Factives Attitude Ascriptions and Fiction

Abstract

We introduce a puzzle concerning the meaning of factive attitude ascriptions with fictional complements (e.g. Mary is surprised that Iago is a traitor). The puzzle is this: On the received view of factive attitude verbs, such ascriptions either entail or presuppose their complements. The complements of such ascriptions however are not true (either false or truth-valueless), yet such ascriptions are intuitively true – we can be surprised to find that Iago is a traitor. We consider two strategies for retaining the received view of factive attitude verbs: Lewis’s intensional truth-in-fiction operator and the pretense-theoretic approach. We argue that both strategies fail to deliver the right results about factive attitude verbs in fiction, and that an adequate account of factives must accept, rather than attempt to explain away, the failure of factives attitude ascriptions to entail or presuppose the truth of their complement in our talk of fiction.

Word count (body): 3,000

1. Introduction

On the received view in linguistic and philosophical semantics, factive attitude verbs – including know that, discover that, realize that, be surprised that – express relations between an agent and a fact, i.e. a true proposition.¹ A factive report like (1a) thus is widely taken to entail (1b):

(1)  a. Mary discovered that Fido can swim.
     b. Fido can swim.

If it is true that Mary discovered that Fido can swim, then Fido can indeed swim. Or, at any rate, if it is false that Fido can swim then it is either false or truth-valueless that Mary discovered that Fido can swim. This bit of orthodoxy extends back to, and highlights the common ground between either side of the Russell-Strawson debate over the factive component of the meanings of singular terms: Russell and Strawson agreed that singular terms were coupled with existential propositions conventionally associated with them but disagreed over the relation such propositions bear to assertions containing singular terms (Russell 1905, Strawson 1950). While Russell held assertions

¹ Examples of this received view can be found in Karttunen 1973, Lewis 1996, Williamson 2000.
involving non-referring singular terms (including fictional names) to be false, Strawson held such assertions to crash due to presupposition failure and lack a truth value entirely.

Philosophical debates about truth in fiction have since focused primarily on fictional names and the question of their reference, yet fictional names are not the only expressions whose conventional meanings apparently carry weighty philosophical commitments. In particular we often use ascriptions involving factive attitude verbs to talk about and engage works of fiction.

The purpose of this paper is to raise a new puzzle concerning occurrences of factive attitude ascriptions in fictional contexts. We consider two strategies for addressing the puzzle within the confines of the received view of factive attitude verbs: Lewis’s truth-in-fiction operator (Lewis 1978) and pretense theory (Walton 1990, Recanati 2000, Predelli 2008). We argue that both strategies fail to deliver the right results about factive attitude verbs in fiction, and that an adequate account of factives must accept, rather than attempt to explain away, the failure of factives attitude ascriptions to entail the truth of their complement in our talk of fiction.²

We begin in the next section by laying out the puzzle of factive attitude ascriptions with fictional complements and forestalling an appeal to ambiguity to resolve the puzzle. In section 3, we consider the Lewisian strategy and argue that there is no plausible assignment of an intensional operator to the relevant sentences that delivers the correct truth conditions. In section 4, we consider a pretense-theoretic of factives about fiction and argue that it also fails to deliver the correct verdicts regarding the assertability conditions of the relevant sentences. In section 5, we summarize the case against the received view of factive attitude ascriptions, and point to alternative conceptions capable of handling fictional subject matter.

2. The puzzle of factives in fiction

According to the received view, the truth of (2a) entails the truth of (2b):

(2)  a. Mary discovered that Iago is a traitor.
     b. Iago is a traitor.

² Our focus is so-called “internal” uses of statements about fiction (Kroon and Voltolini 2018), and “mixed” uses that report an agent’s attitude towards the proposition expressed by an internally used statement about fiction. These “mixed” uses are of course different from the kind of mixed fictional/non-fictional uses of e.g. “Mickey Mouse is a pop icon”.
Of course, (2b) is not true. Given that Iago purports to refer to a fictional character, an utterance of (2b) relative to a context expresses a proposition that is either false or truth-valueless, according to one’s preferred view about the contribution that non-referring names make to the semantic values of sentences in which they occur (Lewis 1978, p. 38). In either case, if (2b) is not true, it follows that (2a) is not true. We should however hesitate to accept this conclusion: it is an everyday feature of our interaction with fiction that we can truly bear a host of factive attitudes toward various fictional states of affairs. Mary can truly discover that Iago is a traitor. As readers and viewers, we can truly be surprised that Snape is an ally to Harry and be glad that Frodo succeeds in his quest to the destroy the Ring. That we can bear factive attitudes about fiction is a datum that a theory of the meaning of fictional sentences should account for rather than reject for failing to align within one’s preferred theory of fictional discourse.

2.1 Against ambiguity

Likewise, we should hesitate to posit ambiguity in the meaning of factive attitude verbs. In accordance with Grice’s (1978) modified Occam’s razor, Mary’s discovery that Iago is a traitor (through reading Othello) is just like the relation she bears to a proposition when she discovers that Fido can swim (through seeing Fido do so). There are two major reasons for accepting that this continuity is reflected in the univocal meaning of the factive attitude verb we use to describe Mary’s mental state in either case. For one thing, positing ambiguity may be unnecessary to account for the differences between (1) and (2), and lead to a less parsimonious theory. For another, pursuing this strategy opens the door to massive ambiguity, since it suggests that the semantic value of an attitude verb depends on the status (either as factual or fictional) of the sentence that occurs as its complement. On this ambiguity approach, (1a) and (2a) attribute distinct attitudinal relations to Mary that we can distinguish with appropriate subscripts: discovering_{FACTIVE} that Fido can swim, discovering_{FICTIVE} that Iago is a traitor. But it’s not clear why the status of the complement should affect the meaning of the propositional attitude verb. If our aim is to provide an empirically adequate semantics for factive attitude ascriptions about fiction,

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3 Meinongians would object to our claim that (2b) is not true. Since we are primarily concerned with the interaction between fictional sentences and factive attitude reports, we set such a view aside.
individuating the meaning of *discovers that* in terms of the nature of its complement fails to help us achieve this aim.

The puzzle, in short, is this: On the received view, factive attitude ascriptions either entail or presuppose their complements. The complements of such ascriptions however are not true (either false or truth-valueless), yet such ascriptions are often intuitively be true, and our judgments of their truth is not merely the result of equivocating between factive and non-factive senses of the attitude verb in question. We turn now to critically consider two strategies for resolving the puzzle, both of which illustrate the case against the received view of factives.

3. The truth-in-fiction operator

It is very natural to say that while (2b) fails to be *strictly speaking true*, it is still *true in some sense*. One way of cashing out this intuitive difference is to hold that while (2b) is not true at the actual world, it is nonetheless true relative to the world of the fiction. This strategy attempts to salvage the truth of (2a) by assessing the truth of (2b) against a non-actual world or state of affairs. Along these lines, Lewis’s (1978) influential view implements this strategy by inserting a covert intensional operator – *it is true-in-the-F-fiction that* – into the logical form of fictional assertions.4 The truth-in-fiction operator takes propositions expressed by an utterance in context and shifts the world of evaluation from the world of the utterance to the world described by the fiction under discussion.5 On this view, an assertion of (2b) is not true in the actual world but true relative to the world described by Shakespeare’s *Othello*. We can remain neutral on the ontological status of such a world, and only note that in such a world, *Iago* successfully refers, and its referent falls under the extension of *is a traitor*.

3.1 Against the Lewisian approach

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4 We henceforth refer to the operator as the *truth-in-fiction* operator, keeping in mind that it is a propositional operator.
5 Of course, in speaking of the world of Shakespeare’s *Othello* we make a simplifying assumption which we retain for simplicity throughout the rest of the discussion. A standard way of assigning meaning to the truth-in-fiction operator is to take it express that its complement is true throughout the worlds compatible with the content of the work – for such a treatment, see Lewis 1978, pp. 42-43 and von Fintel & Heim 2011 pp. 13-15.
The Lewisian strategy offers an apparently easy mend for understanding the sense in which (2b) may be true. Could an appeal to the covert intensional operator resolve the puzzle of the occurrences of factive attitudes in discourse about fiction? We argue that it cannot. The trouble is that there is no assignment of a syntactic position to the operator that delivers the right truth conditions for (2a). Consequently, the Lewisian strategy cannot salvage the truth of (2a).

If there is a truth-in-fiction operator implicit in the logical form of an utterance of (2b) in context, then it is presumably inherited by an utterance of (2a) in context, in which (2b) serves as a sentential argument. In (2a), the truth-in-fiction operator and the factive verb might take different scopes relative to each other. However, neither (3b) nor (3c) seem to capture the intuitively correct truth-conditions of (3a):

(3)  a. Mary was surprised that Iago is a traitor.
    b. It is true-in-the-Othello-fiction that Mary was surprised that Iago is a traitor.
    c. Mary was surprised that it is true-in-the-Othello-fiction that Iago is a traitor.

In (3b) the truth-in-fiction operator takes scope over the factive attitude ascription. An utterance of (3b) is therefore true just in case within the world of the Othello fiction, the referent of Mary (perhaps her counterpart or some other modal surrogate) was surprised to find that Iago is a traitor. Clearly however these are not the truth conditions we are interested in capturing: Mary is not a character of Shakespeare’s play, nor are any of her non-actual world-bound surrogates.

While (3c) appears more plausible than (3b), it also fails to provide the correct truth conditions. On the reading of (3a) in which the attitude verb takes scope over the truth-in-fiction operator, Mary’s attitude of surprise is about the Othello fiction. But her attitude need not have been about the Othello fiction itself to be true: her surprise was, we can say, directly about Iago. If there is a sense in which Mary’s attitude is indeed about work of fiction, it is only indirectly about such a subject matter.

To see this, suppose that Mary read Othello under the mistaken belief that it is a work of nonfiction, one in which Shakespeare documents a series of historical events taking place in Venice and Cyprus around the 16th century. By so doing, she learned (much to her surprise!) about Iago’s betrayal. In such a case, (3b) does not assign the intuitively correct content to Mary’s attitude, and so delivers the wrong results about the truth conditions of (3a).
This point is bolstered by considering factives that occur within the purview of work of fiction. Whereas (3a) is a metafictional sentence, (4a) attributes a factive attitude to a fictional character, and so could easily be imagined to be a part of the fiction itself:

(4)  
   a. Othello eventually realized that Iago is a traitor.
   b. Othello eventually realized that it is true-in-the-Othello-fiction that Iago is a traitor.

While an utterance of (4a) in context might be true relative to the world of the Othello fiction, these truth conditions are not given by (4b). Prefixing the complement with the truth-in-fiction operator renders a sentence that attributes a metafictional belief to Othello, one that he does not bear. It is not part of Shakespeare’s fiction that Othello has attitudes about the fiction. Othello does not have any beliefs that refer to, or presuppose the existence of, the Shakespearean tragedy. His beliefs are directly about characters and features of the narrative that are internal to the fiction – among them, his treacherous compatriot, Iago, and the intrigue that animates the main plot of Shakespeare’s tragedy. If there is an extended sense in which Othello’s realization is about the work itself, we can once again hold that it is only indirectly about it.

The failure of (3c) and (4b) to capture the correct truth conditions of (3a) and (4a) thus show that Lewis’s truth-in-fiction operator cannot take narrow scope relative to the factive attitude verb, while the failure of (3b) shows that it cannot take wide scope. Together the above examples demonstrate that there is no plausible assignment of a syntactic position to the operator that delivers the right verdicts about the meanings of factive attitude ascriptions in our discourse about fiction.

4. Pretense theoretic account of factives about fiction

So far we’ve shown that factives raise a problem for any view (Meinong’s aside) according to which fictional sentences have non-trivial truth conditions – that is, on which they are true in some semantic sense, where this is taken to mean that the truth conditions assigned to a fictional sentence are compositionally determined by the referents of its parts at a (possibly fictional) world of evaluation. An alternative account of truth in fiction – so-called pretense theory – maintains that fictional sentences have an irreparably broken semantics, lacking literal truth conditions, but holds that they are nonetheless assertible as parts of acts of storytelling, pretense, or games of make-believe. The pretense theoretic framework for interpreting fictional discourse has been defended
by Walton 1990, Recanati 2000, and Predelli 2008. While the details of their views differ, they share the contention that fictional discourse is licensed by norms operative within a context of pretense that constitutes the storytelling, pretense, or game of make-believe involved in our interaction with a work of fiction. Much in the way that an actor’s utterances purport to be about Othello when uttered during the course of the play, an utterance of (2b) is an appropriate assertion when (and perhaps only when) made within the context of pretense. We can paraphrase the content of such an assertion by making explicit the pretense that licenses our pretense that lago successfully refers, and this seems to capture what we mean when we assert (2b):

(5) According to the Othello pretense, lago is a traitor.

4.1 Against the pretense-theoretic approach

Pretense theory offers a promising strategy for understanding the conditions under which an unembedded fictional sentence such as (2b) is assertible. Can pretense theory however equally explain the assertability of factive attitude ascriptions about fiction? We argue that it cannot. The pretense approach confronts two major obstacles to accounting for the assertability of an utterance such as (2a). The first concerns the status of (2b) as a presupposition of (2a). On the received view, factive attitude verbs presuppose their complements relative to the context of utterance. A contextual shift from factual discourse to a context of pretense presumably applies to whole utterances. But this bears the problematic consequence that when we assert that Mary discovered that lago is a traitor, we do so as part of the act of pretense, storytelling, or make-believe. But we can ascribe a factive attitude to Mary without ipso facto becoming part of the

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6 That (2b) is a presupposition associated with (2b) is supposed by the well-known projection tests for presupposition, which hold that presupposed (but not asserted) content project through entailment-cancelling environments, including negation, the antecedents of conditionals, and interrogatives among other constructions – as illustrated by (a)-(d) below, all of which presuppose that Fido can swim. (Chierchia and McConnell-Ginet 1999):

a. Mary hasn’t discovered that Fido can swim.

b. If Mary has discovered that Fido can swim, she might not be so stressed out.

c. Has Mary discovered that Fido can swim?

d. Perhaps Mary has discovered that Fido can swim.
pretense under which the sentence is assertible. We should therefore not identify the context of utterance with the context of pretense, since the two can pull apart.

It is tempting to think instead that the context of pretense applies only to part of the utterance. That is, one might hold that if (2a) is true then it is Mary – and not the speaker of (2a) – who (upon learning of Iago’s betrayal) adopts the presupposition associated with the factive verb. It is Mary’s attitude that is factive or truth-tracking and not the assertion that ascribes such an attitude to her. Of course, under a pretense Mary’s factive attitude only tracks the pretend truth of a fictional proposition. We can consequently paraphrase her attitudinal state as follows:

(6) Mary was surprised that according to the Othello pretense, Iago is a traitor.

But as we’ve noted, (6) cannot offer a generally unproblematic paraphrase of (3a), since there are a wide range of contexts in which (3a) is assertible but (6) is not – namely, those in which Mary does not realize that she is engaged in pretense, or mistakenly believes that the story of Othello documents historical events. In such contexts, it is a mistake to hold that Mary’s presupposition makes any reference to a pretense or work of fiction. As we’ve noted, if there is an extended sense in which, even in such contexts, Mary’s discovery or surprise is about the fiction despite her ignorance, it is only indirectly about the fiction. Likewise if there is a sense in which Mary is, even in such contexts, unwittingly engaged in pretense, it is a rather extended sense of engaging in pretense.

Pretense theory thus fares no better than the Lewisian strategy for resolving the puzzle. Invoking a context of pretense, while promising for assertions of standalone fictional sentences, only seems to muddy things further for factive attitude ascriptions in which such sentences embed. In particular, it becomes difficult to say what relation Mary’s factive attitude bears to the practices of pretense, storytelling, or make-believe that constitute the context of pretense. Intuitively, what we attribute to Mary – and what we in turn take on board as a presupposition associated with the factive – is not directly about any of these things.

5. Conclusion: Towards an alternative to the received view

We’ve introduced in this paper the puzzle that factive attitude ascriptions about fiction present for the received view of factives, according to which such ascriptions either entail or
presuppose their complements. Neither the addition of an implicit intensional operator (along Lewis’s truth-in-fiction operator) nor a pretense-theoretic analysis of fictional discourse delivers the right verdicts concerning the truth and assertability conditions of such sentences. An adequate account of factives must therefore accept, rather than attempt to explain away, the failure of factive attitude ascriptions to entail or presuppose their complements.

It bears noting briefly what such an account might look like, or at least how it should differ from the received view. As we’ve emphasized, neither of the approaches we’ve considered can manage the intuition that the attitude we ascribe to Mary is, in a sense we’ve tried to make intuitive, directly about Iago and his betrayal, and (at most) only indirectly about the fiction or the norms of pretense surrounding it. The received view of factives fails to accommodate this difference since it maintains a coarse-grained view of the contribution that a complement makes to the factive attitude ascription in which it embeds. The complement (fictional or otherwise) simply contributes its truth conditions (if any) to the computation of the semantic value of the ascription as a whole. It is no surprise then that the two strategies for retaining the received view – the Lewisian approach and pretense-theory – also fail to capture this difference. Recent work in semantics and pragmatics has however increasingly recognized the need to individuate semantic content by subject matter and not just truth conditions. Our discussion can be viewed as a continuation of this growing trend in contemporary semantics and pragmatics, with factive attitude verbs serving as a case study in its development. Factive attitude reports directed toward fiction do not entail the truth of their complements, though they may comment on the subject matter of the discourse by being partially or indirectly about works of fiction, much in the way in which a realization that Putin is not trustworthy may be partially or indirectly about current political developments without entailing as much.

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7 In the context of factives, for instance, Beaver 2010 and Simons et al. 2017 argue for the need to recognize the variability of projection and its sensitivity to contextual information and the question under discussion (roughly, the subject matter) of the discourse. Given limitations of space, we leave to future work a discussion of these views in relation to the puzzle we’ve presented here.
References


