

## WHAT IS A SERIOUS DISCOURSE?

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**Abstract.** Serious discourse is regularly opposed to fictional discourse. But what is serious discourse? Fictional discourse is ubiquitous and raises challenging questions to philosophical semantics. How to define serious discourse in a non-circular way? I use action theory and speech acts theory to propose an analysis of what a serious discourse is. The notion of expectation is central, as well as that of satisfaction: in serious discourse, we expect the satisfaction of illocutionary act and of perlocutionary plans.

**Keywords:** serious discourse • fictional discourse • illocutionary act • expectation • perlocutionary plan

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The main concern of philosophical semantics since Frege is the construction of a theoretical representation of semantic competence, which aims to explain how our knowledge of the meaning a complex linguistic expression has depends solely on our knowledge of the meanings of its parts plus the way they are combined, *when these complex expressions are used seriously and literally*. Seriousness and literalness are keystones for any study of meanings. It makes little sense, for instance, to study the semantic properties of a term by looking at its non-literal uses. Serious discourse is regularly opposed to fictional discourse. But what is a *serious discourse*?

The semantics of fictional discourse raises important questions for philosophical semantics. Fictional discourse is ubiquitous. Consider the place occupied in culture and education by the great narratives of the past, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, the Norse *Sagas*, and masterpieces we love so much like Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Shakespeare and Molière's plays, Goethe's *Faust*, to mention but a few. Novels, movies, theatrical plays, TV soaps, are still captivating millions of consumers. A funny case happened decades ago in the then Soviet Union. A Mexican soap, *Los ricos también lloran*, was so successful that the soviet authorities decided to present each episode twice a day because, otherwise, many people left their job to watch the soap, causing important economic prejudices to the country. The economy of a superpower was threatened because people wanted badly to watch the ups and downs of a Mexican bourgeois.



The way we understand fictional discourse does not seem at all different from the way we understand serious discourse. But we know there is a difference. The author of a fictional work does not lie or tries to mislead her readers, but she does not have any commitment to truth, and does not describe a “different reality.” A promise or an order made by a fictional character has no effect in real life. There is no fictional truthmakers, no “fictional facts.” However, a lot of people died in the search of the city of gold. The inexistence of El Dorado is something that has been *discovered*. Readers normally do not “discover” that Sherlock Holmes or Hamlet do not exist. They know from the outset that they are not of flesh and blood.

The challenge for philosophical semantics is to explain the difference between serious and fictional discourse, and to do it in a *non-circular way*.<sup>1</sup> (Just for the sake of avoiding gross misunderstanding: serious discourse can be funny, and fictional discourse can teach very “serious” lessons.)

Fictional discourse departs from “serious discourse.” Serious discourse can be found in newspapers, biographies, business contracts, in the court room, in scientific reports, books of history, chronicles, logbook, market bargaining, academic papers, etc. Frege gave some interesting clues for a treatment of fictional discourse (1892, p. 157).<sup>2</sup> Sentences in fiction are neither true nor false, he says, because the references of the singular terms for fictional characters do not exist. Existential presupposition must be satisfied if a sentence is to have a truth-value. Just take any sentence of fictional discourse at random: “I am afraid, Watson, that I shall have to go,” said Holmes, as we sat down together to our breakfast one morning.” (Conan Doyle 2015, p.312). No minimally rational agent would believe that the sentence quoted by Watson was truly asserted by someone of flesh and blood called “Holmes.” It would be a “mock belief,” a belief upon which no one would act rationally (or simply form a plan, a project). And the readers, while enjoying a work of fiction, know from the start that the fictional names are not really used as instruments of reference. So far so good for Frege: sentences *in* fictional discourse do not have truth value.

But this does not work quite well for *parafictional* sentences like “Holmes is more famous than Poirot,” “Holmes has been created in Mars 1886,” “Holmes still inspires today’s detectives,” etc. These sentences are literally true, and they express genuine knowledge about fictional characters. So, the existential presupposition must be somehow satisfied. Parafictional sentences belong to serious discourse. Therefore, when speaking *about* fictional narratives (in parafictional sentences), fictional names can be used to refer to something, be it an abstract artefact or a cultural object. Therefore, in my view, fictional names are not empty. They are used to refer only in parafictional sentences.

One attempt to define serious discourse, as opposed to fictional discourse, just goes like this: serious discourse is one that can be *endorsed* (Recanati 2021, p.25). First, we entertain a thought and then, if it is epistemically appropriate to do so, we

judge the content – endorse the thought – and eventually assert the sentence that expresses it (Frege 1918, p.329). The endorsement would be what distinguishes serious from fictional discourse. In that Fregean perspective, fictional discourse is parasitic on serious discourse; fictional discourse is not endorsed by the author-reader. But if endorsing a discourse means roughly the same as “taking it seriously,” it seems that we are running round in a circle.

Alternatively, we could say that there is no such thing as a mere entertaining of a thought, that understanding fictional discourse is initially on a par with understanding serious discourse. In both cases, we form mental models about how the world is if a sentence is true, but in the case of fiction all the commitments to truth and satisfaction are *cancelled*. However, if cancelling here just means roughly the same as “not taking seriously anymore,” we find ourselves again caught in a circle. Endorsement and cancellation are intuitively interesting ideas, but we must find a way out of the circle.

My suggestion is to use resources of speech acts theory and, more generally, action theory. Action theory teaches us something important about human agency: we very rarely perform isolated actions. Our actions, most of the time, are parts of *plans*. Of course, this holds for illocutionary acts. An isolated illocutionary act can be of an expressive type (like “Ouch!” or “Hello!”); these are easy to understand. Or it can be a reaction to another illocutionary act (like “No!” or “Not again!”), or to a situation (“Seat belt, please!” “Be quiet!”), but then they are not completely isolated after all. Someone asserting, out of the blue, “I have five fingers in my right hand”, will cause perplexity (why calling attention to something standard?). Actions are performed for reasons and when the reasons are not easily grasped, the interpretation is at best precarious. Most of the time, illocutionary acts are understood as parts of a whole discourse or sequence of illocutionary acts. Normally, in a talk exchange, sequences of illocutionary acts are produced by different agents engaged in a conversation. A whole sequence can be divided in subsequences, each one produced by a single agent.

The performance of any illocutionary act presupposes utterance acts. These are basic actions generating conventionally illocutionary acts.<sup>3</sup> Any action can be simulated. This is the livelihood of actors and actresses. The author of a fictional discourse can perform utterances similar to utterances performed in serious discourse. But the illocutionary acts conventionally generated in serious discourse *always come along with expectations about the success and satisfaction of these acts*. Any real action or activity can fail, and any action or activity has an internal criterion of success, thence conditions of success. When we form the intention to do something, we automatically have a representation of what would count as success. Illocutionary acts have an illocutionary point which is the intention with which the act is performed.<sup>4</sup> When acting, naturally, we expect success. Expecting is just believing that something will happen soon in a certain way. But success is not everything. We also expect that our

illocutionary acts (or those of other speakers we trust) will be satisfied (that assertions will be true, that promises will be kept, that orders will be obeyed, etc.). Of course, satisfaction cannot be guaranteed. I can issue an order successfully (with the required authority), and the order not be obeyed; I can put myself successfully under the obligation to do something (a promise), but an event could prevent me to honor my promise. In cases like these, an illocutionary act is performed with success, but is not satisfied. An ideal illocutionary act is performed with success, is satisfied and sincere.

Moreover, most of the time, we perform illocutionary acts with perlocutionary intentions. The perlocutionary is, so to speak, the motor of human communication. We expect all the time that our *perlocutionary plans* will be fulfilled. I *assert* successively different propositions  $P_1$ ,  $P_2$ , etc., with the perlocutionary intention to *convince* you that another proposition is true, or with the intention to irritate you, to amuse you, to cause you to act, and I do that because, somehow, it matters to me. Sometimes, in the performance of illocutionary acts, we expect a determined perlocutionary *effect*, but the shot backfires, and the opposite of the expected happens. You tell jokes with the intention of amusing the hearer, but the jokes irritate her; you perform assertions with the intention to convince, but the hearer disagrees or presents a strong counter-argument. The satisfaction of perlocutionary plans, as we can see, is not regulated by clear-cut conventions. Nonetheless, with a few exceptions, speaker's main intention is always perlocutionary: most of the time, illocutionary acts are means to an end and this end is the satisfaction of perlocutionary intentions.

With all this in mind, I suggest, as a first approximation, the following analysis of what a serious discourse is:

A sequence  $S$  of illocutionary acts performed by an agent  $A$  constitutes a *serious discourse* =<sub>def.</sub> 1)  $A$  does everything necessary to perform each element of  $S$ ; 2)  $A$  has good reasons for expecting that the conditions of success and satisfaction of the acts in  $S$  will be fulfilled; 3)  $A$  performs  $S$  expecting the satisfaction of his/her perlocutionary intentions and plans.

The first clause says that something like an utterance act is a necessary condition for the performance of the illocutionary acts of the sequence. An utterance act can be done in different ways: by using the vocal tract, or by writing down something, using sign language, or moving parts of the body. The second clause tells us that if we speak to be understood, we speak rationally, that is, we take the appropriate means to achieve (part of) our communicative aims. Searle (1969, p.46) distinguishes illocutionary effect (the understanding, governed by conventions) from a variety of possible perlocutionary effects. The two kinds of effects must be distinguished. As a matter of fact, I can make an assertion and never mind what other people think about it ("I just want to express my opinion"). But most of the time, illocutionary acts are parts of plans, and sequences of illocutionary acts are means to achieve per-

locutionary plans. Therefore, I characterize serious discourse by separating clauses 2) and 3). Both mention expectations about satisfaction (of illocutionary acts or of perlocutionary plans). Such expectations are absent in fictional discourse.

My definition can easily be adapted for more than one agent in serious conversation involving turn takings. The whole sequence of illocutionary acts must then be divided in subsequences, each one performed by a single agent.

Finally, I believe my definition avoid circularity. Discourse seriousness is analyzed in psychological terms, that is, in terms of expectations and intentions speakers have when performing sequences of illocutionary acts. Expectation is mental state, a kind of belief about the occurrence of an event that will happen soon. And there wouldn't be actions without intentions. Actions are events and the event expected can be either another action, or an event expected as a consequence of something done by the agents of the context.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>It would be ridiculous to define serious discourse just by saying it is non-fictional discourse!

<sup>2</sup>Also: (Evans 1982, p.27 and ff).

<sup>3</sup>(Goldman 1970, p.26): "Act-token A of agent S conventionally generates act token A' of agent S only if the performance of A in circumstances C (possibly null), together with a rule R saying that A done in C counts as A', guarantee the performance of A'." An utterance-act (token) generates the assertion that it is raining in virtue of conventions associating the sentence "It is raining" to the propositional content of the assertion that it is raining.

<sup>4</sup>See (Searle and Vanderveken 1985, p.87): "... illocutionary point is the internal point or purpose of a type of illocution. Illocutionary point always determines direction of fit; that is the illocutionary point determines how the propositional content is presented as relating to the world of utterance."