

## Deictic Shift Theory

by Mary Galbraith

in memory of Janyce M. Wiebe

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Deixis (adj. *deictic*) is the semiotic term for particularized space, time, and person (Bühler 2011 [1934], 171-245)<sup>2</sup>. The source of perspective, which Bühler called the Origo, defaults to our own bodily experience in present time and space, but through psychological processes such as identification and mimesis we can also enter the presentness of imaginary beings in imaginary space and time, following the cues of a fictional text. Studying how readers shift the Origo from real bodily time, space, and self to the imaginary time, space, and self of fictional narrative is the basic investigative work of Deictic Shift Theory.

The term *Deictic Shift Theory* (DST) was coined as an umbrella term for the projects of an interdisciplinary group at SUNY Buffalo in the 1980s, which began by examining fictional, non-fictional, and concocted narratives for the purpose of studying how deictic cues function in narrative. The group later zeroed in on subjectivity in natural (i.e. not written for purposes of study) fictional text. This was one of the first projects focusing on literature in the new field of cognitive science; faculty and graduate students from departments of computer science (William J. Rapaport, Stuart C. Shapiro, Janyce M. Wiebe, Michael Almeida, Albert Hanyang Yuhan); philosophy (Rapaport); linguistics (David A. Zubin, Naicong Li, Soon Ae Chun); psychology (Erwin M. Segal, Gail A. Bruder); communicative disorders (Judith F. Duchan, Lynne E. Hewitt); geography (David M. Mark, Michael D. Gould); and literary theory (Mary Galbraith) collaborated for this venture and published many of their findings as *Deixis in Narrative* (Duchan, Bruder, & Hewitt, eds, 1995, reis. 2009).

According to Käte Hamburger's foundational work on the nature of fiction, "fictional narration is of a categorically different nature and structure from [reality] statement" (Hamburger 1993, 2013 [1957, 1968] 134)<sup>3</sup>, and this difference is shown paradigmatically by a shift in Origo from speaking subject to third person character;

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<sup>1</sup> les notes de bas de page renvoient aux références en français

<sup>2</sup> en français: Bühler 2009 [1934, 1999], 262-347

<sup>3</sup> en français, Hamburger 1986 [1957, 1968], 124

Dorrit Cohn aptly summarizes Hamburger's thesis on fictionality as the "dislocation of the 'I-origin' from speaking self to silent other" (Cohn 1999 [1989], 24)<sup>4</sup>.

In everyday conversation, speakers declare themselves as "I" and their interlocutors as "you," and they speak of private subjective experience using the first person pronoun. In fiction, a character's interiority is often expressed in the third person without modal qualification. In Japanese, for example, the private experience of third-person characters in non-reportive fiction is marked as emanating directly from the character's subjective experience. S.-Y. Kuroda uses the sentence *Mary wa sabisii* ("Mary is lonely") (Kuroda 2014 [1973], 44)<sup>5</sup> to demonstrate the difference. This sentence would be anomalous if it appeared in a nonfictional context; the expected form would indicate that Mary is judged to be lonely based on outer appearance: "*Mary wa sabisii ni tagaini*" ("Mary must be lonely") (*ibid.*, 41)<sup>6</sup>. Competent readers of fiction accept third-person subjectivity as normal even though in reality we have no first-person access to how "third-persons" feel. We realize that fictional characters are brought into existence by authors who can present their characters' inner lives without qualification because ultimately, the source of this knowledge is the author's imagination.

DST, then, inquires into the nature of fictional time, space, and person by studying the behavior of deixis in natural narrative and how readers follow these cues. Here is a sampling of topics investigated in the 1980s by the SUNY Buffalo Graduate Group in Cognitive Science:

What do we do as readers, deictically and phenomenologically, when we shift our attention from an immediate live situation to a work of imagination? (see Bühler 2011 [1934], 171-245; Segal in Duchan, Bruder & Hewitt, eds, 2009 [1995], 61-78)

How do we recognize when a work of fiction shifts from the experience field of one subjective character to another, or from objective narration to the experience field of a subjective character? (see Banfield 2019; Galbraith, Wiebe, Hewitt, Bruder & Wiebe, in Duchan *et al* 2009 [1995], resp. 19-59, 263-286, 325-339, 341-356)

In addition to personal pronouns, what specific linguistic and grammatical categories-- e.g. definite articles, temporal and spatial adverbial phrases, verb tense, modality, expressive elements, verbs of inner action, embedding--behave differently in reportive and non-reportive narratives? (see Hamburger 1973; Fillmore 1975; Banfield 2019; Kuroda 2014; Cohn 2020; Bruder in Duchan *et al* 2009 [1995], 243-260)

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<sup>4</sup> en français: Cohn 2001 [1989, 1999], 44; le terme traduit par *deplacement* est ici *dislocation* [NdT]

<sup>5</sup> en français: Kuroda 2012, 61

<sup>6</sup> en français: *ibid.*, 58

In terms of reader experience and belief structure, how is reading a fictional narrative different from reading a non-fictional narrative? (Hamburger 1973 [1957]<sup>7</sup>; Kuroda 2014 [1973]<sup>8</sup>; Rapaport & Shapiro in Duchan *et al* 2009 [1995], 107-128)

How are a person's nonfictional knowledge and beliefs brought into play in the reading of fiction? (see Segal, Shapiro & Rapaport, Rapaport & Shapiro in Duchan *et al* 2009, resp. 3-17, 79-105, 107-128)

At what age are children able to produce deictically organized imaginative stories and what is noticeable about children's first narratives? (see Duchan in Duchan *et al* 2009 [1995], 227-241)

Can a computer algorithm be designed to detect shifts between objective and subjective contexts in fictional narrative? (see Shapiro & Rapaport, Almeida, Yuhan & Shapiro, Wiebe in Duchan *et al* 2009 [1995], 79-105, 159-189, 191-225, 263-286)

How are SELF characters (i.e. characters whose interiority is represented in a work of fiction) created in novels written in languages other than German, French, Japanese, and English (the four languages used as demonstration texts by Hamburger<sup>9</sup>, Banfield<sup>10</sup>, and Kuroda<sup>11</sup>)? (see Zubin & Hewitt, Li & Zubin, Chin & Zubin in Duchan *et al* 2009 [1995], 129-157, 287-307, 309-323)

Is the language of fiction itself fictional? (see Galbraith in Duchan *et al* 2009 [1995], 19-59)

DST evolved its own heuristics for studying deixis and fictional subjectivity based on the work of Karl Bühler, Käte Hamburger, Charles Fillmore, Ann Banfield, and S.-Y. Kuroda. There was general consensus in the Buffalo deixis group on (1) the advantages of interdisciplinary collaboration on our topic, 2) the persuasiveness of Hamburger's, Banfield's, and Kuroda's arguments that fictional works are creations of the imagination and fictive narrators are not structurally necessary to tell a story; 3) the characteristics of objective and subjective narration, and 4) the feasibility of creating an algorithm that can track deictic cues in fictional texts. There was disagreement about whether manufactured objects would ever be sentient and what would constitute evidence of this sentience.

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<sup>7</sup> en français: Hamburger 1986 [1957, 1968]

<sup>8</sup> en français: Kuroda 2012

<sup>9</sup> en français: Hamburger 1986 [1957, 1968]

<sup>10</sup> en français: Banfield 1995 [1982]

<sup>11</sup> en français: Kuroda 2012

Phenomenological and epistemological approaches to DST blend easily with enactive and embodied narrative theory because they define fictional self more as pre-reflective experiencing than as articulate speaking. Enactive approaches share with DST a stress on the performative and motor features of reader immersion as well as the importance of unselfconscious experience to figural self (Caracciolo 2012). Because DST subscribes to Kuroda's epistemologically based definition of fictionality while also honoring Hamburger's radical insights into the differences between reality statement and fictional creation, it considers imaginary first-person narration to be just as fictional as narration that alternates between objective narration and third-person subjectivity.

In sum, the topic of DST lends itself to the combination of phenomenological and empirical methodologies in the manner called for by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2003 [1995]<sup>12</sup>). In the Buffalo group, the computational models used by the computer scientists stimulated those in the humanities and social sciences to further operationalize their identification of deictic cues. Conversely, those in the humanities and social sciences challenged those in the computer sciences to do justice to the nuances of literary text (see Duchan *et al* 2009 [1995], xi-xvi). The group goal of programming a computer to track deictic cues in fictional narrative led to spirited group discussion: what does it mean to say that a computer "reads" an artistic creation such as a novel? Literary theory in the late 20th century largely shied away from aesthetics, and so did not supply a clear distinction between *Verstand* (explanatory understanding) and *Verstehen* (understanding as undergoing an experience); this difference is key to the definition of deictic shifts. Unsurprisingly, these disputes were not conclusively resolved, but the combination of computational, phenomenological, and linguistic methods in the group's work nevertheless proved remarkably harmonious in practice (Duchan *et al* 2009 [1995], xi-xvi; Galbraith, phone and email communication with group members).

Deictic Shift Theory draws from and contributes to a wide spectrum of scholarship and research: narrative theory, cognitive poetics, literary linguistics, computational models of reading, evolutionary language theory, neurobiology of imagination, and theory of immersive and enactive reading. Centers, journals, and conferences devoted to theorizing deixis in literature have multiplied in the 21st century, and the scope and importance of deixis studies continue to grow.

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<sup>12</sup> en français: Merleau-Ponty 1995

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### **Notes**

[1] Dans le texte en français, les références en anglais ont été remplacées par les références des traductions en français [NdT].

### **Pour citer cet article en français**

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