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Fictionality

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1 Definition

The term “fictionality” has conventionally been used in connection with fiction to describe qualities and affordances of fictional genres. In this customary understanding, fictionality is by definition the quality possessed by fiction; and the question of fictionality (see Cohn 1999) can without much loss be subsumed under the question of fiction, just as an entry on fictionality could be subsumed under an entry on “Fictional Narration.” There have been earlier endeavors to use fictionality not only in relation to fictional texts but to explain broader concepts such as “as if” (Vaihinger [1911] 2001) as well as, more recently, proposals to connect the term fictionality to the phenomenon of “make believe” (Walton 1990). Within the last decade, however, fictionality has gained ground as an autonomous concept understood as a rhetorical communicative mode (e.g. Walsh 2007; Nielsen, Phelan and Walsh 2015a; Zetterberg Gjerlevsen 2016). As such, fictionality is not just regarded a term attributed to fictional narratives such as novels and short stories; nor is it equated with broad or abstract categories or defined in opposition to truth. Rather, fictionality, as a fundamental rhetorical mode, is understood as a means to communicate what is invented and as such transgresses the boundaries of both fiction and narrative. In this perspective, fictionality is not bound to any genre or limited to narrative representation. Building on this conceptual framework of fictionality as an autonomous concept, a definition of fictionality as intentionally signaled invention in communication has been put forth (Nielsen and Zetterberg Gjerlevsen forthcoming).

2 Fictionality as a feature of fiction

The different approaches to fictionality as a term attributed to fiction have been divided into two and sometimes even three categories: on the one hand, semantic and/or syntactic approaches that regard fictionality as an intrinsic quality of a text; and on the other, pragmatic approaches which claim that the fictionality of a text depends on different kinds of contextual relations (Schaeffer → Fictional vs. Factual Narration [1]). The main proponent for the semantic approach is Cohn, for the

syntactic Hamburger and Banfield, and for the pragmatic Searle. The key debates between the different theories and positions have been centered around potential signposts of fictionality and the role of the sender and receiver in constructing or recognizing fictionality. Whereas semantic and formalistic theories of fictionality explore the possibilities of signposts of fictionality, contextual approaches either deny the pertinence of or have little interest in the existence of such signposts. The former position focuses on text-immanent features while the latter is concerned with the relation between the author and the reader, often highlighting the importance of one at the expense of the other. Regardless of whether these approaches are engaged with semantic properties that are assumed to define a text as fiction or with pragmatic and contextual relations surrounding the fictional text, they are concerned with fictionality as a feature of fiction.

The distinction between semantic/syntactic and pragmatic is inherited from the philosophy of language, in which the semantic approach is characterized as a language-centered, text-internal, context-independent approach and the pragmatic approach as a speaker-centered, text-external, context-dependent approach (McNally 2013). However, few theories of fictionality can be categorized that clearly. Illustrative this sharp division is Searle (1975) who, as one of the chief proponents of speech act theory, has been invoked in the argument against both the semantic and the pragmatic theories of fictionality (for a summary of the debate, see Zipfel 2001, 185–195).

While only few researchers have attempted to combine the two categories of semantic/syntactic and pragmatic (Wildekamp et al. 1980), various alternative systematic distinctions have been suggested (Fontaine and Rahman 2010; Gorman 2005). Pavel (1986: 11) opposes segregationist and integrationist approaches, the former imposing a categorical dividing line between fiction and nonfiction and explaining the nature of the fictional as a deviation from standard rules of semantics (e.g. Cohn), the latter (e.g. Genette) claiming that there is no genuine ontological difference between fictional and nonfictional. Another way of dividing the field is offered by Fontaine and Rahman (2010: 3), who suggest that the debate between pragmatic and semantic is better explained as a difference between focusing on fiction as an activity (creation) and fiction as a product (creature).

2.1 An autonomous concept of fictionality

The idea of operating with an autonomous concept of fictionality concerned not only with fictional texts comes from a narratological and rhetorical approach developed by Walsh (2007).Walsh separates fictionality from its ties to fiction by examining the concept from a pragmatic rhetorical perspective. He takes his starting point in

Sperber and Wilson's (1986) relevance theory, which argues that only the qualitative maxim of relevance derived from Grice's (see *Studies in the Way of Words* 1989) who originally proposed four categories in language use (Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner) is needed in order to account for communication. According to Sperber and Wilson, the reader or listener in any communicative situation will always seek to maximize the relevance of a given statement, that is, to seek an interpretive context in which it seems most relevant. Building on this theory, Walsh argues that a reader—in any type of communication—assumes that fictionality is being deployed whenever the context cues him or her to assume that that is the most relevant interpretation strategy.

3 History of the term and concept

3.1 Etymology and usage of the term

Etymologically, "fictionality" has its roots in the Latin "fingere." "Fingere" has several meanings: 1) to shape, 2) to invent, and 3) to make a pretense of (Glare 2000 : 702–703). The different branches of these etymological roots have been used by several scholars to define the concept as well as to support their own positions. Thus, some theories have highlighted the quality of being shaped or represented (Schmid 2010: 21) while others have focused on its denotations of invention (Nielsen and Zetterberg Gjerlevsen forthcoming) and yet others have emphasized the "pretend" aspect (Searle 1975).

When "fictionality" is used to denote a quality of a text, the grammatically substantive form is derived from the adjective "fictional." One can say of a story that it is a "fiction," that it is "fictional" and that it possesses "fictionality." However, the terms have not been used consistently and are sometimes even used synonymously with other terms. For example, Pavel (1986: 71) uses the concept "fictionality" almost synonymously with terms such as "fictitious," "fictional" and "fictive."

Another term that is often used in relation to fictionality is "fictionalization." Ronen describes "fictionalizing" in the following terms: "[t]ext originally written as history or as philosophy can be 'fictionalized' (that is, converted into fiction)" (1994: 76). In contrast, Nielsen, Phelan and Walsh hold that "*Fictionalization,* for us, is not the act of turning something nonfictive into something fictive but the act of signaling fictionality" (2015b: 105). The latter concept has even fostered the term "de-fictionalize" (Genette 1990a: 773).

Generally speaking, studies devoted to investigating fictionality from various theoretical angles began developing during the 1990s (Riffaterre 1990; Currie 1990;

Walton 1990; Lamarque 1990; Genette 1990a, 1990b; Cohn 1999). Zipfel (2001) provides an in-depth discussion and the most useful explanation of the distinctions between fiction, fictive, fictional and fictionality. His main terminological suggestion is to distinguish between the fictive (events, characters and entities which are made up/invented and thus hence possess fictiveness— Fiktivität) and the fictional (texts which contain invented stories and possess fictionality—Fiktionalität; 2001: 17–19).

3.2 Signposts of fictionality

Among the approaches that have treated fictionality purely as a feature of fiction, the most widely discussed topic is the question of signposts. Hamburger ([1957] 1993) embodies one of the earliest theories of fictionality from within literary theory and attempts to prove that there are certain features that work differently in fiction than in non-fiction. She suggests that, inter alia, the grammatical forms of the epic preterit as well as the related phenomenon of “erlebte Rede” (free indirect discourse) are specific to text-bound fictional representation. On a more general level, she observes that it is precisely the seemingly illogical, unconventional use of grammatical tense, deictic expressions and linguistic markers of the enunciating as well as of the observing instance that is licensed under the conditions of fictional poetic representation. Building on Hamburger there have been several subsequent attempts to describe signposts (Cohn 1990), signs (Riffaterre 1990), indices (Schaeffer [1999] 2010), markers (Fludernik 2005) or signals (Schmid 2010) of fiction or fictionality. Banfield (1982) draws on generative grammar to argue that sentences of pure narration and sentences of represented speech and thought are fiction-specific features. Attempting to make up for what she identifies as a general neglect of the distinction between fiction and non-fiction, Cohn suggests three signposts of fictionality that are specific to the fictional domain: the bi-level structure of story and discourse; certain narrative modes such as the presentation of consciousness; and the doubling of the narrating instance into author and narrator (1999: 130–131). She further argues that the signposts of fictionality point to the “differential nature of fiction” (131), reasoning that there are certain semantic elements unique to fiction and which set works of fiction apart from non-fictional works. Interested not only in fictionality, but in the interplay between fictionality and verisimilitude, Riffaterre (1990: 29–30) lists a number of different signs of fictionality ranging from humorous narrative, multiple narrators and emblematic names for characters to mimetic excesses and authorial intrusions. Along with this, he argues that if there are signs of fictionality there must also be signs of plausibility that make the reader react to a story as if it was true (2). Schaeffer lists the best-known indices of fictionality: 1) verbs of interior processes; 2) FID; 3) introduction of characters without the use of a personal pronoun; 4) use of verbs of situation referring to events distant in time; 5) massive use of dialogue

which transgresses the boundaries for what it would be possible to account for in non-fictional discourse; 6) use of spatial deictics indexed to third parties; and 7) detemporalization of the preterit ([1999] 2010: 238–239).

There have also been several objections to the idea of signposts of fictionality and identifiable features of fiction. Genette (1990a), who adopts an integrationist stance as opposed to Cohn's segregationist approach, dismisses textual signposts of fictionality, opting instead for paratextual markers of fiction. While Genette argues that no indices of fictionality are obligatory, constant or exclusive to fiction, however, he concedes that there are indices *characteristic* of fictionality (772–773). When he maintains that there is no such thing as timeless, identifiable signposts, he does so on the basis that all the proposed signposts, according to him, can also be found outside fiction.

From the perspective of fictional worlds theory, Ronen raises three objections to signs of fictionality in the form of textual indicators (1994: 78). She argues that the interest in textual markers of fictionality is "an outcome and a symptom of a deeply rooted impetus to show that the language of literature behaves differently from other uses of language" (80–81). Ronen recognizes, however, that even though many literary theorists acknowledge this, some still operate with a concept of signposts. Hempfer (2004), for example, proposes a way to account for the different nuances in the discussion of signs of fictionality by distinguishing between signals and characteristics: characteristics are specific understandings of fictionality that certain formal elements can signal. Whereas characteristics constitute fictionality, signals are indices that point to the fictionality.

The rhetorical theory of fictionality originally proposed by Walsh is radically pragmatic in its stance on signposts. Walsh focuses on contextual relations and the sender and receiver in the act of a use of fictionality. He argues that "fictionality has no determinate relation to features of the text itself" (2007: 45) and shows no interest in potential signposts of fictionality. Nielsen and Zetterberg Gjerlevsen (forthcoming) have tried to show that a pragmatic approach to fictionality can be bridged with a semantic search for signposts. Whereas the semantic theory of fictionality searches for signposts in order to identify the specific property of fiction, Nielsen and Zetterberg Gjerlevsen have taken up Genette's idea that signposts are not restricted to fiction. Defining fictionality as intentionally signaled invention in communication implies that such signals are of a communicative order. As rhetorical devices, signposts do not determine a genre as they do in the semantic approach to fictionality, but they can be found both inside and outside fiction. From this perspective, signposts will point to the invented nature of the discourse.

3.3

Fictionality in fictional worlds theory and Internal Field of Reference

Fictional worlds theories is one step toward focusing not only on fictionality as a feature of a fictional text but on fictionality as such. In these theories, fictionality is used to make sense of how fiction works by describing its ability to project fictional worlds. The idea of fictional worlds stems from possible worlds theory, first introduced into narrative theory by Pavel (1975) and subsequently taken up by Doležel (1998), Ryan (1991), Ronen (1994) and others (Ryan → Possible Worlds [2]). Pavel declares that he is "attempting to pave the way for a theory sensitive to the nature and function of imaginary worlds, the representational force of fiction, and the links between literature and other cultural systems" (1986: vii). Ronen seeks to dissociate fictional worlds theories from literary theory because, according to her, literary theory tends to view fictionality as the distinctive feature of literary texts and hence mistakenly equates fictionality with literariness (1994). She equates literary theory with the formalist-structuralist tradition and New Criticism, mentioning Hamburger, Banfield and Jakobson as examples. Ronen stresses the ontologically different natures of possible worlds and fictional worlds by arguing that whereas possible worlds are regarded as alternative possible but non-actualized courses of events, fictional worlds are subjected to other principles which allow their fictional actualization. According to her, fictional worlds have their own distinct ontology and present themselves as a self-sufficient system. Fictional ontologies include fictional facts—things that actually did occur in the fictional world—whereas possible worlds focus on what could and could not have occurred in the actual world (8–9).

Harshaw (1984) uses fictionality to suggest a somewhat similar explanation to the effects of fiction. According to him, fictional texts create a whole network of interrelated referents of various kinds (such as characters, events, situations, etc.) which he calls an Internal Field of Reference (IFR). In Harshaw's theory, what makes fiction distinct is that in addition to references from other fields external to them in the "real" world, fictional texts can also make use of fictionality. Harshaw argues that "Literature is not simply art of language but, first of all, art in fictionality" (238). His theory comes very close to fictional worlds theory in general, as he argues that an IFR is constructed as a plane parallel to the real world (248). It also effectively adopts Ryan's "principle of minimal departure" (1980, 1991), since Harshaw contends that we model our fictional internal frame of reference on the historical world or external frame of reference. Building on fictional worlds theory, but concerned with how fiction differs from other types of discourse, Ryan holds that an adequate theory of fiction should combine fictionality with the principle of minimal departure, the principle by which readers of fiction fill in gaps with

knowledge about the real world. Ryan thus assumes that “the principle of minimal departure picks the *real* world as model for the reconstruction of the fictional world” (418).

3.5 Fictionality as something imagined: The theories of “as if,” pretense and make-believe

Yet another group of theorists has used fictionality to describe something which is imagined, understanding the concept in a broader sense than that of a mere property of fiction. Cohn credits Vaihinger ([1911] 2001) with giving the word fiction “its greatest prominence and scope, as well as its most positive assessment” (1999: 4) in his philosophy of “as if”: the idea that human beings create models and assumptions “as if” something were the case in order to make sense of the world. Vaihinger, as Cohn points out, does not address literary fiction, but rather a number of other types of “fiction” such as mathematical and utopian ones.

Searle’s theory of fiction as a pretended speech act has been described as an as-if theory resembling Vaihinger’s (cf. Hempfer 2004: 314) and Sidney’s dictum that “the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth” (1583 in: 2010: 271). Searle characterizes the act of producing fiction as pretending to make an assertion; “to engage in a performance which is *as if*” (1975: 324). He sets up a distinction between fiction and literature stating: “Roughly speaking, whether or not a work is literature is for the reader to decide, whether or not it is fiction is for the author to decide” (320). Accordingly, Searle argues that there is “no textual property, syntactical or semantic, that will identify a text as a work of fiction”; an author pretends to perform an assertive, and what makes fiction possible is a set of extra-linguistic, non-semantic conventions (325–326). As already mentioned, Searle has mostly served as an adversary of semantic and syntactic theories of fictionality, but some theorists have built their theories from his ideas. The philosopher Gabriel, for example, asserts that his concept of fictional discourse is similar to that of Searle. Further, he builds on the philosophy of “as if” when developing his theory of fiction, stating that in fictional discourse the speaker speaks as if he were performing a special kind of speech act; what really makes it a discourse fictional, however, is that the rules of sincerity are suspended and “the rule of reference is out of place” (Gabriel 1979: 247).

Iser (1978) founds his theory of fictionality on a very broad concept of “as if” in order to connect fictionality to a larger anthropological theory that concerns not only fiction but human behavior (see also Iser 1990, 1991). He contends that fictionality signals that things are only to be taken as if they were what they seem to be (1978: 251). Here, he comes very close to Pavel. Fiction, he states, “always

contains a representation of something, but its very fictionality shows that what is represented is merely an ‘image’, is put in parentheses and thus accorded the status of an ‘As If’” (Iser 1978: 231–232). Hamburger is notable for the attempt to counter the approach to literature as an as-if structure. She distinguishes between a “fictitious” as-if structure which she understands as “being feigned” and a “fictive” as-structure. From that she argues that fiction is not only an as if, but momentarily appears *as* a world of reality (Hamburger [1957] 1993: 56–59).

Walton has used fictionality to describe how a person can be engaged in a game of make-believe. He equates fictions with representation and argues that what all representations have in common is that they play a role in make-believe. Walton goes on to argue that certain objects serve as props to activating imagination, and that for him is fictionality (1990: 58). This theory goes not only for literature but also for pictures, paintings, sculptures and other artefacts. Walton, however, believes that fictionality can only create quasi-emotions and quasi-feelings, such that the feelings caused by representational objects are not real. Building on Walton’s theory of make-believe, Currie (1990) argues in similar terms that make-believe is an important part of everyday life, but he shifts the focus of make-believe from the recipient to the author’s intention. Currie reasons that fictionality occurs only when the author has intentionally aimed at communicating the fictional status of a work to the audience (24).

Theories that explain fictionality as an “as if” structure, pretense or make-believe use the term in a wider sense than theories that ascribe fictionality only to fiction. These theories that focus on fictionality as an ability to imagine, however, still do not focus on fictionality as an autonomous concept.

3.6 Fictionality as a rhetorical concept and its implications for narrative theory

One of the first proposals put forth for an autonomous concept of fictionality not directly connected to fiction comes from Wildekamp et al. (1980) who use pragmatic speech act theories as their starting point. These authors point out that a theory founded on oral communication is transferred directly to written modes, and they argue that speech act theory cannot in itself account for how a reader would be able to know that an author wants to perform a pretended speech act of fictionality. As an alternative, Wildekamp et al. plead in favor of a pragmatic speech act theory which identifies fictionality in terms of how the sender signals to the receiver. Thus, pragmatic considerations are combined with semantic-syntactic features. Resorting to speech act theory enables Wildekamp et al. to argue that fictionality is not restricted to literary systems, but that it also exists in numerous other types of

discourse. On this basis, fictionality can be regarded “a general social phenomenon” (1980: 548).

A new impulse to adopt a rhetorical perspective on fictionality has been given by Walsh in *The Rhetoric of Fictionality* (2007). Walsh’s theory has antecedents both in narrative theory and in philosophical and linguistic traditions. However, his rhetorical approach is more radical in its separation of fictionality from fiction and in expounding the ramifications for narrative theory than earlier attempts. It bears resemblance to pragmatic speech act theory in that, like Searle, he argues that there are no textual properties that can identify a text as fiction but that the surrounding contextual relations are decisive for fictionality. Walsh, however, rejects the theory of pretense and acknowledges the receiver’s role in the perception of fictionality. He positions his theory partly within Wayne C. Booth’s rhetorical approach to fiction, with regard to communicative acts and authorial intention, but he puts a much stronger emphasis on the role of context in interpreting fictionality.

This rhetorical perspective on fictionality as a mode of communication has been explored in subsequent studies. For example, Zetterberg Gjerlevsen (2013) has explained fictionality in relation to general communication theory, arguing that fictionality can be described as a special use of indirect speech acts. Nielsen, Phelan and Walsh (2015a, 2015b) have elaborated the theoretical consequences of separating fictionality from fiction from within the rhetorical position. They contend that fictionality is founded upon a basic human ability to imagine and that it operates as a “double exposure” of the imagined and the real: the paradox that fictionality is not meant to be understood as true and yet is meant to shape our beliefs about the actual world (2015b: 68).

4 Topics for Further Investigation

The fictionality debate has been dominated by an attempt to oppose radical positions often categorized as syntactic-semantic and pragmatic. To remedy this, Gorman (2005: 163–167) encourages investigations of the relationship between the semantic and pragmatic positions. One attempt to do so is the investigation of signposts of fictionality independent of media, genre and boundaries of fiction and non-fiction. Such investigations could be developed much further. Whereas the rhetorical theory of fictionality has extricated fictionality from fiction, investigations of fictionality within many different media and discourse types still remain to be explored: fictionality in pictures, films, plays and everyday conversation. Also to be investigated is fictionality within fiction and the various historical dimensions of the phenomenon. If fictionality is an expression of a fundamental human ability to

imagine, then how does this ability express itself in different ways over time and in various cultures? What does it mean for the understanding of fiction to operate with an independent concept of fictionality?

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