Coping with Imaginative Resistance: A supersemantic investigation

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Semantics traditionally focuses on linguistic communication. In recent years, the supersemantics movement has tried to broaden the scope of inquiry in various directions. In this paper we explore an extension in the direction of artistic expression, starting with analyzing readers' imaginative engagement with written fiction, and then extending our insights to film.

The puzzle of imaginative resistance. Consider the following mini-fiction:

(1) **Fish Tank.** Sara never liked animals. One day, her father caught her kicking the neighbor'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 the beautiful fish that he loved so much. Good thing that she did, because he was really annoying.

When we get to the final sentence our engagement with the fiction seems to break down. Although we grant the author the authority to decide that – in the fictional world – there's a girl who kills fish, it's apparently not up to the author to decide that this is a good thing to do (in that fictional world). Philosophers of art have sought to explain why our imaginative engagement and/or the author's authority breaks down here (Gendler&Liao 2016). In this paper we acknowledge that there is something jarring in discourses like (1), but, contra previous research, we propose that this jarring effect needn't be a reason to give up our imaginative engagement or the author's authority.

Four coping strategies. We hypothesize that readers may use the following four strategies to cope with imaginative resistance:

FV Face Value: The fictional world is exactly as described, however unusual or inconsistent.

PO Pop-out: The author breaks the fourth wall and communicates directly with the reader.

CR Character Report: The offending statement can be interpreted as a (free indirect) report of a character's (mistaken/immoral) thoughts or utterances about the fictional world.

NA Narrator Accommodation: The offending statement reflects the mistaken or misleading opinion of an unreliable fictional narrator.

The FV interpretation strategy exemplifies the most straightforward adherence to authorial authority – in the fictional world of (1) it is indeed good to kill someone's pets if he's annoying. FV is assumed by Priest (1997), who presents a story where, he claims, readers are willing to accept that in the fictional world there is a box that is full and empty at the same time. PO is the other extreme: we give up the story-telling pretense (and the accompanying authorial authority), inferring that the author is telling us his actual opinions about the real world (Gendler 2000). For CR consider Yablo's (2002) story:

(2) **Treasure Hunt.** One more item to find, and yet the game seemed lost. Hang on, Sally said. It's staring us in the face. This is a *maple* tree we're under. She grabbed a jagged five-fingered leaf. Here was the oval they needed! They ran off to claim their prize.

According to Yablo and subsequent commentators, the statement that the five-fingered maple leaf was an oval causes imaginative resistance. A closer, linguistic look at the offending sentence reveals that it exhibits all the characteristics of a free indirect discourse report, so the story doesn't really say or entail that the maple leaf is an oval, but merely that Sally *thinks* it's an oval.

NA, finally, is similar to CR: instead of taking the offending statement as reflecting a crazy property of the fictional world, we interpret it as merely reflecting the deviant opinion of someone in that world – in this case, the fictional narrator. As is well-known in narratology, first person (or homodiegetic) stories can have unreliable narrators, i.e. the first person character presents their own, mistaken or misleading views on the fictional world they inhabit. Following Altshuler&Maier (to appear) we propose that readers can make sense of stories like (1), which seem to be told through an impersonal third person narrator, by first accommodating a narrator. In DRT, that would amount to accommodating a discourse referent representing a speaking, first person agent alongside the referents for the known story protagonists, within the embedded DRS that represents the content of the fiction. Once we've accommodated a narrator, and thus shifted from third to first person narration, we can treat that narrator as unreliable (e.g. by using Eckardt's (2012) 'Cautious Update' mechanism). In the talk, we will extend this DRT analysis of NA to both PO and CR.

Experiment. To detect which strategies readers use when presented with imaginative resistance

stories, we conducted an experiment in which we presented 12 supposedly jarring stories (mainly based off Kim et al. to appear) to 24 MTurk participants. For each story we asked the questions in (3). We used (3a) (similar to Kim et al) to probe for resistance effects and we used (3b) (extending a similar opinion-tracking design by Kaiser, to appear) to test whether the crucial resistance trigger reflects someone's perspective.

(3)   a.   To what extent do you take it to be true within the fictional world of this story that killing the fish was a good thing to do? [5-point Likert scale]

       b.   Whose opinion is it that killing the fish was a good thing to do? [check boxes, multiple answers possible: The author's / The fictional narrator's / Sara's / None of the above]

A high resistance score (= 1−(mean score on (3a))/5) indicates FV. For (3b), a high percentage of *author* answers indicates PO; *narrator* answers indicate NA; and *character* answers (like 'Sara's' in (3b)) indicate CR.

There is a lot of variance between the different types of imaginative resistance discourses. For example, FV is found less with morality-driven resistance like (1), than with logical impossibility stories, like (a condensed version of) Priest's full/empty box. Physical impossibility or extreme implausibility, as in a story called 'Interstate' where one day the I-95 was "painted solid yellow and superimposed with intricate black flower patterns for its entire 2000-mile length," triggers even less resistance.

The extent to which PO, CR and NA are available varies by individual story – suggesting that there may be subtle linguistic or genre cues that facilitate these interpretations. The graph shows our data for three stories. Further analysis and follow-up studies will have to reveal precisely what linguistic characteristics trigger what interpretation strategies, but we can already see that naive MTurk readers are quite willing and able to go beyond FV and (re)interpret the supposedly jarring passage as reflecting a specific point of view.
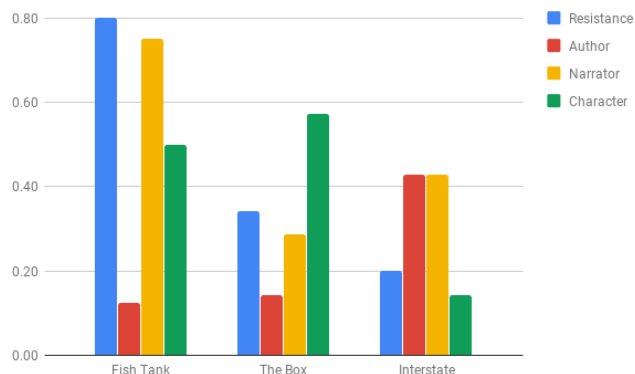
Beyond language. Let's consider if and how our hypothesized interpretation strategies would apply to visual storytelling. Consider so-called unreliable narration in movies like *Fight Club*, which show a sequence of events that are later revealed to be false representations 'from the point of view' of one of the protagonists. The interpretive processing of such a 'reveal' shows some similarities to our CR or NA: we treat a part of the story not as fictionally true but as reporting the misguided opinion of a character. However, there are crucial differences between text and film: the visual perspective almost always remains third person, i.e. we tend to see the 'unreliable narrator' herself in the shots, as opposed to seeing through their eyes – in Maier&Bimpikou's (to appear) terminology, we're dealing with 'blended' perspective. This contrasts, first, with textual CR: in free indirect discourse, indexicals (other than pronouns and tenses) are shifted, indicating a genuine perspective shift. Second, for textual NA, we've postulated a shift from third to first-person narration, so *I* picks out that fictional narrating protagonist.

A genuine visual analogue of textual NA and CR would thus involve some kind of Point of View shooting, i.e. filming from a camera position mimicking the relevant protagonist's (mind's) eyes. While some films use extended first person PoV shooting (*Enter the Void*, *Lady in the Lake*), they don't involve 'jarring' scenes that would trigger coping strategies like NA or CR involving unreliable agents. This need not worry us as textual imaginative resistance is, arguably, a philosophical invention, not attested in genuine literary text either (Todd 2009). Since the stories constructed by philosophers have nevertheless been instrumental in better understanding imagination, fiction, and the semantics of (im)moral terms, we end the talk by speculating what it would mean to shoot a film that triggers imaginative resistance (that can be resolved via NA and/or CR).

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