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## ARE EMPTY NAMES ALL THE SAME?<sup>1</sup>

**SUMMARY:** The chief purpose of this paper is to advance a defence of the old-fashioned view that empty names are neither proper names nor any other kind of interpretable expressions. A view of this sort usually makes it easy to account for the meaning of first-order sentences in which they occur in subject position: taken literally, they express no fully-fledged particular propositions, are not truth-evaluable, cannot be used to make assertions and so on. Yet, semantic issues arise when those very sentences are embedded in the scope of propositional attitude verbs. Such (intensional) constructions, indeed, turn out to be literally meaningful, truth-evaluable, and eligible for making assertions. The novel solution put forward here is to combine a version of sententialism with the idea that *de dicto* reports play a distinctive kind of metalinguistic expressive function. Roughly, that of enabling the ascriber to make explicit a mismatch between the way the embedded sentences are used by the ascriber and the way they are ordinarily used—and, in turn, a mismatch between the way the (empty) names occurring in them are used by the ascriber and the way they are ordinarily used. Fictional names are then regarded as a mere subset of empty names. Accordingly, the above strategy is applied to account for the meaning and use of parafictional (and fictional) sentences and fictional vocabulary in general.

**KEYWORDS:** empty names, attitude reports, sententialism, fictional vocabulary.

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## 1. Introduction

What are we doing when we use empty names, and when we recognize others using them? Are they always used in the same way? Are empty names all the same? This paper aims to address these thorny (and long-standing) issues by providing a naturalist account of the meaning of empty names, that is, an account that does not necessarily ontologically commit us with respect to entities that hardly fit into the world as described and explained by science.<sup>2</sup> I assume that a name is empty if it is devoid of its semantic function (i.e., that of referring).<sup>3</sup> Hence, empty names, as empty, are not proper names at all.<sup>4</sup> If so, they are not proper names in any kind of discourse in which they occur: neither in extensional nor in intensional (or hyperintensional) contexts—such as those created by propositional attitude verbs. In other words, neither when they occur in first-order sentences, nor when they occur in sentences embedded in the scope of those verbs. Central to this antirealist position, however, is the fact that empty names do not stand for any other kind of semantically interpretable expression either. It follows that they are not to be understood in terms of some kind of description either outside or inside intensional constructions.<sup>5</sup> What it will be argued is ra-

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<sup>2</sup> Providing arguments in defence of *ontological scientism* is beyond the scope of this paper; I define the present proposal as naturalist only in the weaker sense that it is not necessarily engaged with entities whose existence is inferred independently of any empirical inquiry, fact or evidence.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout the paper, I presuppose the direct reference theory and the related Millianism about proper names—the view that proper names have denotation but not connotation, in the sense that they are non-descriptive and have as their function simply that of referring to a specific individual. Regarding direct-reference theories, see among many Kripke (1980), Devitt (1981), and Kaplan (1989).

<sup>4</sup> Of course, the emptiness of names is not a feature that could be easily recognized just by “looking at them”. Empty names have a lot in common with proper names: they conform to the phonetic, the graphic (with their characteristic capitalized first letter and all the rest), and syntactically occur in the same particular positions. Yet, semantically, they do not raise to the status of proper names, since they are not tokened by a process supported by any actual launching. Empirical facts determine reference and content. To use a term from Keith Donnellan (1974), the causal chain that carries the name “Vulcan” contains a *block*. And a referential chain ends in a block when it ends with the introduction of a name in a work of fiction, a mistake, an act of imagination, etc. That is, the launching misfired, so that no name was launched. The problem is especially acute with respect to names about which we simply do not know that they are empty. In any case, though, only through empirical investigation we can find out whether a referential chain ends in a block or with the introduction of a name. And, of course, we can also make mistakes and get wrong results. I thank an anonymous reviewer for prompting me to add this clarification.

<sup>5</sup> In other words, the present proposal does not collapse into a version of descriptivism concerning the meaning of empty names, which treats empty names as disguised descriptions.

ther that, in *de dicto* attitude reports, empty names are merely mentioned.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, though, this enables the ascriber to make explicit key features of the way they are used by the ascriber (i.e., as proper names in unsuccessful or pretend acts of reference).

This paper will be structured as follows. In section 2, I will present a classic example in the literature of a sentence in which an empty name occurs. I will then outline the problems that arise when it is taken literally, as well as those that arise when it is embedded in a larger context in which a propositional attitude is expressed. In section 3, I will maintain that the function that the latter plays is of a distinctive kind: namely, a metalinguistic expressive function relative to the use of the former. In section 4, I will show how this account may help us to shed light on the relationship between fictional and parafictional sentences. In section 5, I will suggest that in metafictional sentences (i.e., in the external context), a kind of expressive metalinguistic function relative to the use of fictional names is instead played by fictional vocabulary—as well as by intentional vocabulary relative to the use of empty names in general. Finally, in section 6, I will briefly recap the main results achieved.

## 2. Vulcan

Let us consider the following sentence:

- (1) Vulcan is the intra-Mercurial that causes perturbations in the orbit of Mercury.

(1) is a classic example in the literature on empty names of what Strawson has called “radical failure of the existence presupposition” (1964, p. 81). Radical in that “there just is no such particular item at all” as the speaker purports to be talking about (p. 81). But, a sentence’s existential presupposition is always a precondition of its making an evaluable claim.<sup>7</sup> A presupposition failure is then said to be “catastrophic” in that it has the result that the sentence makes no claim, so that “the question of truth and falsity does not arise” (Strawson, 1954, p. 225). (1), taken literally, suffers from a catastrophic presupposition failure; as a result, it does not make an evaluable claim in the business of being true or false. In other words, it does not encode any fully-fledged proposition;<sup>8</sup> therefore, it is not

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<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, according to the present account, in the *de re* mode, names are used rather than mentioned. For this reason, empty names cannot occur in such constructions: for their use would (mistakenly) presuppose that they have a reference.

<sup>7</sup> Following Frege (1892, p. 162), “[i]f anything is asserted there is always an obvious presupposition that the proper names used have reference”.

<sup>8</sup> According to some Millians, sentences containing empty names encode gappy or unfilled propositions (Adams, Fuller, Stecker, 1997; Braun, 1993; 2005). This view clearly shares important insights with the present account. Nevertheless, unlike the present account, on the Gappy Proposition Theory, gappy propositions are proposition-like entities that can be objects of belief and assertion. Moreover, they are often regarded as false.

in the business of content-transmission and a loss of asserted content inevitably results from an utterance of it.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, when we embed it in a larger context in which a propositional attitude is expressed, we are faced with a different scenario. Let us symbolize “*x* believes that ...” by “*B**x*: ...”. Then we have:

- (2) BLV: Vulcan is the intra-Mercurial planet that causes perturbations in the orbit of Mercury.

In this case, although “Vulcan” is still an empty name (i.e., a name that does not name, so not a name at all) we do have a literal content in the business to be true or false (indeed literally true), that is, we do have a semantic content that can be subject to a full semantic treatment. But, if the embedded sentence (due to the existence presupposition failure) does not encode any fully-fledged proposition, how can we attribute such a belief to Le Verrier? What are we attributing to him then?

As a first stab, we might try the following solution: if (2), then we can at least attribute to Le Verrier the belief that there is something that is the unique intra-Mercurial planet and it causes perturbations in the orbit of Mercury. Indeed, for the so-called principle of existential generalization (PEG), if a predicate applies to a specific individual, then that predicate applies to something (i.e., if *a* is *F*, then there is something that is *F*):

$$\text{PEG: } Fa \rightarrow \exists x(Fx)$$

Given PEG, (1) entails the following:<sup>10</sup>

- (1\*) There is something that is the unique intra-Mercurial planet and it affects the orbit of Mercury.

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Quite the contrary, according to the present account, sentences containing empty names do not encode any kind of proposition at all, that is, they are devoid of any literal content and, therefore, they are neither true nor false. However, the issues of whether those sentences encode gappy propositions or no propositions at all, and whether gappy propositions may count as propositions of some sort lie beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>9</sup> Here I simply consider an assertion to be a kind of speech act in which a full-fledged proposition is presented as true or claimed to be true.

<sup>10</sup> Since (1) is semantically empty, it does not seem entirely correct to apply the notion of entitlement here. It is rather an utterance of it that may strike us as making an evaluable claim and, therefore, it would be more appropriate to maintain that an utterance of (1) somehow implicates (1\*). Perhaps, the relevant notion here is that of “entitled conversational implicature”. However, whether entailments can count as implicatures, and whether it makes sense at all to talk about such a kind of implicatures, is still the subject of a huge and interesting debate (see, among others, Moldovan, 2019). For the sake of clarity, I will leave this further complication aside here.

Unlike (1), (1\*) does not suffer from the existence presupposition failure, so we can evaluate it. (1\*) is false and is false for Russellian reasons: namely, it is equivalent to a conjunction of which at least one of the conjuncts is false. In short, since one of its conjuncts (i.e., there is a unique intra-Mercurial planet) is false, (1\*) turns out to be false. But (1), although undefined (due to the existence presupposition failure), says, in part, (1\*). Hence, (1) may also count as false.<sup>11</sup>

As a consequence, one might be tempted to read (2) as follow:

- (3) BLV: there is something that is the unique intra-Mercurial planet and it causes perturbations in the orbit of Mercury.

Nevertheless, (3) cannot be a literal rendering of (2). At most, (3) can be merely implicated (or entailed) by (2). That is to say, what the latter literally reports is not Le Verrier's belief in the propositional content expressed by (1\*)—i.e., that there is something that is the unique intra-Mercurial planet that causes perturbations in the orbit of Mercury. At most, this is what it can implicate (or entail).

In using the sentence (1), Le Verrier's intention hardly was to make a quantificational and hence purely descriptive claim. He most likely did not take it as encoding a particularized or general proposition,<sup>12</sup> but rather a singular proposition about a particular individual. Nor he intended to use the term "Vulcan" as standing for a certain description (e.g., a disguised definite description) to denote whatever satisfies it. In other words, "Vulcan" was not intended to be used by Le Verrier *attributively* (Donnellan, 1966). Rather, "Vulcan" was intended to be used by Le Verrier *referentially*—albeit unsuccessfully. Le Verrier presumably intended to appeal to particularity in using it, that is, he intended to pick out and deal with something in particular, the putative particular he attempted to refer to. Furthermore, in his unsuccessful act of reference, he presumably aimed to refer rigidly, that is, his intention was to use it as a device for singular reference to rigidly refer and purportedly say something about its putative referent. Indeed, he expected to have discovered something new, that was not known before, and by launching "Vulcan", to have given it a name, to have baptized it as it were, and

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<sup>11</sup> Must be noticed that (1\*), which has a certain quantificational and hence purely descriptive proposition as content, is not a way of expressing the literal content of (1), because it has none. At most, an utterance of (1) conveys in part, the evaluable claim (1\*), whose asserted content really is what (1) only appears to be, that is, false. That is, such communicative effects are pragmatically achieved by virtue of the act of speaking. Predelli (2021) grounds such contentful results on the idea of "impartation". In the paper, I do not rely on this notion, speaking instead of "asserted content", "pragmatically conveyed content", or "implied content".

<sup>12</sup> Particularized and general propositions are propositions that are quantificationally understood. A particularized proposition is indirectly about an individual in virtue of that individual satisfying a condition that is a constituent of the proposition (e.g., "the best football player is Italian"). A general one is not about any particular individual (e.g., "most Italians are not vaccinated").

not to have described it. In a nutshell, he most likely took the term to be directly referential: as a term that does not secure its reference by means of a descriptive meaning. In turn, upon hearing a token of the expression “Vulcan”, we infer that Le Verrier is not thinking about some planet or other uniquely satisfies the condition of being intra-Mercurial and affecting the orbit of Mercury. Instead, we infer that he is thinking via a singular, non-descriptive mode of presentation. His intentional state has, so to say, the property of singularity and aboutness.

If that is correct, (3) is not in a position to do justice to Le Verrier’s intention to use “Vulcan” as a proper name and purportedly to utter (1) to express a fully-fledged singular proposition about its putative referent. For this reason, (3) cannot be understood as a literal rendering of (2)—although the latter can somehow implicate (or entail) the former—and a different account is needed.

### 3. The Metalinguistic Reading

As a way out, one might view (2) as metalinguistic: in the sense that what is literally attributed to Le Verrier by (2) is the belief that the sentence “Vulcan is ...” encodes a true fully-fledged particular proposition. Nevertheless, this one too would probably be a sloppy solution, since the latter is unlikely what Le Verrier literally believed. For all we know, he may not have had any background in semantics! What I try to defend in this paper is instead the idea that (2) can indeed be understood as playing a metalinguistic function but of a distinctive kind: a metalinguistic expressive function that operates primarily at the level of pragmatics. Roughly, (2) shows what Le Verrier is doing in saying (1)—or what he would be doing if he were saying (1): mistakenly using the sentence to make an assertion. In other words, it articulates Le Verrier’s wrong commitment to using the sentence (1) to make an assertion. But here Le Verrier is mistaken not because he presents as true or claimed to be true a false proposition,<sup>13</sup> but rather because the sentence he utters does not express any proposition at all (due to the existence presupposition failure) and therefore is not eligible to be used to make an assertion.

Accordingly, with (2), we (i.e., the ascribers) make explicit the way Le Verrier (i.e., the ascribee) meant to use the term “Vulcan”, namely, as a proper name, although this is not the way we would use it, since we acknowledge that there is no individual which “Vulcan” refers to. Otherwise, if it had been a proper name (and we acknowledged that), then we would have been in a position to export it outside the scope of the attitude verb, attributing to Le Verrier a *de re* belief of Vulcan. In the *de dicto* belief attribution (2), we do not use or intend to use the expression “Vulcan” referentially: indeed we do not use it at all, but rather we merely mention it.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, though, by mentioning it in the subject

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<sup>13</sup> Such a mistake, if possible, would have instead been expressed by means of a *de re* attribution of belief.

<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, it would definitely make sense, in some circumstances, to attribute *de re* beliefs regarding the term “Vulcan”. But those will be literally metalinguistic attributions and, therefore, totally different cases with respect to the ones at stake here.

position of the that clause, we articulate the way we think Le Verrier uses it: in an unsuccessful act of reference. Generalizing, a *de dicto* belief attribution such as (2) makes explicit that a subsentential expression (i.e., the subject of the that clause) is used (or would be used) by the ascriber differently than the way the ascriber would use it. In other words, it discloses a mismatch between the way the expression is used (or would be used) by the ascriber and the way the ascriber would use it. The former does not necessarily coincide with the latter: the ascriber can have the intention of referring to an individual other than the one who actually bears the name in question (if any), she can be mistaken about who/what the actual referent of a proper name is, she can ignore some relevant *substitutional commitments*<sup>15</sup> regarding the name that she adopts in making a statement (which are instead acknowledged by the ascriber)<sup>16</sup>, and so on.<sup>17</sup>

It must be pointed out that this is not at odds with direct reference theories and the claim that proper names are rigid designators. An uttered public name in our actual practice refers to the individual or thing to which it was given, independently of the speaker's intentions. However, there could be a gap between what an individual believes their words to mean and the semantic values that those words actually have.<sup>18</sup> This is not to contend that a given name does not have the same reference (if any) in all the different kinds of discourse where it occurs, nor is it to postulate any semantic ambiguity. At most, it is the speaker or speech act rather than the sentence or the proposition expressed that *pragmatically* may convey a different content (i.e., the asserted content) from the one it is semantically expressed by the sentence (i.e., the semantic content; about the distinction between *asserted content* and *semantic content*, see Yablo, 2006, p. 175). Therefore, in (2), we do not have a kind of case where an empty name really has reference, but an elucidation of Le Verrier's unsuccessful act of reference. It shows that "Vulcan" is used by him as a proper name in an unsuccessful act of reference. It follows that the embedded sentence is mistakenly taken by him to encode a fully-fledged proposition that has an individual as a direct constituent and thus uttered by him in an unsuccessful assertive speech act. Hence, (2) articulates the way Le Verrier (mistakenly) takes (1): as encoding a fully-fledged singular proposition, and the way he (unsuccessfully) uses or would use (1): to make an assertion. This forces us to accept that there could be important

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<sup>15</sup> Following Brandom, simple material substitution inferential commitments are "commitments associated with equivalence classes of subsentential expressions" (1994, Chap. 6; 2000, Chap. 4).

<sup>16</sup> A classic example might be the Superman/Clark Kent case in Frege's version of the puzzle about belief reports (but, of course, mine is not Frege's solution).

<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, with a *de re* belief attribution, we make explicit that the propositional content of the embedded sentence is understood and grasped by the ascriber to be the same that we (i.e., the ascribers) understand and grasp.

<sup>18</sup> Regarding the case in which the semantic reference of a proper name does not match the speaker's reference, see the well-known example of "Gödel and Schmidt" in Kripke's (1980) and that of "Smith and Jones" in Kripke's (2013).

differences between the (semantic) content expressed by means of a sentence and the content that one who sincerely assents to that very sentence grasps or understands. The function of a *de dicto* attribution of belief such as (2) is precisely to show such differences: it makes explicit that the content that the ascriber takes to be the content expressed by the embedded sentence is different from the content that, for the ascriber, that very sentence expresses (if any).

All in all, the result of *de dicto* belief reports such as (2) is a sort of cognitive opacity when it concerns what is believed. According to the present strategy, a way of accounting for this phenomenon characteristic of the intensional contexts created by belief ascriptions such as (2) is then to understand them as aimed at showing a mismatch between the content that the ascriber takes to be expressed by the embedded sentence and the content that, for the ascriber, that very sentence expresses (if any). At the same time, though, a *de dicto* attribution of belief such as (2) fails to express any stand on the propositional content of the belief. Or better, it does not need to be understood as reporting someone's belief in the propositional content of the embedded sentence. To say of someone that she is in some state (e.g., believing) with respect to a sentence does not need to be in general understood as ascribing to her belief in the propositional content of that sentence (if any). Nevertheless, they do not count as the sort of reports that are incoherent in principle. By ascribing to Le Verrier the *de dicto* belief that Vulcan is so and so, we do not ascribe to him belief in the content of the embedded sentence, that is, in the proposition encoded by that sentence—since, according to us, there is not such a proposition. Rather, we attribute to him belief in the very sentence “Vulcan is ...” (i.e., the one to which he assents or would assent). Thus, (2) is seen to attribute to Le Verrier a belief whose content is captured by the embedded sentence “Vulcan is ...” (again, which he assents or would assent to). So to say, in (2) the embedded sentence is not used, but only mentioned. But in doing so, features of its use (hence, pragmatic features) are displayed: specifically, a mismatch between the way it is used by the ascriber and the way it is ordinarily used in practice—or better, the way it would be ordinarily used by the ascriber (in no way indeed).

The idea is then that, in principle, *de dicto* belief reports usually have general or particularized propositions as argument. When they have singular propositions as argument, or they are exportable into *de re* constructions or, if not, their argument turns out to be a *dictum* (i.e., a sentence) rather than a proposition. In a nutshell, the present strategy can be defined as a version of *sententialism*, roughly inspired by Carnap's analysis of belief sentences (1958), according to which what we have been calling “propositional attitudes” are really attitudes towards sentences.<sup>19</sup> “Believes”, “believes-true”, and its fellows are therefore understood to express a primitive two places relation between an agent and

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<sup>19</sup> Quine (1956) was also a proponent of this view, Davidson (1968) has put forward a more complex version of sententialism called “the paratactic account” and, perhaps, Crimmins and Perry's (1989) account of propositional attitude reports as involving unarticulated constituents moves in this direction as well.

a sentence. But this, as already mentioned, does not exhaust the function played by *de dicto* belief ascriptions of that kind: what they play in discursive practice is more of a metalinguistic expressive function relative to the use of the sentences they embed.

#### 4. *De Re/De Dicto* Pretense Reports

There may be reasons why a speaker may utter a sentence without believing it to be true—other than, of course, lying. One might be fictionalizing. According to the present proposal, a fictional sentence about a real individual (i.e., a fictive use of a sentence containing an ordinary proper name) encodes a false fully-fledged particular proposition about that very individual. However, since the teller/author neither believes that that proposition is true nor she aims to express the belief that that proposition is true, she does not make an assertion in uttering the sentence. Rather, she expresses the mock belief that that proposition is true. Accordingly, we (as audience/readers) cannot attribute to her the belief that that proposition is true, but rather the fictive belief that that proposition is true. In other words, we are only in the position of attributing to the teller/author the pretend or simulated belief in the content of that sentence. The latter turns out to be the same content that we grasp as the content of that very sentence, that is, the false proposition about the real individual in question. Let us call them “*de re* attributions of pretense”. For example, consider the following sentence from the fictional story of Macbeth by William Shakespeare:

(4) Macbeth is killed by Macduff at the Battle of Dunsinane.

Taken literally, (4) encodes a false fully-fledged particular proposition about the historical figure Macbeth. However, there Shakespeare is not using (4) to make an assertion. With (4), he is not expressing the false belief that that proposition is true. Rather, he is expressing the fictive belief that that proposition is true. A way of reporting this is by means of the following sentence:

(4\*) In the relevant body of a (fictional) story, Macbeth is killed by Macduff at the Battle of Dunsinane.

Sentences like (4\*), which purport to say how things stand in (or according to) a certain fiction, are usually called “parafictional sentences” (Recanati, 2000)<sup>20</sup> of fictional discourse.<sup>21</sup> The qualifier “in the relevant body of a story ...” (e.g., “in

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<sup>20</sup> Sentences of this form are also called “paratextual sentences” (Bonomi, 2008) or “internal metafictional sentences” (Voltolini, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> It must be pointed out that, according to the present account, fictional sentences like (4) are not to be taken as elliptical sentences that get full expression in metafictional sentences like (4\*). Rather, the latter are to be taken just as reports of what one would express with the former.

the tragedy *Macbeth* ...”) is instead a so-called story-operator (or “narrative operator”, see Künne, 1995). We can then make sense of the indirect context introduced by the story-operator in (4\*) invoking a *de re* kind of pretense and paraphrasing it in the following way:

(4\*\*) In the relevant body of a (fictional) story, Macbeth is killed by Macduff at the Battle of Dunsinane.

(4\*\*) expresses a relationship between the author and the proposition encoded by (4), which he imagines to be true and, in turn, pretends to believe to be true (albeit literally false).

On the other hand, a fictional sentence about a fictional individual (i.e., a fictive use of a sentence containing a fictional name) does not encode any fully-fledged proposition. Indeed, according to the present proposal, a fictional name is nothing but an empty name<sup>22</sup> and thus a sentence in which it occurs in the subject position, due to the existence presupposition failure, makes no claim that we can evaluate. As a result, we cannot even attribute to the teller/author the fictive belief in a certain proposition. But it does not follow from this that we cannot attribute to her the fictive belief in the sentence in question.<sup>23</sup> Let us call them “*de dicto* attributions of pretense”.

One might, for instance, utter a sentence about Vulcan, but without committing herself to the truthfulness of what she is saying. As an example, consider the following sentence from the fictional television series *Star Trek*:

(5) Vulcan is the planet inhabited by Vulcans.

Due to the existence presupposition failure, (5) does not encode any fully-fledged proposition. But from this, it does not follow that in uttering it the author is not expressing anything at all. We can report what she is expressing in uttering (5) by means of the following parafictional sentence:

(5\*) In the relevant body of the story, Vulcan is the planet inhabited by Vulcans.

Here the story operator “in the relevant body of the story ...” (e.g., “in the television series *Star Trek* ...”) creates an intensional context, wherein the principle of substitution does not hold for extensionally equivalent expressions (i.e.,

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<sup>22</sup> In this respect, the present view also diverges from Currie’s. Like him, I deny that fictional names such as “Holmes” are proper names; but unlike him, I do not claim that fictional sentences in which “Holmes” occurs should be taken literally as jointly forming a long conjunction in which the occurrence of “Sherlock Holmes” is replaced with a variable bound by an initial existential quantifier, that is, as work-bound roles (Currie, 1990). I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me to add this clarification.

<sup>23</sup> Nor it does not follow from this that we (as audience/readers) cannot somehow relate to the proposed (fictional) scenario.

for co-referential expressions) but only for intensionally equivalent expressions (i.e., for synonymous expressions). In a way, the opacity of the oblique context introduced by the story operator in (5\*) can be understood as merging and indivisibility of form and content. We can then make sense of this kind of indirect context, and related opacity, invoking a *de dicto* kind of pretense and paraphrasing (5\*) as follows:

(5\*\*) The author imagines that Vulcan is the planet inhabited by Vulcans.

What is important to notice here is that (5\*\*) does not express a relationship between the author and a proposition, but rather between the author and the sentence (5), which she imagines (and, in turn, pretends to believe) to be an instance of a fully-fledged singular proposition-encoding sentence. Accordingly, we (as audience/readers) are in no position to imagine the proposition encoded by the sentence that the qualifier embeds (i.e., the depicted state of affairs), since there is not and cannot be any.<sup>24</sup>

The function played by *de dicto* pretense ascriptions thus turns out to be of a distinctive kind: a metalinguistic expressive function that operates primarily at the level of pragmatics. In particular, they show what one is doing (i.e., pragmatic aspects) in endorsing fictional sentences about fictional individuals (i.e., the sentences that appear within the scope of the story-operators): not just pretending to commit to using them to make assertions (as in the case of *de re* attributions of pretense), but rather pretending to commit to the fact that they can be used to make assertions. At the same time, they make explicit that the teller/author does not commit herself to using the empty names therein as proper names, but rather she commits herself to using them *as if* they were proper names. Hence, they articulate how she intends to use them: not to refer, but merely to pretend to refer.<sup>25</sup> In a nutshell, they show that the teller/author is acting as though she were

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<sup>24</sup> However, again, it does not follow from this that we (as audience/readers) cannot somehow relate to the proposed (fictional) scenario.

<sup>25</sup> These insights clearly stem from the work of Kendall Walton, which allows a proper name like “Holmes” to be both genuinely empty, carrying no commitment to any fictional entity, but also genuinely non-descriptive—focusing instead on the element of make-believe, or pretense, inherent in the telling of a fictional story by the author and the listening to it by the audience. However, following Walton (1990) and the so-called “pretense view”, works of fiction deploy a very peculiar kind of imagination: propositional imagination of the make-believe, variety. Fictional sentences encode propositions that in certain contexts (i.e., in fictional contexts) we are to imagine to be true and, within those contexts, fictional names directly refer to individuals (i.e., the individuals existing in the world of the relevant pretense). But if we fully endorse the view that empty names are neither proper names nor any other kind of interpretable expressions, then sentences in which they occur in subject position, due to the existence presupposition failure, turn out to be devoid of any propositional content. So, how can the imagination deployed by works of fiction be propositional? According to the present account, unlike Walton’s, what they literally invite us to imagine is not that certain propositions are true (hence, that certain

taking them to be and to be used as referring expressions. It follows that she is acting as if she were taking the relevant sentences to encode fully-fledged singular propositions, that is, grasping and understanding their content to be fully-fledged singular propositions.

In general, this conception is consistent with a non-descriptive view of second-order expressions.<sup>26</sup> According to the latter, the function of those expressions is not to describe, that is, they are not used to talk about how the world is. Rather, they expose features of the inferential potential of the things we say: what comes of our assertion/thought and what comes from (Frápolti, Villanueva, 2012; 2015; 2018).<sup>27</sup> It follows that “believe”, “pretend”, “imagine”, “suppose”, “hypothesize”, etc. are not to be understood as truth-conditional functions that, by adding conceptual components, modify the truth-conditions of what falls within their scope. Instead, in attributing an intentional state to someone (e.g., a thought that *p*), we locate the relevant state of the person *in the logical space of reasons*. Following Sellars (1956, §36; 1963, p. 169), in characterizing an episode or a state “we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says”.<sup>28</sup> This is to place it within the “vast network of possible intentional state and action-types related to each other by normative relations of inference [...] sensitive to standards of correctness and appropriateness” (deVries, 2020). Attributing, say, a belief to an agent is not describing the agent, but it is holding the agent responsible for a stand. Thus, inferential relations are exposed: the relations of entailment (and incompatibility) that entitle the agent to hold that belief and the consequences of holding that belief.<sup>29</sup> However, as mentioned above, with a *de dicto* ascription of belief the attributor ascribes to the agent the endorsement of the sentence that appears within the scope

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states of affairs are the case) but at most that certain sentences are instances of fully-fledged singular proposition-encoding sentences. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to add this clarification.

<sup>26</sup> From the syntactic point of view, second-order predicables are sentence operators, that is, functional expressions that have complete sentences as arguments within their scope. Higher-order functions are, among others, modal operators (e.g., “necessarily”, “possibly”), epistemic operators (e.g., “*x* believes that”, “*x* knows that”), normative operators (e.g., “it is good that”, “it is right that”), semantic operators (e.g., “it is true that”, “it is false that”), temporal operators (e.g., “tomorrow”, “yesterday”), logical connectives (e.g., “no”, “if ..., then ...”).

<sup>27</sup> In turn, “the meaning of these expressions is exhausted once their inferential potential is indicated” (Frápolti, Villanueva, 2012, p. 485): namely, when we are justified in using them, and what commitments are involved in their use.

<sup>28</sup> In this passage, Sellars is focusing on the specific case of characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing.

<sup>29</sup> In turn, this commits the attributor to the relations of entailment (and incompatibility) that entitle that attribution and to the consequences that can be derived from the attribution—that is, it commits the attributor to attribute to the agent further beliefs and plans to act on them.

of the operator (i.e., her acceptance of or assent to that very sentence)—rather than the proposition that it encodes (if any). This means that it precludes some of the relations of entailment (and incompatibility) to which one is entitled as well as the further ascriptions to which one is committed by the related *de re* construction. In doing that, it shows that the agent uses the sentence differently from the way it is ordinarily used in practice—or better, differently from the way the attributor would ordinarily use it. As such, unlike a *de re* report, it does not articulate a mismatch between the way a proposition is entertained by the agent and the way it is entertained by the attributor, but rather it articulates a mismatch between the way the sentence is grasped or understood by the agent and the way it is grasped or understood by the attributor. Accordingly, it makes explicit that a subsentential expression is used by the agent differently from the way the attributor would use it. Thereby, it articulates a mismatch between the way the expression is deployed by the agent and the way it is ordinarily deployed in practice—or better, the way the attributor would ordinarily deploy it. I defined this function played by *de dicto* constructions as a distinctive kind of metalinguistic expressive function.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The present proposal might be considered questionable when faced with the phenomenon of translation. Indeed, I have claimed that, due to the existence presupposition failure, it is misleading to say that first-order sentences involving fictional names, taken literally, encode fully-fledged propositions, and hence have meaning at all. Therefore, strictly speaking, we cannot deliver a literal translation of the linguistic meaning of those sentences. Nevertheless, I have maintained that they can still imply and pragmatically convey certain propositional contents (e.g., some quantificational and hence purely descriptive ones)—albeit those will not be their literal contents. The purpose of a (good) translation then is not to report those propositional contents into a different language, but to provide, in that language, a sentence that, although (like the original one) does not encode a particular fully-fledged proposition, is however able to render those communicative effects. This could be achieved merely by providing a literal word-for-word translation, but not necessarily. The same applies to the second-order sentences that embed them. A (good) translation of them will be one that expresses a relationship between the teller/author and a sentence that, while different from the original, is still able to render its communicative effects into another idiom. At the same time, though, the translated higher-order sentence will have to be able to retain the same metalinguistic expressive function played by the original one. In short, according to the present account, it is, strictly speaking, impossible to translate a (first or higher-order) sentence involving an empty name: the only possible result would be a mere repetition or a new different sentence. This somehow echoes McGregor's notion of literary thickness and his idea that a translation is a different work of literature (McGregor, 2014; 2016). However, this is certainly an extreme conclusion that seems to be contradicted by countless counterexamples. What I am suggesting here, though, is that they are still translatable, but in a less strict sense—albeit something will be inevitably lost in translations. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to add this clarification.

### 5. Fictional and Intentional Vocabulary

The above strategy can also be applied to fictional vocabulary in external predications,<sup>31</sup> that is, when moving from inside to outside the scope of story operators, in the so-called “metafictive” use of sentences containing fictional names.<sup>32</sup> The predicate “... (is) fictional” and the related sortals (e.g., “Mr. Spock is a fictional character”, “USS Enterprise is fictional spacecraft”, etc.) can indeed be understood as playing a kind of metalinguistic expressive function relative to the use of fictional names. Consider the following sentence:

(6) Vulcan is a fictional object.

(6) does not allow the move of adding the narrative operator. At the same time, though, (6) is not entirely correct from a semantic point of view. In fact, as in (1), if we take the expression “Vulcan” to be used and not mentioned, its use presupposes that it has a reference, but since this presupposition fails, (6) does not express an evaluable claim. Nevertheless, whoever understands the way the author speaks in her novel/story (e.g., in the TV series *Star Trek*)—namely, that she only behaves as if she were using the term “Vulcan” to refer—already knows that (6) is true in some sense. Or better, (6) says something that is not said but only elucidated (or shown, in Wittgenstenian sense) in the story (e.g., in *Star Trek*). This is why (6) can be somehow re-formulated meta-linguistically:

(6\*) “Vulcan” is not a proper name, but it is presented as a proper name in a story.

(6\*) means nothing but that “Vulcan” is (intended to be) used *as if* it were a proper name, as a term that *acts the part* of a proper name, that behaves *as though* it were a proper name, and so on. Hence:

(6\*\*) “Vulcan” is a term used in a pretend act of reference.

If we follow Roman Ingarden (1973), fictional objects can be understood as a subset of purely *intentional objects*. Intentional objects are usually defined as nonexistent or “pseudo” objects that depend on intentional acts or states—including the intentional acts that make up the contexts of fiction (for a more detailed analysis of intentional objects, see, among others, Brentano, 1911; Crane, 2001; Scruton, 1970–1971). That is to say, they are mere projections from intentional acts or states, which is why they have the status of nonexistent

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<sup>31</sup> The external context is here simply understood as the real context, as opposed to the context of fiction.

<sup>32</sup> Those are usually called “metafictional sentences” (Recanati, 2000). Other common labels for sentences of this form are “external metafictional sentences” (Voltolini, 2006) or “metatextual sentences” (Bonomi, 2008).

(Moltmann, 2015, p. 145). As such, they are not part of the ontology. “Object” in this sense makes sense only relative to some subject or thinker (i.e., relative to the ascriber but not to the ascribee).<sup>33</sup> We can therefore broaden the above strategy as follows:

(7) Vulcan is an intentional object.

(7) can be re-formulated meta-linguistically:

(7\*) “Vulcan” is an empty name.

(7\*), in turn, as follows:

(7\*\*) “Vulcan” is a term used as a proper name in an unsuccessful or pretend act of reference.<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, those are not to be understood as deflationary metalinguistic paraphrases. *Being fictional, hypothetical, intentional*, etc. are not object language predicates that should be given metalinguistic analyses, that is, covertly metalinguistic predicates.<sup>35</sup> Instead, intentional vocabulary in general (and fic-

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<sup>33</sup> Notice that “intentional object” must not be taken to mean intensional objects, in the sense in which propositions and other intensions are. Even though some scholars endorse the view that there are intensional objects (Lamarque, Olsen, 1994, pp. 42–43), such entities are not what is meant here by talking of intentional objects. When Le Verrier considers the planet Vulcan, he is not thinking about an intension. He is thinking about a planet. So, even if there are intensional objects, this is not what intentional objects are.

<sup>34</sup> Similarly, according to the present proposal, the subject of negative existentials such as “Vulcan does not exist” is empty and, as already pointed out, empty names are expressions that make no separate ontic-semantic contribution. This forces us to give a metalinguistic rendering of those sentences (i.e., “‘Vulcan’ designates nothing”, or better “‘Vulcan’ is not a semantically meaningful term”). Or better, the predicate “being non-existent” can be understood as playing a metalinguistic expressive function of the above-mentioned distinctive kind. But it does not necessarily follow from this that, according to the present account, sentences like “Vulcan does not exist” either express the same proposition as sentences like “there is no such true proposition as that Vulcan exists”, or that they convey them pragmatically (see mainly Kripke, 2011; 2013 for a defence of this approach, and Hausmann, 2019 for a criticism of it). Moreover, such negative existentials may strike us as true also due to the truth of some other fully-fledged propositions that an utterance of them may engender or imply, but which are not their literal content. Those related propositions might simply depict the fact that no individual has the properties necessary for “being Vulcan”, that is, no individual is actually occupying the role of Vulcan. I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me to add this clarification.

<sup>35</sup> In Carnap’s technical terms, metalinguistic predicates in the material mode of speech are called “quasi-syntactical” predicates, where “the correlated syntactical predicate is that which designates the appertaining expressional genus” (Carnap, 1967, p. 297). An example is “1 is a number” whereby the “correlated syntactical predicate” is “number

tional vocabulary in particular) plays a distinctive metalinguistic expressive function relative to the use of empty names (e.g., fictional names): it shows what one intends to do in employing those expressions. Or better, it makes explicit fundamental aspects of their use that are already implicit in their principal use (e.g., in fiction). In short, the use of intentional/fictional vocabulary articulates essential features of the framework within which makes sense to use empty/fictional names. At the same time, though, the use of the former somehow derives and depends on the way the latter are used. Paraphrasing Brandom (2015), its use is explicative of practices-or-abilities necessary for the deployment of those expressions and is elaborated from those very practices-or-abilities.<sup>36</sup>

The present account can be therefore understood as a reconstruction of what is going on in explicit discourse about fictional/intentional objects. As such, it aims to provide an insight into the function played by fictional/intentional vocabulary, which is, I suggest, to make explicit what one is doing in deploying empty/fictional names: using them as proper names in unsuccessful/pretend acts of reference. Thus, their function turns out to be that of explicating how those expressions are used (i.e., as proper names in unsuccessful or pretend acts of reference), and how they should not be used (i.e., as ordinary proper names).

This expressivist treatment, though, does not collapse the contrast between talking about intentional and fictional objects and talking about linguistic types or inscriptions. Indeed, from the fact that what one is doing in saying, for example, “Vulcan is an intentional/fictional object” is classifying “Vulcan” as an empty/fictional name (i.e., as an expression used as a proper name in an unsuccessful/pretend act of reference), it does not follow that that is what one is saying. It certainly does not follow that that is all one is saying—albeit the latter has to be understood against the background of the former, that is, in light of its primarily expressive function. In other words, its content supervenes on its function—which is, again, to show what one is doing in deploying the term “Vulcan”—and “[n]o additional notion of content is required” (Köhler, 2017, p. 16).<sup>37</sup>

From the meta-semantic point of view, explicit talk about fictional/intentional objects is meaningful exactly *by virtue of* expressing what one is doing in deploying empty names (e.g., fictional names). As a result, in order to account for the meaning and truth of our claims about intentional/fictional objects, we do not need to countenance some sort of ontological category or seek some reductive

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word”. On his analysis, what appear to be claims about objects disclose themselves to be claims about linguistic types. Hence, they are “quasi-syntactic” (or “pseudo-object”) sentences formulated in the material mode of speech (or elucidations, in Tractarian terms).

<sup>36</sup> It must be pointed out that, since Brandom (2015) defines this distinctive kind of expressive role as that played by nondescriptive vocabulary in relation to the use of ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary, he mainly focuses on modal vocabulary, normative vocabulary, and ontological-categorical vocabulary.

<sup>37</sup> In that paper, Köhler defends the idea that meta-normative expressivism is best seen as a meta-semantic, rather than a semantic view.

view of what entities they really are.<sup>38</sup> There simply is no further question to be asked about whether there really are entities of some sort to serve as truthmakers for those claims, that is, as posits or touchstones that explain the meaning and the truth of the sentences about them. Therefore, what I am opposing here is not the hypostatization of those entities, but rather the notion of “correspondence” or “representation”: in order to account for the meaning of explicit talk about fictional/intentional objects, raising metaphysical questions about substantive criteria for referring or truthmaking, as well as seeking a deeper theoretical explanation, is neither received nor needed.

As mere projections from intentional acts or states, we can describe fictional/intentional objects as David Pears (1951) describes universals: “shadows cast by words”. In fact, even though *Vulcan* is not reducible to a linguistic type or inscription, we do not have here a case where an empty name really has a reference or stands in some referential relation—at least not as a paradigmatically referring term. The present account cannot be summed up by stating that, say, fictional objects dissolve into fictional names, nor into any other kind of metalinguistic reading. But it is not committed to the claim that they are possible concrete things either (Lewis, 1978; 1986; Priest, 2005). And, of course, empty names are not seen as picking out entities that hardly fit with any naturalist account, such as various Meinongian nonexistent objects. The same holds for the claim that fictional names denote full-fledge abstract particulars whether abstract artefacts (Kripke, 2013; Salmon, 1998; Schiffer, 1996; 2003; Searle, 1979; Thomasson, 1999; Voltolini, 2006)<sup>39</sup> or Platonic abstracta (Pelletier, Zalta, 2000; Zalta, 1983). As such, it also diverges from all those views, currently of high relevance in philosophy of fiction, which take fictional names to denote concepts of some sort.<sup>40</sup> Ultimately, this is not an account of what those entities are, since it does not need to be ontologically committed to the existence of any of such entities. Not being so committed, this view needs neither to endorse a non-naturalist ontology nor to provide a metaphysical explanation for the nature of any extravagant entities.

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<sup>38</sup> Accounts of fictional names that, like the present one, aim at avoiding esoteric ontologies and sui generis entities are usually classified as “fictionalist positions”.

<sup>39</sup> Presumably, elements of that position can be also found in van Inwagen’s (1977) theory of fictional objects as posits of literary criticism and in the work of Ingarden (1973).

<sup>40</sup> There are currently different versions of what we can call conceptualism. Among them is the so-called role-realism, according to which fictional names are disguised definite descriptions that pick out roles/offices, understood as sets of properties or requisites (Currie, 1990; Glavaničová, 2018; Lamarque, Olsen, 1994; Wolterstorff, 1980). Others conceive fictional names as denoting individual concepts (Abbott, 2011; Ciecierski, Grabarczyk, 2019; Glavaničová, 2021; Sainsbury, 2009; Stokke, 2020), namely intensions of individual expressions or individual description (Carnap, 1958, pp. 7–9; Church 1951, p. 111). Still, others account for fictional entities in terms of denoting concepts (Cocchiarella, 1982; Landini, 1990; Orilia, 2012) or concept-correlates (Cocchiarella, 2007; Evans, 1985, p. 402; Landini, 2012), where concept-correlation is the cognitive capacity humans have to represent a concept, which is not an object, as if it were an object.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

This paper has aimed to advance a non-reductionist naturalistic view of empty (and fictional) names. I have, therefore, tried to account for the features of the discursive practice involving those expressions without postulating any kind of entities that hardly fit into the world as described by science. Trivially, empty names, as empty, are not names at all. But they are not any other kind of semantically interpretable expression either. It follows that first-order sentences in which they occur in subject position, taken literally, do not express any fully-fledged propositions, are not truth-evaluable, are not eligible for making assertions and so on. Yet, different is the case with intensional constructions that embed those very sentences, which turn out to be literally meaningful, truth-evaluable and eligible for making assertions. How do explain this phenomenon then?

According to the present solution, in *de dicto* attitude reports, the embedded sentences are merely mentioned, rather than used. At the same time, though, they make it possible to show what an agent intends to do in using those sentences. In particular, they make explicit a mismatch between the way she uses (or would use) those sentences and the way they are ordinarily used in practice—or better, the way the ascriber would ordinarily use them. However, what they reflect is not a difference in the way the propositions expressed by those sentences are entertained—since there are no such propositions. Rather, they make explicit a mismatch in the way of meaning those very sentences. Accordingly, they make explicit a difference between the way the names in the that clauses are meant to be deployed by the ascriber versus that of the ascribee. When empty names are involved, what they show is that the former uses (or would use) those expressions as proper names in unsuccessful acts of reference, although that is not the way the latter would use them. I have defined this function played by *de dicto* reports as a kind of metalinguistic expressive function relative to the use of the embedded sentences and, in turn, relative to the use of the (empty) names that occur in them.

The same function, I have then argued, is then played by parafictional sentences, insofar as they are understood as *de dicto* ascriptions of fictive belief or pretense. In particular, they play the function of articulating what one is doing in saying something fictional, in the sense of fictively using a sentence containing a fictional name. Fictional names, as a subset of empty names, are not names at all—nor any other kind of interpretable expression. What distinguishes them is merely the kind of propositional attitude within which the sentences involving them are embedded. In any case, the happenings of a story about fictional objects are always trapped within propositional attitudes. It follows that fictional objects—as well as all the contradictions and impossibilities that usually arise within fictional stories—live in intentionality and, as such, are not at all objects to which we ought to be ontologically committed.

When fictional names are deployed in external predications (i.e., in metafictional sentences), I have suggested that the same sort of metalinguistic expres-

sive function relative to the use of those expressions is instead played by fictional vocabulary (i.e., predicates such as “being fictional” and the like). Ultimately, this solution has been extended to the intentional vocabulary in general (i.e., predicates such as “being hypothetical”, “intentional”, “fictional”, etc.), thus providing an overall insight into the distinctive kind of explicative function that it plays relative to the use of empty names.

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