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**About
(Abstract)**

- Full-length article in: JLT 8/2 (2014), 257–269.

The paper looks at the diversity of contexts in which aboutness claims are made: e. g. »x is about a «, »x is about φ «, and so on. It asks what such claims *mean* and whether there is a univocal meaning (of »about«) in all cases. The paper argues that there is a single meaning of »about« and that it can be elucidated in terms of conditions on interpretation. To establish the truth-conditions of aboutness claims we need to appeal to what objects or concepts must be invoked to make sense of the claims themselves as uttered in context. So aboutness is not essentially a referential relation nor explicable purely extensionally. Aboutness claims involving works of fiction are discussed and the thought that the identity of fictional characters is interest-relative is brought to bear on the issue; this in turn suggests that aboutness claims concerning fiction are themselves interest-relative.

More specifically, certain long-established views on »about« are addressed, notably that of Nelson Goodman, who distinguishes a relational from a non-relational sense, the latter characterised by the one-place predicate » a -about«. Goodman's device is valuable but it is argued does not amount to a separate sense for »about«. Something more fundamental is going on in aboutness claims, something which all examples have in common whether they are genuinely relational or not. Proposals – e. g. from Rudolf Carnap – involving semantic ascent, whereby names rather than objects named are deemed to be the proper subjects of aboutness claims, are also rejected, partly because names are often not involved or implied.

So instead a principle of invocation is introduced, which asks what must be invoked in a competent interpretation of an aboutness claim. To say truthfully that S is about a requires a grasp of the context in which S is uttered, knowledge of which can ground an interpretation of S . And the truth-value of » S is about a « will itself depend on the context in which the utterance is made. Judgments of aboutness are interest-relative because under different interests different factors will be salient, as contextually determined. Whether it is true to state that Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe* is about the real life Alexander Selkirk will depend on the kind of interest brought to the novel, for example, concerning historical facts about its origin or literary facts about its content.

Finally, consideration is given to claims about fictional characters. How can we »invoke« a fictional character in an interpretation if there are no such things? Reverting to Goodman's terminology, in virtue of what is *Pickwick Papers* Pickwick-about? As Pickwick is not an object standing in a relation to the novel we might construe the predicate »Pickwick-about« as identifying a concept, something like Pickwick-as-depicted-in-*Pickwick-Papers*. This thought is developed by looking at identity conditions for fictional characters. When are two characters identical or different (Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, versions of the Faust character, or Maria in *West Side Story* and Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*)? Again, it is argued that these questions afford no absolute answer but will depend on the context-dependent interests brought to bear on them. A passage in Robert Louis Stevenson's novella might be Mr-Hyde-about but not Dr-Jekyll-about, which is just to say that to understand the passage we must invoke the Mr Hyde conception not the Dr Jekyll conception. Given that these two conceptions are distinct, with their own defining

characteristics, we can say that under certain interests Dr Jekyll is not identical with Mr Hyde, while of course under other interests (taking the novella as a whole) the characters are identical.

References

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