

Names, fictional names and “really”

1 Introduction

Fictional names pose at least two kinds of problem: how, if at all, do they mean anything? And how, if at all, do they affect the truth or other semantic value of sentences in which they occur? Answering the first question is especially difficult if one holds both of the two opinions (1) that all genuine names have bearers and (2) that fictional names do not. One must then conclude that fictional names are a kind of non-name, and one will have to try to explain away their apparent intelligibility. In this paper I shall take for granted one of the views that lead to this difficulty, namely that many fictional names lack bearers. However, I shall take issue with the other component, that a name must have a bearer. A full treatment requires two parts. First, one should undermine the arguments designed to show that all names (or all names of a certain kind) must have bearers. Then one should provide an alternative account. The first of these tasks is undertaken in §2. The second task is a large one and only a small part of it will be attempted here, starting in §3.¹ There I consider whether we can make use of the notion of make-believe to give a positive account of what is involved in understanding a fictional name. In §4 I discuss what difference, if any, “really” makes to the truth conditions of sentences, especially those which involve fiction.

2 Evans’s arguments for the Russellian view of names

The idea that names must have bearers has a long history, going back at least to the middle ages, for example, to Anselm:

Si vero non significat aliquid, non est nomen. (quoted by Henry 1984, p. 3)

The view is helped on by the notion of “signification”: an expression without signification, as an empty name might be called, would be one without significance, that is, without meaning. Nearer our own times, Russell is a famous proponent:

¹The task is taken further in Sainsbury (forthcoming).

what does not name anything is not a name and therefore if intended to be a name is a symbol devoid of meaning. (1919, p. 179)²

Gareth Evans has adopted essentially this view, claiming that at least a large class of ordinary proper names are “Russellian” in that to suppose they have no bearer is to suppose that there are no truth conditions for sentences in which they are used. We can call contrasting views “Fregean”: these allow that there can be genuine names, capable of being understood, which do not have a bearer. (The label “Fregean” does not imply anything more than this; plenty of “Fregean” views would not have been held by Frege.)

A surprising number of the features Evans associates with Russellian singular terms can be accepted by a Fregean. It can be agreed that the use of a name requires discriminating knowledge of its bearer, if it has one; that names are normally used information-invokingly; and that one can properly attribute a meaning to a putative name only if there is, for each sentence in which it occurs, a truth knowledge of which would suffice for understanding. I will first show how these points can be met; and then move to Evans’s two official arguments for the claim that singular terms which are standardly used information-invokingly are Russellian, and so require bearers.

2.1. Discriminating knowledge

Evans says that Russellian singular terms are governed by Russell’s principle, which at one point he expresses as follows: “the subject must have a capacity to distinguish the object of his judgement from all other things” (1982, p. 89). Perhaps no version of this principle should be accepted. However, this issue is independent of the debate between Russellian and Fregean accounts of names, since theorists of both kinds can accept the principle. The sentence from Evans just quoted must really identify a capacity that comes into play only when a subject’s judgement has an object, which not all judgements do: there are purely general judgements like “there exists at least one dog”. Once the sentence has been appropriately generalized, it is acceptable to a

²Cf. “the linguistic function of a proper name is completely exhausted by the fact that it names its bearer” (Kripke 1979, p. 240).

Fregean; for a Fregean can accept that a subject must have a capacity to distinguish *any* object of his judgement from all other things.

A Fregean could even accept what Evans says is an *excessively demanding* version of the principle, as applied by Dummett, on Frege's behalf:

the general idea was that a grasp of the sense of the name consisted in a capacity to say, of any given object, whether it was the referent or bearer of the name. (Dummett 1973, p. 488)

The natural reading of this principle is that persons who understand “*a*” should be able to answer arbitrary questions of the form “Is this *a*?”. Even for empty names, these questions are perfectly intelligible, by Fregean standards (though the answer for such names ought always to be “No”). Such a theorist can impose, or refrain from imposing, a condition of this kind, as he sees fit in the light of independent considerations.

2.2. *Invoking information*

Understanding an expression consists in immersion in the practice of its use. Evans's notion of the information-invoking use of a name can be seen as an attempt to characterize this immersion for this class of expressions. According to Evans, a name (more generally, a singular term) is used in an information-invoking way if the hearer of an utterance containing it must, in order to understand the utterance, link it with some information in his possession (cf. Evans 1982, p. 305). (This must not slide into the stronger condition that some information must be linked with it.) Evans allows, what certainly should be allowed, that an informational state apparently about an object may not be about any object at all: “An informational state may be of *nothing*: this will be the case if no object served as input to the informational system when the information was produced” (p. 128).³ Moreover, he allows that identity of an informational state can be defined in a way that does not require a common object as its source: “When two states embody *the same information*, they are necessarily such that if the one is of an object *x*, then so is the other” (p. 129). The requirement is merely that the information be from the same object if from any. So there are

³For this to be true, “input” must be regarded as a technical term, which awaits clarification.

no general reasons why a Fregean should not accept that “the use of an ordinary proper name is always information-invoking” (p. 310).

2.3. Understanding and knowledge

For any utterance that can be understood, Evans claims, “there is some true proposition such that knowledge of its truth constitutes understanding the utterance” (300). Although it is not clear that Frege himself would accept this condition, one who is Fregean as I use the term here can allow for such truths, ones derivable from claims like: “Vulcan” refers to something iff that thing is Vulcan.⁴ Evans thus overshoots when he claims: “But when the singular term is information-invoking, it seems to me that if there is nothing to which it refers, then we must deny that there is any such true proposition” (300).

Evans makes specific claims about what understanding an information-invoking expression requires, for example: “if the conditions of understanding require the audience to be thinking of an object which is also the object the speaker refers to, then, if there is no object the speaker refers to, those conditions cannot be satisfied, and his remark cannot be understood” (p. 332). If we were to replace “an object which is also the object” by “whatever object”, this conditional would have an antecedent acceptable to the Fregean, but the conditional as a whole would be false. In subsequent

⁴Here I assume the kind of reference-condition semantics described by Burge (1974), in which names are treated by axioms like

$$\forall x (\text{“Hesperus” refers to } x \text{ iff } x = \text{Hesperus}).$$

The setting is negative free logic: atoms with empty names are false, and universal and existential quantifier rules are modified. An axiom of the above form for an empty name like “Vulcan” is true: the right hand side is false for each value of x , leading to the appropriate verdict that there is nothing to which “Vulcan” refers. One interesting feature of the theory is that the semantics associates names neither with an object nor with a description (in the usual qualitative sense of “description”).

subsections I muster what arguments I can find in Evans that would support his version of the antecedent rather than an existentially neutral one.

2.4. The first argument: truth is seamless

This first argument starts with the lemma that in order to understand singular terms which are intended to invoke identifying information “one must oneself believe there is something to which the term refers” (326). Since this belief is in part constitutive of understanding, and since understanding is a form of knowledge, the belief must also be knowledge, and so true. “Truth is seamless: there can be no truth which it requires the acceptance of a falsehood to appreciate” (p. 331).

One could present the argument as follows:

- (1) Understanding an utterance containing an information-invoking use of a singular term requires believing that there is something the term refers to.
- (2) Understanding is knowing what is said.
- (3) “Truth is seamless”: knowing what is said cannot require having a *false* belief.
- (4) Hence the belief specified in (1) must be true: there is something the term refers to.

The two most dubious premises, which are therefore natural targets for the Fregean, are (1) and (3). The latter is a hasty, and unsatisfactory, attempt to formulate something like a “no false lemmas” account of knowledge. It is unsatisfactory, because I can know that I have at least one false belief (who doesn’t?), but this is a piece of knowledge I could not have unless I believe a falsehood.⁵ One option, therefore, would be to develop an improved version of this constraint on knowledge, and see whether using it instead of (3) would affect the soundness of Evans’s argument. Whatever the upshot of this approach, the Fregean would still wish to challenge (1); and I believe that Evans has, at this stage of his account, provided no reason at all to believe it.

⁵Thanks to Peter Klein for pointing this out.

There is little doubt that in many cases of communication a hearer expects the names used by a speaker to refer, and takes it that he needs to know to which objects they refer. The question is the extent to which this expectation is a necessary product of understanding. I will follow Evans in setting aside those cases, like fiction and negative existentials, in which it is clear that understanding takes place when this expectation is absent—conniving uses, as Evans calls them.

The Fregean can grant that something very close to this expectation belongs to understanding. Evans allows that “the notion of the intended referent is rather like the notion of a *target*” (317), something that might be aimed at yet not hit, and something that might figure in different ways at different levels of action-plans (aiming at that man and aiming at the man who insulted you may not amount to the same thing, even if that man is the one who insulted you). The Fregean can accept the following:

one who understands a speaker using a name must be able to answer the question: what did the speaker aim to refer to?

Answering the question correctly does not commit the understander to belief in the existence of such an object. If you say that Vulcan is heavier than Neptune, I know that you aimed to refer to Vulcan. There is no inference to: there is something to which you aimed to refer. On the contrary, if I know that Vulcan does not exist, I will know that you failed in your aim.

This comports with Evans’s claim that “for a hearer to understand a speaker ..., he must know which object the speaker intends to refer to” (318). The ellipsis contains the words: “making a reference”; the Fregean could replace them by “using a referring expression”. What Evans needs, but does not in this phase of the argument provide, is an argument for an understanding-condition which requires the hearer not merely to have a belief about what the speaker aimed to refer to, but to believe that the speaker succeeded in his referential aim.

The upshot is that even if hearers typically expect names to have referents, we have not yet been given a reason to suppose that this is part of what is involved in understanding them. Understanding requires appreciating what the speaker is aiming to refer to, an appreciation which

can amount to knowledge even when the aim radically misfires through lack of a referent. Fregeans can properly reject Evans's lemma (1). In any case, the lemma would create a fracture in our name-using practices between what Evans calls the conniving uses (involved in fiction and sincere negative existentials) and normal uses, for the former uses, even in assertion, let alone in other speech acts, clearly do not require, on the part of either speaker or hearer, belief that the singular terms refer. The Fregean, by contrast, sees unity: reference is needed for atomic truth, and so must be believed in by a sincere speaker and an accepting hearer in such cases; but it is not needed for meaning or understanding, and what is needed can be the same whether or not the truth of an atom is what is in question.

A lively name-using practice may make room for an existential question. Before doubts occur, we use the name believing the associated information. As doubts creep in, our confidence in the associated information diminishes. It seems clear that this diminishing confidence, the terminus of which is doubting all of it, is to be sharply distinguished from gradual loss of understanding. Indeed, if the doubts culminate in the belief that the supposed object does not exist, so that uses of the name come to be classified as conniving, it seems we cannot allow that loss of understanding occurs, else the belief in non-existence would not be the negation of the earlier belief in existence.

2.5. The second argument: the demand of unity

... the challenge, to those who wish to argue that information-invoking referential communication can take place in the absence of an object, is to state a communication-inducing relation between the origin of the speaker's information and the origin of the hearer's information which does not presuppose that the information originates in episodes involving the same object, but which, when the information *is* from an object, holds in just those cases when it is from the same object. I do not say that it cannot be done, but I myself do not see how to do it. (p. 337)

Here is a proposal to meet the challenge:

the information invoked by the speaker must have the same source or origin as that invoked by the hearer.

Information originating (in the appropriate way) in the same object has the same source; so does information originating (in the appropriate way) in the same witness. Evans explicitly mentions what he calls the “journalistic sense” of the word “source” (p. 337), and he uses it in such a way as to exclude what is needed for the displayed principle: in the journalistic sense, Deep Throat, rather than Nixon, is the source of Woodward and Bernstein’s information. However, “source” need not be so restricted, or, if it need, let us choose another word, say “origin”. The origin of a malicious rumour may be an evil tongue; the origin of information about the centre of the earth might be a complex theory, or alternatively might be signals emitted by an instrument located at that spot, in which case the information originates at the earth’s centre. There is a reasonably clear and non-disjunctive notion of the origin of information, and it is surprising that it seems not have struck Evans as a candidate solution to his problem of unity.⁶ I will test this proposal against his detailed arguments.

An early example is a demonstrative case where communication takes place “between a speaker and a hearer who are sufficiently far away from one another to observe different parts of the same rather large object” (333). Evans envisages that the only alternative candidate for bringing out what speaker and hearer share is some spatial descriptions; but these would be different as between speaker and hearer, so not shared after all. “The only thing that can bring unity out of this diversity is the fact that there exists an object of which both spatial descriptions are true.” (334) However, there is an alternative: the bodies of information each uses to guide their speech or understanding have the same origin. In this case, that is because the information comes from the same object; but the condition is general and will work when this is not so.

⁶Admittedly, the notion is a hard one to explicate. If a fit of anger makes a person concoct a falsehood involving a fictitious event, neither the anger nor the person is the reference of a term for the event, and the person not the anger counts as the “origin” of the information. Some other complexities are mentioned later in the text above and are discussed in Sainsbury (forthcoming).

Turning explicitly to the case in which there is supposed to be understanding in the absence of an object, Evans writes:

the only candidate communication-allowing relation between the thoughts of speaker and hearer, which is discoverable in the absence of an object—that they both involve exactly the same way of identifying, or purporting to identify, an object—is far too strong a requirement to impose upon referential communication in general. (p. 336)

One can agree with Evans when he says that identity of modes of identification is too strong a condition to work in general, yet disagree that this condition is the only one available for the case in which there is no object. On the contrary, the present proposal meets the case with a weaker condition, for distinct bodies of information may have a common origin.

The notion of origin needs attention. An over-imaginative, or self-deceiving, or evil tongue, T_0 , may start a rumour which is embellished by others. The rumour is that there's a dragon, Fiamma, who lives in the mountain just south of the village and whose preferred diet is human babies. You hear the rumour from T_1 and I hear it from T_2 , each of whom heard it, on separate occasions, from T_0 . You say that Fiamma is green, trusting to T_1 's embellishment, and I say she is red, trusting to T_2 's. By some standard, our Fiamma-related information has different origins; but there is a standard which rules that these different bodies of information have the same origin, in T_0 . This is the standard we need: it correctly represents us as disagreeing about Fiamma's colour. It rules as it does because although the information that Fiamma is green is new to T_1 , and the information that Fiamma is red is new to T_2 , both these pieces of information were intended by their producers to link to Fiamma, so the “ultimate” origin lies further back, with T_0 . This is the origin that is invoked by my proposal.⁷

⁷Evans makes a similar point in connection with non-empty names: a hearer's information may originate in “quite different episodes” (p. 337) from those in which the speaker's information originated. The problem of giving a proper account of origin is barely scratched by the proposal in the text, though a developed Fregeanism essentially requires such an account.

There can be equivalent bodies of information with different origins, in which case we have to see them as involving distinct name-using practices. To lives on the north side of the mountain. North siders have no contacts with south siders. Quite co-incidentally, a south sider spreads a rumour about a dragon, Fiamma, who lives in the mountain just north of the village and whose preferred diet is human babies. Were a south sider to meet a north sider and begin a “Fiamma”-involving conversation, there would be an illusion of understanding; but no more than an illusion since their information has no common origin. To put it in a tendentious way, though one whose naturalness is of interest, they would be talking about different dragons, whether or not they could ever know this. This kind of case mirrors for empty names things that Evans has taught us about non-empty names.

Evans was well aware of the point of view I have been expressing:

When there is this common information, it seems very tempting to suppose that we can draw just the same distinction between understanding and misunderstanding as we do in the case where there is a referent. We cannot say that the hearer who understands has got hold of the right object; but he can, so to speak, attach the remark to the right information. (p. 339)

He says that he has tried to weaken this temptation, by arguing that the notion of the “right” information cannot be made to work properly (this alludes to the unity argument) and that understanding a remark cannot involve a false belief (this alludes to the “truth is seamless” argument). I have tried to show that both these arguments fail. I now turn to what is involved in understanding empty names, or rather, to understanding a subgroup of these: fictional names.

3 Understanding fiction

Let us use “quasi-understanding” to denote the state people are in with respect to fictional names, and sentences containing them, which, as we would ordinarily say, they understand. Given Evans’s Russellian view of names, together with his disinclination to believe that fictional characters really exist, he is forced to conclude that quasi-understanding is not a species of understanding, for

fictional names are not a species of name. Although this is not to be accepted, we can none the less explore whether a Fregean can use Evans's account of quasi-understanding to explain what it is to engage in a practice of using a fictional name. The conclusion of this section is that although it is of interest that some name-using practices exist only in virtue of the imaginative production of, and engagement with, fiction, it is not the case that every participant in such a practice needs to appreciate the role that fiction plays in it.⁸

Before amplifying the remark that Evans's view is not to be accepted, I briefly describe Walton's notion of quasi-fear, upon which Evans explicitly models his account of quasi-understanding.

3.1 *Quasi-fear*

Walton asks us to consider Charles, who has the bodily signs of fear while watching a horror movie. Let us use “quasi-fear” with initial neutrality, for the state, whatever it is, we are inclined to call fear in Charles, made manifest by the fear-like bodily symptoms.⁹ Walton argues that Charles's quasi-fear is not fear. The argument involves a positive and then a negative phase. The positive phase is designed to establish that it is make-believedly the case that Charles is afraid. In watching the movie Charles is prompted to imagine a situation—that the deadly green slime is closing in on him—in which he is in danger. This extends the make-believe of the movie, so that it is make-believedly the case that Charles is aware that he is in danger. A further extension makes it make-believedly the case that Charles is afraid of the slime, an extension grounded in the thought that if things were as Charles imagines with the slime, that is, were the slime evidently posing a danger to him, he would be afraid of it. Since it might be both make-believedly and really true that Charles is afraid, the argument requires a negative phase. This consists in arguing that Charles

⁸This conclusion is argued for below (§3.2); it will already have been accepted by those convinced by the “Shylock” example in §2 of “Sense without Reference” (Sainsbury forthcoming).

⁹“His muscles are tensed, he clutches his chair, his pulse quickens, his adrenaline flows. Let us call this physiological/psychological state ‘quasi-fear’. Whether it is actual fear (or a component of actual fear) is the question at issue.” (Walton 1978, p. 6)

cannot really be afraid since he does not really take himself to be in danger.¹⁰ Putting the two parts together, we have an account of Charles's quasi-fear as involving it being make-believedly the case that he is afraid though he is not really afraid.

In the case of quasi-understanding, the positive phase is supposedly achieved by reflecting on how understanding needs imaginative engagement with the fiction; the negative phase is supplied by the doctrine that names are Russellian, and so cannot be genuinely understood.

In our present dialectical position, we have no reason to accept the negative phase of the argument about quasi-understanding. Quasi-understanding is very different from quasi-fear. There is something initially puzzling about saying that Charles is afraid. We are inclined to say: he's not *really* afraid. Questions such as: "how can he be afraid given that he knows the slime isn't real, so that he's not in danger?" and "why doesn't he just turn the TV off?" and "why does he watch if it affects him like that?" are genuine questions, not mere philosophers' questions. By contrast, there is nothing initially puzzling about a person's understanding of a fictional sentence (a high proportion of sentences to which infants are exposed fall into this category). We have no inclination to ask questions like "how can he understand, given that he knows it's just a story?" or "given that he knows there's no such person as Hamlet?". On the face of it, understanding fictional sentences can serve as a paradigm of genuine linguistic understanding, whereas fiction-induced (quasi)-fear cannot serve as a paradigm of genuine fear. The upshot is that when we discover an inconsistency between the natural claim that quasi-understanding is a species of understanding and the claim that a name (of the relevant kind) cannot be understood unless it has a bearer, we will need some persuading that the resolution of the tension requires giving up the natural claim. The thesis that quasi-fear is not fear explains something puzzling; the thesis that quasi-understanding is not understanding creates a puzzle where before nothing was puzzling.

¹⁰The argument is not as simple as this, for Walton takes account of those who (irrationally) seem to fear something they say they recognize to be harmless. Such people are motivated by fear, whereas Charles is not (cf. Walton 1990, p.201–2).

We can turn our backs, then, on the negative phase of the argument about quasi-understanding: quasi-understanding is a species of understanding. There remains the question of what species. It does indeed seem that (quasi)-understanding fictional names typically involves some imaginative engagement with the fiction, rather than becoming quasi-afraid does; so it may be that a full account of the practices of using fictional names will allude to this engagement. In this spirit, we can ask whether the positive phase of Evans's argument about quasi-understanding can offer insights available to Fregean theorists of names. I include under this umbrella those who hold that an expression having sense but lacking reference can make a contribution to the truth-conditions of sentences in which it occurs, and also those who, unlike Frege, hold that such a sentence whose truth conditions do not obtain is false.

3.2 *Make-believe and understanding*

We can agree with Evans that “Understanding these [fictional] uses of singular terms requires from the hearer something *of the same general kind* as is required to understand ordinary information-invoking uses of singular terms: the hearer must possess some information or misinformation, and somehow bring it to bear upon his interpretation of the remark” (Evans 1982, p. 344). There is room for dispute about the details.

The kind of fiction that is relevant to the discussion is the kind Evans calls “existentially creative”, involving the pretence that something exists which does not really exist (as opposed to fictions in which there is pretence, concerning things which exist, that they are other than they really are). Evans's attractive idea is that existentially creative fiction makes room for fictional names: our capacity to use them systematically depends upon our engaging in an existentially creative fiction. Translating this into a condition on understanding would suggest something like: a name is capable of being understood if some fiction has it that it has a bearer. This is analogous to a sufficient condition for the possibility of understanding ordinary names: such a name is capable of being understood if it has a bearer. One might expect that structurally similar embellishments of each condition would yield something sufficient for actual understanding and not just the possibility

thereof. These conditions would then feed in to the understanding of whole sentences in standard compositional ways.

Using “ $F(\)$ ” to mean “the fiction has it that ()”, a preliminary interpretation sees Evans as saying that existential creativity makes room for sentences s such that $F(s)$ has truth conditions, the supposed corollary being that s is capable of being quasi-understood. We can express this as the hypothesis:

- (5) if $F(s)$ has truth conditions then s is capable of being quasi-understood.

Suppose the story teller says: “And then Alice came to the dragon’s cave, and said the magic formula the friendly genie had given her, and which no human ear could understand: ‘erty uiop asd’. The dragon heard and realized that he was not to attack Alice.” This ensures that $F(\text{“erty uiop asd”})$ has truth conditions yet the quoted string is not capable of being quasi-understood by the story’s intended audience; so (5) must be rejected. The example is quite unlike the sentence “Hamlet was indecisive”, though it is part of the pretence that it is capable of being understood (at least by dragons). We therefore need to look for a more nuanced account of the way in which a fiction can yield a truth condition.

One emerges from Evans’s discussion of fiction with a vivid appreciation of the fact that there is an important structural similarity between thinking within and about fiction on the one hand, and thinking within and about reality on the other. Anything one can really do with language one can also make-believe to do. Suppose one thought that, for factual discourse, it was approximately correct to say (with appropriate qualifications) that understanding a sentence s (which in fact means that p) is knowing that s is true iff p . A direct application of the point about structural similarity would suggest the following:

- (6) one understands a sentence s which has a use only in fiction iff one knows that $F(s)$ is true iff p .

However, while knowing that $F(s)$ is true iff p may be a sufficient condition for understanding s , it seems to me not to be a necessary one. Suppose someone reads a novel as a historical narrative (some novels are written so as to encourage such a reading). I think he has none the less

understood it, one sign being that he may need to exploit this understanding to appreciate what we, trying to disabuse him of his error, are saying. We insist: “But Anna Karenina isn’t a real person; she’s only a character in a novel”, and the too credulous reader needs to bring to bear an existing understanding of the name in order to appreciate what we have said.

A Fregean who accepts a Burge-style negative free logic can insist that T-sentences for fictional sentences are factually true. It is not just that, in the fiction, “Anna had grey eyes” is true iff Anna had grey eyes; this can be read as true absolutely. On this reading, the right hand side of the biconditional, containing an atom with an empty name, is false; hence so too is the left hand side. (We can also make room for other readings in which some or all parts of the biconditional are implicitly prefixed with an “F” operator, or are assessed for truth-in-fiction as opposed to truth.) Called upon to explain how “Anna” has a meaning in the metalanguage, we can indeed allude to Tolstoy’s work, allowing that it would not have had this meaning had he never written. But we have no need to suppose that participants in the practice which exists only thanks to his work need appreciate this fact: there might be benighted over-incredulous ones. Such participants will bring information to bear in understanding the name (for example, that Anna was wooed by Vronsky); but they do not need to know that this is misinformation, nor that it is the special kind of misinformation which is created by novelists. So we can agree with Evans that the intelligibility of fictional names depends upon existentially creative make-believe, without advancing to the conclusion that the make-believe needs to be known to everyone who understands such a name.

It may be that active imaginative engagement of a kind the subject must realize is appropriate only to a fiction is required for some aspects of the appreciation of fiction and other works of art (as Walton (1990) makes highly plausible); but this is not to say that this sort of engagement is required for understanding fictional sentences.

The structural similarity between real and fictional linguistic activities runs deeper than was at first anticipated: participation in a fiction-based name-using practice may be indistinguishable to the participant from participation in a real-object-based practice. This upshot is only to be expected if,

as seems to me correct, fiction and error are species of a single genus, for it is obvious that one can participate in a practice based upon error without appreciating this basis.

4. “Really”

We move back and forth between fiction and reality in various ways. We exploit fiction while commenting on its merely fictional nature; we think about and have attitudes towards fictional characters and we compare them with real ones; encountering fiction produces real effects, apparently of fear or joy (or, at least, of raised pulse rate). Does the expression of such activities require (or at least make natural) a truth-condition affecting operator?

An interesting contemporary view, pioneered by Evans and developed by Wiggins, is that the answer is affirmative, and that “really” is precisely such an operator. Both philosophers use this notion to explain the possibility of true singular negative existentials. The idea is that “really” occurs in the logical form of, for example, “Hamlet does not exist”, and a proper appreciation of how this is so is essential to a correct account of how such sentences can be true. The aim of this section is to make an opposed suggestion: as used in ordinary English, “really” performs no such function; nor is there any need to introduce a technical notion which does.

Evans clearly recognized that someone who, like himself, adopts a generally Russellian approach to names owes an account of true negative existentials which have a name in the position of grammatical subject, for these otherwise stand as plain counterexamples to the Russellian view. There are two problems. First, on the Russellian view, such sentences would appear to be meaningless, for they appear to contain a name lacking a bearer. Second, once this difficulty has somehow been overcome, it remains to explain how such sentences can be true.

We have already seen how Evans addresses an aspect of the first issue, at least for sentences like “Hamlet does not exist”: he denies that this fictional name is really a name, or that it can be understood. But this makes the second problem even harder; for how can an expression which

cannot be genuinely understood be used in a sentence which is genuinely true, and so can be genuinely understood? His account of “really” addresses this second problem.

The suggestion is that true negative existentials function rather like a “move within a pretence [which expresses] the fact that it is a pretence” (1982, p. 369). To use an image from Wiggins (1995), a sincere user of such a sentence is seen as standing with one foot in the fiction, where the singular term leads a simulacrum of a normal life, and one foot in the real world, from which perspective the term can be used to state the fact which makes its behaviour abnormal.

Evans implemented this idea by suggesting that we can think of a sentence like “Hamlet does not exist” as equivalent to “Hamlet does not really exist”, whose form is more fully described by:

Not (really (Hamlet exists)).

Here the contained “Hamlet exists” is a sentence which represents a move within a pretence: we pretend that there is such a person as Hamlet, and thus make it part of the pretence that “Hamlet” is a name for Hamlet (though this is not really so). So far, this allows for “Hamlet exists” to be used only within the pretence; but the role of “really” is to enable it to have a “serious” use as well, for:

“Really” is a word which, when prefixed to a sentence, produces a sentence such that an utterance of it is true (absolutely) if and only if the sentence preceded by “really” is itself such that there is a proposition expressed by it when it is uttered as a move in the relevant game of make-believe, and this proposition is true (absolutely) . . . (p. 370)

In the normal case of telling fictional tales, Evans is clear that propositions are not expressed, though it is make-believedly the case that they are. On a natural reading of the quoted passage (which comes close to the end of a hastily concluded chapter, which would no doubt have been elaborated considerably had Evans lived), Evans is saying that there is also another kind of case, in which the very act of make-believing to express a proposition is at the same time an act of genuinely expressing a proposition. This interpretation is supported by the fact that most of the discussion attached to this account of “really” relates it to a case of that kind.

Two men . . . both seem to see a little green man on a wall, and are persuaded, with reason, that there is no such thing; they are, they think, victims of a trick . . . [But suppose in fact]

there is a little green man on the wall. It seems clear that a subject in this situation ... would actually be thinking of that little green man. (1982, 360–2)

In this case, an utterance of the form “That little green man is *F*” would express a genuine proposition and “‘Really (That little green man is *F*)’ would be true (if the little green man is *F*)” (p. 371). Truth of “Really (*p*)” requires that “*p*” play a double role, expressing a genuine proposition in the course of a make-believe in which in general there is only the pretence of proposition-expression and not its reality.

Dummett (1983) has, with some reason,¹¹ cast doubt upon whether “That little green man is *F*”, uttered under the circumstances of supposed but non-actual hallucination we have described, is such a sentence, that is, one concerning which it is fictionally the case and also genuinely the case that it expresses a proposition. Even granting the justice of this doubt for this case, there are certainly others for which it would not be just. Perhaps in one of the Holmes stories there occurs the sentence “Baker Street is north of Oxford Street”. This is *really* true (as opposed to so many other sentences in the book): Baker Street really is north of Oxford Street. It would seem that Evans’s account handles this nicely. The narrator of the story, even if he had primarily story-telling intentions, has in fact, whether he cared or not, said something really true. (For it to be the truth we take it to be we would, of course, have to credit the narrator with intending to use “Baker Street” of the real Baker Street, and “Oxford Street” of the real Oxford Street, so bringing these streets into the story, in a way commonplace in fiction.) So a criticism of Evans should not be based merely on the claim that no sentences can live the kind of double life needed to verify “Really (*p*)”.

Dummett has a different objection. Using “E(*g*)” to abbreviate “That little green man exists”, he argues that, given Evans’s account of “really” quoted above,

¹¹Dummett quotes Evans’s own words: “a necessary condition for a speaker to have referred to an object by the use of an expression is that it be the intended referent of that use of the expression” (Dummett 1983, p. 300, Evans 1982, p. 318).

the condition for the truth of “Not (really (Eg))” ought to be ... that either “ $E(g)$ ” does not express any proposition when used in the make-believe, or it does express such a proposition, but that proposition is not literally true. So understood, however, the negative statement would not genuinely be exploiting the make-believe game; and that was not Evans’s intention. (Dummett 1983, p. 303)

Dummett’s criticism brings to light an unclarity in Evans’s theory. On one interpretation of his words, “the relevant game of make-believe” is a Russellian description with narrow scope relative to the biconditional. The truth condition, thus construed, is that there is a relevant (perhaps contextually determined) game of make-believe within which “ p ” expresses a true genuine proposition. On this construal, it seems that Dummett is right so say that the condition does not achieve what Evans hoped. A test is that one could put any old rubbish for “ p ” and the condition would not be satisfied, so that “really (p)” would be false. The conclusion is that there is no need to understand “ p ” to understand “really (p)” which, as Dummett says, was certainly not Evans’s intention.

On an alternative construal, the talk of “the relevant game of make-believe” serves as a presupposition to the truth condition for “really (p)”, in the sense that if there is no such game, there is no truth condition. If we put rubbish for “ p ”, no truth condition will be attributed. On this construal, no ground has yet been provided for thinking that Evans’s account fails to do justice to the requirement that some kind of understanding of “ p ” is required for understanding “really (p)”. However, Dummett’s criticism can be taken further.

Evans cannot simply require that “ p ” in “really (p)” needs to be understood, because if “ p ” contains a fictional name it cannot, on his Russellian theory, be understood. His idea is that, if the presupposition that there is a relevant game of make-believe is satisfied, “ p ” can be quasi-understood, where this is not a species of understanding. But while the presupposition ensures the possibility of quasi-understanding, it does not ensure its actuality. To know that “really (p)” has a truth condition you need to know that there is a game of make-believe in which “ p ” has a use; to know what it is for “really (p)” to be true you need to know what it is for “ p ”, thus used, to be true.

But this cannot in general be known: where “*p*” has no truth condition (as opposed to it merely being the case that F(“*p*” has a truth condition)), there is nothing that counts as knowledge of what it is for “*p*” to be true.

What this criticism brings to light is that Evans has not satisfactorily explained the “game-to-reality shift”. The truth-condition for “really” has to be general, and to shift us in to reality. Yet it remains to be explained how quasi-understanding can be an input to genuine understanding: we cannot know what it would be for “*p*” to be really true in the most common case, that in which there is no such thing as what it is for “*p*” to be true (absolutely).

We might think that what is needed is a revised account of the truth-conditional impact of “really”. I shall suggest the more radical view that “really”, at least as used in ordinary English, makes no contribution to truth conditions. Everyone can grant that a speaker will normally reach for the word only when he takes it that some fiction, speculation or error is salient and calls for exposure. But it will also be granted, even by those who see “it is true that *p*” as co-inciding in truth conditions with “*p*”, that a speaker will reach for the longer form only when, for example, conceding something (“while I admit that it is true that *p*, I would not go so far as to say that ... ”).¹² We therefore need a positive reason to write a role for “really” into truth conditions, as opposed to treating it as a pragmatic indicator. Since it must be factive, so that we have every instance of “if really (*p*) then *p*”, the question resolves into whether we can find a case in which “*p*” is true but “really (*p*)” is false. (We ought to be pessimistic, for it is hard to see how we could have “not really *p*” without “not *p*”.)

Evans suggested such a case: “Had this man’s parents not met, this man would not have existed” contrasts with what results from inserting “really” before “existed”. This example is problematic ad hominem, as Evans accepts from Dummett that sentences which co-incide in truth conditions

¹²A comparison with “actually” would in some ways be more to the point. But Evans (1979) has quite special views about this word.

may embed differently in modal contexts. Setting this aside, it is not clear that inserting “really” produces any change of truth value, as opposed to some oddity. The interpreter of the “really” version looks for some pretence or speculation or false view to the effect that this man would have existed under the supposed circumstances, and finding none feels dissatisfied; but it would be hard to *dissent* from the conditional supplemented with “really”. So it remains to establish that “really” makes a difference to truth conditions.

“Really” as used in ordinary English certainly does not operate like Evans’s “really”. Rather, as it is natural to expect, it serves to highlight a contrast between reality and any of the things that can differ from reality, which include fiction but are not confined to it. It prepares the interpreter for a contrast with something which, apart from fiction, may be error, or mere appearance, or exaggeration, or understatement, or other departures from reality. Here are some examples.

Exposing straightforward error:

The author is quoted as saying he feared a fiend, but what he really said was that he feared a friend.

Contrasting the genuine with the feigned:

The service is currently exploited by a wide range of applicants, but should be confined to those really in need.

Deflating exaggeration:

In saying that the number of Jews gassed in Auschwitz was really little over 2 million, as opposed to the frequently claimed 3 million or more, I do not mean to diminish the horror of the events.

Introducing the seemingly unbelievable: something so extraordinary is said that it is as if its denial were already part of the background, and the affirmation implicitly contrasts with it:

In 1945, Hitler really expected England to be willing to form an alliance with him against Russia.

Pre-emptive strike against contrasting views: Even idioms it might be tempting to dismiss as mere idioms, not needing to be brought into a unified explanation, can be accounted for:

He's really nice. (Let no one tell you otherwise! And don't imagine he merely appears to be nice!)

Contrasting correct and incorrect views about fiction:

Hamlet is indecisive and morose, but not really neurotic.

The role of “really” in such a sentence is to suggest the concession that the view that Hamlet is neurotic has some followers; if this were not so, there would be some inappropriateness in the affirmation. It does not, however, take one out of the “world of fiction”; it does not effect a game-to-reality shift.

In all these cases, the omission of “really” would appear to make no difference to truth conditions.

Given that it is really rather obvious that the ordinary English “really” does not function at all as Evans’s “really” does, it is better to construe his expression as a technical neologism. The question then is whether it is coherent, and whether it is required. As we have seen, there are doubts about whether it is coherent by Evans’s own standards. From a Fregean perspective (using “Fregean” in the rather special sense mentioned earlier) it is far from obvious that it is required. For Evans, it was supposed to address the problem of how names which couldn’t be genuinely understood could be used in sentences which were genuinely true, notably, negative existentials. The Fregean regards the names as genuinely understandable, so the problem does not arise for him in this form. Frege himself offered a second-level account of existence. For those who prefer a first level account, there is a straightforward option: unlike Frege, who regarded every simple sentence containing an empty name as lacking truth value (assuming the name to be used as a name, rather than to introduce a concept), treat every atom containing an empty name as false, and deny the unrestricted validity of existential generalization.¹³ Once the genuine intelligibility of empty names is granted, both first- and second-level approaches to existence can do without Evans’s neologism.

¹³This “negative free logic” is described by Burge (1974).

Whereas Evans assigns the “really” operator wide scope over “Hamlet exists”, Wiggins (1995) assigns it narrow scope. His overall aim is to suggest that a second-level approach to existence sentences deserves development; and his development takes for granted a view of names which has some similarities with Evans’s. His account has the advantage of dealing explicitly not only with fictional sentences, but also those relating to speculation, like Le Verrier’s speculations about Vulcan, speculations in effect dismissed as unsound by a sincere utterance of “Vulcan does not exist”. While I am sympathetic to the idea of developing a second-level approach (and to much else in Wiggins’s paper), I am less persuaded that “really” has any significant role to play. Given what has gone before, I shall assume it is best to see the word as a newly introduced technical device, so the critical questions are not whether it works like its English homonym but whether it is coherent and necessary.

Whereas for Evans, considerations about quasi-understanding made it essential that a fictional name in a true negative existential sentence occur within the scope of “really”, Wiggins allows that quasi-understanding is a kind of understanding. It is made possible only thanks to the fiction, speculation or error, but, Wiggins insists (and I agree) it “can be just as good as understanding ever can be” (p. 107). From the point of view of their intelligibility, empty names can, on Wiggins’s theory, occur anywhere; and Wiggins exploits this possibility by according them wide scope relative to “really”. In particular, he sees “Vulcan does not exist” as containing an occurrence of “Vulcan” which lies outside the scope of “really”, rather as things seem in “Vulcan doesn’t really exist”. We are invited to think of an utterance of the sentence as involving two phases. In the first, we are in “speculative mode” or “rehearsing mode”: we enter into Le Verrier’s speculations, associating our own use of the name with his. In this way, we introduce the concept of being Vulcan. In the second phase, we are in “reality-invoking mode” or “commenting mode”: reality bites, and we deny that this concept is instantiated.

What “really” marks is the transition—within one sentence—from one sort of thinking and talking, the speculative mode, to the other sort, a reality-invoking mode. What the true negative existential sentence will force us to recognize is that we need both these modes . . . (1995, p. 106)

In summary form, “Vulcan does not exist” is represented by Wiggins as:

as regards Vulcan, there isn’t really <of> it (Wiggins 1995, p. 108)

where the “<of>” indicates that we are treating the apparent singular term that follows as introducing an individual concept in the kind of role that makes it a suitable argument for the second level denial of instantiation.

On Wiggins’s account, there are two ways in which a name may be used in the course of saying something true even if it does not have a bearer. One is by being used only in rehearsing mode, in the manner stressed in connection with “as regards Vulcan”. The other flows from the second-level account of existence, which requires that there are occasions on which names, or what appear to be names, or what appear to be pronouns anaphoric on names, in reality function as concept-words, introducing the individual concept corresponding to the name, to which a second-level existence concept is applied. Both these ways are exploited in the account of “Vulcan does not exist” or “as regards Vulcan, there isn’t really <of> it”. The initial occurrence of “Vulcan” does not need a bearer because it occurs in the scope of rehearsing mode. Its second occurrence, or the occurrence of the “it” which depends upon it, does not need a bearer thanks to its interaction with “<of>”, which ensures that it is functioning as a concept-word. This suggests that we should think of “really” and “<of>” as a fused idiom.

For suppose we do not. Then we would have to give an account of sentences of the form “(...) really (...)”, with “<of>” not occurring in (...), which has the consequence that they can be true when a non-denoting name, used as a name, occurs within (...), but not when such an expression, or a pronoun dependent upon it, occurs within “(...)”; for, by hypothesis, the separable “<of>” alone made possible the non-referring use within “(...)”. These assumptions would make anaphoric dependence between the first and second clauses unintelligible. For example,

Santa Claus does not really bring presents,

with “really” instantiating the technical notion under discussion, would have some such logical form as

As regards Santa Claus, really he doesn’t bring presents.

Here the “he” is not interpretable in accordance with the proposal, for it is in the “reality” part of the sentence and so needs a bearer; yet its anaphoric dependence on the earlier occurrence of “Santa Claus” ensures that it has whatever bearer “Santa Claus” has, that is, none. Because we have supposed that “really” can occur without “<of>”, we cannot appeal to “<of>” to restore an anaphoric connection.

Now suppose that we treat “really” and “<of>” as a single idiom, so that “really” will appear only when we are introducing a name functioning as a concept-word. Then it is unclear that we need anything else from such an expression than that it convert this occurrence of a name into a concept-word-occurrence. If this is done, nothing else is needed, for the name does not need a bearer for the sentence to be true.

So although I am attracted by Wiggins’s proposal, I cannot really see how it works in detail. Moreover, it has a consequence I find strange. Wiggins denies that we can move to such claims as

In reality, Vulcan does not exist

on the grounds that we would then be committed to the intolerable conclusion that really *there is* something to the concept of which nothing answers. One can accept as true

Vulcan is something to the concept of which nothing answers

with the first word genuinely a name (as opposed to concept-word) but used only in rehearsal. Likewise we can accept the existential quantification to

There is something to the concept of which nothing answers

though the initial quantifier is still used only in rehearsing mode, and no more really existentially commits us than would an utterance (as it would most naturally be interpreted) of “There is a detective at 212B Baker Street”. But if the singular sentence were prefixed by “really”, its truth would require “Vulcan” to be used both in commenting mode and as a name (as opposed to concept-word); so its truth would require the existence of Vulcan. Likewise the inferred existential generalization would be in reality mode and not just rehearsing mode.

However, “in reality, Vulcan does not exist” strikes me as true, and I regard this as casting further doubt upon Wiggins’s story. Intuitively, it certainly seems that we can say: here is how reality is: Neptune belongs to it but Vulcan does not. Indeed, even on Wiggins’s own account it would seem that there should be a true reading of the sentence, on which it is equivalent to the claim that it is real that the Vulcan-concept isn’t instantiated. In other words, there seems no reason why the other potential explanation of how an empty name may be used in speaking truly, namely that it functions as a concept-word, should not come to the fore, and do all the work required.

I would like to endorse Wiggin’s view that the proper use of any name, including an empty one, involves immersion in the practice of using that name. In the case of “Vulcan”, the relevant practice is fixed by Le Verrier’s failed speculation, so that a typical user of the name will have some familiarity with that speculation.¹⁴ What at the moment I cannot see is how this requirement upon the intelligibility of the name can properly be held to be explicitly drawn upon, as opposed to presupposed, in the semantics for sentences in which it occurs. I offer this remark in the hope that Wiggins will offer us some more detail about the roles of “really” and “<of>”.¹⁵

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¹⁴This is not necessary, only typical: cf. Sainsbury (forthcoming).

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