A Puzzle about Fictional 'I's

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This paper introduces and discusses a novel puzzle about occurrences of reflexive indexical pronouns like 'I', 'me', and 'my' within narrative fictions featuring internal narrators. In brief, the puzzle is that, even if we grant that some fictional uses of singular terms denote non-fictional entities, it appears to be impossible for any reflexive indexicals to do so. This highlights an interesting tension between fictional discourse and the standard semantics for certain pronouns, and indicates a potentially fruitful area of future research for both philosophers of language and narratologists.

Fictions can be said to be typically about fictional people, places and events. Among these purely fictional entities are Pierre Besuchow, The Lonely Mountain, and Harry Potter's first Quidditch match. However, fictions often seem to be about non-fictional people, places and events, too. For instance, *War and Peace* seems to be about Napoleon, the 1812 French Invasion of Russia, and Moscow. This latter point – that fiction can be 'about' real-world entities – has been a topic of some debate in both Narratology and Philosophy, with some contending that fictions are ontologically homogeneous, concerning fictional objects only. Such a view naturally goes hand-in-hand with the semantic claim that singular terms occurring in a work of fiction never refer to non-fictional objects. As such, 'London' as it occurs in *A Tale of Two Cities* does not refer to the real London; instead, it denotes a fictional surrogate, the London-of-the-story.

There is something attractive to this fictional surrogate approach. Unfortunately, as yet, no one has provided an adequate account of it, and several key questions remain unanswered. For example, what exactly is the relation surrogates bear to their real-world counterparts? Can there be more than one real-world counterpart to a fictional surrogate? And how many and which properties does a fictional object have to share with a non-fictional object to be a surrogate of it? Anyone committing to fictional surrogates must tell us something to settle these and other, related, questions.¹

Further, even if we grant that singular terms occurring within fictions never refer to non-fictional objects, there are good reasons for thinking that certain fictional occurrences of singular terms do in fact *denote* non-fictional entities. For example, the most natural readings of the following trio all involve taking certain terms to do so:

'He adored New York City' (Allen, *Manhattan*)

'Napoleon, the man of genius, did this!' (Tolstoy, *War & Peace*)

'He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish'. (Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*)

Here it seems that 'New York City', 'Napoleon', and the 'Gulf Stream' all are at least partly about certain real world entities – that is, respectively, a real city, a real French Emperor, and a real place where real people can (and do) go fishing.

Similarly, Friend (2000: 191f), reports on a time when, while giving a talk at a conference, she told a short fiction about her colleague, Anthony Everett, being a secret MI6 agent:

Assume that you are at the Empty Names conference, listening to the story. You would probably look at Everett while I tell it. If you did not take the story to be about the real person, one of the organizers of the conference, you would not find it so amusing. The fact that what I've said of Everett in the story isn't true of him should not be a problem. After all, though Everett may not really be a secret agent, it is not so difficult to imagine that he is (he's British, he travels a lot, etc.). In fact, if you know Everett well, you are probably imagining even more than what is true in the story. Perhaps you are considering how Everett has managed to keep up his secret agent skills right under your noses. Consider some other responses you could

¹ Motoarca (2014) offers a starting point for such a view, but leaves much of it underdeveloped.

have. After the story is told, you might go up to Everett, and in a joking tone inquire as to whether he's caught any spies lately. Similarly, just as a tourist might go to Baker Street in London to be on the street where Holmes lived, you might be imagining yourself in the very building (CSLI) where there is a spy trap.

As Friend notes, it appears that imaginative engagement with these stories requires 'engagement with the real person and the real place mentioned in the story' (2000: 192). In other words, proper imaginative engagement with the story requires imagining things about the relevant real world entity – if you don't direct your imaginative thoughts towards that entity, you've failed to engage with the story in the appropriate way.²

Of course, Friend's example is merely an intuition pump, not a knock-down argument. But the fact that taking her fiction to be about a real person offers the simplest and most natural explanation for typical reactions to it (e.g. glancing at Everett while it is being told, imagining more about him, joking with him about it, etc.) supplies strong (albeit defeasible) abductive evidence for thinking that real entities can be denoted by fictional singular terms.

This point can be bolstered by noting that fictions can teach us things about non-fictional entities. For example, by reading Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*, one can learn quite a bit about the history of the Knights Templar; relatedly, reading Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* can teach you a lot about bee keeping. The most natural explanation for this phenomenon is to say that the relevant entities are denoted by the related (fictional) terms – i.e., that, in *Foucault's Pendulum*, 'Knights Templar' denotes the non-fictional organization the Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon, and that 'bees' in *The Secret Life* denotes bees.

Finally, there are strong reasons to think that abstract objects, like numbers, properties, and concepts can be denoted by singular terms occurring in fictional texts. For instance, take the following line from Goethe's *Elective Affinities*: 'Hatred is a partisan, but love is even more so'. This claim, which is part of the content of Goethe's fiction, is clearly about two properties – hatred and love. Yet this claim features two singular terms – 'Hatred' and 'love' – which, if the sentence is to make any sense, denote the (non-fictional) notions of hatred and love. In other words, Goethe's sentence is about the nature of hatred and love, two non-fictional properties. But, if that's right, then non-fictional things can be denoted by terms used in fictions.³

For these reasons, it is plausible to think that fictional occurrences of singular terms can denote non-fictional entities.⁴

And while the above cases all feature proper names, it is not a bridge too far to extend this possibility to other singular terms – in particular, to reflexive indexicals like 'I', 'me', and 'my'. So it is natural to think that the 'I' in

'That chestnut tree... How many times have I seen it blossom...' (Seethaler, *The Tobacconist*)

denotes Freud, who (fictionally) utters the line. Similarly for the 'I' in,

The fact is I'm rather hard up. (Stoppard, *Travesties*)

is naturally read as denoting the real Joyce, who (fictionally) is the speaker that delivers the (fictional) utterance. Finally, the most natural reading of the 'my' in

² Hence one who (mis)interprets the line from *Manhattan* as being about a fictional New York surrogate is akin to one who (mis)interprets it as being about London: they're picking out the wrong place. For more on this point, see Folde (ms).

³ Imagine denying this, and insisting that Goethe's claim is about some surrogate properties, hatred-in-the-story and love-in-the-story. Not only would such a claim be bizarre beyond belief, but it would fly in the face of the most natural (and standard) interpretation of Goethe's assertion.

⁴ Of course, it remains an open question whether particular instances do, but this does not take away from the possibility of singular terms doing so.

'You know nothing of my work.' (Allen, *Annie Hall*)

takes it to denote Marshall McLuhan. But is this so? More generally, do *any* occurrences of reflexive indexicals in fiction denote non-fictional objects?⁵

The main thrust of this article is to attempt to answer these questions. And, in light of the above, if the intuitive answer (to both questions), is 'yes' – provided certain conditions are met – then some fictional instances of 'I' denote non-fictional entities. And while we agree with this intuitive answer, here, we aim to show that it turns out that satisfying these conditions is much more onerous than might initially be thought. In fact, nearly *all* fictional instances of reflexive pronouns – including all the examples given above! – fail to denote non-fictional entities. And while there are some rare successes, these are extremely few and far between.

With that in mind, the structure of this paper is straightforward. First, (§1), we detail some preliminaries, including a brief interlude concerning the nature of quotation. This leads (§2) to the puzzle – due to the fact that most narratives are told to us by a narrator, it is hardly ever the case that an instance of a reflexive pronoun denotes a non-fictional thing. Then, after dismissing some attempts to undercut the puzzle (§3), we present (§4) the one exception – the rare case where pronouns like 'I' do successfully denote a non-fictional object.

§1. Preliminaries

Before spelling out the puzzle, a few quick preliminaries. First, the following discussion is restricted to *narrative* fictions. This is primarily done because most – though not all! – fictions are fictional narratives. And, even if the puzzle identified below applies only to narrative fictions, it still remains a point of sufficient interest to anyone working on fiction and its relationship to the real world.

Second, we assume that, when it comes to most narrative fiction, 'there is at least one narrator in every narrative', though this narrator 'may or may not be explicitly designated' (Prince 1982: 8). The narrator is the one who reports to us (the readers) the story – as Lewis puts it, they tell the story as 'known fact' (1983: 270). This idea has widespread support in the literature:

In my view there is always a teller in the tale, at least in the sense that any utterance or record of an utterance presupposes someone who has uttered it. (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002: 89)

[W]e can proceed on the assumption that a more or less clearly marked narrator is represented in every narrative work. (Schmid, 2010: 64)⁶

Of course, why the 'most'? That is, why not say *all* narrative fictions feature a narrator? For one, we should distinguish the following claims

External Every fictional narrative has an external narrator

Internal Every fictional narrative has an internal narrator

The first of these is a conceptual truth, as it amounts to the claim that fictional narratives have authors. The second is a distinct claim that every fictional narrative includes, in the world of the fiction, some entity that is the fiction's narrator. While many accept this latter claim, we think is likely false; this is because a fictional narrative can explicitly have it that there is no (internal) narrator (see Köppe & Kindt 2014: 91 and Köppe & Stühling 2011) or can leave it open whether there is an internal narrator (see Folde *ms*). However, to generate our puzzle, we do not need

⁵ We focus here on occurrences of 'I', but a similar question could be asked about 'here' and denoting non-fictional locations and 'now' denoting non-fictional times.

⁶ See also Walton (1990), Alward (2005), Wilson (2007), and Margolin (2012).

Internal to be true. Rather, we can derive the puzzle if *most* fictional narratives have an internal narrator – for the puzzle cases emerges whenever we have a narrative fiction with an internal narrator. And it is plausible that most fictional narratives feature an internal narrator.

Third, per standard, we take it that reflexive indexicals have a contextually invariant character that maps to different content in different contexts.⁷ Importantly, an indexical like 'I' only expresses some specific content – that is, denotes a particular individual – when it is *used*; otherwise, the semantic function isn't triggered. Thus a sentence like 'I am the owner of the dog', which features a use of the pronoun, would trigger the semantic function of 'I', while 'The word 'I' only has one letter' would not.

Finally, something about quotation. It is generally accepted that there are three distinct kinds of quotation.⁸ Examples serve to clarify:

- (1) Quine said, '9 is a number'
- (2) Quine said that 9 is a number
- (3) The appeals court said this language 'makes no sense'

The first example is an instance of *direct* quotation; in uttering (1), the term '9' is mentioned and not used. Meanwhile, (2) is a form of *indirect* quotation. Here, '9' and the other material in the quoted utterance is used, though it is embedded within a 'that' clause (and typically will involve some grammatical re-interpretation). Finally, (3) is an example of *mixed quotation*, one both directly and indirectly quotes. Hence uttering (3) requires both using *and* mentioning the quoted material.

With these preliminaries settled, we can now present the puzzle about occurrences of indexicals in fictional texts.

§2. The Puzzle

Imagine we are reading a narrative fiction *f* with an internal narrator which includes the following line, (fictionally) delivered by Napoleon:

(N) I will conquer Russia

Given that *f* is a narrative fiction with an internal narrator – that is there is a (fictional) individual who is telling us the story – it seems sensible to ask, what is said when *f*'s narrator tells us (N)? In other words, what is the form of the utterance the narrator makes when the fiction includes the line expressed by (N)?

Given that the narrator is telling us what Napoleon (fictionally) said, it is clear that the narrator's statement must involve a form of quotation. However, once we acknowledge this, it quickly becomes apparent that *there is no utterance the narrator can make which allows for the 'I' to denote Napoleon*.

Suppose that it is direct quotation. In that case, the form of the narrator's utterance is something like

- (4) Napoleon said, 'I will conquer Russia'

⁷ By 'character' we mean a 'meaning rule ... set by linguistic conventions... [that] determines the content of the expression in every context' (Kaplan 1989: 505); meanwhile, we take content to be a mapping from circumstances of evaluation to extensions.

⁸ See e.g. Davidson (1979), Partee (1973), Cappelen and Lepore (1997)

However, if this is what the narrator says, the 'I' does not denote Napoleon. For in (4) the quoted material is only mentioned, not used, meaning 'I' does not play its standard semantic role. Consequently, it does not denote the real Napoleon.

Meanwhile, suppose that the narrator is indirectly quoting, such that the narrator is in fact saying

(5) Napoleon said that I will conquer Russia

The problem here is that, if the narrator says (5), then the 'I' they use refers to themselves, not Napoleon. To make this clear, compare my uttering, 'Erika said that I would pay for drinks' versus 'Erika said that she would pay for drinks'. The latter describes Erika's generous act of covering our tab, while the former details her shifting the (sizable!) bill onto me.

What would capture (N) is something like

(6) Napoleon said that he will conquer Russia

But (6) does not feature an instance of 'I'. Instead, it involves a different pronoun – in this case, the non-reflexive pronoun 'he'. And since it fails to include an instance of an indexical pronoun, (6) is not relevant to our question concerning the denotation of fictional uses of 'I'.

Finally, suppose the narrator is using mixed quotation. In that case, what they say is something along the lines of

(7) Napoleon said 'I will conquer Russia'

Recall that mixed quotation involves both using *and* mentioning the quoted material. If so, then this utterance will inherit the problem facing indirect quotation; specifically, if the quoted material is used by the narrator, then the 'I' denotes the narrator, not Napoleon. And replacing the 'I' with a suitable pronoun,

(8) Napoleon said 'he will conquer Russia'

not only fails to directly quote what Napoleon (fictionally) said but, like with (6), fails to feature a reflexive pronoun. Either way, mixed quotation does not help to properly characterize the narrator's utterance.

The upshot is that there is no sensible way to understand what the narrator says when telling us that Napoleon said (N). More specifically, there is no way to understand what the narrator says that results in an instance of 'I' that denotes Napoleon; the narrator's utterances either feature a reflexive pronoun that is *mentioned* but not used (and hence does not denote Napoleon), a reflexive pronoun that is used but does *not* denote *Napoleon* (instead it denotes the (fictional) narrator), or an *non-reflexive* pronoun (like 'he') that is used and denotes Napoleon.

Thus the puzzle: once we unpack the options, there seems to be no way for a reflexive pronoun like 'I' to denote a non-fictional entity. No matter what reading we use, we cannot get from the 'I' to Napoleon. Or, to put the puzzle in a way more convivial to philosophers of language: reflexive indexicals in narrative fiction turn out to be a kind of semantic 'monster'.⁹

§3. Dismissing some attempts to defuse the puzzle

There are several ways one might attempt to dismiss the puzzle. In this section, we would like to discuss and reply to three initially plausible responses.

⁹ See Kaplan (1989) for more on semantic monsters, and, for monstrous interpretations of quotation, see Cumming (2003) and Geurts and Maier (2003).

One *prima facie* appealing option would be to deny that that our fiction *f* is narrated, in the sense that it features an internal narrator who is telling us (the readers) the story. Instead, we might treat narrative fictions as more akin to real life situations where we over-hear other people talking; i.e., each character is (fictionally) simply speaking their relevant lines, which we just happen to be listening to. This would allow Napoleon himself to (fictionally) say (N), thereby (fictionally) using the reflexive pronoun 'I' to denote himself.

The main difficulty with this approach is that it entails giving up on the nearly tautological claim that fictional narratives featuring a narrator have an internal narrator. This alone makes such a response to the puzzle look wrongheaded. But it's also worth noting that this move seems at odds with the intuitive idea that fictional narratives are narrated – after all, if there is no (internal) narrator, then there is no one (or no thing) to narrate. Again, this seems far too high a price to pay to resolve this puzzle. Finally, because the *f* is an arbitrary fiction (apparently) featuring an internal narrator, this response requires not only rejecting **Internal** but in fact embracing

Non-Internal

No narrative fiction features an internal narrator

And while it is plausible that some narrative fictions lack an internal narrator, Non-Internal requires significant argumentative support. Thus this response requires taking up an extremely heavy theoretical burden, simply to resolve our puzzle.¹⁰ For these reasons, this does not seem like an adequate solution.

A second solution would be to retain the idea that narrative fictions are told to us by a (fictional) narrator, but to assert that this narrator is employing a fourth, novel kind of quotation. Such a form of quotation would avoid the difficulties spelt out above by somehow allowing for the relevant reflexive pronouns to be quoted while still retaining their original denotation. So our fictional narrator could, employing this new quotation, say something like (7), but the 'I' involved would retain its original denotation – namely, Napoleon.

While this sounds like a great solution to the puzzle, the proposed form of quotation is simply too good to be true. For one, details about how this new form of quotation works need to be filled in. Do quoted pronouns always retain their original denotation, or do they sometimes shift to have a new denotation? And how does this form of quotation behave when embedded within other, more standard forms of quotation – if I directly quote an utterance of yours in which you employ this new quotation to express an indexical pronoun, does the pronoun in my utterance denote me or you? Does this retaining of original denotation also apply to non-reflexive pronouns, like 'you', or do they shift too? These are only some of the numerous questions that one would have to answer in order to make this new kind of quotation intelligible.

This also highlights a second problem with such a solution: the proposed new form of quotation looks completely ad hoc. That is, it seems to be a piece of high-powered semantic machinery. And, to motivate adopting such machinery, one would need to provide alternative, independent reasons for doing so – otherwise, it looks to be a magic bullet, specifically designed as a get-out clause for this particular puzzle. Sadly, such reasons do not seem to be forthcoming. So, between the ad hoc and inchoate nature of this solution, it too looks like it does not adequately address the puzzle.

Finally, one could try to solve the puzzle by claiming that terms can denote even when they are merely mentioned. Then, the narrator could assert something like (4), where the 'I' is not used, but the pronoun could still perform its semantic function of denoting.

An initial problem with this solution is that it does nothing to ensure that the pronoun retains its original denotation. More bluntly, even if the mentioned 'I' denotes, there is no reason to think it denotes Napoleon, rather than the narrator. Another problem is that this solution

¹⁰ Such a response is also at odds with Lewis's (1983) intuitive account of truth in fiction. See Currie (1990) and Woodward (2011) for more on this approach.

delivers the wrong results whenever we consider everyday direct quotations. Consider, for example, philosophers of language talking about racial slurs. It is clear that this discussion is *about the terms*, and does not in fact employ these slurs. But, if mention suffices for semantic function, then talking about slurs is the same as using them. So papers like e.g. Hom (2010) about the semantics of slurs turn out to be horrible racist diatribes – a clear mistake.

The general upshot is that these three ways one might try to solve the puzzle do not work. The puzzle is in fact a puzzle – it really is the case that, even if we grant that other terms occurring in narrative fiction can denote non-fictional objects, no reflexive pronouns can do so. An immediate consequence is that our trio of initial examples, given at the end of §1, do not feature terms that denote non-fictional individuals. This is because, no matter how we might try, no reflexive indexical could.

§4. The Caveat Case

...Almost. There is one exception – that is, one circumstance where a reflexive pronoun can be both used by the narrator and successfully denote a non-fictional entity.

To work towards it, let us first note that we can generate the same puzzle using other indexicals. For example, suppose we have a fiction wherein a character, Neil, who, commenting on Glasgow, says,

(C) It is lovely here.

Intuitively, it looks like 'here' denotes Glasgow. However, if we understand the narrative fiction as a story being told to us by the narrator, provided that the narrator is not (fictionally) located in Glasgow, there is no suitable way to understand (C) which features a use of 'here' that denotes Glasgow.

This is because the indirect quotation treatment of (C) is

(9) Neil said that it is lovely here.

And, so understood, the use of 'here' denotes whatever location the narrator has when they utter (9). So, if the narrator is (fictionally) located in Glasgow, then their use of 'here' will denote Glasgow.

The same goes for 'now': if the narrator is telling us the story *at a time distinct from the moment the original statement was made*, there is no way to understand the narrator's utterance which features a use of 'now' that denotes the appropriate time. However, if the narrator's utterance is made at the same time as the quoted claim, then the 'now' will denote the appropriate time.

This hints at the one exception to the puzzle: whenever the narrator is a non-fictional entity. More specifically, whenever the narrator is a non-fictional entity, their use of 'I' will denote a non-fictional object – namely, themselves.

Of course, most instances will have the wrong truth conditions. For example, while (5) features a use of 'I' that (assuming the narrator is a non-fictional object) denotes a non-fictional thing, it misattributes a claim to Napoleon. In fact, the only time we get both successful denotation and have the correct truth conditions is when the narrator is a non-fictional object and is identical to the character making the utterance. So, sticking to our current example, things only turn out right when Napoleon *is* the narrator.

Thus something like the following serves as an example where a reflexive pronoun in fact denotes a non-fictional entity:

An American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains. Moments later he said, 'There they go, there they go.' He meant his brains. That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book. (Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse Five*, p. 103)

However, circumstances like this are extremely rare – even restricting ourselves to stories that feature singular terms that denote non-fictional entities, only very few narrative fictions feature internal narrators that are non-fictional entities.

In fact, most narratologists would even deny that the above example is an instance where a reflexive pronoun denotes a non-fictional object. This is due to the widespread belief that author and (internal) narrator of a fictional narrative cannot be identical:

The relation between author and narrator remains to be considered. It seems to me that their identification ($A = N$), insofar as it can be established, defines factual narrative [...] their dissociation ($A \neq N$) defines fiction [...]. (Genette 1993: 70)

The narrator, which is a strictly textual category, should be clearly distinguished from the author who is of course an actual person. (Margolin 2009: 351)

Narrator (narrative entity, narrating subject): personifying expression for the speaker of narrative discourse that, in the case of fictional discourse, is fictional and has to be distinguished from the real author of the narration. (Martinez & Scheffel, 2007: 187, our translation)

But we do not need to identify narrator and author to generate a suitable case. Instead, all we need is an instance where the narrator – who is distinct from the author! – of the fiction is a non-fictional entity. So, the following cases provide instances of what we're after:

I, Tiberius Claudius Drusus Nero Germanicus This-that-and-the-other (for I shall not trouble you yet with all my titles) who was once, and not so long ago either, known to my friends and relatives and associates as "Claudius the Idiot", or "That Claudius", or "Claudius the Stammerer", or "Clau-Clau-Claudius" or at best as "Poor Uncle Claudius", am now about to write this strange history of my life; starting from my earliest childhood and continuing year by year until I reach the fateful point of change where, some eight years ago, at the age of fifty-one, I suddenly found myself caught in what I may call the "golden predicament" from which I have never since become disentangled. (Graves, *I, Claudius*)

'His clumsiness, I thought, is part of his disguise, part of his armor, a kind of self-defense mechanism – he seems most sincere just when he makes the least sense. I knew I still had much to learn.' (Coover, *The Public Burning*)

I found, for example, that Cicero was fond of repeating certain phrases, and these I learned to reduce to a line, or even a few dots – thus proving what most people already know, that politicians essentially say the same thing over and over again. (Harris, *Imperium: A Novel of Ancient Rome*)

Each quote features the use of an indexical pronoun that the narrator employs to denote themselves. And all these quotes are all delivered by fictional narrators who happen to also be non-fictional individuals: respectively, Claudius, Nixon, and Tiro. Consequently, they serve as instances where a fictional occurrence of an indexical pronoun serves to denote a non-fictional entity. However, it is only in circumstances like this – that is, where the narrator of the fiction is itself a non-fictional entity – that the puzzle is avoided. The upshot is that reflexive pronouns like 'I' *can* denote non-fictional objects, but only in vanishingly rare circumstances.

§5. Conclusion

This paper has detailed a novel puzzle concerning the denotation of non-fictional entities within fictional contexts. Specifically, even if we grant that it is possible for some singular terms that occur in fiction to denote non-fictional entities, it turns out to be extremely difficult to engineer circumstances where reflexive pronouns do so. This highlights the interesting and strange nature

of fictional discourse, and indicates that it remains a rich topic to be mined by those interested in its semantics, as well as the semantics of pronouns and quotation.¹¹

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