

# Searle's Approach to Fiction (Extending the Concept to Other Media)

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**Abstract:** The essay summarizes crucial propositions of John Searle's approach to fiction and extends the analysis to other genres, specifically to drama, photograph and film. For Searle, novelists pretend to make assertions, because they need to make use the effect inherent in this sort of speech acts – to represent a state of affairs. We believe that all fictions arise as imitations of authentic representation: a fictional photograph imitates a documentary photograph that is the image captured with the help of photographic film or digital media. A fictional film imitates real people and real events recorded on a camera. Fictional film characters only exist, because the film-makers pretend that they have documented them. Fictions are a part of the social universe: we treat fiction according to the rules and habits we have acquired as members of the society. Fictions are also capable of imitating the effect of authentic representations: novels and films achieve to provoke real emotions.

**Keywords:** speech act theory, John Searle, fiction, pretense theory, representation.

In this essay, I am going to reflect on John Searle's paper *The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse*, which was first published in the journal *New Literary History* in 1975 and later included in the book *Expression and Meaning* (1979). Searle's paper dealt with illocutionary characteristics of literary fiction. Today I will attempt to outline Searle's conclusions and to demonstrate that their relevance goes beyond the borders of literature and its system. I will also try to elaborate on some of Searle's partial conclusions.

John Searle views the use of language as performing speech acts whose successfulness is conditioned by complying with constitutive rules. For example, if we want to make a successful assertion, the sen-

tences we pronounce must be true, verifiable and sincere. In *The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse*, Searle compares a newspaper report taken from the New York Times with an excerpt from Iris Murdoch's novel. At first sight the style of the newspaper article seems to be completely the same as that of the novel's narration. However, while the newspaper report can be seen as a successful assertion since it observes its constitutive rules, the novel passage does not respect these same rules (the speaker does not guarantee the veracity of the fictional utterance; she does not represent the actual state of affairs, etc.). By comparing these two texts, Searle finds out that authors of fiction only *pretend*: "By pretending to refer to people and to recount events about them, the author creates fictional characters and events" (Searle 1979, 73). Searle's observation is penetrating: what lies at the core of a fictional utterance is not the aim to deceive the recipient by a false assertion, but to make use of the effect inherent in statements – to represent a state of affairs. Although literature *cannot imitate reality* directly, it *can perfectly imitate an utterance about reality*. Therefore, fictional utterance employs the form of assertion even though it actually fails as an assertion. In this way, authors of fictions achieve a special effect: their readers are aware of the fictitiousness of this speech act, but – in accordance with the rules of this type of language game – they read the fictional account *as if* it was an assertion. During the act of reading, readers imagine in their minds, at least temporarily, the circumstances to which the novel refers as if it was the real world, even though they know that the reference world is not the real world.

Since the publishing of *The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse*, Searle's argument has appeared in a similar form in a great number of significant works dealing with questions of literary fiction. Richard Ohmann in (1971) regards the illocutionary force of fictional discourse as mimetic; Barbara Herrnstein-Smith in (1978) concludes that genres of literary fiction imitate genres of factual writing (authors of novels pretend that they are creating autobiographies, memoirs, etc.). Furthermore, the conception of fictional discourse as imitation of an authentic speech act has been reflected in semiotic theories: for example, Felix Martínez-Bonati portrays discourse of literary fiction as an iconic depiction of sentences (or as a "pseudo-sentences"; see Martínez-Bonati 1981, 78-79) which is in contrast with the linguistic denotation of objects in the empirical world. The fictitiousness of literary language is char-

acterized by the fact that it does not refer to reality but only depicts a communication act.

Searle's theory of fiction introduced in *The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse* is, in my opinion, valid for almost all kinds of fiction and not just for narrative or literary fictions. Searle himself considers the case of dramatic fiction, where, according to him, the actors take part in the pretending: "Here (in the case of drama) it is not so much the author who is doing the pretending but the characters in the actual performance" (Searle 1979, 69). I personally think that dramatic fiction is not as different from narrative fiction as it might seem. I think that the difference between narrative and dramatic fiction lies entirely in the manner of authorial pretending. While narrative fiction is based on a sequence of feigned assertions that we assign to the central narrator within fiction, there is no narrator in drama. Instead, the author creates monologues and dialogues of characters, which, however, have absolutely the same status as the narrator's assertions: they imitate authentic speech acts, such as assertions, warnings, promises, requests, orders, verbal expressions of states of mind and emotions, etc. The characters' utterances (and this is where drama differs from a narrative) are complemented by a secondary text, which is not intended for the (readerly) audience, but for the actors. Searle notices that unlike the characters' utterances, these stage directions are seriously meant speech acts. They are instructions that oblige the actors to act in a certain way on the stage. Yet the text of the stage directions does not disturb the readers even if they only *read* the play: through the directions, they are informed about what each character is doing. To come back to the original proposition by Searle, that is that dramatic fiction is not based on the authors' pretending but on the pretending of the actors, I think that this original argumentation merges the creation of dramatic fiction with its performance on the stage. From my perspective, dramatic fiction is produced in the same way as narrative fiction: it is based on a creative authorial imitation of speech acts.

I believe it is beyond all doubt that fictions arise as imitations of authentic representation. According to Searle, it is non-deceptive pretending, and in the case of verbal fictions it is based on the illocutionary stance of the author. The fact that fictitiousness cannot be recognized based on the nature of the depiction itself but that it is dependent on the authorial intention which the recipient must be able to identify applies, in my opinion, to other media as well. For instance, photography is a

means of capturing images with the help of photographic film or digital media. Everybody who has ever taken a holiday photo knows that a photograph can preserve an authentic image of an object. A photo of Sean Connery in a tuxedo and with a small Beretta pistol is an authentic image as well. However, if the caption says that the image does not represent a person called Connery, but a person called James Bond, I can assume that this is fiction because an instance, analogical to the author of literary fiction, has arranged the picture. The fiction is created by the person who pretends that the photograph is an authentic representation of Bond. This happens in the same way in film. Film can record moving pictures and sound in a documentary manner. Incidentally, the first films depicted mundane scenes such as the arrival of a train at the station, as in the film projected by the Lumière brothers in Paris in 1896. In keeping with Searle's proposition, cinematic fiction could also be described as pretending: the creators of the film pretend that through the medium of film, they have recorded real events as they occurred. The fictitiousness of the events on screen therefore stems from the fact that they imitate the version of reality captured by the camera; in other words, film characters and events only exist because the film-makers pretend that they have documented them.

Literary theory is often puzzled by our understanding fictions, i.e. by the fact that we can identify them and read them in an appropriate manner. Gregory Currie and Kendall Walton invented the term *make-believe* to describe the attitude we assume towards fictions (see Currie 1990; or Walton 1990). Make-believe does not stand for believing in the veracity of an assertion but rather for the willingness to employ our imagination in dealing with the content that is communicated to us. In a manner following Searle's, Currie is attempting to determine precise rules enabling the recipient to identify a fictional utterance. In my opinion, analyses of this kind are somewhat complicated and also redundant, while the key significance lies in the fact that we can appreciate the nature of artistic fictions. Literature is a part of the social universe which John Searle describes in his books (see e.g. Searle 1997): we treat fiction in the form of literature and film according to the rules and habits we have acquired as members of the society. Novels and cinematic stories are collectively perceived not as representations intended to capture reality but rather as a special kind of pseudo-representations intended to invoke a certain type of an aesthetic experience (such as amusement, enlightenment or emotion). Literary and cinematic fictions

constitute a common part of social reality: we know in what way we are supposed to read or watch them in the same way as we know that we are supposed to use money to pay for goods or a park bench to rest.

With this remark about experiencing fictions I have arrived to the last point I would like to consider. Towards the end of *The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse*, Searle poses a question of why we should even rack our brains about fictions, that is, representations (be it verbal or other) that we know to be pretended. The philosopher concludes that fictions, despite their "non-seriousness", facilitate the telling of serious messages. Even though there is no doubting the correctness of this conclusion, I would like to consider another, far more mundane explanation. Quite simply, we enjoy reading fictions – they can bring us very real pleasure. While reading a fictional story, I enter a communicative situation that could be described as a communicative exchange with *double illocutionary aspect*. To stay with Searle's example: I am reading a novel in which Doyle pretends to be John Watson, who is recounting a true story. At the same time, however, I temporarily forget that I am dealing with literary fiction by Conan Doyle, and I read the novel as though it presented true memories of Dr. Watson, relating sincerely and truthfully the adventures he experienced with Sherlock Holmes. Stories such as *The Hound of the Baskervilles* provoke the feeling of suspense and horror, and yet this is a pleasant kind of fear. How is that possible? I believe that the answer lies in the specific character of fictional communication. Fiction is capable of imitating the effect of an authentic assertion: we are worried about fictional characters, we feel for their suffering, and occasionally they even make us cry. The fictional narrators' accounts portray the experience of somebody else and have – like speech acts – their own perlocutionary effects. However, the compassion, excitement and horror of fictions are provided in adequate doses: even though we can get carried away at times, eventually we will always realize that we are only dealing with a fictitious representation – that Watson, Holmes and the beast wandering around Baskerville only exist because Doyle has created them by a sequence of pretended assertions. Therefore, Doyle's pretended assertion has perlocutionary effects of its own: we can appreciate it as an accomplished work of art, as an impressively constructed fictional representation.

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