of distinguishing fictional utterances from assertoric utterances. As a consequence, this account of fictional force offers a satisfactory way of distinguishing fiction from lying.

Keywords Fiction · Speech acts · Force · Assertion

1 Introduction

Consider the first sentence of A.S. Byatt's, 2009 novel *The Children's Book*:

- (1) (1) Two boys stood in the Prince Consort Gallery, and looked down on a third. It was June 19th, 1895. (Byatt, 2009, 5)

In writing (1) Byatt was not asserting that on 19 June 1895 two boys were standing in the Prince Consort Gallery looking down on a third boy. (1) is not put forward as a claim about what was actually the case. Byatt used (1) to make a *fictional utterance* (also sometimes called a *fictive utterance*), as part of telling a fictional story. Yet the same sentence could be used assertorically, for instance, as part of a work of history.

✉ Andreas Stokke
andreas.stokke@filosofi.uu.se

¹ Department of Philosophy, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

This kind of observation has led many to agree that fictional and non-fictional discourse are distinguished only in terms of force (cf. e.g. Searle, 1975, Lewis, 1983 [1978], Currie, 1990, Sainsbury, 2010, Davies, 2015, Recanati, 2000, 2018). In other words, there is no syntactic or semantic difference between fictional and non-fictional discourse. As Searle (1975) wrote in an often quoted passage,

There is no textual property, syntactical or semantic, that will identify a text as a work of fiction. What makes it a work of fiction is, so to speak, the illocutionary stance that the author takes toward it [...]. (Searle, 1975, 325)

Similarly, Currie (1990) writes,

If Doyle had been writing history instead of fiction when he wrote “It rained in London on January 1, 1895,” he would have been making an assertion. The transition from history to fiction is marked, at least, by the loss of one kind of force: assertative force. (Currie, 1990, 6–7)

Given this consensus, it is not surprising that a lot of work has aimed at giving an account of fictional force, the kind of non-assertoric speech act that authors of fiction perform in telling their stories.

There are two main contenders in this area of theorizing. Some argue that fictional utterances are pretend assertions (Searle, 1975; Lewis, 1983 [1978], Recanati, 2000, 2018, Schiffer, 2003, Kripke, 2011).¹ Others hold that fictional utterances are prescriptions or invitations to imagine certain things (Currie, 1990; Sainsbury, 2010; Friend, 2011; Davies, 2015). The debate between these views has been extensive, and there are well known problems with both. These arguments will not be rehearsed here.²

This paper argues for a new approach to fictional force. Instead of focusing on the kind of action involved in fictional discourse – pretending, prescribing, or something else – I propose to focus on the communicative effects of fictional discourse. In particular, I want to suggest a way of understanding fictional force based on the general view that the force of an utterance is, at least partly, a matter of its intended communicative footprint.

This approach grows out of the well-known framework for theorizing about communication initiated by the work of Stalnaker (1999 [1970]), (1999 [1978]), (1999 [1998]), (2002), and others. A central component of this picture of communication is a general picture of linguistic force. As Stalnaker puts it,

If the goal of speech, or at least one central goal, is to exchange information, then it is natural to explain the force of speech acts as the attempt to add to or

¹ More precisely, fictional utterances of declarative sentences are pretend assertions, while e.g. a fictional utterance of an interrogative is a pretend question, and so on.

² For problems with the pretense view, see in particular Currie (1990, ch. 1), Sainsbury (2010, ch. 2). For objections to the prescription to imagine view, see e.g. Friend (2008), Bergman and Franzén (2022).

alter a body of information that is presumed to be shared by the participants in the conversation. (Stalnaker, 1999, 6)

On this view, to assert that p is, roughly, to make a bid for p to be added to the *common ground* of the conversation, the pool of information that is taken for granted by the participants for the purpose of the exchange.

Correspondingly, instead of asking whether authors of fictions are engaged in pretense or prescription, or some other kind of action, this paper asks what kind of shared, inter-personal information fictional utterances interact with, and how.

I distinguish two kinds of information associated with fiction. The first is the familiar notion of *fictional truth*, or what is true in a fiction. The second is the record of what we as audiences have been told by the narrator. I call the latter the *fictional record*. I argue that to utter a sentence with fictional force is to intend that its content be added to a fictional record.

We will see that this way of understanding fictional force offers attractive ways of accounting for some communicative features of fictional discourse, including the way authors often rely on audiences to infer conversational implicatures from what they make explicit as part of the story.

Further, an account of fictional force should be satisfactory *qua* account of (one kind of) non-assertoric force. In particular, it should have desirable consequences concerning differences between the relevant range of assertoric and non-assertoric utterances. I argue that my account of fictional force gets this difference right by showing that it makes persuasive predictions concerning the distinction between speaking fictionally and lying.

Fictional utterances and lies are related in that typically both are utterances of things the speaker believes, or knows, to be false (cf. Maier, 2019). Nevertheless, speaking fictionally and lying are distinct phenomena, and this should be reflected in an account of fictional force. I endorse the standard view that you lie only if you make an assertion. Moreover, we will see that, on my account of fictional force, no utterance made with fictional force is an assertion. Hence, fictional utterances and lies are mutually exclusive categories (cf. Mahon, 2019, Marsili, *in press*).

This view has the consequence that, even though authors routinely include things in their fictions that are actually true, and often do so with the aim that readers should learn things about the actual world from the story, they are not asserting such things.

Section 2 introduces the notion of a fictional record, as distinguished from what is true in a fiction. Section 3 argues that fictional force can usefully be understood in terms of fictional records and shows how it provides accounts of phenomena such as conversational implicature in fictional discourse. In Sect. 4 I show that this view offers an attractive way of delineating fictional discourse in relation to assertoric discourse and consequently of distinguishing fictional utterances from lies.

2 Fictional records

2.1 Fictional truth and fictional records

It is standard to note that truth in fiction can both go beyond and be underdetermined by what we are explicitly told by the narrator. Davies (1996) gives a clear statement:

Being explicitly stated in the text of S is neither necessary nor sufficient for being true in S, however. It is not *necessary* because we must allow for at least some things to be true in the story though neither explicitly stated nor immediately derivable from what is explicitly stated. It is not *sufficient*, on the other hand, because we want to allow for deceptive or deceived narrators, or for narrators who consistently understate, exaggerate, or employ irony. (Davies, 1996, 44)

In other words, we should distinguish between what is true in a fiction and what we are explicitly told by the narrator. To take Lewis's (1983 [1978]) classic example, it is arguably true in the Sherlock Holmes stories that Holmes has exactly two nostrils, even though the narrator, Dr Watson, never tells us this.³

I want to point out that an analogous distinction holds for what the narrator conveys, or what we are told.⁴ A useful way to see this is to note that narrators sometimes say things that are true in the fiction but which give rise to conversational implicatures that are false in the fiction. Consider the following passage from Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*:

(2) [...] the telephone rang in the hall below. [...]

I ran down the stairs and took up the receiver.

What?' I said. 'What? Certainly, I'll come at once.

I ran upstairs, caught up my bag, and stuffed a few extra dressings into it.

'Parker telephoning', I shouted to Caroline, 'from Fernly. They've just found Roger Ackroyd murdered.' (Christie, 2011 [1926], 45)

In discussing this passage, Sainsbury (2014) writes,

It is tempting to suppose that it is part of the content of this passage that Dr Sheppard's interlocutor on the telephone said that Ackroyd had been murdered. Twenty-two chapters pass before we are disabused of this interpretation. (Sainsbury, 2014, 281)

Like others (e.g. Lewis, 1983 [1978], Currie, 1990, Stock, 2017) Sainsbury is using "content" to mean what is true in the fiction. If one uses "content" this way, it is not part of the content of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* that Parker said on the phone that Ackroyd had been murdered. However, it is undeniably part of what the narrator, Dr

³ The literature on truth in fiction is vast. For a sample, see Lewis (1983 [1978]), Currie (1990), Woodward (2011), Byrne (1993), Phillips (1999), Bonomi and Zucchi (2003), Stock (2017), Badura and Berto (2019), Franzén (2021), Zucchi (2021).

⁴ This follows Stokke (2022).

Sheppard, conveyed to us that this is what happened. That is why we are surprised later on when we find out that it did not.

So as audiences to fictions we keep track of at least the following two kinds of information: what is true in the fiction and what we have been told by the narrator. For ease of reference, I will call the former the *fictional truth*, the other I call the *fictional record*. Countless fictions exploit this difference and rely on the audience to retain a picture of both and their differences. In many cases we are aware that the two do not coincide. Moreover, both typically go beyond what is explicitly stated by the narrator.

In the rest of this section, I turn to fleshing out the notion of a fictional record more. In the next section I will argue that fictional force can usefully be understood in terms of fictional records.

2.2 Common grounds and corpora

As the example of (2) shows, audiences to fictional stories routinely infer things as part of the story from what the narrator makes explicit. As I will argue later (see 3.2), the inference triggered by (2) is an instance of conversational implicature. This suggests that, at least to a large extent, we interpret what the narrator of a fictional story tells us in ways that mirror how we interpret each other in everyday conversation. This suggests thinking of fictional records as analogous to information shared among participants in ordinary, non-fictional discourse settings.

On the familiar picture originating in the work of Stalnaker (1999 [1970]), (1999 [1978]), (1999 [1998]), (2002), communication relies on background information, called the *common ground*, which serves both to support interpretation and as a storage for new information that is added during the conversation. Information is included in the common ground through various means, such as assertion, presupposition accommodation, conversational implicature, or by being manifestly observable. In turn, speakers can assume that common ground information is available to help make sense of subsequent utterances.

A fictional record functions like a common ground. In reading or hearing a fictional story, a cache of information is incremented with what the narrator makes explicit and through various other means, including conversational implicatures, presupposition accommodation, and other mechanisms. In turn, the audience draws on this information to make sense of the story.

To make this more precise, I follow Currie (2010) in adopting Lewis's (1998 [1982]) notion of a *corpus* of information. As characterized by Currie,

A corpus is a body of representations, emanating from a more or less unified source—a single individual, a team of experts, a tradition—and in which we may have a more or less systematic interest. [...] Corpora are things according to which something or other is true; it may not be raining in actuality, but it may be raining according to someone's belief, according to the bulletin from the weather bureau, according to a story, fictional or non-fictional. (Currie, 2010, 8)

Along these lines, we characterize the fictional record of a story as follows:

2.2.1 Fictional record

The fictional record of a story s for an audience $A = \text{df}$ the set of propositions p such that all members of A believe that p is true according to the narrator of s .

It is crucial to be clear about what we mean by "true according to the narrator" here. In particular, that p is true according to the narrator does not mean that, in the fiction, the narrator believes that p , let alone that p is true in the fiction.⁵ As Currie says,

When something is true according to a corpus, the agents from which it emanates are not always committed to its truth; that will be so for belief systems and historical texts, it may be so for weather reports, it is not so for fictional stories. (loc. cit.)

The fictional record of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* includes the information that Parker said on the phone that Ackroyd had been murdered. This is part of how things are in the fiction according to the narrator, Dr Sheppard. Yet we do not mean that Dr Sheppard, in the fiction, believes that Parker said on the phone that Ackroyd had been murdered, nor that this is true in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. What we mean is that it is true according to how Dr Sheppard represents things to us – at least until he reveals the truth.

Having distinguished fictional truth from fictional records, in the next section I spell out the view of fictional force I favor.

3 Fictional records and fictional force

3.1 Updating fictional records

On the view I want to propose here, utterances with fictional force are aimed at changing, or updating, fictional records. To spell this out more precisely, we assume, as usual, that $\llbracket S \rrbracket^c$ is the denotation of the sentence S , relative to the context c . Roughly, if S is a declarative sentence, $\llbracket S \rrbracket^c$ is the proposition expressed, or what is said, by S in c . If S is a non-declarative, such as an interrogative, we take $\llbracket S \rrbracket^c$ to be the contribution that S makes to a Stalnakerian common ground. For instance, typically, uttering an interrogative sentence makes it common ground that the speaker wants to know the answer to the relevant question. Yet, since this is not my topic here, I refrain from discussing non-declarative utterances further.⁶ All the examples discussed here involve declaratives.

Given this, we can state the view of fictional force in terms of fictional records as follows:

⁵ This does not rule out views such as that of Currie (1990) according to which what is true in a fiction is delineated as the beliefs of a fictional author (distinct from explicit narrators).

⁶ For discussion, see Stokke (2014), (2018b, ch. 10).

3.1.1 Fictional force

a utters *S* with fictional force if and only if there is a fictional record *F* such that, by uttering *S*, *a* intends to update *F* with $\llbracket S \rrbracket^c$.

In other words, given how we have characterized fictional records above, this means that to utter a sentence with fictional force is to intend that an audience believe that its content is true according to the narrator.

As a first illustration, consider the opening sentences of Marilyn Robinson's *Housekeeping*:

(3) My name is Ruth. I grew up with my younger sister, Lucille, under the care of my grandmother, Mrs. Sylvia Foster, and when she died, of her sisters-in-law, Misses Lily and Nona Foster, and when they fled, of her daughter, Mrs. Sylvia Fisher. (Robinson, 2004 [1980], 3)

Robinson uttered (3), presumably by writing it down. In doing so, Robinson was not making an assertion. If she had been, she would have asserted that her name is "Ruth," and that she grew up with her younger sister, Lucille, and so on. Since Robinson is well aware that those things are not true (so we assume), she would have been lying if she had uttered (3) with assertoric force. But she did not do that. Instead, she uttered (3) with fictional force.

When she uttered (3) with fictional force, Robinson intended to make it part of a fictional record that the narrator's name is "Ruth," and that she grew up with her younger sister, Lucille, and so on. In other words, Robinson's utterance was intended to make audiences believe that those things are true according to the narrator, Ruth.⁷

So, on this view, the observation that (3) was uttered with non-assertoric force is captured by the fact that it was not intended to update ordinary common ground information, but was instead intended to update a body of information comprising what audiences think is true according to the narrator of *Housekeeping*. As outlined above, this body of information – the fictional record of *Housekeeping* – is the audience's picture of the corpus of how the narrator, Ruth, represents things as being in the fiction, which may or may not correspond to what is fictionally true in *Housekeeping*, or to what the audience think is true in *Housekeeping*.

3.2 Audiences and implicatures

We have characterized fictional records as relative to audiences.⁸ Correspondingly, as seen from the above, fictional force is a matter of intending that one's audience

⁷ As this suggests, we take the context relevant for settling reference of pronouns, among other things, to be the fictional record itself, rather than the context of utterance. Cf. e.g. Stalnaker (1999 [1998]) who suggests that the common ground is the context relevant for determining reference of pronouns.

⁸ Since the fictional record is distinct from fictional truth, this does not imply that what is true in a fiction varies depending on the audience. My account agrees with the standard view on which "What was true in

have certain beliefs, in particular, beliefs about what is true according to the narrator. By contrast, it might be thought that we should characterize fictional force without reference to audiences. For instance, it might be suggested that to make an utterance with fictional force is just a matter of intending to make something true according to the narrator of one's story.

Yet there are reasons for thinking that this cannot capture the full range of utterances with fictional force. This can be seen from the fact that, as we have already noted, authors of fictions often rely on audiences to fill out the fictional record. Take (2).

(2) [...] the telephone rang in the hall below. [...]
I ran down the stairs and took up the receiver.
What?' I said. 'What? Certainly, I'll come at once.
I ran upstairs, caught up my bag, and stuffed a few extra dressings into it.
'Parker telephoning', I shouted to Caroline, 'from Fernly. They've just found
Roger Ackroyd murdered.' (Christie, 2011 [1926], 45)

Suppose we had characterized fictional records without reference to audiences, for instance, simply as the collection of propositions that are true according to the narrator. What can one say about (2) on such a picture? All one can say is that by uttering (2) with fictional force, Christie intended to add to the fictional record not only the "literal" content of (2) but also that Parker said on the phone that Ackroyd had been murdered. But there is no explanation available here for how Christie could intend that her utterance of (2) have the result of also updating the fictional record with the latter information. Indeed, on this view, one cannot explain why Christie could *not* hope to convey that, for instance, zebras can run about 65 km/h by uttering (2).

The information that that Parker said on the phone that Ackroyd had been murdered is not an entailment or presupposition of (2). Instead, it is clear that Christie was relying on readers of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* to infer that information from (2). When she uttered (2) with fictional force, she intended to make audiences believe that its "literal" content is true according to the narrator, Dr Sheppard, and as a result to infer that it is likewise true according to Dr Sheppard that Parker said on the phone that Ackroyd had been murdered.

As suggested above, we explain this inference as a (particularized) conversational implicature. In particular, the inference is plausibly regarded as relying on the presumption that the narrator is observing the Maxim of Relation, "Be relevant." Grice (1989, 27). If I tell you, "My parents called. They bought a new car," you will most likely infer that my parents told me on the phone that they bought a new car. Understanding me as wanting to convey that my parents told me that on the phone is a way of seeing the information that bought a new car as relevant to their calling my up. By contrast, imagine that I tell you, "My parents called. They finally figured out how to use their phone." You will not infer that they told me that on the phone because there

a fiction when it was first told is true in it forevermore. It is our knowledge of what is true in the fiction that may wax and wane." (Lewis, 1983 [1978], 272) See Stokke (2022) for further discussion.

are other reasons why the information that they figured out how to use their phone is relevant to their calling.⁹

Similarly, a plausible explanation for the audience's inference with respect to (2) is that they are assuming that the narrator is being cooperative, and in particular, is observing Relation. In turn, since Christie can anticipate this, we explain why, by making (2) part of the fictional record, she can hope to make audiences believe that, according to the narrator, Parker said on the phone that Ackroyd had been murdered.

More generally, it is a platitude that authors of fictions rely on their audiences to flesh out the story.¹⁰ This is one motivation for characterizing fictional force as we have done, that is, as utterances intended to make audiences believe that their contents are part of fictional records.

At the same time, as discussed by Stock (2017) and others, there may seem to be reasons to think that intentions directed at audiences are not necessary for uttering something with fictional force. Stock defends a version of the prescription to imagine view on which, roughly, to utter a sentence with fictional force is to intend that one's audience make-believe its content. She notes that a challenge for this view comes from cases of "authors who intend that no one read their work [...]." (2017, 29) If someone can produce fiction while not intending that anyone ever read it, at least *prima facie*, intending that its content be imagined is not necessary for producing fiction.

In response, Stock suggests that one might argue that "Even if I write a work genuinely intending no one to read it once I have finished, nonetheless I also might intend that *if anyone were to eventually read it, they would imagine certain things as a result.*" (2017, 30) The analogous option is available for the view I am arguing for here. But, moreover, there are reasons to think that the view of fictional force in terms of fictional records does better than the prescription to imagine view with respect to objections of this kind.

As has recently been noted by Bergman and Franzén (2022), one can imagine a fictional author who intends that, even if there were an audience, they *should not* imagine the contents of her work, perhaps because of its overt sexual imagery or the like. However, it is hard to think of an analogous case involving the kind of intentions appealed to by the view I am defending. Suppose someone writes a text but does not intend that if someone were to read it, they should think that its contents are meant to be part of a fictional record. That is, the writer does not intend that if someone reads her work, they should think that its content is true according to the author or narrator in the sense we have spelled out above. I take it that such an author cannot be said to have produced the text with fictional force.

To be sure, it does not follow that she produced the text assertorically. Perhaps she was practicing her typing skills, or perhaps she was engaging in a kind of surrealist "automatic writing." But if her utterances were made with no intention that an audience, should there ever be one, believe that the relevant contents form part of a fictional record, she cannot be said to have made those utterances with fictional force.

⁹ I owe this point to Matt Mandelkern.

¹⁰ See Stokke (2022) for a fuller account of this in terms of the framework also invoked in this paper.

Yet one may have such intentions, even if one does not intend that one's audiences imagine anything.

Correspondingly, one objection that is often leveraged against the pretense view of fictional utterances is that it is unable to distinguish between fictional utterances and other kinds of non-assertoric discourse (Currie, 1990, 17, Bergman and Franzén, 2022, 3–4). For instance, someone practicing her typing skills, or warming up her voice, by typing out or uttering, "My name is Ruth," may pretend to assert that her name is "Ruth," and yet she is not making a fictional utterance with that content. Or consider the (real-life) example of (4) discussed by Green (2010, 83 Stokke (2018b, 222–223), Bergman and Franzén (2022, 3–4), and others.

(4) *President Reagan, during a soundcheck*: My fellow Americans, I'm pleased to tell you today that I've signed legislation that will outlaw Russia forever. We begin bombing in five minutes.

While Reagan was pretending to assert that bombing of Russia was imminent, he was not making a fictional utterance. That is, on our view, he was not intending for audiences to include that information in a fictional record. Nor was he intending that they include it in an ordinary common ground. He was making neither a fictional utterance nor an assertion.

3.3 Third-person narratives

So far we have seen that the analysis of fictional force in terms of fictional records provides an attractive way of understanding first-person narratives, like *Housekeeping* and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. I now turn to illustrating how it accounts for third-person narratives, as well.

Consider again (1).

(1) Two boys stood in the Prince Consort Gallery, and looked down on a third. It was June 19th, 1895. (Byatt, 2009, 5)

As before, when Byatt uttered (1) with fictional force, she was intending to make (1) part of a fictional record. In other words, my account implies that the intended effect of Byatt's utterance of (1) was to make audiences believe that (1) is true according to the narrator of *The Children's Book*.

The Children's Book is a third-person narrative. However, on the view I am arguing for, there is a fictional record for the novel, which is distinct from what is true in the fiction *The Children's Book*. In turn, given the way we have characterized this notion, this means that there is a body of information that audiences take to be true according to the narrator of *The Children's Book*. So, strictly speaking, our account implies that *The Children's Book* has a narrator, even though it is not told in the first person.

However, this view is compatible with different ways of understanding the notion of a narrator for third-person stories. What is required for this way of understanding fictional force is just that, even in such cases, we can distinguish between the

fictional record and what is true in the fiction. If one wants, one can think of the fictional record as what audiences take to be true according to the text, as opposed to what is true in the fiction. For instance, one can think of the fictional record for *The Children's Book* as comprising what an audience takes to be true according to the text of *The Children's Book*, as long as one distinguishes this from what is true in *The Children's Book*, where the latter is understood as the familiar notion of truth in a fiction. More simply, one might distinguish between what is true "according to" *The Children's Book* and what is true "in" *The Children's Book*.

Alternatively, one can think of the fictional record, in these cases, as the audience's picture of what is true according to the author *qua* narrator. Although it is not right to think of (1) as true according to Byatt *tout court*, it is compatible with my proposal to think of (1) as true according to Byatt *qua* narrator of *The Children's Book*. Similarly, something may be true according to Louise *qua* Dean of Studies, but not true according to Louise *tout court*.

The same applies to first-person fictions. I have no quarrel with a view that insists that the fictional record of, say, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* comprises what audiences think is true according to (the text of) *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, or according to Christie *qua* narrator of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, as long as this is not equated with what is fictionally true in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. One might say, for instance, that it is true according to the text of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* that Parker said on the phone that Ackroyd had been murdered, although that is not fictionally true in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.

More specifically, there is no sense in which my proposal is committed to there being a fictional character in *The Children's Book* who is telling the story, in the way that, for instance, Dr Sheppard is a character in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Nor do we need to endorse a view like Currie's (1990), on which engaging with fiction in variably involves imagining what Currie calls a "fictional author," that is someone who narrates the story:¹¹

We readers make believe that the text we are reading is the product of some one who has knowledge of certain people and their actions. And the teller (the fictional author) is identified as the person uniquely responsible for this text, a copy of which I'm now reading. (Currie, 1990, 153)

I remain neutral on whether or not this is accurate as a psychological description of how audiences engage with narrative fictions. What I am committed to is just that there is a body of information, a corpus, that is distinct from what is true in the fiction, and which comprises what audiences to the work are told.

There are good reason to accept this distinction, even for third-person narratives. In particular, it is routinely recognized that third-person narratives can be unreliable in the sense of the text saying things that are not true in the fiction, al though

¹¹ Currie (1990, ch. 2) employs this notion in his account of truth in fiction, on which "what is true in the fiction is what the teller believes." (Currie, 1990, 75) Similarly, Lewis (1983 [1978]) discusses a view of truth in fiction that involves the notion of the story being told as known fact in some possible world.

many resist seeing such cases in terms of an unreliable narrator. Consider a simplistic example:

(5) Alex stepped inside his apartment. Once inside he immediately checked his lottery ticket without even taking his coat off. His number had won. He was rich. He partied for a week. He bought a Ferrari and a penthouse. Then he woke up. It was all a dream.

On my view all of what is said by (5) goes on the fictional record. By contrast, only the last two sentences are also fictionally true. Intuitively, there is a clear sense in which we were told that Alex's lottery ticket won, that he partied for a week, bought a Ferrari, and so on, even though we later realize that this is not true in the fiction. Even after it is revealed that he did not buy a Ferrari, we still take it to be part of what we were told by the story. Just as for unreliable first-person narrators, like Dr Shepard, it is part of the effect of such stories that we recognize both of these categories.

Some argue that, in cases like (5), the interpretation accommodates the presence of a narrator who is taken to have said the things that later turn out not to be fictionally true. (Eckardt, 2015, 2021; Maier & Semeijn, 2021). Roughly, on this approach, when reading (5), once the audience realize that, for instance, they have been told that Alex partied for a week, even though this is not fictionally true, they take it that there is an unreliable narrator who told them that Alex partied for a week. More broadly, some hold that every fictional story is interpreted as having a narrator in virtue of audiences' need to resolve indexicals and similar linguistic phenomena (Zipfel, 2015; Eckardt, 2021; Zucchi, 2021).

As above, I have no stake in these issues here. Stories like (5) show that there are many cases of third-person narratives for which some things on the fictional record are not fictionally true. My aim is just to point out that the distinction is well-motivated, even for third-person narratives.

To be sure, it might be asked why we should distinguish these two for third person fictions, like *The Children's Book*, for which the text does not say things that are not true in the fiction (so we are assuming). Why not just speak of what is true in the fiction in this case?

There are two points to highlight in response to this question. First, we have seen that the distinction is needed for other fictions, both first person, like *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, and third-person, like (5). Indeed, the distinction is needed for any case in which some information is part of what we are told but not part of what is true in the fiction, or vice versa. So, even if there can be cases in which the two coincide completely, we have good reasons not to regard such cases as evidence that there is no distinction after all, but rather as special cases in which the fictional record and the fictional truth include all and only the same information.

Second, at least in many cases, the fictional record arguably differs from what is fictionally true, even if everything we are told is also fictionally true. In particular, at least in many such cases, some things are fictionally true but not part of the fictional record. For instance, it is arguably true in *The Children's Book* that polar bears have spines. Yet this is not part of what we are told by the text, which never mentions polar

bears. Someone who has never entertained the thought that polar bears have spines has not thereby missed anything in reading the novel.

I conclude that the distinction between fictional records and fictional truth is well motivated, and as such can be applied across the board, even if there may be special cases in which the two coincide completely.

3.4 Fictional force and fictional truth

Having laid out the view of fictional force I favor, I want to address a potential objection. Suppose one agrees that there is a difference between fictional records and fictional truth. Given this, it might be suggested that fictional force should be characterized in terms of fictional truth rather than fictional records. For instance, Bergman and Franzén (2022) defend the view that to make an utterance with fictional force is to intend to make something true in the relevant fiction.

The phenomenon of unreliable narrators is at least a *prima facie* objection to this proposal. Take a toy example. Suppose the first-person narrator of a novel, Malcolm, says (6).

(6) I never stole anything.

Yet during the course of the book we find out that Malcolm has in fact stolen many things. Clearly, in this case, the author did not intend to make it true in the fiction that Malcolm never stole anything. Even so, the author uttered (6) with fictional force. So, at least, this view will need to accept that, in some (presumably, many) cases, uttering a sentence with fictional force is not a matter of intending to make the content of that sentence true in the fiction.

In response, one might point out that (6) does make something true in the fiction, namely, that Malcolm said, "I never stole anything." Analogously, it is arguably true in *Housekeeping* that Ruth said (3). After all, Ruth is a fictional character in *Housekeeping*. And it is clear that we are supposed to take (3) as said by Ruth. That is why we interpret *I* in (3) as referring to Ruth, for instance. So perhaps one could say that when the author uttered (6) with fictional force, the intention was to make it true in the fiction that Malcolm said (6).

This suggestion, however, fails to generalize. Take (5). Suppose the author of (5) is Tom, an actual person who writes fictional stories. As part of telling this story, Tom uttered "He partied for a week." He did so with fictional force. Tom did not intend to make it true in the fiction that Alex partied for a week. But did he intend to make it true in the fiction that the text says, "He partied for a week," or that he, Tom, *qua* narrator said that, or the like? Arguably, he did not, and neither of those things is true in this fiction.

To be sure, there can arguably be fictions that contain truths of this kind about themselves. Yet the present suggestion requires that *all* fictions contain truths about themselves, and in particular contain truths about what their texts, or authors *qua* narrators, say. This is a strong commitment, and faces some obvious challenges.

Consider the following story:

(7) The universe was empty. Except for one lone, uninhabited planet, covered entirely by ice, circling around the only sun in the cosmos. One day a rock appeared on the horizon. It gleamed and shimmered. But it was just a mirage, created by the reflection of the sun in the surface of the ice.

I take it to be clear that it is at least intuitively most plausible to deny that it is true in (7) that its text says what it actually does – after all, there are no texts in this fiction. The same applies to analogous suggestions. For instance, it is not true in (7) that its author *qua* narrator said whatever the text of (7) says, since there are no authors, let alone humans.

By contrast, Currie (1990) holds a view according to which what he calls "mindless" fictions – that is, fictions like (7) in which there is no intelligent life – prompts audiences to imagine contradictory things. As we saw earlier, Currie maintains that audiences to fictions imagine a fictional author who tells the story. In the case of mindless fictions, he accepts the consequence of this view, namely that audiences "make believe contradictory things: that it is told as known fact and that there is no one there to tell it." (1990, 125–126).

Even if one is sympathetic to the idea of characterizing fictional force in terms of fictional truths about what the text, or narrator, says, one does not have to accept this view concerning what audiences to mindless fictions imagine. Still, one might try to embrace the analogous view about fictional truths by suggesting that mindless fictions are inconsistent in the sense that, for instance, it is both true in the (7) that there are no texts, or narrators, and also true that the text, or narrator, of (7) says what it actually does.

This suggestion is clearly counterintuitive. It is highly unnatural to insist that it is true to say that, in this fiction, the text of (7) says what it does (or the like). To be sure, it is undeniable that there are inconsistent fictions, in the sense of fictions in which it is true that p and also true that $\text{not-}p$.¹² Yet, at this point, it is clearly more attractive to simply accept that fictional force is to be characterized in terms of fictional records, rather than fictional truth, given that, as we have seen, the distinction is well motivated.

On the view I am arguing for, Tom's fictional utterance of (5) was intended to make its content part of the fictional record of (5). The same holds for the author of (7). Correspondingly, it is true according to the text, or narrator, of (5) that Alex partied for a week, and it is true according to the text, or narrator, of (7), for instance, that the only thing that exists is one icy planet and a sun, and so on.

¹² For some discussion, see Lewis (1983 [1978]), Sainsbury (2010, ch. 4), Badura and Berto (2019), Franzen (2021), Maier and Semeijn (2021).

4 Fiction and lies

4.1 Are some fictional utterances assertions?

I endorse the view that an utterance has fictional force only if it is not an assertion.¹³ According to the framework we are assuming here, assertions are directed at the common ground of the ongoing conversation. To make an assertion is to propose that the relevant content be added to the common ground. In other words, given the account of fictional force I have laid out, to say that an utterance has fictional force only if it is not an assertion means that you intend to update a fictional record with p only if you do not also propose p for the common ground.

Many non-fictional utterances are aimed at updating corpora, in the Lewisian sense we invoked earlier (see 2.2). The testimony of a witness in a court room is a body of information that is built up through her various utterances. Yet the witness also aims at updating the shared common ground. What makes fictional discourse different is that it is only aimed at incrementing a corpus, and not at the common ground. And moreover, the relevant kind of corpus is what we have called a fictional record, that is, a collection of information that an audience thinks is true according to a narrator, or text.

Further, note that we are not denying that fictional utterances often have effects on the common ground, and often these effects were intended by the author, or storyteller. For example, when a grandmother starts telling a fictional bedtime story to her grandchildren, her utterances arguably have many effects on the non-fictional common ground such as that she is speaking, that it is bedtime, and many other similar things. Some of these were most likely intentional. But clearly, the grandmother did not *assert* any of those things. One central reason for telling the story may well be *not* to assert outright, for instance, that it is bedtime, but to communicate this indirectly by means of the story.

To assert that p it is not enough to make an utterance that counts as proposing p for the common ground. For instance, conversationally implicating that p ordinarily counts as proposing p for the common ground but does not involve asserting that p . To assert that p you need to *say* that p , and *thereby* make such a proposal.¹⁴ So, more precisely, the claim that no fictional utterance is an assertion means that if an utterance says that p and is made with an intention to add p to a fictional record, the same utterance does not also thereby propose p for a non-fictional common ground.

One challenge for this view comes from examples like the following. Imagine that during her bedtime story the grandmother says,

(8) It's bedtime. So all the animals in the magical forrest are brushing their teeth and putting on their pyjamas.

The grandmother uttered (8) with fictional force, as part of telling her fictional bedtime story. So, if one thinks that fictional force excludes assertoric force, one must

¹³ See Mahon (2019) and Marsili (in press) for similar views.

¹⁴ See Stokke (2018b) for a detailed view of this kind.

accept that the grandmother did not assert that it is bedtime. Even so, clearly one of the grandmother's aims is to convey to the children that it is their bedtime. Yet, as I explain below, it is a mistake to think that the grandmother said that it is the children's bedtime when she uttered (8).

Undeniably, the grandmother wants it to become common ground that it is the children's bedtime – that it is *actually* bedtime. But what she said was that it is the animals' bedtime. That is the content she wants to be part of the fictional record. This is why she can use *so* as a conjunction. In the fiction the animals are brushing their teeth and putting on their pyjamas because it is bedtime in the fiction.

Indeed, (8) is parallel to many other cases. For example, suppose it is a sunny day and the grandmother tells the children:

(9) It's raining. So all the animals in the magical forrest are putting on their rainboots and getting out their umbrellas.

What is said by the first sentence of (9) is that it is raining in the forrest. It is intended as updating the fictional record with the information that it is raining. The same holds for the first sentence in (8). That is, the grandmother is adding to the relevant fictional record that it is bedtime and that all the animals are brushing their teeth and so on.

Yet one might ask, if she is not asserting that it is the children's bedtime, how can she hope to convey to the children that it is by telling them (8)? There is an obvious way of accounting for this. Namely, the grandmother wants the children to learn from the story that it is actually bedtime. In other words, this is an instance of the familiar phenomenon by which fictions are told with the aim, among others, of allowing the audience to acquire knowledge of certain actual truths.

However, there are other cases that may seem to be more problematic for the view that no fictional utterance is an assertion. It is routinely observed that fictions often include statements that are also actually true. Take this sentence from *The Children's Book*:

(10) In 1884 the Fabian Society branched out of the Fellowship of the New Life. (Byatt, 2009, 37)

It is a consequence of the observation that fictional and non-fictional discourse are distinguished only in terms of force that, in (10), *the Fabian Society* and *the Fellowship of the New Life* denote the actual Fabian Society and Fellowship of the New Life, just as they do when appearing in a work of history, on Wikipedia, in a newspaper article, or the like. As a fictional utterance (10) has the same truth conditions as it would have if it were an assertion.

Moreover, we can assume that at least one of Byatt's aims in including (10) in *The Children's Book* was to make readers believe it to be actually true (if they did not already). Even so, on my view, when Byatt uttered (10) as part of the novel she did not assert that in 1884 the Fabian Society branched out of the Fellowship of the New Life. One kind of motivation for this is that Byatt's utterance does not commit her to its (actual) truth. Suppose you found out that, in fact, the Fabian break-out took place in 1890, and that Byatt could easily have known that by checking any of the many

readily available sources on the matter. Can you accuse Byatt of being sloppy or irresponsible with the facts, if not downright misleading? You cannot. *The Children's Book* is a novel, and there is no requirement on Byatt to be accurate or diligent in checking facts before she includes them in the story.

At the same time, as we said, when Byatt wrote (10), she very likely wanted us, the readers, to think not just that it is true in the fiction, but also that it is actually true. Yet this aim is parallel to the grandmother's aim that the children should learn that it is actually bedtime from the story she tells them in which it is bedtime in the forrest. Telling fictional stories that aim to teach audiences actual truths is different from asserting those truths. We sometimes have reasons to prefer the former to the latter.

Against this, one might point out that actual novels are routinely criticized for being historically inaccurate. Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, for instance, has been the subject of heated debate and scorn for depicting historical events and figures in ways that depart widely from the actual truth.¹⁵ On the present view, these criticism are misguided. Whatever its literary merits, one cannot fault *The Da Vinci Code* qua work of fiction for including statements that are not actually true. Yet, to be sure, as we will see below, there are cases in which one can fault a fictional work for being misleading.

4.2 Fictional force and lying

We should conclude that an utterance has fictional force only if it does not have assertoric force. This conclusion has the consequence that fiction and lying are mutually exclusive categories. It is almost universally agreed that lies are assertions, that is, you lie only if you make an assertion (Chisholm & Feehan, 1977; Adler, 1997; Williams, 2002; Carson, 2006; Faulkner, 2007; Fallis, 2009; Saul, 2012, Stokke, 2013, 2018b, Mahon, 2019). Hence, since no utterance with fictional force is an assertion, no utterance with fictional force is a lie. Similarly, Mahon, 2019 argues that.

If something is a lie then it is not a literary work of any kind, and if something is a literary work of any kind then it is not a lie. Being a literary work, and being a lie, are mutually exclusive kinds. (Mahon, 2019, 323)

As above, Mahon's motivation is that "novels do not contain any assertions, and lies are certain kinds of assertions." (loc. cit.)¹⁶ I want to make two comments on this before moving on to considering some consequences of the view given the framework I have proposed in this paper.

First, even if no fictional utterances are lies, fictions may still be deceptive. It is not difficult to imagine someone producing a fiction with the intention that audiences end up with false beliefs. For instance, we can imagine an author writing a fictional story with the intention of making audiences believe that Jesus and Mary Magdalen were the ancestors of French kings. Yet this author did not assert that Jesus and Mary Magdalen were the ancestors of French kings, and hence she did not lie, even if she

¹⁵ See e.g. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Da_Vinci_Code#Historical_inaccuracies.

¹⁶ Mahon (2019) uses "literary" more or less interchangeably with "fictional."

knew that Jesus and Mary Magdalen were not the ancestors of French kings. Still, the novel can be said to intentionally deceive if aimed at making people believe that Jesus and Mary Magdalen were the ancestors of French kings.

More generally, there are many examples of didactic fiction told for deceptive purposes. Someone might tell you a fable with the aim of making you believe that revenge is good, even though they personally do not believe so. They tried to deceive you, but they did not make any assertions, and hence they did not lie.

Second, this view is compatible with the observation that lying very often involves saying things that one has simply made up (cf. Stokke, 2018a). Suppose I make up the story that my mother has won an Oscar, and I tell you that in an attempt to impress you. What I said was something I made up. But my utterance was an assertion, indeed a lie. Hence, on this view, my utterance was not made with fictional force. Indeed, I did not intend for you to include in a fictional record that my mother has won an Oscar. I intended you to add that to the ordinary common ground of our conversation, just as with any other assertion. Conversely, fiction is rife with things that are simply made up by the author, the utterances used to tell the story are not assertions of made up things, but are intended to be taken as fictional by the audience.

4.3 Intentions and beliefs

The particular way in which one characterizes what making an utterance with fictional force involves has consequences for when someone can be said to be making utterances with fictional force, and thereby falling short of lying even if what is said is believed to be false.

On the characterization of fictional force I have proposed, whether or not an utterance is made with fictional force is a matter of the speaker's mental states, in particular, her intentions.¹⁷ This means that there can be cases in which someone utters a sentence with fictional force even though no one realizes this, and indeed even though everyone thinks the speaker is making an assertion. As such, there can be cases in which everyone thinks the speaker was lying, even though she was not. Yet, as I explain below, the range of such cases is constrained in significant ways.

It is widely agreed that, roughly, one cannot intend to do something one does not think one can do. I cannot intend to read Angela Merkel's mind, nor can I intend to appoint myself as Pope. Perhaps I can *try* or *wish* or *want* to do so. But I cannot reasonably be said to intend to do them, as long as I do not believe that I can do them.

There are different ways of spelling this out in the literature.¹⁸ For our purposes, we can adopt the following simple constraint on intentions:

¹⁷ Stock (2017) endorses what she calls "extreme intentionalism about fictional content." By "fictional content" she means fictional truth. Hence, her view is not per se a view about fictional force, but about what determines what is true in a particular fiction.

¹⁸ See e.g. Audi (1973), Grice (1973), (1989, 98), Davidson (1989 [1978]), Velleman (1989), Neale (2005), Mele (2010), Stokke (2010), Kissine (2013, ch. 2), Fallis (2014), Michaelson & Stokke (in press). See also Velleman (1989, 113–115) for discussion and more references.

4.3.1 Belief-intention constraint

a intends to φ only if *a* believes that she can φ .

Given the way we are understanding fictional force, the Belief-Intention Constraint implies that one utters a sentence with fictional force only if one believes one can add its content to a fictional record. In turn, this means that if one does not think that one's audience will believe that the relevant content is true according to the relevant narrator, or text, one cannot be said to have made an utterance with fictional force.

Imagine that an author, call her "Milary Hantel," writes a book in which it says that Anne Boleyn poisoned Henry VIII and married Thomas Cromwell who became King Thomas I of England. She submits it to a well-known academic publisher who agrees to publish the book as a work of history. Its cover, its marketing, the style in which it is written, and so on, all correspond to other books that are undeniably works of history, written by professional historians. The book receives harsh criticism. In response, Hantel publicly announces that she did not intend it as a work of history, but as a work of fiction.

On the view I have argued for, there are two main possible verdicts on this case, depending on the further details. Either Hantel did believe that her audiences would take her utterances as having fictional force, that is, as aimed at updating a fictional record. Or she did not believe that, and hence, given the Belief-Intention Constraint, she did not intend for the contents of the book to have fictional force.

In the former case, even if Hantel's beliefs, incredibly, turn out to be true, they are clearly unjustified or irresponsible, perhaps even irrational. As such, she can be criticized on that account. In the latter case, she lied when she claimed that she meant for the book to be fictional, in which case she can be criticized on that account. Moreover, in this case, Hantel arguably put forward her claims as assertions, and as such they are themselves lies, assuming that she is aware that they are false.

Yet there are situations in which it is not unreasonable to think that one's audiences will recognize one's intention that one's utterances be taken as fictional, even if this belief turns out to be false. Suppose that, after finishing her manuscript, Hantel decides to get it published as a novel. She puts in an envelope addressed to Penguin's fiction desk. But the postal service mistakenly delivers it to another publisher that specializes in early modern history. They publish the book as a work of history without asking Hantel about it. In so far as she did believe that her audiences would think that her utterances were aimed at a fictional record, on my view, Hantel did make those utterances with fictional force. Even if audiences end up taking the book as a work of history, Hantel can reasonably claim that she was telling a fictional story, and was not putting the text forward as a work of history.

So, on this view, there are constraints on what one can reasonably intend, and as a consequence, there are constraints on when one can be said to speak, or write, with fictional force. Yet, ultimately, whether one's utterances are put forward as assertions or as fictional is a matter of one's intentions.

5 Conclusion

There is a distinction between the fictional record and what is true in a fiction. The distinction is motivated by the observation that narrators, or texts, often say things that are not fictionally true, and they often rely on audiences to fill out the story. This distinction offers a way of characterizing fictional force. An utterance has fictional force if and only if it is intended to increment a fictional record. We have seen that this view several advantages in accounting for phenomena such as conversational implicatures in fictional discourse. Moreover, the view provides an attractive way of distinguishing fictional utterances from assertoric utterances, and consequently of distinguishing fiction from lying.

Funding Open access funding provided by Uppsala University.

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