

Making up stuff by Emar Maier

A novel, by definition, tells a fictional story—but does that make its author a liar? On the space between stories and lies.

H.P. Grice assumption that communication is fundamentally a cooperative endeavour. (presenting as much of the relevant information as possible example)

Grice distinguishes various other *parameters of cooperativity*, each associated with a number of so-called maxims.

we'll zoom in on the *maxims of quality*: 'do not say what you believe to be false' and 'do not say that for which you have insufficient evidence'

While it might seem intuitively clear that cooperative speakers should adhere to these maxims, it is equally clear that, as a matter of fact, we violate them on a regular basis.

We exaggerate ('I'd sooner be found dead in a ditch than ask for another Brexit delay')

We tell lies ('I did not have sexual relations with that woman')

We bullshit— a technical term referring to statements made by someone who doesn't care about their truth or falsity

We tell jokes ('I was so proud to finish the puzzle in six months. On the box it said three to four years')

We write novels ('It was a bright, cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen...')

We use metaphors ('All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players')

We use sarcasm and irony ('Cold, windy *and* raining? I love Dutch weather!')

In all of these cases there is a clear sense in which we are not really presenting the truth, as we know it, based on the best available evidence.

But there are vast differences between these phenomena. While some constitute morally objectionable behaviour, others are associated with art and poetry.

The first distinction is between violating a norm and flouting it. Saying in a deadpan tone: ‘Sure, dad, your knock-knock jokes are always hilarious,’ I’m technically violating the maxim of quality, but I’m not lying. I used sarcasm intentionally to convey the opposite of what my words literally mean.

Liars violate the same maxim, but they don’t flout it. Lying has an altogether **different effect on the interpreter than irony, sarcasm or metaphor.**

A successful lie is just an ordinary assertion. (When the former US president Bill Clinton said that he ‘did not have sexual relations’ with his intern Monica Lewinsky, he was trying to deceive us into believing just that – no hidden, nonliteral layer of interpretation was intended)

Fiction is more complicated. (a short story, a novel, a movie, a joke, or children’s game of pretend), consists of speech acts that look **like ordinary assertions.**

As with lies and irony, there is **no dedicated grammar or style** for constructing fictional statements that would reliably **distinguish them from regular assertions.**

In a seemingly realistic story you might not be able to tell if it’s a work of fiction or not.

Plato wanted to ban poets from his ideal society, David Hume called them ‘liars by profession’

Unlike the liar, the fiction author doesn’t hide her untruthful intentions

A proper appreciation of the work presupposes that we know that Harry Potter is a fictional character, made up by J K Rowling. However, unlike in the case of irony, **the fiction author’s words have their regular meaning.**

There are two hypotheses:

1. **Both fiction and lying** are quality-violating assertions – ie, speech acts presenting something **believed to be false**
2. We can analyse **fictional discourse** as constituting **a different type of speech act**, where the usual norms and maxims don’t apply.

1. Plato, who wanted to ban poets from his ideal society, David Hume who called them ‘liars by profession’, and Albert Camus who wrote that ‘fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth’

Lies are simply assertions of something that the speaker believes to be false

Both fiction and lies are forms of assertion, it becomes really hard to distinguish them.

1st difference: while **most lies are simply false**, many philosophers have argued that **the statements making up a work of fiction**, even those involving clearly nonexistent entities, **are not really false, but at least ‘in some sense’ true** – viz., a true **relative to the fictional world in question**. When an English literature exam asks: ‘Gollum bites off Frodo’s ring finger; true or false?’ the only right answer is ‘True’. While neither fiction nor lies are meant to express known facts about the real world, in many contexts we’re inclined to count some fictional statements as, in some sense, true. **Lies, by contrast, never generate fictional worlds or fictional truths at all – they’re just plain false, or at best accidentally true.**

2nd difference: the paradox of (the emotional response to) fiction, spelled out in some detail by the philosopher Colin Radford in the [paper](#) ‘How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?’ (1975), co-authored with Michael Weston. Radford starts from the observation that we can be moved by stories, written or told, fact or fiction.

Example: when I meet you at a bar and proceed to tell you in great detail about how my old, beloved dog Buddy died in my arms last night after a brutal battle with a degenerative disease, and how my other dog, Spot, is now at home howling with loss and misery, refusing to eat, staring out the window waiting for his good friend Buddy to return – you might be moved to tears. But imagine I then reveal that I’m actually a cat person, never had a dog, never will – and in fact I just made up the whole thing for a laugh. At that point, your sadness will quickly evaporate and make way for other emotions such as anger. Yet, as Radford puts it, we weep for Anna Karenina, knowing quite well that Leo Tolstoy’s 1878 novel is a fiction and Anna Karenina, like Buddy, never existed. For some reason, works of fiction induce what the English poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1817 called a **‘willing suspension of disbelief’**, **allowing us to be emotionally engaged with commonly known falsehoods**. **Lies evidently lack this property:** once a lie is exposed, suspension of disbelief and emotional engagement in accordance with the story’s content become impossible.

Assertions can violate the maxim of quality in two ways: overt violation (flouting) gives rise to a **nonliteral interpretation** that doesn't violate the maxim (irony and metaphor) covert violation – **which deceives the interpreter** into thinking she's dealing with a norm-abiding, truthful assertion – does not affect interpretation, until it is exposed, in which case the original interpretation is cancelled altogether.

Fiction doesn't fit in either category, and hence we might want to give up the starting assumption that fictional statements are the kinds of speech acts that are subject to the maxim of quality in the first place.

Fictional statements, despite their outward similarity in terms of grammar, **are not straightforward instances of assertion at all.** Semantic approach (David Lewis in 'Truth in Fiction') the statements making up fictional discourse are, logically speaking, abbreviations of more complex constructions. *'Harry Potter fails History of Magic' abbreviates the unproblematically true assertion 'In the Harry Potter books, Harry Potter fails his History of Magic test*

Pragmatic approaches, the difference between fictional statements and regular assertions lies not in some hidden logical operators in the fictional assertion, but in the fact that telling fictional stories is an altogether different speech act from the act of assertion that makes up our talk about the weather, or our newspaper reporting. Contemporary philosophers such as Kendall Walton, Gregory Currie and Kathleen Stock further **characterise the speech act of fiction-making as one that prescribes imagining rather than knowledge or belief.**

Novels can't lie, because the novelist is not bound by actual or believed truth norms at all

Fictional characters – like real people – are frequently quoted spouting all kinds of confused nonsense, falsehoods and lies about their fictional world. When Narcissa Malfoy examines Harry Potter's slain body and tells Voldemort that he's dead, she's lying. But what we're interested in is whether it's

possible that the text itself – including lines such as: ““He is dead!” Narcissa Malfoy called to the watchers’ – could ever be considered as false descriptions of the fictional world.

We might reason that, since it is the text itself that generates the fictional world, the statements that make up that text should automatically become true in that world. **When George Orwell wrote that ‘the clocks were striking thirteen’, it thereby became true in the fictional world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) that the clocks were striking thirteen.** Unlike for the historian or the journalist, there is no relevant world outside the text, relative to which we could fact-check whether Orwell miscounted. This line of argument can be summed up in the principle of authorial authority: the statements that make up a work of fiction are true in that fiction.

There are no doubt many things that are true in a given fiction beyond what is explicitly written. None of the Sherlock Holmes stories explicitly says that the detective has 46 chromosomes, or that Amsterdam is the capital of the Netherlands, yet we take these propositions to be true in the fictional world of *Sherlock Holmes*. *But*, even in the intended direction, ***the principle of authorial authority* is problematic.** Two counterexamples follow.

1. *Unreliable narrators* – ie, cases where the unquoted parts of the text are understood as told by a lying or confused narrator. (ie, stories presented as told by a fictional ‘I’ from inside the story world.)

Not everything the text says is automatically true in the fictional world it creates

Convincing examples from third-person narratives, told from an impersonal, omniscient perspective (such stories have no narrator: ‘**no one speaks here**; the events seem to narrate themselves’ as Émile Benveniste put it in. One good example is the opening line of Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813): ‘It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.’ It is clearly tongue-in-cheek, despite the seemingly omniscient narrator fading into the background for the remainder of the story.

2. Imaginative resistance.

Example: Sara never liked animals. One day, her father caught her kicking the neighbour's dog. He got really angry, and she was grounded for a week. To get back at her father, she poured bleach in the big fish tank, killing all the beautiful fish that he loved so much. Good thing that she did, because he was really annoying.

Readers will have no trouble accepting that, in the fictional world of this story, a girl named Sara kicked a dog, got grounded, and then killed her father's fish with bleach. But with the last sentence we resist: even though the text says it was a good thing that she killed the fish, readers (both philosophers and naive subjects of psychological experiments) typically reject that it really was a good thing in the world of this story.

Emar Maier conclusion

If we want to use language to effectively exchange information about the world around us, it has to be guided by norms such as 'Say only what you believe to be true.' But – also – rules are meant to be broken. We've seen how liars and ironical speakers exploit the norms of cooperative discourse, but in very different ways. Fiction turned out to be harder to pin down: on the one hand, the fiction author, like the liar, tells known falsehoods; but on the other hand, she thereby creates fictional truths. I conclude that **fiction isn't lying**, even when the preface falsely claims what follows to be a truthful memoir, or when some of the fictional characters or even the narrator turn out to be highly unreliable