

# STRUCTURAL / POSSIBLE / FICTIONAL

## A few notes on the shift from structural poetics and stylistics to the theory of fictional worlds in the perspective of Lubomír Doležel's work

Original study

Marek Holan (ORCID: 0000-0002-0657-5644)  
Department of General Linguistics, Faculty of Arts, Palacký University in Olomouc, Czech Republic.  
(marek.m.holan@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** This article deals with the fictional worlds semantics (FWS) from the perspective of its relation to structural poetics and some branches of analytic philosophy, while these connections are explored via the general term *meaning*. Three questions are stated: 1.) how does the relation between structural notions and FWS perspective look like and what are possible dissimilarities; 2.) what is the role of analytic philosophy in this relation; 3.) how the meaning is constructed between the (fictional) text and the recipient? Some open problems in analysing the relation between structural concepts of meaning/reference re-construction and their adapting by FWS are thus inquired, especially in connection to thoughts presented by a prominent scholar in the field of FWS, Prof. Lubomír Doležel. Finally, a possible direction for grasping the meaning/reference problem in FWS from the perspective of dynamic semantics and game-theoretical semantics is proposed.

**Keywords:** structural poetics; fictional worlds semantics; meaning; reference; Ferdinand de Saussure; functional oppositions; dynamic semantics.

In past decades, the notion of structure, fictionality, and semantics was strongly emphasised in discussions about the theory of literature, and even philosophy or linguistics. This article deals with some aspects of the relation between *structural poetics* (as a set of methods and models used for constructing a course of the analytical approach to literary fiction), *fictional worlds semantics* (as a bidirectional programme – both in the sense of *poetics* and in the sense of *ontological referential frame*), and *possible worlds semantics* (as a philosophical framework) – some ideas derived from the theoretical work of Lubomír Doležel (as a bridging figure between structuralist tradition and fictional worlds semantics) serve as a referential framework for these thoughts. It is not intended to bring an exhaustive

description of the subject matter or a historical summary – in this article, I would rather present a theoretical framework which (hopefully) draws connections between some branches of structuralist thinking and the way of approaching questions considering meaning from the perspective of analytic philosophy, and the fictional worlds semantics as a poetological phenomenon. Special attention is paid to the general question of meaning-construction in fictional worlds semantics which can be viewed from perspectives that can broaden the viewpoint built up strictly based on possible worlds semantics.

The questions are as follows: 1.) how does the relation between structural notions and fictional worlds semantics perspective look like and what are possible

dissimilarities; 2.) what is the role of analytic philosophy in the above-mentioned relation; 3.) how the meaning is constructed between the (fictional) text and the recipient? Therefore, the questions presented above divide this article into three parts which – combined and as a conclusion – there provide possible outcomes regarding the question of meaning-construction in the area of fictional worlds semantics.

### 1. RELATIONS / INTERCONNECTIONS / LAYERS

Firstly, the relation between structural notions and fictional worlds semantics (further FWS) perspective should be examined. As presented in Doležel's *Occidental Poetics*<sup>1</sup>, the FWS can – to some extent – be viewed as an expansion or completion of structural poetics. Poetics is presented as a fundamental theoretical and methodological perspective in which the scientific study of literary texts should be going on, because it comprises a wide variety of viewpoints (in Doležel's terminology *modes*; therefore, it can operate on a level of constant adjusting). This adjusting can be viewed as a synchronic as well as diachronic process – two modes can operate at the same time, affecting each other or not, but they can also tend to be overcoming or replacing each other.

A concrete suitable poetics of this kind is the structural one, as it provides us with very efficient procedures: it pays attention to (seemingly?) empirical literary research, it helps us to overcome the normative approach in poetics, it interconnects the study of language (in its generality) as a scientific phenomenon with its artificial usage. However, the crucial distinction here is the contrast between various epistemological goals: in the case of structural poetics and FWS it is embodied in the contrast between *interpretation* and *explanation*. Whereas structural poetics, as much as it tends to present itself as a theoretical and methodological approach with a strong explanatory force, is in the end merely an interpretative tool, FWS looks like an effective explanatory device for the purposes of literary studies.

The distinction between interpretation and explanation should be emphasised more clearly, as it looks like an arbitrarily stated one. A crucial contradiction within structural poetics is that it presents very precise instruments supported by a robust philosophical tradition but with unlimited usage. There is no intention to say poetological instruments should not imply general usage (quite the opposite), but when applying the structural point of view, we can easily become trapped in an impression the structure we are looking for can be anything – from the relations between individuals within the text of fiction to relations between the fictional environment and recipient. This implies one thing: when we are trying to grasp the literary text from a perspective of structural poetics, we have to choose our point of view, in other words, we have to do some kind of pre-segmentation, select some cluster

we are going to examine, and therefore interpret the text according to chosen perspective. We are withdrawn from the option of presenting a complex explanation by the demand of choosing something and missing something else. If the structural interrelations are the functional ones, they can be reshaped at any moment pointing the function in another direction, claiming other connections, and making different interpretative work, as valid as the former one. In other words, in a world where everything is structured, we have to segment the whole into partial layers. Through the interpretative action, we can start making sense of the functional connections between such layers. However, the explanatory power of structural poetics can be re-established on a general level of constructing abstract relations between constructive elements of the work of literary fiction (author/recipient/propositions/entities) – at the same time, this is the moment FWS emerges as a useful extension of structural poetics.

If we accept the assumption that structural analysis deals with two types of layers (construct – constituent/basis – surface/whole – parts), the importance of FWS comes into account – it can be used as a referential frame covering the structural construction. The major problem of structural poetics is the question of *reference* – and it is this particular one that the FWS helps to solve (Sládek et al. 2018). We can stay within the structural interpretational frame and explain the question of reference in fiction with the help of the FWS – this area is closely connected to the meaning-construction and as such it will be dealt with in later parts of this article. At this point, we can say that the construct-constituent scheme models a situation of constant functional interchange between formally established types of layers (construct is formed by a set of constituents, whereas the constituent level is organised on the one hand by the functional relations between its parts, and on the other hand by the functional “overview” of the construct frame). As a text-oriented approach, the structural system concentrates mainly on various modes which create an aesthetical effect (or function) – the textuality here is treated as a language phenomenon from the Saussurian point of view. The textual dimension in the conception of FWS is treated partly as an epistemological phenomenon (we deal with the fictional reality on the principles of text organisation as pragmatic activity), and partly as an ontological phenomenon (the fictional reality with all its world-creating elements is constructed based on text-modeling-activity as a referential principle). We can take the structural notion into account, considering the construct-constituent duality as a modeling basis, and then we can enrich the abstract frame with the referential ontological actualisation of the fictional world properties based on the epistemological dialogue with the textual level as manifested in our actual world.

1 Doležel 2000 [1990].

## 2. TEXT AS A LANGUAGE ISSUE

In the following section, we should step aside to consider some problematic points which arise when we take into account the perspective of analytic philosophy with its language view. In the context of Doležel's seminal work *Heterocosmica*<sup>2</sup>, this philosophical tradition is most controversially treated in the connection to the "one-world" perspective of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell.

Principally stated, the realm of one world (in the context of possible worlds semantics, further PWS) is a referential frame which deals with our propositions as constructed in some language and which therefore has to deal also with the propositions that are part of fictional discourse. The notorious objections of these perspectives are that fictional propositions are without reference, based on empty sets and therefore non-true, or that reference (tied with *meaning*) is not the matter of fiction, the matter of fiction is only *sense* (how the reference is given). As bad as it seems, these discrepancies only mean that from some point of view, the doctrine of analytic philosophy could not (at least when constructing its foundations) deal with the fictional propositions in a complex way. The outcome is a paradoxical "clash" situation when Doležel, on the one hand, states the need for a precise scientific language for the study of fictionality (more generally for the scientifically based theory of literature, or poetics), but on the other hand, there is a strong rejection of the Frege's and Russell's view on fictional propositions. The paradox of this situation arises more clearly when considering that the proposed FWS relies strongly on some concepts designed in the realm of analytic philosophy (mainly the concept of intension and extension).

One possible source of these partial discrepancies / partial connections can be the fact – very fundamentally stated – that the goal of analytic philosophy was a language *construction*, whereas the FWS (as well as structural poetics) focuses on language *analysis*. Another issue is that with the intention of new (scientific) language construction also comes a need for new concepts (or re-contextualisation of old questions). The rejection of fictional propositions likely arose from this epistemological motivation to reshape the conceptual caption of the actual world (and since, as became clear later, the possible, and also the fictional, worlds are connected to the actual world on a specific basis, they could not easily fit into such conceptual framework). The problem of language construction and its limited capabilities to include fictional propositions was, we may say successfully, overcome by some results of PWS – and this can be also viewed as one point of connection where the analytical tradition and rigorously-treated literary theory can meet on common ground.

Different type of problematic relations comes into account when considering one of the foundational

projects of the structuralist programme – Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology –; those problems provide the basis for the final part of this article.

## 3. PLAYING WITH THE MEANING

The critique of the Saussurian approach as an (un)suitable for the theory of fiction can be viewed as a completion of the argument that FWS is – to some extent – a culmination of the project of structural poetics. On the one hand, it clearly provides the basis for further structuralist research; on the other hand, its conception of reference – mainly in relation to the fictional reference – is viewed as insufficient. The problem of self-referentiality of fictional propositions was treated by the structuralists themselves (Sládek et al. 2018), but the omnipresent difficulties with semantic (and semiotic) ambiguousness seem to be solved by a radical shift to the FWS with a more detailed and flexible referential model. A crucial part of this controversial situation includes mainly the dichotomy of the signifier and the signified and the position of meaning/sense/reference in the Saussurian language scheme – briefly, the language of fiction is self-referential because it emphasizes only the formal properties of language in general; as a construct on its own (without a relation to the actual world) it builds up the meaning on the conventional synergy between the signified and the signifier. In this scheme, the sense is derived from the formal structure (properties) of the signifier (Doležel 2003 [1998]).

A problematic point of the argument comes right at its beginning when the Saussurian view on language is characterised as relying on a nomenclatural conception (Doležel 2003 [1998]). This opinion was successfully relativised and even disproved by a (post)analytic analysis which connected the Saussurian semiology to Frege's sharpening-the-nature-of-meaning attempts<sup>3</sup>. This rejecting tendency can be interpreted in two ways: either the Saussurian model of sign and reference was subjugated to the view which promoted the insufficiency of such model by relativizing the functionality of its elements merely based on simplifying them (the sign relation of de Saussure is constructed solely on the language-oriented foundations and it does not emphasize its relation to the actual world, therefore it cannot be related to the world *ex post* by some other technique); or the (formally coherent) possibility to enrich the Saussurian sign (and reference) model by Frege's semantics was not taken into account.

But the truly pivotal moment comes when we begin to investigate the position of *meaning* in the criticised self-referential model. The presumable equivalence between the terms *meaning* and *reference* brings up the question of whether the exhaustive nature of meaning in Saussurian conception is investigated completely. It is without a doubt that de Saussure relied strongly on a historical discourse

2 Doležel 2003 [1998].

3 See Peregrin 1999.

and his potential to clarify all the crucial terms was limited by de facto non-existent scientific ground (and proper language) on which he would be able to define such entities as formal meaning or to formulate a truly strong theory of reference (Peregrin 1999). On the other hand, his sign theory provides a basis for implementing the referential mechanisms devised in the realm of analytic philosophy (mainly the Frege-inspired model of objective abstracts). Peregrin sees this process as bidirectional: de Saussure provides the interchange with a functional model of language (the relations between construct and its constituents – and these constituents themselves – as a formative ground for language modeling; the oppositional nature of these relations as a starting point of meaning/reference modeling), whereas Frege and his successors sharpen the nature of meaning/reference constructed by above-mentioned interrelations. An interesting point is, that if we treated the conception of language as a matter of “pure” formal and functional relations seriously, we would have to conclude that such a linguistic device is likely to be capable of creating the worlds on a language (textual) basis. The thing is, not only the fictional texts, or texts in general, but also the language itself in its various usages is a device of world-making – this is not contradictory to the FWS; the only objection could be, that we have to examine the world-making potential of (natural/artificial) language in relation to the fictional discourse in a broader manner. For example, the distinction between *imaging texts* which depict, or “document” the actual world (historiographical texts, scientific texts etc.) and the *constructional texts* which construct the (possible, fictional) world is a very fluid one, as both textual practices, in fact, create a world to some extent – it is not likely that there is any text capable of simple depiction or documentation. As meaning is strongly dependent on an actual (and personal, historical, etc.) context of communicants taking part in the discursive process, we always need to re-establish our notion of reference and its function in actual communicative act. Therefore, the communicative act always re-establishes (or co-creates) some world.

In this regard, we may mention some other possible frameworks for implementing slightly different approaches to meaning/reference, which could be applicable as an area of hypothetical “semantic bridge” between structural poetics, FWS, and analytic philosophy. From the above-mentioned notions, we may conclude that structural poetics is mostly concerned with analysing constructive elements of (artistic) text – we analyse the relation on construct–constituent basis, draw connections between underlying and superficial layer, and all this is framed by the concept of opposition-as-a-formative-element. The outcome can be interpretative, depending on the segmented cluster(s) we choose to analyse. FWS, on the other hand, tend to constructing/infering the worlds from texts – the functional/structural regard is a tool of analysis, the goal is to be fictional on a functional basis; the outcome tends to seem explanatory

(we explain how the entities such as fictional worlds and their inhabitants came to existence). Analytic philosophy goes in the direction of establishing a hierarchy of texts, based on their ability to produce meaning (to have some referential power) and to prove their truth values. The overall course of research comprises partly normative, partly interpretative, and partly explanatory goals. From the perspective of FWS, the structural poetics is an insufficient way (it stops at the “gate” of world-making) and the approach of analytic philosophy can be sometimes viewed as too rigid (“we cannot speak and create meaning fictionally”) – the goal is to examine broader phenomena (worlds) via precise language which allows wider communicational activities (fictional propositions), organisation and strong referential framework is the key point of contact.

It could be helpful not to stop at the point of drawing the referential links and to be satisfied with an exhaustive world-infering process, but we could also bring up some final notions on the meaning-constructive realm constituted by the text and the recipient(s). So far, this space was constructed as some kind of semiosphere, or semiotic realm, mostly with regard to the channel (or transferring medium). However, it is also possible to view this interrelation on a purely semantical basis – and we can anticipate a possibility of a dynamical field where the text/world level communicates with the recipient level, while both levels change permanently. We may apply the viewpoint of dynamic semantics, for example, and investigate the constitutive and at the same time shifting nature of meaning and reference in this communicational process which takes place in some discursive context (Stokhof 2018). Considering this, the fictional worlds may turn up to be not indisputably solid ontological entities, but rather unstable objects. If we apply a perspective of game-theoretical semantics as well, we may get an operational principle which defines this world-recipient relation as a constant game of reference and meaning-seeking with truthful/valid propositions as constructive elements (Peregrin 2018) from which we can infer the structure of the fictional world. It seems that the unquestionable notion is that an arbiter of such a semantic game should be the text itself – the question is whether it is plausible that the precise entity which constructs the world is at the same the arbiter of relevance/verification of our operational hypotheses – and vice versa in the case of fictional world arbitrating possible textual aspects. This may be the case where some referential meta-language could be needed.

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