The semantics of first person narration in literary fiction: Splitting the deictic center

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An issue often overlooked in semantic considerations of literary fiction is the reference of deictic and indexical expressions. Deixis is a property of language that allows expressions to "point at" relevant features of the context (Levinson, 2004). Within this category, there is a class of expressions called indexicals (Kaplan, 1979), which fix their reference directly to the deictic center.

I focus on first person narration. The problem it poses for fictional discourse is that the Kaplanian approach does not allow to differentiate between an author and a narrator in fictional discourse. The difference between an autobiography and a work of fiction is that one is true, while the other one is false or pretend-true (Walton, 1990; Currie, 1990). On the other hand, the solution that is proposed by proponents of "indexical shift" is to allow indexicals to fix the deictic center inside the fictional narrative (Predelli, 2008; Vecsey, 2015). This solution would erase the author along with the actual circumstances in which the piece of fiction originated from the analysis of the discourse.

The solution I propose is deictic center split, which occurs when the desired reference of an indexical does not appear to match its appropriate relation to the deictic center. I opt for allowing each coordinate in the deictic center to encompass multiple roles that can be filled by multiple referents for a specific utterance. For example, the "agent" coordinate inside the deictic center may manifest in an utterance as either an author or a narrator of a given speech act. When someone utters a statement in first person that is meant to be interpreted as narrated by a different entity, the agent coordinate of the deictic center may split to accommodate both of these entities.

This analysis ensures that both the author and narrator are included in the deictic features of a piece of fiction, proposes a mechanism for deixis in fiction, and provides a new framework for explicating some of the consequences of the use of deixis inside literary fiction.

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