Fictional Names and Cybernames[1]

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Abstract

Given the controversial, complex and digital nature of the names used on the Internet, we will provide a classification of names as occurring in cyberspace through the help of the theories available for genuine proper names and for fictional names. Furthermore, we will provide an innovative account of their function and of the proceedings of human reasoning involved in understanding the meaning of the names under discussion.

We choose to draw a parallel between fictional names and names in cyberspace because we consider the first category helpful for our research on what the second ones are concerned with. Thus, we focus on two types of names, and we address corresponding theoretical issues. We will explain the nature of names in works of fiction and in cyberspace in the framework of possible world semantics. First, we will explore philosophical ideas borrowed from Gregory Currie (cf. Currie, 1990), Saul Kripke (cf. Kripke, 1980). Second, we will use methods of formalization specific to formal semantics. Moreover, we will use concepts like *transworld identity* (cf. Kaplan, 1978), the similarity principle (Lewis, 1979 [1973]), and rigid versus non-rigid designators (cf. Kripke, 1980) in order to make sense of cybernames.

Our corpus is drawn from English literature (for example, *Mrs. Dalloway*, by Virginia Woolf) and virtual communities (www.facebook.com). The first contains clear cases of fictional names and the latter displays what has recently been coined as cybernames.

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0. Introduction

The semantics of fictional names represents an interesting aspect in the field of possible world semantics. Our paper will focus mainly on Gregory Currie's account in order to explain how fictional names function (Currie, 1990). At the same time, we will tackle the problem of names and nicknames in cyberspace, which have recently been coined as *cybernames* and which we consider to have a controversial nature.

As a starting point for our paper, we mention Currie's emphasis on the fact that there may be fictional stories which contain **real life characters**: authors refer to real persons when they write the fictional story. For example: Napoleon is a character in *War and Peace*, but not a fictional one. Hence:

▪ The name used is not a fictional name because there is a person in the actual world (w@) whom this name refers to.

▪ The name used in the story finds its reference outside the fictional story even though not everything stated in the story is true with regards to the real life character. In this case, we do not deal with a fictional name, but with a **genuine proper name** – a label, with no inherent meaning, but still meaningful because its meaning lies in its denotation. Thus, its meaning is exhausted by its reference; it is non-descriptive.

At the same time, Gregory Currie argues that not all the names which are used in fiction and which were introduced because the authors considered real persons are genuine proper names. For example: Lewis Carroll used in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* the name

"Alice", having in mind Alice Liddell. Nevertheless, this name is considered a fictional one because "Alice" doesn't refer to Alice Liddell.

We may wonder why Napoleon is a genuine proper name while Alice is a fictional name. Currie explains this different treatment of names in fiction by saying that the truth value of a story lies "in what it is reasonable to infer the fictional author believed" (1990: 129). Of course, the fictional author is "a fictional construct, not the real live author of the work" (Currie, 1990: 75), different from the author himself.

Insofar as Napoleon is concerned, everyone knew about this person at the time *War and Peace* was written. Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that the fictional author of the book intended the name to refer to Napoleon and he believed he did. By contrast, Alice Liddell was not known at the time of writing and it is not reasonable to think that the fictional author referred to her; Currie states that without identifying *the fictional author* with Lewis Carroll (the author himself) we would not make this inference (1990: 129).

1. Fictional Names

Most fictional stories are written without referring to real life individuals and we consider the names used in these fictional stories to be clear cases of fictional names. For example: Clarissa, Watson, Peter Pan, etc.

Gregory Currie identifies three uses of fictional names (1990: 127-181):
- "**fictive" uses** (fictional names used by authors of fiction in their works);
- "**metafictive" uses** (used by the readers of a fictional story);
- "**transfictive" uses** (comparisons between fictional stories).

1.1. "Fictive" Use of Fictional Names

Fictional names could be considered expressions of which it is true in the story that they are proper names (Currie, 1990: 128): **empty proper names** (Currie, 1990: 129). But being proper names implies that they have reference, that they are directly referring devices; otherwise, they would be meaningless. It results that *Clarissa is buying flowers* is meaningless since the expression *Clarissa* does not contribute to its meaning. However, on the contrary, this sentence is meaningful. Currie solves this problematic aspect by introducing the following distinctions (1990: 132-133):

- **existing things** versus **nonexistent things**

Existing things	Nonexistent things
dogs, children, Prince Charles, Noam Chomsky, etc.	unicorns, Clarissa, Watson, Peter Pan, the planet Vulcan, Little Red Riding Hood, etc.

This distinction would imply that Clarissa is Richard's wife, a hostess of parties and nonexistent. Currie continues on this line and states that Clarissa might also *think* that she exists and in exactly the same way we could be like Clarissa: we *think* that we exist but we cannot be sure that we do. This will lead us to a sceptical attitude. Hence, this distinction is not helpful and he introduces another one:
- **what exists** versus **what is actual**: "What is actual is what exists in the actual world (@), and that world is just one of many. Things that exist in worlds other than @ are nonactual existents" (Currie, 1990: 133).

According to this distinction, Clarissa is an **actual nonexistent** / a **nonactual existent**. She does not exist in w@. She is empty in w@, but she exists in another world where we can identify her by a particular description: the person who does and is all the things Clarissa is

said to do and be in the story. Thus, the intension (sense) of a fictional name like Clarissa (a nonactual existent) is an *individual concept* (Kaplan, 1979 [1978]: 91): "a function which assigns to each possible world an element of its universe, without the consequence that the function always assigns something which exists in the possible world" (Idem, 1979 [1978]: 92).

The worlds in which someone does everything that Clarissa is said to do (and is Clarissa) are called **qualitative worlds** (Currie, 1990: 148). Of course, this means that there is a Clarissa in W1, in W2, in W3….Wn, as long as they satisfy the required description:

$$\in x \; \{W1, \; W2, \; W3 \; ... \; Wn\} \text{ if the } Wis \text{ satisfy P}$$

The description is used to fix a reference and not to provide meaning: Clarissa's intension (sense) is determined by its extension (reference) in each possible world.

The idea that Clarissa, Peter Pan, etc. exist in many worlds makes us take into account the notion of "transworld identity" (Kripke, 1980: 51) which "concerns the issue of individuals at one world being identical with themselves at every other world" (Oltean, 2009: 265). We will present two theoretical orientations.

On the one hand, David Lewis has a view which does not accept "transworld identity". He considers that "similarities across possible worlds determine a counterpart relation which need be neither symmetric nor transitive. The counterpart of something in another possible world is *never* identical with the thing itself" (Kripke, 1980: 45). Thus, things from different worlds are never identical and Lewis promotes the **principle of similarity**, according to which a person in one world does not find himself in another world but rather his "counterpart". Thus, individuals are *world-bound* (Lewis, 2004, [1986], apud Currie, 1990: 136).

On the other hand, Kripke promotes **the principle of identity**, stating that one and the same thing can exist in several worlds (Oltean, 2006: 98).

The two views have in common the supposition that the possible worlds are other dimensions of a more inclusive universe, "that they can be given only by purely qualitative descriptions, and that therefore either the identity relation or the counterpart relation must be established in terms of qualitative resemblance" (Kripke, 1980: 45).

Insofar as the problem of identity or non-identity across possible worlds is concerned, we mention Kripke's distinction between **rigid** designators (they designate the same individual in all possible worlds) and **non-rigid designators** (they designate different individuals in different possible worlds) (Kripke, 1980):

Rigid designators	Non-rigid designators
Proper names: - They are not ambiguous because they have a referent attributed by the initial Christian rite of baptism through which the referential relationship between words and various classes of objects is created. This relation is then established in the linguistic community (Moeschler and Reboul, 1999: 153). - They are *singular terms*. Their meaning is given by their reference. - Semantically unstructured, directly referring devices (Oltean, 2006: 99).	**Definite descriptions**: they refer to different object from different worlds. **Fictional names:** - Actual nonexistent objects/nonactual existent objects. - Pick out a particular individual about whom we are saying something. Still, they pick out different entities in different worlds on the basis of a description about Clarissa (for example) with a particular individual in the story. **Names in cyberspace** (in virtual communities like Facebook/MySpace etc.).

Because we can understand the sentences in which fictional names appear without assigning a reference to them, Currie argues that sentences like:

Susan Rawlings *has four children*,

Peter Pan *flies*,

Clarissa *sets out to buy flowers* are similar to:

Someone *has four children*, *flies*, *etc.* (without asking who that someone is). Accordingly, fictional names can be interpreted like variables bound by the existential quantifier (Currie, 1990: 150-155). Hence, we have a story which can be represented by the following formula:

$F(t1…tn)$ – the tis being the fictional names. This formula is reformulated by replacing the fictional names with a variable bound by an existential quantifier:

$\exists x1…\exists xn \ [F(x1…xn)]$ (there is an n-tuple of things that satisfies the properties and relations

specified in the story. Clarissa denotes, in each world, the person, if there is one, who is the first member of the n-tuple of things). This represents the **content** of the story.

For the "fictive" use of fictional names, we should also take into account that there is a fictional author/teller who "has knowledge of certain people and their actions. He has in mind a certain n-tuple of individuals, and these are the characters described in his text – whether or not there is another n-tuple somewhere else doing the same things […]" (Currie, 1990: 153):

$\exists x1…\exists xn+1 \ [F(x1…xn+1)]$ ($xn+1$ is responsible for the text T and T sets out $xn+1$'s

knowledge of the activities of $x1…xn$) (Currie, 1990: 154).

Last but not least, in the case of "fictive" use, readers are involved in a cooperative game of make-believe.

1.2. Metafictive Use of Fictional Names

Fictional names are not used only by writers of fiction. They are used by readers as well. When we make statements about fiction, they are always prefixed by an intentional operator "It is part of the story that ___":

Fs(P) = "It is part of the fiction S that P"

"It is true in the story that P"

"In the story, P"

Currie argues that fictional names function as **abbreviated definite descriptions** when they are bound by the operator F. These descriptions depend from reader to reader. For example, for Clarissa, there are many descriptions that they associate the name with: "the person who is married to Richard"; "the woman who hosts parties" etc.

Kripke argues against the idea that fictional names are abbreviated descriptions (Kripke, 1980: 157-158). He claims that if fictional names function in this way, they might turn out to have reference. For example: we read a text about Clarissa and then we encounter someone who is a perfect match to the character described in the text. Currie gives the following solution (Currie, 1990: 163):

- if the author knew nothing about **Clarissa** in w@, then the text is not about **C** in w@ and the text he produces does not describe **C** in w@. Currie calls this text **T1**.
- if there is someone else who writes about Clarissa on purpose, then this text (**T2**) would be totally different from **T1** because they are products of different communicative acts. Hence, Kripke's argument represents only a case of **aboutness/accidental reference**, Currie concludes: "a story can be true of someone without being about that someone" (Currie, 1990: 164).

1.3. Transfictive Uses of Fictional Names

Romeo and Juliet have a more tragic destiny than Tristan and Isolde.
I think Hamlet is like the character Hawkeye in the television series MASH.

These kinds of sentences do not occur within the scope of the operator F. They present cases of interfictional comparisons and the stories in which they appear have to be treated separately. Moreover, Romeo/Juliet/Tristan/Isolde/Hamlet is the one who satisfies a particular description in a given world: there is a (partial) function from worlds to individuals that picks out Romeo/Juliet in each world where somebody is Romeo/Juliet etc. (Currie, 1990: 172). This function is called the Romeo role/the Juliet role, etc. It results that being x in a world means occupying a role in that world. Roles are also known as characters and they are:

- "theoretical entities, in that sense of the term which contrasts with concrete things" (Currie, 1990: 173);
- partial functions from world to individuals with no value in w@.

2. Cybernames

We consider cyberspace to be an alternative world/a possible world in which people construct new selves: users build new representations of themselves. These online representations are counterparts to the individuals in front of the computers. We label them using a term borrowed from David Crystal: *Netizens* (2010). Hence, we could make the difference between Users (offline individuals) and Netizens (online individuals):

Users	Netizens
▪ individuals who use the Internet	▪ individuals in cyberspace/inhabitants of cyberspace
▪ those who are in front of their computers	▪ representations of the offline individuals
▪ the individuals in flesh and bones	▪ what users decide to show online (online personas created by users)
▪ those who are in the actual world	▪ internal to cyberspace
▪ external to cyberspace, offline individuals	

Given the special status of the cyberspace world, we could adopt the similarity principle promoted by Lewis, his *Counterpart Theory*. This would entail that "individuals are confined to one world" – The Theory of Worldbound Individuals (TWI) (Plantinga, 1979 [1978]: 148) which might be too disturbing a view because this would mean that, in cyberspace, a user who belongs to several virtual communities does not present the same Netizen, but different Netizens. Not to mention the discrepancy between the online persona and the real life persona. Still, this might be the case.

Insofar as the rigid/non-rigid designators pair is concerned, in cyberspace we observe a dynamics of names and nicknames:

- In online social networks like Facebook, cybernames could be labelled as **rigid designators** if we consider that they always have a virtual referent attributed when users create their accounts. The creation of the account is equivalent to the initial rite of baptism mentioned. The relation between words and classes of objects is established and

then accepted by the linguistic community on Facebook (causal theory of reference, Kripke). However, we can ask ourselves:

> What is the result of giving a name?
> Is it an identity relation; that is to say, is the real person identical with the online person?

- Sometimes we cannot fix a referent in real life unless we know the user and the fact that he has created a particular Internet account. This is because the virtual persona is not the same as the real life persona. Moreover, users can belong to various virtual communities. Their representations would not be the same in each virtual community and definitely not consistent with the user's offline persona. Hence, we could say that we are dealing with **non-rigid designators**.
- At other times the virtual persona built by the Net surfer has no referent in the real world. For example, we can create a Facebook profile/participate in the public chat on conquiztador.com with a fake identity and pick a name randomly.

In order to solve this problem, we could use the distinction between *Netizens* (inhabitants of cyberspace) and *Users* (individuals in front of the computers). Hence, there are two options: either we search for the referent outside the virtual world or we search for it in the virtual world. In both cases, the cybername functions as a non-rigid designator:

- In the first case it functions as a non-rigid designator because the identity principle is undermined as the User is never a perfect match to the Netizen due to the selections and changes performed online;
- In the second case, the cybername is a non-rigid designator because it has no real reference, exactly like fictional names.

Because cyberspace is an alternative to our real world we argue that we have to search for the referent only in the virtual world. Thus, the names used in virtual communities can be labelled, mutatis mutandis, like fictional names: **nonactual existents**/**actual nonexistents** (Currie, 1990: 133) because they always have only *cyber referents* (the Netizens, not the Internet users).

Last but not least, we could explain the online naming process using Kripke's causal chain theory: "[…] we could imagine a genuine *causal chain of links* from name user to name user that extends from *N*'s baptismal ceremony down to us today, our use of the name being grounded on the original act of naming" (cf. Kripke, 1982 [1972], apud Oltean, 2009: 267).

3. Conclusion

There are three ways in which fictional names are used:
- "fictive" uses (fictional names are either **bound variables** or **transworld entities**);
- "metafictive" uses (fictional names are **abbreviated definite descriptions** within the scope of the operator F);
- "transfictive" uses (**roles**).

The nature of cybernames is close to the nature of fictional names with a fictive use because their function is similar. Moreover, the proceedings of human reasoning involved in understanding the meaning of cybernames are similar to those involved in understanding the meaning of fictional names.

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138

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