

## FACT, FICTION AND FRENCH FLIGHTS OF FANCY

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This is a talk about the nature of fictional discourse. This topic is not generally regarded as part of linguistics. But then, linguistics traditionally studies only a very narrow range of language phenomena. The topic of fictionality is important in the philosophy of language. But then again, the philosophy of language is not traditionally regarded as a central part of linguistics.

The talk is a (slightly) satirical discussion of a (very) satirical novel, *La septième fonction du langage* by Laurent Binet (2015)<sup>1</sup>, a thriller / detective novel / spy story, with an absurd / burlesque / crackpot / drôle / extravagant / farcical ... zany plot. The title refers to the famous model of six functions of language proposed by Jakobson (1960)<sup>2</sup>. The novel imagines that he has discovered a magical seventh function, which holds the secret of ultimate perlocutionary power: the ability “to convince anyone to do anything at any time”. The secret services of several countries are searching for Jakobson’s manuscript.

The book is a merciless pastiche of a group of cultural theorists. The characters include “real people”: leading French politicians, in particular Giscard and Mitterrand, and intellectuals, including Althusser, Barthes, Culler, Derrida, Eco, Foucault ... Kristeva, Sollers and many other members of the intelligentsia who created what Americans called “French Theory”. Of course, you will probably argue, they are not “really” real people, but a mixture of factual and fictional characteristics who/which exist only in the fictional world of the novel. But both ordinary and expert readers have had problems with this mixture of fact and fiction.

Binet’s novel starts in 1980 with the death of Roland Barthes in a traffic accident: this really is how he died. But suppose it was not an accident, but murder: someone thought Barthes had the manuscript. In the novel, Althusser kills his wife (in the real world he really did kill his wife, although not for the reason given in the novel). In the novel, Searle kills Derrida (in the real world they were pretty rude about each other’s work, but Searle certainly did not kill Derrida). By now the plot has become outrageously unbelievable – and the characters have been joined by the entirely fictional Morris Zapp, who has wandered in from novels by David Lodge.

In real life, Searle (1976)<sup>3</sup> tries to disentangle “the logical status of fictional discourse”, but he does not explain how readers distinguish fact from fiction, or indeed how far you can go with outrageous caricatures of living persons before you find yourself in a libel case. The novel raises problems which have not been solved by either literary scholars or language philosophers (and they are not solved in this talk, so don’t get too excited).

An article based on this talk will appear in a memorial volume in honour of Walter (Bill) Nash (1926-2015), who would, I am sure, have enjoyed Binet’s novel. Bill Nash was himself the author of a comic novel and many short stories, and was also a linguist, parodist, poet, stylistician, expert on Old Norse sagas and modern English usage. See Amazon.co.uk: search for “Walter Nash” and click “Amazon’s Walter Nash page”.

20 Oct 2017

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<sup>1</sup> Binet, L. 2015. *La septième fonction du langage*. Paris: Grasset. [Le Livre de Poche, 2016. Translated as *The Seventh Function of Language*, Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2017; *Die siebte Sprachfunktion*, Rowohlt, 2017.]

<sup>2</sup> Jakobson, R. 1960. Closing statement: linguistics and poetics. In T. Sebeok (ed) *Style in Language*. Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press. 350-77.

<sup>3</sup> Searle, J. R. 1976. The logical status of fictional discourse. *New Literary History*, 12, 6(2): 319-32.