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Two approaches to defining internal, external, and zero-focalization

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Abstract: The paper discusses two approaches to defining internal, external, and zero-focalization. According to the first approach, the three types of focalization are defined in terms of a relation of a character's knowledge to the narrator's report. We argue that the definitions based on this approach are seriously flawed. According to the second approach, whether a narrative is internally, externally or zero-focalized depends on how the information that the reader gets about the fictional world is constrained. We discuss some ways of rendering these definitions more precise, and we point to a remaining problem of the definitions.

Keywords: focalization, point of view in narrative, narrative perspective, narrative, narrator, narrative theory

1 Introduction

The theory of focalization is one of narratology's most flourishing branches today. Talk of "focalization" stems from the work of Gérard Genette who, in his much celebrated *Narrative Discourse* (1980), aims at both systematizing and correcting previous theoretical accounts of point of view in narratives. The theory of focalization as presented in *Narrative Discourse* has become hugely influential and, as far as we can see, dominates current narratological discussion. In this essay, we discuss two particular approaches to the definition of internal focalization, external focalization, and zero focalization that are suggested in *Narrative Discourse*. According to the first approach, the three types of focalization can be defined, and differentiated, on the basis of the relation between what the narrator says and what a specific character knows. We shall argue that, as they stand, these definitions are seriously flawed, mainly because they collapse the distinction between internal and external focalization.

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However, there is a second approach to be found in *Narrative Discourse*, namely, one that is based on the idea of focalization as a restriction of the information the reader gets from the text. Taking up this idea allows one to formulate an alternative definition of the three types of focalization. According to this alternative approach, passages of internal focalization restrict the information the reader gets insofar as in passages of internal focalization, the reader is not told anything that transcends the mind of the focal character, and passages of external focalization restrict the information the reader gets insofar as in passages of external focalization, the reader is not offered any direct insights into any of the character's minds. Passages of zero focalization, in contrast, show no such constraint. In what follows, we start by characterizing, and criticizing, the first approach to focalization (Sections 2 and 3). In Sections 4 and 5, we characterize the second approach to focalization and show how it can be rendered more precise. Next, we briefly discuss focalization without a fictional narrator (Section 6). We close by discussing three problems for the second approach to focalization, and by offering a brief conclusion (Sections 7 and 8).

2 The knowledge approach to focalization

In his influential *Narrative Discourse*, Genette takes up an ongoing discussion about point of view in narrative. Drawing (mostly) on the work of Pouillon (1946) and Todorov (1966), he distinguishes three types of focalization in terms of a relation between what the narrator says and what a character knows:

[T]he consensus settles with no great difficulty on a three-term typology. The first term corresponds to what English-language criticism calls the narrative with omniscient narrator and Pouillon calls “vision from behind,” and which Todorov symbolizes by the formula *Narrator > Character* (where the narrator knows more than the character, or more exactly says more than any of the characters knows). In the second term, *Narrator = Character* (the narrator says only what a given character knows); this is the narrative with “point of view” after Lubbock, or with “restricted field” after Blin; Pouillon calls it “vision with.” In the third term, *Narrator < Character* (the narrator says less than the character knows); this is the “objective” or “behaviorist” narrative, what Pouillon calls “vision from without.” (Genette 1980: 188–189)

Genette introduces the terms “zero focalization” for “*Narrator > Character*,” “internal focalization” for “*Narrator = Character*,” and “external focalization” for “*Narrator < Character*” (Genette 1980: 189–190). Genette at no point gives a precise definition of these new terms in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. In order to facilitate our ensuing discussion, we propose to reformulate

what he says about the three types of focalization (and allocate abbreviations to the definitions) in the following way:

- EF_{Knowledge Approach}: A text is externally focalized if and only if “the narrator says less than the character knows.”
- IF_{Knowledge Approach}: A text is internally focalized if and only if the narrator “says only what a given character knows.”
- ZF_{Knowledge Approach}: A text is zero-focalized if and only if the narrator “says more than any of the characters knows.”

Let us call these three definitions the *Knowledge Approach* to focalization.¹ The reason why we take the Knowledge Approach, thus defined, as our point of departure is that, as a brief look into post-Genettean theory of focalization reveals, the idea that focalization can somehow be defined in terms of what a narrator says and a specific character knows has been taken up many times.²

3 A critique of the knowledge approach to focalization

In this section, then, we shall criticize the Knowledge Approach. We will mount three lines of criticism against it: first, if the Knowledge Approach is correct,

¹ Note that we are not primarily interested in an exegesis of *Narrative Discourse*, so some very few exegetical specifications must do. Genette does not explicitly reject or criticize the definitions of the Knowledge Approach, but his elaborations on focalization do point to some implicit modifications, and indeed amendments, of the Knowledge Approach as formulated above. Concerning external focalization, for instance, Genette claims that it is not only a character’s knowledge that is at issue, but also the character’s “thoughts or feelings” (Genette 1980: 190; see also Jahn 1996: 244), and he indicates that internal focalization can be carried out in a more or less strict manner (see Genette 1980: 192–193). Moreover, there is a second approach to the definition of types of focalization to be found in *Narrative Discourse*; we will discuss it under the heading “Constraints Approach” in Section 4 of our paper.

² See, e.g., Bal (1983: 236); Berendsen (1984: 141); Edmiston (1989: 730); Nelles (1990: 366–367); Simpson (1993: 33); Phelan (2005: 111); Linhares-Dias (2006: 403); Horstkotte and Pedri (2011: 332). Genette’s formulation is also widely adopted in recent (German) introductory textbooks to narratology and dictionaries; see, e.g., Martinez and Scheffel (1999: 64); Stocker (2003: 56); Lahn and Meister (2008: 107–08); Kress (2009: 523); Niederhoff (2009: 115); Kuhn (2011: 122). Note that some of these authors criticize various aspects of Genette’s theory of focalization and propose amendments. What they have in common, however, is that they hold that a character’s knowledge lies at the heart of focalization as explained by Genette.

then every externally focalized text is internally focalized as well; second, if the Knowledge Approach is correct, then most internally focalized texts are externally focalized as well; third, the Knowledge Approach cannot deal with internally focalized passages of unreliable narration.

3.1 The knowledge approach falsely has it that external focalization implies internal focalization

The first argument against the Knowledge Approach is embarrassingly simple yet utterly devastating. Recall that it is sufficient for a text to be externally focalized that the narrator says less than a specific character knows; and that it is sufficient for a text to be internally focalized that the narrator does not say more than a specific character knows. But surely, if the narrator says less than a certain character knows then the narrator does not say more than this character knows. Therefore, if the sufficient condition for external focalization is fulfilled the sufficient condition for internal focalization is fulfilled as well. Accordingly, if the Knowledge Approach is correct, then every externally focalized passage of text is internally focalized as well.³

3.2 The knowledge approach falsely has it that most internally focalized texts are externally focalized

According to the Knowledge Approach it is sufficient for a text to be internally focalized that the narrator does not say more than a certain character knows. Now a moment's reflection makes it clear that in internally focalized passages of text the narrator does usually not tell the reader everything a certain character knows. For instance, the focalizer will usually know that one plus one equals two, that one plus two equals three, and so on. We are not aware of any internally focalized narrative where the narrator actually tells the reader everything the focalizer knows. Rather, in an internally focalized narrative the narrator will tell the reader less than the focalizer knows. But according to the Knowledge Approach, that the narrator tells the reader less than the focalizer knows is sufficient for the text to be externally focalized. The Knowledge

³ For this critical point and the following one, see already Kablitz (1988: 244). See also Currie (2010: 336), for a very similar argument.

Approach thus implies that most, if not all, internally focalized texts are externally focalized as well. This is clearly not true.

3.3 The knowledge approach cannot deal with many internally focalized unreliable narratives

The notion of knowledge is hotly debated both in philosophy and literary theory. However, most would agree on the claim that knowledge is sufficient for truth in the following way: if someone knows that p then p is true (cf., e.g., Audi 1998: 214; Lehrer 2000: 11). For our present aim it is sufficient to acknowledge that this connection to truth is part and parcel of everyday attributions of knowledge. This characteristic trait can be brought to light by comparing attributions of knowledge to attributions of belief. Surely, there is a difference between (1) or (2):

1. Peter knows that Munich is the capital of Germany.
2. Peter believes that Munich is the capital of Germany.

It does not make any sense to assert “Peter knows that Munich is the capital of Germany but, in fact, Munich is not the capital of Germany.” In contrast to that, asserting (2) is perfectly consistent with claiming that Munich is not the capital of Germany. I might, for instance, say “Peter believes that Munich is the capital of Germany but, regrettably, he is mistaken – Berlin is the capital of Germany.” If I say that someone knows that p , what I’m saying is that this person believes that p *and* that (for all that I know) it is actually true that p . In sum, then, our argument relies on a factive notion of knowledge as it is used in everyday attributions. Thus, claiming that (in the fiction) Watson knows that Sherlock Holmes lives in Baker Street involves claiming that (in the fiction) Watson believes that Holmes lives in Baker Street *and* that this is actually true (in the fiction). It is important to keep this feature of the notion of knowledge in mind, because the Knowledge Approach spells out focalization in terms of characters’ knowledge. More specifically, on this account a text is internally focalized if and only if everything the narrator says is known to a specific character. But a certain type of unreliable narration makes it clear that this cannot be true. We will argue that these narratives should be classified as instances of internal focalization and that this is not consistent with the definitions under consideration.

In cases of unreliable narration what the reader is told about the fictional world and what is actually the case in the fictional world diverge. With one type of unreliable narrative the reason for this is that the focalizer of the text has wrong beliefs about the fictional world: the reader is only told what the character functioning as focalizer believes, but the character’s beliefs are not true. It

is then up to the reader to find out what really is the case in the fictional world.⁴ There are at least two reasons why such a narrative should be described as being internally focalized: the reader is only told what the character believes, and the narration takes place from the perspective of the character.

According to the Knowledge Approach, however, internal focalization means that the narrator only says what is *known* to the character functioning as focalizer. But this cannot be true in the cases of unreliable narration under discussion, because in these cases the unreliability is due to the focalizer being mistaken. And as was shown above, we cannot say that the focalizer knows that *p* and that she is mistaken about that. So in these cases it is not true that everything the narrator says is known to a specific character. Narratives of this type are paradigmatic cases of internally focalized narratives. But the Knowledge Approach definition does not allow us to call them such, because in these cases not everything the narrator says is known to a certain character. So the Knowledge Approach cannot be correct.

4 The constraints approach to focalization

In the previous section we have argued that, for three reasons, the definitions supplied by the Knowledge Approach are seriously flawed: on these definitions every externally focalized passage of text is internally focalized as well, on these definitions internally focalized passages of text will usually (if not always) also be externally focalized, and some texts that clearly seem to be instances of internally focalized unreliable narration do not satisfy the condition for internal focalization. But this, of course, does not mean that the basic idea behind the Knowledge Approach is completely mistaken. We will now consider a reformulation of the definitions that is both immune to the problems raised and in line with what we take to be this basic idea.

The Knowledge Approach defines different types of focalization in terms of the relation between what the narrator says and what a character knows. For instance, if a text is internally focalized what the reader gets to know depends on what a specific character knows. We take it that the basic idea is that, somehow, focalization concerns what the reader is told, or not told, about the fictional world. This certainly is in line with Genette's claim that "focalization is essentially ... a *restriction*" (Genette 1980: 192; see also pp. 185–186, and Genette

⁴ An example for this is Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*; for an interpretation, see Phelan and Martin (1999), or Nünning (2008).

1988: 74). The Knowledge Approach is *but one* (mistaken) way of substantiating this basic idea. Thus, the definition has it that a text is *externally focalized* if and only if the narrator says less than a particular character knows. As we have argued above, we should not accept this definition. But if we call to mind passages which are regarded as paradigmatic instances of external focalization, what is striking is not simply that the narrator says less than the character knows, but that the reader is not told *specific* things. What the reader is not told is what is going on in the character's mind. We might capture this idea in the following definition:

EF_{Constraints Approach}: A passage of text is externally focalized if and only if in it the reader is not given any explicit information about what a specific character believes, thinks, sees, hears, and so on.

In section 3.3, it was shown that *internal focalization* cannot be defined in terms of knowledge. If we take a look at the texts that Genette describes as internally focalized it becomes clear that we do not have to talk about what a specific character *knows*. Rather, we have to take into account a broad range of a focalizer's attitudes that may limit what is said in the text. There has been quite some discussion about what exactly this talk of a focalizer's attitudes may amount to. We have already briefly alluded to Genette's claim that, apart from a character's knowledge, his thoughts and feelings may be at issue (see note 1). Chatman suggests that a person's "point of view" may be constituted by, *inter alia*, his "perception," his "ideology," or his "interest-vantage" (see Chatman 1978: 151–152). Similarly, Rimmon-Kenan distinguishes a "perceptual facet," a "psychological facet" (which, again, is divided into a "cognitive" and an "emotive component") and an "ideological facet" (Rimmon-Kenan 2002: 78–84; see also Simpson 1993: 21). Sternberg differentiates between "epistemic," "ontic" and "evaluative" axes of "perspective" (Sternberg 2007: 688), and he also indicates that these may actually come down to an open list of many different things, namely, "a subject's ontology, culture, ideology, idiolect, emotivity, self-consciousness, artistic values and competence ..." (Sternberg 2007: 714; see also Currie 2010: 332, 334–335).⁵

Now, it is obviously hard to come up with a comprehensive list of all the aspects that may constitute a person's perspective or point of view. Note that the distinctions proposed already contain a mixed bag of phenomena: for instance,

5 Currie stresses that a person's point of view is also a matter of the person's dispositions.

while perceiving is something a focalizer *does*, her ideology has to do with the *content* of what she believes, and it inevitably includes both thoughts about matters of fact and evaluations. So, in any case it does not make much sense to claim that in internal focalization, either a focalizer's ideology or her values limit what is said in the text. Luckily, however, it is not necessary to give an exhaustive list of all the aspects a focalizer's point of view or perspective may have. What does matter is that we gain some implicit understanding of the multifaceted phenomenon that is at issue here – and for this aim, the open-list approach adopted by Chatman and others will do. A focalizer's point of view or perspective may be constituted by what the focalizer believes, pretends to believe, supposes, wishes, hopes, fears, and all other mental attitudes. This suggests the following definition:

IF_{Constraints Approach}: A passage of text is internally focalized if and only if in it the reader is only given information about what a specific character believes, pretends to believe, thinks, hopes, fears, and so on.

Does the Constraints Approach allow for a definition of zero-focalized texts? The idea behind the definition of zero-focalization supplied by the Knowledge Approach is, presumably, that in these cases the reader might be told *anything* (and this is then put in the unfortunate formulation “more than the character knows”). That means that there is no focalization constraint in operation. So we can simply define zero-focalized texts in the following manner:

ZF_{Constraints Approach}: A text is zero-focalized if and only if no focalization constraint is in place.

If the Constraints Approach is correct, then internal, external, and zero-focalization are mutually exclusive. A passage of text cannot be internally focalized and zero-focalized because a passage of text is only zero-focalized if no focalization constraint is in place, and a passage of text can only be internally focalized if the internal focalization constraint is in place. At first glance, a passage of text cannot be externally focalized and zero-focalized because a passage of text is only zero-focalized if no focalization constraint is in place, and a passage of text is only externally focalized if the external focalization constraint is in place. And a passage of text cannot be internally and externally focalized because the internal and the external focalization constraints are mutually exclusive: a passage of text is only internally focalized if the reader is only told what a

specific character believes, thinks, and so on; and a passage of text is only externally focalized if the reader is not told what a specific character believes, thinks, and so on. This, however, presupposes that the phrase “a specific character” in both definitions refers to the same character. We will come back to this point in the next section.

It is important to see what the fact that zero-focalization is incompatible with internal and external focalization does *not* mean. That a passage of text is zero-focalized does not mean that it may not contain any sentences about what a specific character believes, thinks, and so on. Rather, it means that the passage cannot consist only of sentences about what a specific character believes, thinks, and so on. If it did consist only of sentences about what a specific character believes, thinks, and so on, the passage as a whole would be internally focalized and not zero-focalized. Similarly, that a passage of text is zero-focalized does not mean that it may not contain any sentences that are not about what a specific character believes, thinks, and so on. Rather, it means that the passage cannot consist solely of sentences that are not about what a specific character believes, thinks, and so on. In this case, the passage as a whole would be externally focalized and not zero-focalized. We do not think that this is an unfortunate fact about the definitions. That a text is zero-focalized does not mean that it does not contain any passages that are internally or externally focalized. It counts in favor of the constraints approach that it does not rule this out.

5 Relative focalization

As we saw, Todorov defined the three different types of focalization by relating what the narrator says to what *a specific character* knows. On the definitions of internal and external focalization that we provided, a passage is internally focalized if and only if it is only about what *a specific character* believes, thinks, and so on, and a passage is externally focalized if and only if it does not give the reader any direct insight into what *a specific character* believes, thinks, and so on. This talk of a specific character is imprecise. As far as we can see, there are two promising ways to make it more precise. Firstly, we might say that the character in question is simply the main character of the passage. Thus, a passage is internally focalized if and only if it is only about what the main character of the passage believes, thinks, and so on, and a passage is externally focalized if and only if it does not give the reader any direct insight into what the

main character of the passage believes, thinks, and so on. Thus, we might give the following definitions of internal and external focalization:

MCIF_{Constraints Approach}: A passage of text is internally focalized if and only if in it the reader is only given information about what the main character believes, pretends to believe, thinks, hopes, fears, and so on.

MCEF_{Constraints Approach}: A passage of text is externally focalized if and only if in it the reader is not given any explicit information about what the main character believes, thinks, sees, hears, and so on.

Secondly, we might say that internal and external focalization is relative to characters. At first glance, this seems to make a lot of sense. Intuitively, a passage that describes one character's behavior from another character's perspective might be externally focalized relative to the first character and internally focalized relative to the second character. A passage can thus be internally focalized relative to one character, and externally focalized relative to another character.⁶ We might thus give the following definitions of relative internal and external focalization:

RIF_{Constraints Approach}: A passage of text is, relative to a character, internally focalized if and only if in it the reader is only given information about what that character believes, pretends to believe, thinks, hopes, fears, and so on.

REF_{Constraints Approach}: A passage of text is, relative to a character, externally focalized if and only if in it the reader is not given any explicit information about what that character believes, thinks, sees, hears, and so on.

Note that these two options are not mutually exclusive. As noted above, if a text describes one character's behavior from another character's perspective, intuitively, the text is focalized externally relative to the first character, and focalized internally relative to the second character. If the second character is the text's main character then the text will also satisfy MCEF_{Constraints Approach}. This is not problematic. In fact, we can think of MCIF_{Constraints Approach} and MCEF_{Constraints Approach} as specific cases of relative internal and relative external focalization respectively. For a text falls under MCIF_{Constraints Approach} if and only if it is

⁶ This strategy is discussed in Genette (1980: 191–192, and (1988: 75).

internally focalized relative to its main character. And a text falls under $MCEF_{\text{Constraints Approach}}$ if and only if it is externally focalized relative to its main character.

$MCIF_{\text{Constraints Approach}}$ and $MCEF_{\text{Constraints Approach}}$ presuppose that there is a main character. A passage of text that does not have a main character does not satisfy either. The relative notions of internal and external focalization we introduced above do not have this drawback. Furthermore, as we saw, $MCIF_{\text{Constraints Approach}}$ and $MCEF_{\text{Constraints Approach}}$ are simply specific cases of relative internal respectively external focalization. This strongly suggests that relative internal and external focalization are more fundamental. It seems, then, that the relative notions of internal and external focalization are to be preferred. However, we will discuss problems with these definitions in section 7.

6 Focalization without a fictional narrator

The Knowledge Approach presupposes that there is a fictional narrator. The definitions that we have provided in the previous section do not presuppose this. In general, we do not believe that every fictional narrative has a fictional narrator.⁷ And it is quite clear that on the Constraints Approach a fictional narrative can be focalized even if it does not have a fictional narrator. The basic idea behind the Constraints Approach is that internal and external focalization are simply specific ways in which the information that the reader is given about the fictional world is constrained. If a fictional narrative is, relative to a character, internally focalized then the only information the reader is given about the fictional world is what that character believes, thinks, and so on. If a fictional narrative is, relative to a character, externally focalized then the reader is not granted any direct insights into that character's mind. If a fictional narrative is zero-focalized then neither of these constraints on the information that the reader is given is in place. Now, narratologists sometimes claim that what information the reader is given about the fictional world somehow depends on the narrator. If this was true then, arguably, what type of focalization a text exhibits would depend on its narrator. But it cannot be true that what information the reader gets about the fictional world depends on the fictional narrator.

⁷ To be more precise, we believe that all arguments for the claim that every fictional narrative has a fictional narrator that have been advanced so far fail (see Köppe and Stühling 2011). This means at least that the assumption that every fictional narrative has a fictional narrator is unfounded.

What information the reader gets by reading a fictional narrative depends on the text of the narrative. The reader gets the information that is included in the text, and the reader does not get the information that is not included in the text. And what information is included in the text cannot depend on the fictional narrator. The reason is simple: the text exists in the actual world, the narrator does not, and the properties of something that does exist in the actual world cannot depend on something that does not exist in the actual world.

At this point, it should be clear how, on the Constraints Approach, focalization works in narratives that do not have a fictional narrator: it works just the way it does in fictional narratives that do have a fictional narrator. Whether a narrative is internally, externally, or zero-focalized depends on how the information that the reader gets about the fictional world is constrained. But how this information is constrained does not depend on the fictional narrator – it does not even depend on whether the narrative has a fictional narrator. That the focalization of a narrative text does not depend on a fictional narrator, however, does not mean that it is not fictional that it depends on the narrator. If a fictional narrative has a fictional narrator then it is fictional that there is someone who tells the story that the reader reads. Thus, for the Sherlock Holmes stories, it is fictional that Watson tells the story that the reader reads. Usually, in the fiction it will depend on the narrator what information is included in the story and what information is left out. Internal and external focalization are specific constraints on what information is included in a story, zero-focalization is the absence of these constraints. Thus, if a fictional narrative has a fictional narrator, it will usually be fictional that its mode of focalization depends on the narrator. Again, this does not mean that its mode of focalization will *actually* depend on the narrator.⁸

⁸ A side note for philosophers: we are aware that there is an ongoing debate about whether or not fictional objects exist (or are real). We have an inclination towards antirealism, which is why we phrased our argument the way we did. But anti-realists should also accept our conclusion. Take abstract artifactualism, for instance. According to this position, fictional objects are abstract artifacts that authors create by writing fictional texts. Which fictional objects an author creates and what properties they have depends on what the author writes. Thus, the existence and properties of fictional objects depend on the text of the relevant fictional work, not the other way around. What information the fictional text gives the reader depends on the actions of the author, not on the actions of the fictional narrator. In fact, as the fictional narrator is an abstract object he is incapable of acting. (Obviously, this does not mean that it cannot be fictional that the narrator performs actions.) Realists of a different stripe should accept similar arguments.

7 Three problems for the constraints approach

It seems to us that the Constraints Approach spells out an important and ultimately correct intuition: when a text is internally or externally focalized the information the text gives the reader about the fictional world is constrained in specific ways. And when a text is zero-focalized these constraints on the information that the reader gets about the fictional world are not in place. But the Constraints Approach nonetheless runs into three problems. The first problem is that the definition of internal focalization does not supply a necessary condition. According to $RIF_{\text{Constraints Approach}}$, a text is, relative to a character, internally focalized if and only if the text *only* gives the reader information about what that character believes, thinks, and so on. But it seems that this is not necessary for internal focalization. Consider the following passage:

3. Peter and Paul looked at the vase. “Can you tell which era it is from?” Paul asked. Peter took out his magnifying glass. Between the twines of the clearly visible floral pattern there were little dots of paint not visible to the naked eye.⁹

Here, the last sentence is internally focalized. Unfortunately, it provides the reader not only with information about what Peter sees, but also with information about how the vase looks. Thus, $RIF_{\text{Constraints Approach}}$ counts clear cases of internal focalization not as internal focalization. In fact, the same problem occurs in texts that describe one character’s behavior from another character’s perspective. These texts do give the reader information about the character whose behavior is described.

The second problem concerns $REF_{\text{Constraints Approach}}$: it is questionable whether this definition supplies a sufficient condition. Most passages of text will not provide the reader with any explicit information about what most characters believe, think, and so on. However, it would clearly be wrong to count them as externally focalized with regard to all these characters. Thus, the condition given in $REF_{\text{Constraints Approach}}$ is clearly not sufficient.

In order to evade these two problems we tentatively propose the following adjustments to our definitions. Firstly, a (passage of) text is only focalized internally or externally relative to a character if it is about that character in some sense. Clearly, that a text is not about a character (does not mention, describe, characterize, etc. this character in any way) is not sufficient for it to be externally focalized relative to this character. However, if a text describes a

⁹ The example is from Klauk et al. (2011: 221).

character but does this in a way such that the reader is not told explicitly what this character believes, thinks, and so on, then it is focalized externally relative to this character. Generally speaking, it seems plausible that a text is only focalized relative to a character if it is in some sense about this character. This is somewhat vague, but this is not necessarily a problem. Whether a passage of text is about a character will sometimes be up to interpretation. Accordingly, it will be a question of interpretation whether it is focalized (internally or externally) relative to any character. We take this to be a welcome result.

Secondly, the basic idea behind the constraints approach is that focalization is at heart a constraint on the information the reader is given. As we have seen, the idea that a text is internally focalized relative to a character if and only if the only information the reader is given in it is what that character believes, thinks, and so on runs into a problem. The problem is that in internally focalized passages the reader is often given information that exceeds information about what the relevant character thinks. But we suspect that this need not be the end of the constraints approach. Recall the above quoted passage:

Peter and Paul looked at the vase. “Can you tell which era it is from?” Paul asked. Peter took out his magnifying glass. Between the twines of the clearly visible floral pattern there were little dots of paint not visible to the naked eye.

We argued that in this passage the reader does not only learn how Peter perceives the vase, but also how the vase actually looks. Note that there seems to be a systematic difference in how the reader receives this information. The content of the final sentence is the content of Peter’s perception. The reader is directly told how Peter perceives the vase to be. From this and the fact that Peter’s perception of the vase seems to be reliable (we are not told that Peter is drunk, or hallucinating, or dreaming or the like) the reader infers that the vase actually is how Peter perceives it to be. Thus, this piece of information is imparted to the reader in a much more indirect way. We might thus say the following: the reader is directly told how Peter perceives the vase to look, and the reader is indirectly told how the vase looks. We suggest that for the question whether the sentence is internally focalized it is only pertinent what information the reader receives directly.

If we make these two adjustments we end up with the following definitions:

RIF_{Constraints Approach}-1: A passage of text is, relative to a character *c*, internally focalized if and only if (i) the passage is about *c*, and (ii) the only direct information that the passage gives the reader is what *c* believes, pretends to believe, thinks, hopes, fears, and so on.

REF_{Constraints Approach-1}: A passage of text is, relative to a character *c*, externally focalized if and only if (i) the passage is about *c*, and (ii) the passage does not give the reader any direct information about what that character believes, thinks, sees, hears, and so on.

Note that these definitions are somewhat vague. No doubt a lot of analysis will be necessary to make them precise to a satisfying degree. However, we hope that they point us in the right direction.

The third problem for the Constraints Approach concerns the question whether the definition of internal focalization that we have ended up with actually supplies a sufficient condition. Recall again the last two sentences of the above quoted passage, this time with a small addition:

Peter took out his magnifying glass. Between the twines of the clearly visible floral pattern there were little dots of paint not visible to the naked eye, he thought.

By adding “he thought” to the last sentence, one may give a different flavor to the passage, such that the passage is taken to be zero focalized, rather than internally focalized.¹⁰ It seems to us that a defender of RIF_{Constraints Approach-1} has a number of options here. Firstly, she might deny that we are facing a counterexample and insist that RIF_{Constraints Approach-1} yields the altogether desired result that the passage is internally focalized. Secondly, she might argue that we are dealing with a limiting case such that the passage is neither internally focalized nor zero focalized.¹¹ Thirdly, she might propose an amendment to the definition that captures the intuition that internally focalized passages of text only supply readers (directly) with information concerning the *content* of what the respective character *c* believes, pretends to believe, thinks, hopes, fears, and so on. By adding “he thought” to the passage, the passage supplies information which, arguably, transgresses the content of Peter’s thought. Thus, according to the amended definition, the passage does not count as internally focalized any more.

10 This intuition might have motivated Genette’s remark on internal focalization that it “implies in all strictness that the focal character never be described or even referred to from the outside” (Genette 1980: 192).

11 This option, however, requires a certain interpretation of ZF_{Constraints Approach}: the definition has it that “a text is zero-focalized if and only if no focalization constraint is in place.” If RIF_{Constraints Approach-1} is neither satisfied nor not satisfied, then the passage of text may be taken to count as zero focalized.

8 Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that the definitions of internal, external and zero focalization that are suggested by the Knowledge Approach are seriously flawed. These definitions should be given up once and for all. A second approach to the definition of the three types of focalization, the Constraints Approach, takes up an important intuition that appears to have motivated the Knowledge Approach, namely, the idea that in internal and external focalization, what the reader gets to know about the world of the fiction is constrained in particular ways, while no such constraint is effective in zero focalization. The respective definitions allow for an exclusive taxonomy of the three types of focalization, and they do not rely on the notion of a fictional narrator. However, the definitions remain to some extent vague. Whether a (passage of) text is focalized or not is, sometimes to a considerable degree, a question of interpretation.¹²

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