Veracity Exculpature vs Literary Indirect Discourse

FOUNDATIONAL ISSUES IN SEMANTICS SEMINAR, OCTOBER 2017, DANIEL.HOEK@NYU.EDU

Free indirect discourse (FID) is a way of reporting a subject's thoughts or speech marked by the following characteristics (e.g. Sharvit 2008):

- *Optional verbs*: Where attitude verbs are included in FID at all, they are typically optional.
- *Speaker-centric indexicals and tense*: The subject is referred to in the third person, while indexicals like "I", "you", "now", "today" typically retain their 'unshifted' reference. If the speech or thought reported are in the past, the subject's present is referred using the past tense.
- *Freedom*: FID is unconstrained relative to SID in that it can include direct questions and exclamations ("Yes", "Well", "Ouch", "Oh").

We'll focus particularly on this last aspect of FID. Consider this example:

Science, Karl thought, had always progressed by falsifying general hypotheses. After each refutation, scientists framed a new, as yet unfalsified hypothesis. They did so with the aim of making it, too, easy to falsify. But hang on, that's strange! Why did these scientists select theories that were more likely to be false? Weren't they trying to find the truth? (1)

(1) is most naturally read as discussing Karl's opinions about science, not the speaker's. Note that the exclamations and the question at the end of (1) admit of two very different readings:

- On the *attributive* reading, (1) reports that Karl was surprised about his own conclusion, and reports that he wondered why scientists select a theory likely to be false. The speaker/narrator need not really be surprised or puzzled about anything. (Possible continuation: "The question vexed Karl all day, and that night he had trouble falling asleep.")
- On the *non-attributive* reading, the *speaker* expresses surprise at Karl's view, and asks why Karl thought scientists select theories that were likely to be false. (Possible continuation: "For some reason, Karl did not find this strange at all.")

On the non-attributive reading, the speaker is really posing a question/making an exclamation, but with a different content from the literal one. On the attributive reading, the question/exclamation is used to convey information about the subject's thoughts.

Claim: The attributive and non-attributive readings of (1) are manifestations of completely different kinds of FID. One type is accounted for in terms of a pragmatic process I call *veracity exculpature*. The other kind is mostly confined to narrative and literary contexts. I propose to call the second kind *literary indirect discourse*.

Veracity Exculpatures

When describing the content of representations of all kinds, we have a tendency to speak as if the representation in question were accurate, even when we do not think it is:

The dagger Macbeth saw was covered in bloodstains.(2)(Target reading: The content of Macbeth's visual experience is as it would be if he did really see adagger covered in bloodstains)

Hob believes a witch burnt his barn, Nob believes she blighted his mare. (3)

(Target reading: The content of Hob and Nob's belief states are as they would be if Hob **knew** a witch burnt his barn, and Nob believed she blighted his mare)

Ellen believes a burglar robbed her. She wishes the person who robbed her had never robbed anyone. (4)

(Target reading: *The content of Ellen's belief and wish states are as they would be if Ellen knew a burglar robbed her, and wishes that person had never robbed anyone.*)

The availability of the target readings can be explained by appeal to a pragmatic mechanism I have called *conversational exculpature*. Intuitively, conversational exculpature *subtracts* some contextually presupposed information from what the literal the speaker literally says to arrive at their intended message. Examples (2-4), on my account, illustrate a special kind of conversational exculpature, where the contextual presupposition subtracted is a presupposition to the effect that the representation under discussion is an accurate one. I call this *veracity exculpature*.

The following example shows how veracity exculpature can produce an FID-like effect:

Rafael's *Girl with a Unicorn* shows Maddalena Strozzi just before her wedding. She is sitting in front of the open window, and holds a woolly-haired baby unicorn in her lap. (5)

As in (1), the second sentence of (5) appears to directly describe Maddalena, and yet it is interpreted as a description of the content of some representation (in this case a painting). It is also possible to follow (5) up with an exclamation or a question:

Look, what an odd-looking creature it is!	(6a)
---	------

What is the colour of her dress?

But here, only the non-attributive readings are available.

N.B., tense matters! For whatever reason, the veracity presupposition for visual representations is always that they accurately depict a *present* situation. That is why exculpature is unavailable in (7):
Rafael's *Girl with a Unicorn* shows Maddalena Strozzi just before her wedding. She was sitting in front of the open window, and held a woolly-haired baby unicorn in her lap. (7)

(6b)

Conversational Exculpature for Declarative Sentences

A *partial proposition* is an ordered pair of disjoint sets of worlds. $\langle t, f \rangle$ is true at w just in case $w \in t$ and false at w just in case $w \in f$. It has no truth-value at worlds outside of $t \cup f$. The *restriction* of proposition p to proposition q, written $p \upharpoonright q$, is the partial proposition $\langle p \cap q, \neg p \cap q \rangle$.

A (*full*) *question S* is a partition of logical space Ω . Two worlds *w* and *v* agree about *S*, written *w* ~_{*S*} *v*, just in case *w* and *v* are contained in the same partition cell of *S*.

A proposition p is *wholly about* (or simply *about*) S just in case p is a union of S-cells. (Equivalently, p is about S iff p is closed under the relation \sim_S). A partial proposition is about S just in case it is a restriction of some full proposition about S.

The *completion* of a partial proposition $\langle t, f \rangle$ by the question *S*, written $S(\langle t, f \rangle)$, is defined just in case $\langle t, f \rangle$ is about *S*. Then $S(\langle t, f \rangle)$ is this, possibly partial, proposition:

 $S(\langle t, f \rangle) =_{df} \langle \{w : w \sim_S v \text{ for some } v \in t\}, \{w : w \sim_S v \text{ for some } v \in f\} \rangle$

Prediction: Suppose in a conversation with *S* as its QUD, the speaker makes an assertion with *p* as its literal content, while contextually presupposing *q*. Then whenever the proposition $S(p\uparrow q)$ is well-defined, it is available as a non-literal reading of the speaker's claim.

Conversational Exculpature for Questions

A *partial question* is a set of mutually disjoint sets of worlds. The *restriction* of a question *S* to the proposition *q*, written *S**q*, is the partial question $\{s \cap q : s \in S\} \setminus \{\emptyset\}$.

A question *T* is *wholly about* (or simply *about*) *S* just in case *T* is at least as coarse-grained as *S*. (Equivalently, *T* is about *S* iff every *T*-cell is closed under the relation \sim_S). A partial question is about *S* just in case it is a restriction of some full question about *S*.

The *completion* of a partial question *T* by the question *S*, written S(T), is defined just in case *T* is about *S*. Then S(T) is the following, possibly partial, question:

 $S(T) =_{df} \{ \{ w : w \sim_S v \text{ for some } v \in t \} : t \in T \}$

Prediction: Suppose in a conversation with *S* as its QUD, the speaker asks a question with *T* as its literal content, while contextually presupposing *q*. Then whenever the proposition $S(T\uparrow q)$ is well-defined, it is available as a non-literal reading of the speaker's question.



Declaratives: Let *p*, *q* and *r* be full propositions, and let *S* be a question. Then $r = S(p \restriction q)$ if and only if the following three conditions are met:

►	<i>r</i> is about <i>S</i> .	(Aboutness)
۲	p and r are conditionally equivalent given q	(Equivalence)
۲	<i>q</i> overlaps every cell of <i>S</i> .	(Independence)

If just the final condition fails, $S(p \restriction q) = r \restriction s$, where *s* is the strongest proposition about *S* entailed by *q*.

Questions: Let *S*, *T* and *R* be full questions, and let *q* be a proposition. Then $R = S(T \upharpoonright q)$ if and only if the following three conditions are met:

•	<i>R</i> is about <i>S</i> .	(Aboutness)
►	Ttq = Rtq	(Equivalence)
Þ	<i>q</i> overlaps every cell of <i>S</i> .	(Independence)

If just the final condition fails, $S(T \upharpoonright q) = R \upharpoonright s$, where *s* is the strongest proposition about *S* entailed by *q*.

This allows us to handle (5) as follows: $S_5(p_5 \uparrow q_5) = r_5$.

*p*₅: During the sitting, Maddalena has a woolly-haired baby unicorn on her lap.

*q*₅: The *Girl with a Unicorn* is a completely accurate depiction of the sitting.

*S*₅: What is depicted in Rafael's *Girl with a Unicorn*?

*r*₅: The *Girl with a Unicorn* depicts a woolly-haired baby unicorn on Maddalena's lap.

Likewise, to account for (1), note we get $S_1(p_1 \upharpoonright q_1) = r_1$.

- *p*₁: Scientists aimed to make new hypotheses easy to falsify.
- *q*₁: Karl knew scientist's aims.
- *S*₁: What did Karl think?
- *r*₁: Karl thought that scientists aimed to make new hypotheses easy to falsify.

To derive the non-attributive content of the exclamation (6a), we assume that the truth-conditional content is transformed in the usual way, while the expressive content projects through the exculpature operator. To see the predictions questions, note $R_6 = S_5(T_6 \upharpoonright q_5)$ and $R_1 = S_1(T_1 \upharpoonright q_1)$.

- *T*₆: What colour dress did Maddalena wear during the sitting?
- *q*₅: The *Girl with a Unicorn* is a completely accurate depiction of the sitting.
- *S*₅: What is depicted in Rafael's *Girl with a Unicorn*?
- *R*₆: What colour dress is Maddalena depicted as wearing in Rafael's *Girl with a Unicorn*?
- T_1 : Why did scientists select theories that were more likely to be false?
- *q*₁: Karl knew scientist's aims.
- *S*₁: What did Karl think?
- *R*₁: Why did Karl think scientists selected theories that were more likely to be false?

Thus the account makes sense of the core data about pronouns and tense in FID: the speaker is literally describing the situation the subject's thoughts are about. In describing that situation, of course they use pronouns and tenses that are appropriate for the speaker rather than for the subject. Furthermore, it predicts the non-attributive readings of questions and exclamations.

Literary Indirect Discourse

But the attributive readings are not recoverable by exculpature: e.g. questions can't be transformed into propositions. Consequently, (8) and (9) cannot be accounted for as veracity exculpatures:

Tony stared at the mysterious woman at the other end of the table. Had she noticed him yet? What was she thinking about? (8)

Annabelle berated Henry loudly in the street. What a damned fool she was for having trusted him! She would never make such a stupid mistake again. (9)

In my view, examples like (8) and (9) are instances of a very different phenomenon. They exploit a particular literary/dramatic convention that gained prominence in the stream-of-consciousness movement at the start of the 20th century.

We can describe that convention as follows:

Literary indirect discourse (LID): The narrator pretends to be in complete agreement with the thoughts the subject is having or expressing at this moment in the story, and does so by expressing those same thoughts, and in the same order.

The function of this convention is to transmit the subject's thoughts in a direct way, in order to familiarise the reader more fully with the subject's mental states.

This way of accounting for LID explains the characteristic behaviour of pronouns and tense in FID, since the narrator must use different pronouns and tense if they are to achieve their aim of expressing the same content. It also accounts for the fact that this particular type of indirect discourse, with its attributive uses of questions and exclamations, is very rarely found outside of narrative or literary contexts.

On this account, (8) and (9) are like theatrical performances, not serious speech acts. Their aim is not purely descriptive. Still, LID transmit information. How? Well, if the listener is aware that the narrator is using LID, they can infer from the fact that the narrator is expressing a certain thought, that the subject must have had that thought (at least according to the narrator). Likewise, they can infer from the fact that the subject must have been surprised or puzzled. This accounts for the attributive readings of direct questions and exclamations.

The indirect way in which LID transmits information about the subject's thoughts is comparable to the indirect way in which a theatrical performance or a film transmits information about a certain course of events (i.e. one takes what an actor says as expressions of a character's views, and not as a direct recounting of the events that took place). There has always been a close connection between narration and theatre: in Ancient Greece, there was a continuous development from epic poems to monologues to plays. There are many common theatrical narrative conventions besides LID. For instance, the narrator may pretend to have personally witnessed the story they are telling. Or they may pretend to have played an active part in the story. Or they may pretend to have been personally told the story by one of the characters. All these forms typically involve the narrator empathising with the plight of their protagonist.

The LID convention is simply an extreme kind of empathetic narration. For a better understanding of why this radical narrative style came to prominence, it will be helpful to turn to one of its main advocates, Virginia Woolf, who wrote extensively on the topic. First, there is something Woolf was

actively trying to avoid: namely a stale, third personal recounting of the facts. By way of illustration, consider this criticism of her contemporary Arnold Bennett:

"We cannot hear her mother's voice, or Hilda's voice; we can only hear Mr. Bennett's voice telling us facts about rents and freeholds and copyholds and fines. What can Mr. Bennett be about? I have formed my own opinion of what Mr. Bennett is about—he is trying to make us imagine for him; he is trying to hypnotize us into the belief that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living there." (Virginia Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*)

Second, there was something Woolf was trying to achieve: i.e. to make her readers witness the events of the story precisely as they were perceived by the character in the story, without the interference of anything external to the character:

"Life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? ... Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness." (Virginia Woolf, *Modern Fiction*)

References

Banfield, Ann,	1982, Unspeakable Sentences. Routledge.
Blumberg, Kyle,	2017, "Counterfactual Attitudes and the Relational Analysis". In: Mind.
Doron, Edit,	1991, "Point of View as a Factor of Content". In: Proc. of SALT 1.
Hinterwimmer, S.,	2017, "Two kinds of perspective taking in narrative texts". In: <i>Proc. of SALT</i> 27.
Popper, Karl,	1959, The Logic of Scientific Discovery. Routledge.
Schlenker, Philippe,	2004, "Context of Thought and Context of Utterance". In: <i>Mind & Language</i> 19.3.
Sharvit, Yael,	2008, "The puzzle of free indirect discourse". In: Linguistics and Philosophy 31.
Woolf, Virginia,	1924, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown".
	1925, "Modern Fiction".