# Fictionality as Rhetoric: A Distinctive Research Paradigm

[post-acceptance revisions in tracked changes]

**Abstract**: The rhetorical account of fictionality has drawn considerable attention in narratological circles, but the extent to which it is fundamentally at odds with all previous approaches, despite their diversity, has not been recognised. This essay aims to show that it represents a significant departure from the broad consensus underlying previous theoretical accounts of fictionality, by conceiving of it as a resource integral to direct communication, rather than as the quality marking fiction’s detachment from its framing communicative context. It clarifies the implications of a rhetorical approach by situating it in relation to the main currents of the theoretical debate and articulating its critical dissent from each of those traditions. Doing so establishes a basis for scrutiny of some open questions within the domain of rhetorical approaches, concerning the scope and precise definition of fictionality conceived in this way. The essay concludes by pointing towards three distinct areas of further research opened up by a rhetorical perspective, concerning the contextual variables of the fiction’s medium, its immediate discursive environment and its cultural and historical juncture.

**Key words**: rhetoric; fictionality, fiction, narrative, theory

There is a certain type of raconteur, to be found in the pubs of Britain and no doubt elsewhere, who delights in telling stories that go something like this:

Cheers! I’ll buy the next round. I would’ve been here sooner but I got a bit held up on the way. It was a weird thing – I was coming here straight from work, right, so I went down Hartoft Street to walk in by the river; but when I got to the last house before the steps, this man comes staggering out of the door right in front of me. He’s got his hand over the side of his head, like this, and there’s blood everywhere. I said “Blimey, what happened to you?” He said “I bit my ear!” I said “You bit your own ear – how did you manage that?” He said “Well, I stood on a chair!” Cheers!

The joke is often much worse than this one, and it typically gives more pleasure to the teller than the listeners. They are as likely to groan as to laugh, largely because the effect of the punchline, whatever its intrinsic merits, is redoubled by its function in a kind of generic joke at their expense – that is, the revelation that this is indeed a joke, not a personal anecdote. The generic frame shift is from non-fiction to fiction, marked by an abrupt re-orientation of the listeners’ sense of the point of the story.

This re-orientation is categorical: it is not qualified by the extent to which we take the autobiographical set up of the anecdote to be true or false. In fact, the truth or falsehood of such a story may remain ambiguous throughout; the absurdity of the punchline in my example may be just enough to make it manifestly untrue, but this is not necessary to our recognition of a joke (consider jokes based upon puns, for example). And contrariwise, it would not be hard to imagine a humorous personal anecdote that remains within the bounds of autobiography despite exploiting the resources of hyperbole, stylisation, loose accountability to the facts, ironised authorial ethos, in short poetic licence of all kinds, even including a comic resolution not greatly different in form to a punchline. The truth status of such stories, then, is fuzzy; they can exhibit varying degrees of approximation, or accountability, to fact. This scalar quality contrasts with the sharp binary distinction between anecdote and joke, which is not essentially a question of truth status, but of communicative point. The joke is revealed as a joke by the way it cuts short our expectations of the story’s informative relevance; the way it makes the question of its truth status beside the point. It also works as a practical joke at the listeners’ expense to the extent that it succeeds in delaying their assumption of the anecdote’s fictionality until the punchline.

A joke of this sort, then, is both an exemplary fiction and an object lesson in fictionality, by virtue of making its own fictionality part of the joke. For my purposes it serves to introduce some key features of a rhetorical view of fictionality, which can be sketched in a preliminary way like this: fictionality is best understood as a quality of fiction as communication, not a quality of its referent or object of representation. It is an assumption about the communicative act, rather than an attribute of some semantic or ontological product of that act. Fictionality conceived this way is a direct communicative resource, not the result of a pretended, disavowed or otherwise framed kind of utterance. Definitions of fiction typically dissociate it from other discourse in order to protect normal expectations of truthfulness, but on a rhetorical view this is unnecessary because communicative integrity does not require any commitment to the literal truth of an utterance, only a presumption of its relevance, which may be achieved otherwise. The distinguishing quality of fictionality, then, is not some mediated kind of falsehood, but independence from directly informative kinds of relevance.[[1]](#endnote-2) As a specific use of discourse, fictionality is part of the pragmatics of communication, and necessarily contextual; and as a distinct move within communicative pragmatics, eliciting a specific range of effects, fictionality is a rhetorical resource. This essay aims to clarify such a view of fictionality by distinguishing it clearly within the field of theories of fiction, and by identifying some of the implications of that distinctiveness.[[2]](#endnote-3)

If we place such a rhetorical approach to fictionality in the context of the extensive scholarship on the topic over the last fifty years, it becomes apparent that it is a significant departure in several respects. Answers to the question, “what is fiction?” or, “what constitutes its fictionality?” have been proposed from multiple perspectives in philosophy, literary theory and narrative theory, producing a complex topography of differently nuanced standpoints; nevertheless it is possible to discern the broad tendencies and the relatively small set of ideas around which most approaches cluster, and to chart a course through them towards a rhetorical position.

# 1. Fictional Worlds, Semantics and Ontology

The premise most fundamentally at odds with a rhetorical approach is that fictionality does not attach to the fiction-producing communicative act, but to its product, a fictional referent or object. For some theorists, however, fictional reference is the very core of the issue; and it remains foundational even for many who place their main emphasis elsewhere, as we shall see. The strongest inducement to think about fictionality in relation to fictional referents is its congruence with our ordinary, untheoretical talk about fictions. We do of course discuss fictional characters as imaginary beings to whom fictions refer; and we do invoke the idea of a fictional world as the environment those beings inhabit, and in which they act. The world of *Jane Eyre*, or *Tom Jones,* or *Little Dorrit*; the world of Austen’s novels, or Balzac’s; Middlemarch, Wessex, Yoknapatawpha County, Middle Earth; or indeed the Star Wars universe, or the Marvel Comics universe. The range of my examples is meant to convey how pervasive this idea is, but also what a loose notion it is. It is a way of expressing the representational coherence within, or correlation between, narrative fictions, used to convey everything from just a certain prevailing atmosphere to a nerdily detailed extrapolation of spatial geographies, chronologies and pre-histories, the attributes of whole cultures and civilisations, imagined ecosystems, technologies and even physical laws. From a rhetorical perspective, these possibilities are richly suggestive of the diverse ways in which we use fictions; but such uses are not intrinsic to the concept of fiction itself. Theorists of fiction commonly assume that their task is to make these responses to fiction theoretically coherent and indeed normative; but it is no more intrinsically necessary to do so than it is to define fiction in terms of its capacity to evoke timeless themes, to suggest moral lessons, or to excite a rage for symbols or allegory. Moreover, fictional-world approaches are intelligible because they themselves participate in this contingent use of fictions; they merely repeat such imaginative response to fiction in a theoretical register, and so secure intuitive appeal at the expense of explanatory force.

The idea that fiction involves creation of and reference to a fictional world is nonetheless one of the most pervasive assumptions driving theoretical accounts of fiction, and the ways in which such approaches work are worth inspecting. Two closely related but distinct traditions can be identified: one is concerned with semantics, the other with ontology. The philosophical roots of both can be found in modal logic, where the efforts of Saul Kripke and others to reconcile modal operators of possibility and necessity with the extensional system of classical propositional logic led to the development of possible world semantics. Lubomír Doležel’s narrative semantics proposed to treat fictionality in a similar modal way, therefore conceiving fictional worlds as the referential grounds for the sentences of fictions. Doležel’s move, as a development in semantics, had a circumscribed purpose; it addressed a problem (or a perceived problem) of meaning, posed by the reference of the sentences of fiction, and was more concerned with the relations between extensional and intensional semantics in fiction than with the world-ness of fictional worlds.

Kripke’s modal semantics, too, stopped short of modal ontology; but this philosophical option was central for others, like David Lewis, for whom a many-worlds ontology seemed an attractive metaphysical option. Possible worlds, conceived as ontological rather than semantic modalities, also appealed to several theorists of fiction – notably, Thomas Pavel and Marie-Laure Ryan – who accordingly conceived of fictionality as itself an ontological modality, and fictional worlds as, indeed, worlds, both constructed and referred to by fictions. There are different views on the degree of equivalence between fictional worlds and possible worlds: Ryan treats the relation robustly by invoking a “principle of minimal departure” from the actual world, in order to compensate for the inevitable under-specification of fictional worlds (*Possible Worlds* ch. 3); Ruth Ronen, on the other hand, is much more circumspect, minimising the ontological commitments implied by speaking of the “world” of a fiction. Nonetheless, all of these positions raise the basic issue at stake between a fictional-worlds view and a rhetorical view of fiction, which is that they locate the quality of fictionality in the object of reference rather than in the communicative utterance.

The chain of reasoning is this: the meaningful use of language requires reference; reference requires a referent; to be meaningful, fictions must have fictional referents. The fundamentally process-oriented logic of narrative representation, its concern with what happens, in itself sits awkwardly with the emphasis upon substantive objects of reference in fictional worlds; but from a rhetorical standpoint the global nature of a world is even more problematic. The desire to treat fictions as ontological wholes results in a theoretical repurposing of the role of inference in interpretation. It ceases to serve the interpreter’s cognitive effort to ascertain the communicative relevance of an utterance, and becomes instead (whether or not formalised under a principle of minimal departure) a runaway engine of world construction – which is a task of ontological extrapolation no longer accountable to any specific communicative purposes at all. It is not just that fictional-worlds approaches have nothing to say about communicative purposes; it is that they actually foreclose the possibility that the distinctiveness of fiction might have something to do with its communicative use.

A basic theoretical motive behind fictional-worlds approaches, closer to home than modal logic or many-worlds ontology, is their reaction against the tendency of structuralist and post-structuralist thought to bracket reference and court relativist, social constructivist attitudes. More specifically, their re-affirmation of the solid ground of reference is a realist rejection of the claim, associated with Hayden White among others, that all narrative form is artifice and so all narratives are in some sense fictions. This “doctrine of panfictionality” (Ryan, “Postmodernism”) certainly ought to be rejected, but not on the basis that narrative artifice is somehow cancelled by reference; narrative is indeed artifice, and no less accountable for that fact. Artifice does not equate with fiction, however, precisely because fiction, from a rhetorical perspective, is a distinct *use* of narrative. Accordingly, it is misguided to invoke criteria of reference, as Lehtimäki et al. do, in order to arbitrate in problematic or borderline cases. Fictionality as rhetoric is a categorical matter of communicative force, and replaces criteria of reference, not with intention *per se*, but with the context of communicative intent; no-one produces fiction by mistake. Henry James may have sincerely meant his assertion that “It is impossible to imagine what a novelist takes himself to be unless he regard himself as an historian and his narrative as a history” (116), but even if the statement were not belied by the text of his own novels (it is), their fictionality is paratextually unambiguous.

A rhetorical approach to fictionality is not a repudiation of the insights of structuralism and post-structuralism, but a move beyond their limitations, enabled by pragmatics and cognitive models of communication. It does not need reference criteria in order to establish the categorical distinction for which Françoise Lavocat, for example, finds it necessary to adopt a fictional-worlds approach, in the most recent major contribution to this tradition. A rhetorical approach also offers, as I’ll suggest later, a more solid foundation than referential criteria for Lavocat’s own central interest in the extent to which the use of fictionality is continually being negotiated; its variance across history, cultures, media and discourses.

# 2. Fictional Acts, Pretence and Make-believe

The main alternative to the fictional-worlds approach to fictionality has been a tradition predicated upon the idea that fictionality attaches not to fictional objects but to fictional acts of communication, representation or imagination. This would appear to be a step closer to a rhetorical perspective, but in fact all of its incarnations retain assumptions that are fundamentally incompatible with the rhetorical view of fictionality as a direct communicative resource. One important lineage for such fictional-act approaches is derived from speech-act theory, and was put forward initially, in different variants, by Richard Ohmann and John Searle. According to Ohmann (who was discussing literature but concerned primarily to explain fictionality), “a literary work is a discourse whose sentences lack the illocutionary forces that would normally attach to them,” because they are not directly uttered, but represented; that is, “a literary work *purportedly imitates* (or reports) a series of speech acts, which in fact have no other existence” (14). Searle’s version re-inflects this notion of mimetic illocutionary force by invoking the concept of pretence; this allows him to separate the utterance itself from its illocutionary force. Fictional utterances, for Searle, are “nonserious,” in that they involve no commitment to the associated illocutionary acts, but are merely the means by which the author of a work of fiction “pretends to perform” those acts (320, 325). The pretence account collapses Plato’s distinction between diegesis and mimesis, according to which the poet may speak “in his own person” or “in the person of someone else” (150 [book III, 393b-c]): while Plato’s imitative sense of mimesis equates with first-person fiction, Searle over-generalises it to include third-person fiction, as “imitating the making of an assertion” (324).

One explicit consequence of this view is that fictional utterances cannot be indirect speech acts of some other kind, because unless a speech act is seriously performed, it cannot flout its own felicity conditions in order to imply an indirect, serious illocutionary intention. Among other things, this consideration frustrates Gérard Genette’s argument that pretended speech acts may simultaneously be indirect speech acts with the illocutionary function of instituting a fictional world (“Pragmatic status” 64). Pretended speech acts do not provide any theoretical way back in the direction of fictional-worlds theories, because they situate fictionality right there, in the notion of pretence itself. But the pretence model disregards the regularity with which fictions draw attention, explicitly and implicitly, to their own fictionality; in such moments there is no serviceable serious speech act for them to imitate. Furthermore, the bare notion of pretence doesn’t specify anything beyond the negation of an utterance’s apparent illocutionary force, because Searle’s concern is to preserve the integrity of speech-act theory by expelling fictionality from its domain, attaching it to the act of pretending instead of the speech act itself. The question of how we should understand the communicative force of pretence, or of imitation, is left unaddressed, because the pretence account is much less concerned with fictionality than with the threat it presents to speech act theory.

This is one respect in which Kendall Walton’s approach to fictionality has more to say, by virtue of its focus upon games of make-believe. For Walton, make-believe is a species of imagining (12); while he speaks broadly of the worlds of games of make believe, and of what is fictional (i.e. fictionally true) in those worlds, he rejects the idea that fictionality is a modal kind of truth secured by reference to fictional worlds (41). He also rejects the definition of fiction in terms of illocutionary acts, whether pretended or fiction-producing, because, he claims, “the institution of fiction centres not on the activity of fiction makers but on objects – works of fiction or natural objects – and their role in appreciators’ activities” (88). Works of fiction, then, are props in these activities, which are games of make-believe. A prop “is something which, by virtue of conditional principles of generation, mandates imaginings” (69). Yet it is the mandate, the rule, rather than the prop itself that matters, and Walton also allows fictionality without props, as for example in dreams: “Spontaneously imagining something does, in effect, make it fictional (in that fantasy). But it does so by establishing a prescription to imagine it” (44-5). This is an oddly regressive formula (imagining something establishes a prescription to imagine it), and it is indicative of a larger sense in which fictionality continually recedes before Walton’s advance. The notion of a game of make-believe is similarly cyclical: The game is a framework of rules circumscribing the make-believe, but the make-believe is also the imagining of those rules.

Walton’s game appears to conflate Roger Caillois’s two senses of play: rule-bound *ludus* and open *paidia*. It is only on such a basis that games of make-believe can seem to be both quarantined domains of fiction and real-world activities. Nowhere is this equivocation brought out more clearly than in relation to emotional engagement with fictions. Other theorists of fiction have tended to equate such emotion with immersion in the fictional world. Jean-Marie Schaeffer, for example, shares Walton’s impulse to situate fictionality in the larger context of mimesis, and grounds the idea of immersion explicitly in a game and make-believe context, saying “one cannot understand what fiction is if one does not take as the starting point the fundamental mechanisms of ‘doing-as-if’ – of ludic feint – and of imaginative simulation” (xii). Schaeffer begins his discussion with Lara Croft and videogames, which he takes to be representative of fictions in general; in doing so he aligns himself with fictional-worlds ideas of immersion, which often appeal to digital media—most notably, in work by Marie-Laure Ryan such as *Narrative as Virtual Reality*. These approaches take the virtuality of digital simulations to be emblematic of the idea that engagement with fiction is an imaginative immersive experience. In this respect Schaeffer’s account, despite adopting much of Walton’s model, including the notion of children’s games as a founding idea (xii), ultimately remains within the fold of fictional-worlds theory. For Schaeffer, our emotional engagement is with fictional worlds, and is an intra-fictional phenomenon; whereas the relation between the fiction and reality is one of “global analogy,” in which the “fictional universe” might be termed “a *fictive model* of the ‘factual’ universe” (193). Walton’s own resistance to fictional worlds and to “what has been misleadingly called the suspension of disbelief” (241) is not an argument for the real-world communicative relevance of fictions, however, but an objection to the fictionalisation of psychological participation itself. He emphasises the conceptual hygiene of maintaining “the separation between our actual mental lives and the mental lives we lead in the worlds of our games of make-believe” (252); so that, having extended the ontological distinction of fiction to encompass our imaginative use of it, he can only countenance the idea that engagement with fictions involves quasi-emotions, themselves part of a game. Walton is surely right to reject the view that emotional response to fiction depends upon an immersive forgetting of its fictionality, but it is decidedly odd to conclude that we therefore have no genuine emotional involvement with fiction at all.

Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olson also advocate an institutional model of fiction, but with a more synthetic view of the relation between fiction producers and fiction appreciators, in which “fictive utterance” invokes the conventions of a practice in order to elicit the appropriate kind of interpretative attention, the “fictive stance” (43). In outline, this model is cast in terms of communicative purposes congruent with a rhetorical approach, but it turns out to hinge upon a recuperation of Coleridge’s suspension of disbelief, achieved by adapting Walton’s account to the reception of pretended speech acts: the “fictive stance” enables the audience “to make-believe (imagine or pretend) that the standard speech act commitments associated with the sentences are operative even while knowing that they are not” (43).

For a greater emphasis upon communicative intention, there is Gregory Currie’s account of fiction; though his rationale for privileging intention has less to do with the rhetorical force of fictionality than the need to qualify its relation to truth and falsehood. It allows him to say that fiction is not intrinsically false, but that “if the work is true, then it is at most accidentally true” (46). Geir Farner takes a similar line of thought a little further by adopting, from Thomas Roberts, the idea of “fiction by intention” (Roberts 9); Farner, rejecting the association in Roberts between this intention and overt untruth, says instead that the intention is to make overt “*a request to regard* everything as fiction” (12-13). This move comes close to framing fictionality in communicative rather than representational terms, except that the notion of regarding everything as fiction somewhat begs the question; it turns out, in Farner’s account, to involve constructing a “mental model of the action” (35-37), so that although there is no theoretical assumption of a fictional world to which the text refers, such a referent arises anyway in interpretation: “The fictional action of which the mental model is a model comes into existence as a fictional entity, because it is inconceivable that the model does not render something” (37-38). The convolution has ultimately done nothing to shift the presumption that fiction must be grounded upon fictional objects.

# 3. Textual and Semiotic Accounts

If approaches to fictionality through the communicative act have tended to lapse into versions of fictional reference, what of approaches that focus upon textual properties? Dorrit Cohn’s *The Distinction of Fiction* was one prominent appeal to the idea that fictionality can be defined independently of both communicative context and referential relations, in terms of textual signposts – principally, narrative modes for the representation of consciousness, the text-immanent relation between story and discourse, and the dissociation between author and narrator (109-131). However, her appeal to such signposts remained impervious to objections that they were neither necessary nor sufficient as indices of fictionality (in the case of representations of consciousness); or that they were not manifestations of fictionality but theoretical postulates predicated upon it (in her accounts of the story–discourse distinction and of the narrator). Moreover, the concept of fiction as “nonreferential narrative” that these features are taken to underwrite is actually, in Cohn’s usage, no more than a terminological variant on the idea of reference to a fictional world: when she speaks of the “self-referentiality” of fiction, she means that it “creates the world to which it refers by referring to it” (13).

Cohn’s tightly restricted attention to novelistic discourse is considerably enlarged by Umberto Eco, who brings a semiotic frame of reference to the question of fictionality, thus making an important enabling move with respect to the diversity of the media of fiction. A semiotic approach also orients textuality towards its communicative function, in closer sympathy with a rhetorical account. Eco’s own semiotic analysis of cinema is more concerned with film narrative than fiction, however, and the same tendency is apparent in narratologically inclined film theorists like David Bordwell, even in work featuring “fiction” in the title. Film criticism has been all too ready to lapse from a semiotic perspective upon filmic communication into one founded upon the idea of a diegetic world; indeed Genette did not derive his key term, diégèse, from Plato’s discursive category of diegesis, but from “theoreticians of cinematographic narrative” (*Narrative Discourse* 27n.), referring to the universe of the represented events. In Eco’s own usage, too, semiotics is ultimately subsumed by his representational investment in fictional worlds, almost as if critical analysis had been overwhelmed by the language of creative imagination. Just such a tendency seems to be enacted in *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*: “Woods are a metaphor for the narrative text,” Eco declares in the first lecture (6); but by the last, the woods have quite explicitly become a metaphor for worlds, to be contrasted, compared and confused with the actual world.

Two further approaches to textual signs of fictionality, tending in opposite directions, are worth noting. The first is Michael Riffaterre’s *Fictional Truth*, which argues that textual signs of fictionality produce an autonomous verisimilitude, predicated not upon correspondence with reality but upon text-internal coherence. Here the logic of fiction is radically divorced from communicative context; yet it is worth noting that Riffaterre’s premise also effectively rebuts the referential argument for fictional-world theories; what matters is not reference, but text-internal co-reference. A more recent argument by Mari Hatavara and Jarmila Mildorf, on the contrary, suggests that many textual features associated with fictionality are continuous with devices invoked for other narrative purposes, independent of fiction. At this point, however, even if it can be meaningfully said that the term “fictionality” remains applicable, it has been reduced to pure discursive form rather than rhetorical function.

# 4. Pragmatic and Empirical Approaches

I have said that Eco’s semiotic approach is a helpful move in the direction of communicative pragmatics, the emphasis that is most hospitable to a rhetorical model of fictionality as a direct communicative resource, and considerations of this kind are foregrounded in works such as *The Role of the Reader* and *The Limits of Interpretation*. Eco is not unique in making such moves whilst remaining fundamentally committed to a fictional-worlds concept of fiction, however; pragmatic and empirical approaches in general have uncritically retained this premise. A manifestation of this tendency in a quite different negotiation between represented objects and communicative acts is advanced by Harald Fricke, who distinguishes between the semantic nature of narrative fictionality and the pragmatic nature of dramatic (or performative) fictionality. Such a division runs wholly counter to the cross-media scope of a semiotic perspective, abandoning the idea of a unitary concept of fiction altogether, and in doing so it foregrounds the extent to which ideas specific to language often constrain theorisation of the communicative dimension of fiction across media.

Other theorists primarily concerned with literary fictions also invoke pragmatic contexts without escaping the gravitational pull of referential categories: Didier Coste, for example, emphasises the idea of fictionality as a quality of communicative acts, but pursues it nonetheless through reference and fictional (or “imaginary”) worlds (108). Marcello Pagnini defines the literary pragmatically as a form of communication, and fictionality as a deviation from the “ordinary communication model” characterised by “acceptance of the introjection of referents” (108). This way of handling the issue suggestively explains the interpretation of fiction through “metaphoric referentiality” (109), but proves to be more about securing the autonomy of the literary text than its function in communicative context; its closest affinities are with Riffaterre’s emphasis upon the integrity of the internally coherent artefact. Much other work in the pragmatics of fiction seems content to supplement established theories of fiction without significantly challenging them. The contribution pragmatics has to make is apparently just that “a text is fictional because of a silent agreement between the author and the recipient…that the characters and events in this particular text… are to be treated as fictitious.”[[3]](#endnote-4) There is some passing interest in relevance theory (of which more below), but circumscribing the issue in this way means that most work on the pragmatics of fiction is effectively confined to the pragmatics *within* fiction.

One place where we might look to find a more substantial commitment to communicative contexts is the empirical study of literature, again a direction indicated in Eco’s work. Siegfried J. Schmidt has advanced a consolidated empirical theory, and situates fictions in relation to their contexts in “social reality” (60); yet his premise is a text-world model, in which the adherence of literary text worlds to aesthetic convention sets them apart from reality. To say, as he does, that fiction is “more intensely coherent and meaningful than social reality” (70) seems a category error – surely it should be “than non-fiction”? Yet he goes on to consider the argument that just this incommensurability presents literature (read “fiction”) as illusion, and only demurs from such views to the extent that they imply a negative evaluation of literature.

David Miall is also interested in empirically grounded theory, but rejects Schmidt’s view of the pragmatic contextual basis of fictionality, preferring to appeal to formal signposts such as internal focalisation (21). Leaving that aside, again the theoretical premises pre-empt any possibility that the empirical orientation will break new ground. Building upon Walton, Miall claims that “we share in the imaginative act of narrating, moment by moment, the unfolding fiction,” and that our imaginative alignment with the narrator resolves the problem of fictionality because the narrator is someone “with the requisite knowledge and feelings to act as an observer or participant in the unfolding narrative” (74). It is another version of immersive make-believe, if idiosyncratic in its privileging of narratorial perspective; imaginative and emotional engagement are facilitated by making-believe, not in the fictional world itself, but in the narrator’s experiential relation to it. There is no recognition of a real-world communicative act in which fictionality is a direct communicative resource; once again, appeal to a concept of the narrator as intrinsic to fiction merely begs the question.[[4]](#endnote-5)

Miall invokes the support of Noël Carroll to distinguish between simple delusion and our emotional involvement with fictions, but Carroll’s argument is more interesting than that. He makes the point that it is possible to entertain a proposition as unasserted, and yet have an emotional response to it. This is how Carroll distinguishes imagining from knowing or believing; it is “to understand the meaning of the proposition (to grasp its propositional content), but … to be neutral about its truth value” (209). He goes on to characterise fiction in just these terms, as a pragmatically distinct mode of communication that invites us to entertain unasserted the propositions it articulates. This takes us a step closer to the idea of fictionality as rhetoric, although Carroll cuts off its potential in two ways: by framing the whole argument at the level of the propositional unit, the meaning of which resolves into “propositional content” (209); and (a corollary of this first constraint) by glossing the relevant sense of imagination in ontological terms. He says that “we may have emotional responses to fictions concerning situations, persons, objects, and things that do not exist. For we can imagine or suppose that they exist” (210). In doing so he retreats back within the confines of fictional-worlds theory.

# 5. Relevance and Cognitive Effects

There are communicative perspectives upon fiction that establish its pragmatics on a more substantial footing. Terry Eagleton, in *The Event of Literature*, invokes Wittgenstein and the idea of fiction as a language game, so displacing the question of its meaning from reference to use. He goes on to formulate the view that fictions “function rhetorically, registering values and attitudes in the guise of describing the way things are” (112); but he nonetheless continues to rely upon such notions as suspension of disbelief and engagement with fictional worlds. Similarly, Marina Grishakova foregrounds the potential for a cognitive account of the continuity between fictions and their contexts of interpretation, but couches this continuity in terms of experiential sense-making, via cognitive frames. The concept of cognitive frame does offer a coarse-grained model of the contextual parameters of communication, and of our negotiations between a fiction’s particulars and the general characteristics of narrative; but conceived as a textual “subworld” or a “subuniverse of experience” (191), it can only subordinate communication to an experiential model of fictional worlds.

A cognitive orientation can gain more direct purchase upon the communicative act than this. Relevance theory, as advanced by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, is founded upon the cognitive economy of communication. Its emphasis upon contextual cognitive assumptions, rather than a code model of language, has been taken up in literary terms by Adrian Pilkington, for whom figurative language (and subsequently literary communication in general) is best explained by the relevance-theory concept of “poetic effects,” or the cognitive effects derived from an utterance’s wide range of weak implicatures rather than its relevance as literal information (“Poetic Effects” 55). This expansive conception of implicature is important because it provides a way to articulate the cognitive value of fiction that is consistent with the ordinary understanding of represented events, but distinguishes between complex connotation and instrumental information. Fictionality itself, however, is not pursued by Pilkington, whose interest remains at the level of “small-scale poetic effects … achieved by individual rhetorical devices” (*Poetic Effects* xiii).

Relevance theory has large implications for fictionality beyond the notion of “poetic effects,” notably in its approach to figurative utterances and to irony, though this is not apparent from Sperber and Wilson’s own brief comments on fictions, which just treat them as representations of fictional worlds offering a global relevance through some analogical relation to reality (265). Their approach to fiction underplays the potential of relevance theory’s fundamental claim, that communication is a matter of ostensive and inferential changes to a mutual cognitive environment, driven by expectations of relevance, without recourse to either a code model of language or H. P. Grice’s “Maxim of Quality,” which privileges literal truth. On such an account, fictions make sense as serious (rather than framed or disavowed) utterances, understood in communicative context through the cognitive assumption that a rhetoric of fictionality is in play; an assumption that has the effect of minimising expectations of an utterance’s directly informative relevance, and so privileging the inferential retrieval of less immediate implicatures. There is a long tradition affirming the “higher truth” of fiction, going back to Aristotle’s claim that because fiction (“poetry”) speaks of universals rather than particulars, it is more philosophical and serious than history (16 [51b]). For some, fiction apparently attains to this higher truth just by virtue of being fiction, without regard to its particulars; on the other hand, for Aristotle it is secured, too narrowly, by his recuperated notion of mimesis, grounded in probability. Relevance theory provides the means for a more finely granular and more comprehensive account of fiction as a serious mode of communication.

# 6. Rhetorical Accounts

The possibility of a rhetorical approach to fictionality arises from the idea that fictionality might itself be a communicative resource, rather than merely the consequence of certain kinds of communication or representation. Fictionality, on this view, is a feature of the communicative process, rather than a product of that process. Such a theoretical move cuts across the whole range of perspectives upon fictionality just surveyed. All these approaches, despite their variety and their proliferation of explanatory concepts, proceed by demarcating a domain of fiction as the product of communicative (or imaginative) behaviour. It may be a fictional world, a pretended speech act, a game of make-believe, or some variant upon these ideas, but in all cases it manifests a double logic, in which fiction is framed, or disallowed, with respect to the larger context of seriously assertive discourse within which it occurs, and then a secondary mechanism is invoked to put the fiction back into relation with that context and explain why we care about fictions at all. The archetype of this appeal to a double logic remains the double negative of Coleridge’s “suspension of disbelief.”

There is of course a long tradition of rhetorical approaches to fiction that do not disturb this consensus at all. It derives from the rhetorical criticism of the Chicago School, and is best exemplified by Wayne Booth, for whom the rhetoric of fiction bore first of all upon its representational strategies and the intra-fictional communicative relations in which they were transacted, and functioned in the communicative context of authors and readers only via this passage. Indeed the “communication model,” in narratological usage, is itself an elaborate exercise in the dissociation of the discourse of fiction from its real-world contexts.[[5]](#endnote-6) Even a shift of emphasis to real-world communicative acts, however, does not amount to a distinctively rhetorical approach unless fiction entails some specific communicative gambit, with a definable functional relation to its effects upon readers or audiences (Sternberg and Yacobi 437).

This is where the idea of fictionality as rhetoric intervenes. As a rhetorical move it is not intrinsic to any particular features of the utterance, but is circumstantial; it consists in the re-orientation of communicative attention achieved by the contextual assumption of fictionality itself. This assumption, to cast the idea in the slightly technical language of relevance theory, is just a pragmatic, contextual inference about communicative purposes manifest in the shared cognitive environment between communicator and audience; it has a basic effect upon the way in which the audience seeks to realise the relevance of the communication, minimising expectations of its direct relevance as information, and so directing cognitive effort towards the retrieval of less immediate implicatures.[[6]](#endnote-7) In other words, when we recognise in context that an utterance is exploiting the communicative resource of fictionality, we look to grasp its point without the expectation that it will be straightforwardly informative.

At the end of *Mrs. Dalloway* Virginia Woolf writes, “It is Clarissa, he said. For there she was” (213). The statement in part inhabits Peter Walsh’s perspective, and is charged with the “terror,” “ecstasy” and “extraordinary excitement” that he feels; but it is also a direct authorial assertion about Clarissa. As such it is not only information concerning a character for whom we have no reason to think there is a real-world referent, it is also information of a banal and inconsequential kind. However, we also understand that the final sentence consummates the revelation of character with which the whole novel is concerned. It asserts the intrinsic value of an imaginative appreciation of complex personality: the journey we have taken, through the entangled superficialities and depths of her feelings, attitudes, relations and life history, from the novel’s opening “Mrs. Dalloway” to this “Clarissa.” Through internal focalisation it layers our direct apprehension of these qualities with Peter’s perspective upon her, itself a tangle of emotional intensity, immaturity, absurdity, delusion and earnestness. Following an extended, meandering conversation between Peter and Sally, it converges with the parallel chronology of the preceding section, and so creates a retrospective sense that Clarissa’s concurrent withdrawal into the little room, at the height of her party, was a more prolonged absence than had been conveyed by its representation from her own perspective. In doing so it brings home the novel’s formal exploration of the variance between the leaden regularity of clock time and the volatile intensities of psychological time. In all these ways Woolf’s final sentence invites and rewards the effort to realise aspects of its communicative point independent of informative relevance.[[7]](#endnote-8)

Fictionality, on this account, is rhetorical rather than just communicative, because it elicits a specific range of cognitive effects; and it is rhetorical rather than just stylistic, because it is a pragmatic, not discursive, feature of communication. A rhetorical approach to fictionality is also importantly distinct from a rhetorical approach to generic fiction. One of the simplifications of my opening joke, as an example of fictionality, is that a joke inherently realises most of its relevance all at once, gathered up in the singular coup of the punchline, so that the whole discourse is understood to be organised around this point. This singularity means that the scope of the assumption of fictionality coincides with the generic frame of the joke as a discursive unit. But the situation is more complex in a novel. Here the generic frame itself cues the assumption of fictionality at the level of the text as a whole, yet readers may justifiably assume the informative relevance of some parts of it (consider historical novels, novels set in identifiable places, novels drawing upon established discourses of knowledge, etc.). The texture of extended fictions allows for fluid movement back and forth between fictionality and informative relevance – much as a narrative may, for example, slip freely in and out of internal focalisation. The rhetorical distinction is categorical, but its effects are contingent upon local context: even where the generic context marks fictionality as the presiding dominant regime, there is room for informative relevance. Conversely, local irruptions of fictionality are commonplace in non-fictional discursive contexts where they are clearly subordinate to the overall priority of informative relevance.

# 7. Versions of Fictionality as Rhetoric: Disputed Points

My characterisation of fictionality as rhetoric has already become too specific to represent the whole range of current rhetorical approaches to fictionality, however, so I need to distinguish more carefully between rhetorical approaches in general and the particular theoretical commitments of the view I am expounding. The shared premise of rhetorical approaches is that they focus upon the real-world communicative relevance of fictionality, rather than dissociating it from that context in order to treat it as referential or seriously asserted within a fictional frame. Fictionality, according to this rhetorical view, is an oblique way of communicating, rather than a non-serious or unreal quality of certain acts or objects of representation. Fictionality as a communicative mode is distinct from fiction as a generic discourse, and independent of specific media; it is also a cultural, rather than ontological matter, so that its conventions and uses have a history.

When it comes to fleshing out a rhetorical concept of fictionality, though, this consensus begins to fragment. I have invoked relevance theory in order to define fictionality as a contextual assumption prompting us to understand an utterance’s communicative relevance as indirectly, rather than directly, informative. One of the more striking consequences of this definition is that it does not assume that the utterance is false, only that the issue of its literal truth does not arise, because it is not the point. This view has a long pedigree, being akin to Sidney’s claim that the poet “nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth” (103). However, it is at odds with the rhetorical definition of fictionality offered by Henrik Skov Nielsen and Simona Zetterberg Gjerlevsen, who declare that “We define fictionality as intentionally signalled, communicated invention.” At stake here, first of all, is the distinction between a rhetorical and a referential model of fictionality. As “communicated invention,” the utterance could be understood to be communicated *as* invention, or to be the communication *of* invention. If the latter, the utterance’s fictionality simply depends upon its referential status, and the definition lapses from a rhetorical focus upon communication back into a representational model of fiction. The fact that such a definition courts this interpretation is itself problematic, I think; but even with a properly rhetorical emphasis, in which the utterance is communicated *as* invention, the emphasis upon invention is superfluous and unwarranted. What is crucial about the assumption of fictionality is that it directs attention away from the direct informative relevance of the utterance; it is redundant to also assume that the implied reason for doing so is that the utterance is untrue. It is also illegitimate to assume, as a theorist or a reader, that invention *is* being communicated; it is a commonplace that novelists draw upon their own experience, for example, yet if fiction were indeed communicated invention, a curious consequence would be to make such a practice dishonest. Of course fictionality is associated with invention, and most fiction is indeed invented to some degree; but this is a circumstantial consequence of fictionality’s freedom from informative relevance; it is not intrinsic to it. Once accountability to fact ceases to be a communicative priority, there is every reason to take advantage of the creative opportunities afforded by invention.

A somewhat different fracture line within rhetorical approaches to fictionality appears between the communicative and representational aspects of the utterance. I have emphasised the contextual and pragmatic nature of a rhetorical account of fictionality founded upon relevance theory, from which perspective the frame of communication is a shared cognitive environment larger than the utterance itself. The representational dimension of fiction is therefore logically subordinate to its communicative function. Within the narratological tradition, however, one theoretical legacy of structuralism is the logical primacy of story over discourse, which is to say, the priority of representational object to communicative act. Since this theoretical tradition was developed almost exclusively in relation to fictional narratives, and provided no way to negotiate the boundary of fictionality, it proliferated levels of actually or implicitly represented communication, within the frame of fiction, in a perpetual deferral of the problem of crossing that boundary. For this reason, the standard narrative “communication model,” built upon narrators and narratees, is intra-fictional. It subordinates communication to representation, and in doing so it effectively excludes the possibility of understanding fictionality as a communicative resource. So when James Phelan, whose rhetorical approach to fiction has deep roots in the history of narrative theory, proposes to adapt and extend Seymour Chatman’s version of the narrative communication model (Phelan, “Authors, Resources, Audiences”), it seems as if the weight of that heritage has pulled his concept of fictionality out of orbit, in another kind of lapse back into a representational model of fiction.[[8]](#endnote-9)

# 8. Fictionality, Metaphor, Irony

Other live topics of debate between rhetorical approaches to fictionality concern the scope of the concept. Once it is dissociated from generic fiction, a host of candidate utterances present themselves as possible instances of fictionality. Many of these can be straightforwardly evaluated once a clear definition is adopted, granting of course that any attempt to define fictionality is already partly motivated by views about its scope. On my account, to assume the fictionality of an utterance is to understand it independently of any directly informative relevance. This defining feature makes it clear that counterfactuals, hypothetical scenarios, prospective narratives, and similar forms, in which the relevance of the utterance builds upon or contrasts with specific informative assumptions, are not in themselves instances of fictionality (it is significant, for example, that we can distinguish between counterfactuals and counterfactual fiction). Other delimitations of scope seem to require further theoretical elaboration, or perhaps just a practical determination of conceptual boundaries. For example, does a rhetorical concept of fictionality effectively embrace all figurative language? Does it apply to non-narrative representations – an imaginary landscape, say, or a unicorn?

Relevance theory offers a powerful way of assimilating metaphor to an ostensive-inferential model of communication, without the need for exceptional treatment of figurative language as a deviation from normal usage. The essential mechanism is not an assumed flouting of conversational maxims or violation of literal truthfulness, but just the inferential effort to maximise relevance in context. This account complements the idea of “poetic effects” that Sperber and Wilson use to explain kinds of relevance derived from multiple weak implicatures, and has itself been straightforwardly adopted for literary analysis (222; Pilkington, *Poetic Effects*). But should the concept of fictionality extend to the use of metaphor? Idiomatic usage resists calling metaphors fictions, and this does seem an unhelpful dissipation of fictionality’s conceptual specificity, but it has been countenanced in some rhetorical approaches to fictionality (Phelan and Nielsen; Nielsen and Zetterberg Gjerlevsen). The reason is that once fictionality is conceived as a localised communicative resource, beyond generic fictions, a question arises as to how local, how finely granular, manifestations of fictionality may be. One principled basis upon which a distinction can be made is that fictionality is an utterance-level phenomenon, whereas metaphors function within utterances, which themselves substantially establish the informative context of the metaphor’s relevance. Some metaphors are arguably co-extensive with the utterance – “Je suis Charlie Hebdo,” for example (Nielsen and Zetterberg Gjerlevsen); but even such cases do not involve a contextual assumption of fictionality as I have argued fictions do. It would be a plausible theoretical clarification to say that the assumption of fictionality does not inform the utterance in itself but the narrative mode in which it participates.[[9]](#endnote-10) It is actually implicit across the whole range of theories of fictionality that the relevant sense of fiction pertains to narrative fiction, even though there are of course non-narrative senses of ‘fiction.’ Setting the bounds of fictionality this way might be taken as an ad hoc restriction of scope, but the contrast with metaphor suggests that there is a principled basis for confining the rhetorical concept to narrative. Terminological consistency, on such terms, would just dictate that concepts like fairies, vampires or time machines are more properly described as metaphorical or imaginary, rather than fictional.

One further specification of the rhetoric of fictionality can be gleaned from comparison with the relevance-theory account of irony, which Wilson and Sperber explain as a form of echoic utterance. That is, the relevance of an ironic comment does not lie in the mere negation of what it seems to assert, but in the attribution of that thought or perspective to some actual or hypothetical person, and in the evaluative attitude expressed towards such a person (125). This echoic account is importantly distinct from a pretence model of ironic utterances, and some of the reasons parallel the objections to a pretence model of fiction. It is notable first that irony need not echo a specific utterance, but often sets itself against quite diffuse normative attitudes. Even where an ironic utterance invokes an actual prior speech act, it need not conform to the original’s form or illocutionary force; its evaluative stance is towards a certain propositional content, not a particular discursive expression of it (Wilson and Sperber 139). More importantly, with irony as with fiction, there is often no plausible serious speech act that could be the object of imitation, indicating that the pretence model is at best an over-generalisation from the specific case of overtly represented discourse. Echoic utterance, then, most essentially corresponds not to imitation (with respect to a represented discourse) but to reflexiveness (with respect to the communicative act itself).[[10]](#endnote-11) Fictionality is no more to be conflated with irony than with metaphor, of course: quite apart from irony’s specific evaluative orientation, it is not necessarily an utterance-level phenomenon, as is readily apparent, for example, from its role within internal focalisation or free indirect discourse. However, there is a specific analogy with the rhetoric of fictionality to be drawn from the idea of echoic utterance as a kind of reflexiveness. This connotation was even more prominent in the first formulation Sperber and Wilson gave to the echoic account, which drew upon the use–mention distinction (125), and it points to an essential feature of the assumption of fictionality. As a contextual orientation towards a whole narrative utterance, the assumption of fictionality places the utterance in a similarly reflexive light; the direct informative relevance of the narrative is superseded by the second-order relevance it affords when considered *as* such a narrative. This is communicative reflexiveness, it should be noted, not representational reflexiveness; the kinds of representational self-consciousness associated with metafictionality are only derivatives of this primary quality of fictionality as rhetoric.

# 9. Implications

While the ironic attitude inherently establishes a broad evaluative stance towards the ironised view or thought, the reflexiveness of fictionality is much more capacious. Precisely because the assumption of fictionality informs relevance at the level of narrative utterance, the contextual parameters of that reflexive relevance are as variable as the direct functions of narrative itself. This does not mean that a rhetorical account of fictionality lacks definite features, but rather that these features can only be specified by descending to particular contexts and particular cases. Unlike an ontological notion of fictionality, which is metaphysically categorical, the rhetorical concept is only pragmatically categorical; accordingly, the question of how variation in pragmatic contexts informs the communicative effects of fictionality becomes a significant new avenue of research. There are three kinds of context that affect the way fictionality operates in fundamental ways. The most immediate is the fiction’s medium and the specific communicative possibilities it affords; the second is the fiction’s relation to the informative discursive context within which the utterance appears; and the broadest is its relation to the system of discourses that characterise its cultural and historical context. A brief glance at each of these three prospects will serve as my conclusion.

## 9.1 Transmedial Fictionality

There is a significant correlation between certain approaches to fiction and an interest in fictions across media, perhaps best exemplified in the work of Marie-Laure Ryan. Research on fictions in iconic and, especially, interactive media has been significantly influenced by Ryan’s work, thanks partly to the thoroughgoing way she has brought to bear the predominantly literary conceptual apparatus of narratology in these fields. The relation also runs in the other direction, however: Ryan’s fictional worlds approach to fictionality in general is strongly inflected by certain ideas of virtual experientiality that such media seem to support (see especially part two of *Narrative as Virtual Reality*). Derek Matravers has debunked the tendency for theories of fictionality to be framed with reference to illusory or imaginative experience, a tendency he identifies with the legacy of Kendall Walton’s make-believe model. He rightly insists that the distinction between experience and narrative, or “confrontation” and “representation,” is more fundamental than that between fiction and non-fiction (45); and that much of the fictionality debate collapses this distinction by appeal to make-believe as a proxy for experiential engagement, or to “recentering” facilitated by metaphors of virtuality, transportation and immersion.[[11]](#endnote-12) However Matravers quite wrongly goes on to argue that there is no distinct cognitive attitude towards fiction, and indeed that media such as film are not best understood to elicit imaginative engagement with representational situations at all (ch. 9). These conclusions are symptomatic of his emphasis upon the opposition between representation and experiential encounter, rather than communication; yet fictions in iconic and indeed simulative media, just as much as linguistic fictions, are semiotic forms that serve distinct communicative purposes by virtue of their fictionality. One of the conspicuous strengths of an account of fiction based upon the cognitive pragmatics of relevance theory is that it accommodates communicative acts well beyond the narrowly linguistic paradigm upon which narratology was founded without reducing the domain of meaning to that of experience; it foregrounds the contextual relation between different semiotic systems and the communicative force of fictionality. While there is already a substantial body of research on the distinct affordances of various narrative media, it has not yet brought into focus the variation in rhetorical negotiations of fictionality entailed by their specific semiotic resources, because fictionality has not yet been addressed in a pragmatic communicative relation to those resources, instead of in medium-independent ontological terms (see Thon).

## 9.2 Fictionality beyond Fiction

The second avenue of inquiry opened up by a rhetorical concept of fictionality is the analysis of uses of that rhetoric in communicative contexts beyond generic fiction. The circumstance that fictions often include informative utterances, and that non-fictional discourses often include elements of fictionality, has led Stacie Friend to draw an antithetical conclusion: that fiction is best defined as a genre, delimited in a family-resemblance way by a set of individually non-essential criteria (181). However such a view effectively abandons any interest in how fictionality works within non-fictional contexts; in public and political discourse, in certain forms of biography and autobiography, in advertising, in everyday oral conversation. These cases can be accommodated by distinguishing between the local fictionality of particular utterances and the global fictionality or non-fictionality of the discursive acts or occasions to which they contribute, allowing that there is no necessary alignment between the two. From a relevance-theory perspective, these are different contextual frames, and while it is more inclusive global assumptions about the fictionality or informative relevance of a discursive act that dominate, this does not exclude the potential for contrary assumptions about relevance in the local context of included utterances. The rhetorical effects of local irruptions of fictionality within globally informative discourses are already the focus of significant narratological research interest, prompted in part by some of the arguments discussed above (see Nielsen et al., “Ten Theses”); the field is immature, though, and many of the attendant questions about the nature and scope of fictionality have yet to be properly explored.

## 9.3 Historicising Fictionality

The third context appeals to the historical and comparative study of fiction, which is, of course, a very well-established field of research; it has long been a staple topic within literary history, and has gained impetus within narratology since the demise of the classical structuralist and synchronic paradigm with which the field was first staked out. Diachronic approaches to narratology throw into relief both the historical variations in fictional narrative form and the theoretical limitations of a conceptual framework that treated the realist novel as a normative, if not universal, model of fiction (Fludernik). However, it is not only the forms of generic fiction that have a history, but also the rhetorical force of fictionality itself, within the economy of discourses characterising different historical and cultural contexts. Unlike concepts of fictionality based upon non-referentiality, or pretended illocutions, or circumscribed games of make-believe, a rhetorical account foregrounds the communicative relevance of fictionality as a contextual variable that, in its broadest parameters, must be related to the specific formation of cultural discourses that prevails in a given society and historical moment. Catherine Gallagher’s reconceptualisation of the rise of the novel as the “rise of fictionality” is an important move in this direction, but clearly the use of narrative beyond informative purposes was not born with the novel; this was not the rise of fictionality, but the rise of one form of that rhetoric. There are finer variations to be discerned in the way fictionality has been understood within the history of the novelistic paradigm (see Zetterberg Gjerlevsen); there are also broader and more fundamental variations in the functions of fictionality within pre-modern and non-Western cultures (see Gu; Cullhed and Rydholm). A rhetorical account of fictionality does not only presuppose such contextual contingencies, it also provides a theoretical framework within which they can be explained and made intelligible.

In these three respects, then, a rhetorical model of fictionality opens up large new fields of domain-specific research, in which there is an irreducible reciprocity between theoretical and contextual paradigms. Conceiving of fictionality as a rhetoric not only offers a significant re-conception of the theoretical understanding of fiction, but also provides an exemplary model of the context-dependence of formal concepts.

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1. . A natural antithesis that offers itself here would be a distinction, within communicative acts, between informative acts and fictive acts. The terms are appealing because they also provide for a clear contrast between the fiction-producing act or stance (fictive) and the representational product of fiction (fictional). However, I have not adopted this usage because of the risk of terminological confusion. It is certainly a well-established sense of “fictive” in English, found for example in Gregory Currie’s use of “fictive utterance,” “fictive intent” and “fictive communication” (11, 23, 30); also in Frank Kermode’s invocation of “the fictive power of words” (134). The contrast between “fictive” and “fictional” is succinctly articulated by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen when they state that “Fictional content is such that how things are (in the fiction) is determined by how they are described to be in a fictive utterance” (51). The usage is recognised in sense 1b of the OED entry on “fictive,” “Adapted to or concerned with the creation of fiction; imaginatively creative.” Nonetheless, while “fictional” is the vastly more common term for the products of fiction (fictional characters, fictional events), there are also many instances of “fictive” used in this sense. The distinction is even less clear in an international context: German usage of “Fiktivität” and “Fiktionalität,” in Zipfel, for example, tends in exactly the opposite direction; and Françoise Lavocat’s discussion indicates that French usage will not serve to arbitrate in favour of either orientation (18). Under such circumstances it is futile to legislate, and I have generally avoided the word. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. . The founding arguments for the view of fictionality assumed here can be found in Walsh, *Rhetoric of Fictionality*; a broader, collective rhetorical agenda is articulated in Nielsen et al., “Ten Theses.” The latter elides some significant points of difference among rhetorical approaches, which are elucidated towards the end of this essay. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. . Locher and Jucker (7), summarising and approving Klauk and Köppe. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. . On this pervasive rationale for the concept of the narrator, see Walsh, *Rhetoric of Fictionality* (ch. 4). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. . See the canonical diagram in Chatman (151). The theoretical import of the narrative communication model is that in fiction there is no diegesis in Plato’s sense, but only mimesis – imitations of the narration of another (cf. the discussion of pretence accounts in section 2). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. . Aside from the concept of relevance itself, terms here that have a specific role in the theoretical framework of relevance theory include “contextual assumption,” “manifest,” “shared cognitive environment,” “cognitive effort” and “implicature.” Sperber and Wilson provide a full and patient exposition of the theory in *Relevance, Communication and Cognition*. I have offered a gloss on the theory and its application to fiction in chapter one of *The Rhetoric of Fictionality*. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. . In “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” Woolf attempts to explain the novelist’s interest in character by telling “a simple story which, however pointless, has the merit of being true” (321). Indeed, it is precisely as a true story that it suffers from pointlessness; however, Woolf’s purpose in presenting the anecdote about her encounter with “Mrs. Brown” is to enact her imaginative response, which was to “begin almost automatically to write a novel about her”; all its relevance lies in the way fictionality realises the opportunity for characterisation, and as with *Mrs. Dalloway*, it is only in a directly informative sense that the story “ends without any point to it” (324). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. . This argument is elaborated in Walsh, “Rhetoric, Communication, Fiction.” [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. . David Davies has argued that fictionality is a quality of narrative, as opposed to fictional works (39), in the context of an account that has some affinity with the rhetorical model advanced here, except that it is framed in relation to a notion of “fictive utterance” as a distinct category of speech act. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. . For an elaboration upon narrative voice in fiction as a reflexive hierarchy of representational acts, recuperating Plato’s distinction between diegesis and mimesis as a corrective to the communication model of narrative transmission, see Walsh, “Person, Level, Voice.” [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. . See Marie-Laure Ryan, “Fiction, Cognition and Non-Verbal Media” (14). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)