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Tense in fiction

**ABSTRACT:**

How are tenses interpreted in novels, short stories and plays? I argue that understanding tenses in fiction does not amount to assigning any special meanings to them. I claim, however, that the choice of the point of origin (speech time) for interpreting tenses is regulated differently for texts of fiction and texts that are meant to report facts. For texts of the latter type, the point of origin, as well as the contextual coordinates fixing the reference of temporal and spatial indexicals, is given by the time of writing. For texts of fiction, the point of origin of tenses (and the reference of temporal and spatial indexicals) is either fixed in the text or else, as it usually happens, not fixed at all. This difference reflects the fact that for texts of fictions it hardly matters whether they are true or false, thus the context of evaluation may be left undetermined. This proposal has some consequences for the analysis of sentences of the form "In the text, phi." I explore them in the second part of the talk. I argue that to evaluate these sentences we need to find out which contexts and event times ``realize" the text: the truth of "In the text, phi" depends on phi's being true in the worlds of these contexts with respect to a point of origin and an event point that coincide. I show how this semantics accounts for the use of the present tense in sentences in the scope of the modifier "In the text".