

# Presuppositions and Truth-Value Intuitions

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**Thesis** This talk is concerned with an intuitive contrast that arises when we consider sentences containing empty definite descriptions. While (1) ‘The king of France is bald’ appears to be neither true nor false, sentences like (2) ‘My friend was visited by the king of France’, (3) ‘Obama is the king of France’ or (4) ‘The king of France exists’ induce clear intuitions of falsity. This is surprising, for one might think that all of these sentences carry the false presupposition that there is a unique king of France and should receive the same evaluation as a consequence. Recently, some authors have developed an account of this intuitive contrast (Lasersohn (1993), von Stechow (2004), Yablo (2006)). According to them, all sentences containing empty definite descriptions carry a false presupposition and thus lack a truth-value but for some reason we still reject some of the sentences as false. I argue against these accounts and develop a Strawsonian alternative that vindicates our pre-theoretic truth-value judgements. According to the developed account, the two types of sentences actually differ in truth-value, since they differ in their presuppositions. Hence, pace recent literature, I develop an account according to which our truth-value intuitions are trust-worthy.

**First Part: Against Recent Accounts.** According to recent accounts, all sentences containing empty definite descriptions carry a false presupposition and thus lack a truth-value. However, we still reject some of the sentences as false. Roughly, the common idea is that we add the false presupposition temporarily to our body of beliefs to allow an evaluation of the sentence in question. If the sentence conflicts with some other proposition we believe, we reject it as false; otherwise, we do not. For instance, we can reason that even if there is a unique king of France, Obama is not the king of France. For we believe that Obama is the president of the US and that presidents of the US are not kings of France. Consequently, we reject (3) as false. In contrast, we cannot reason that even if there is a unique king of France, he is not bald. For we do not believe, e.g., that kings of France have to be bald. Therefore, we do not reject (1) as false. However, these accounts are not convincing. *Firstly*, in some contexts even ‘The king of France is bald’ seems false, e.g. as an answer to the question ‘Are there any bald people?’ But, as I argue, the accounts are unable to explain this context dependency of our intuitions. *Secondly*, as already mentioned, (4) seem false as well. However, we cannot reason that even if there is a unique king of France, he does not exist. Thus, the accounts cannot explain why existence sentences appear to be false.

**Second Part: A Strawsonian Account.** According to Strawson, an utterance of a sentence containing ‘the king of France’ carries a presupposition iff it says something about the king of France (Strawson (1964)). We can use the notions of topic and comment to formulate this thesis more precisely as follows:

(T<sub>1</sub>) A definite description  $D$  contained in a sentence  $S$  induces a presupposition iff  $D$  is the topic expression in  $S$ .

*Firstly*, I explain how (T<sub>1</sub>) can account for the relevant data. (2) is a passive construction and thus its topic expression is ‘my friend’. In the same vein, (3)’s topic expression is ‘Obama’, as topic expressions usually appear in subject position. In contrast, (1)’s topic expression is ‘the king of France’, since in (1) ‘the king of France’ appears in subject position. Accordingly, ‘the king of France’ induces a presupposition only in the case of (1) but not in the case of (2) and (3). Moreover, we can also explain the data that causes trouble for the previously discussed accounts. Firstly, since it can depend on the context whether ‘the king of France’ functions as the topic expression, it can also depend on the context whether the definite description induces a presupposition. Secondly, as argued by Atlas (1988), in existence sentences like (4) the topic expression is ‘exists’ and not ‘the king of France’, although the latter expression appears in subject position. Thus, ‘the king of France’ does not induce a presupposition in this case.

*Secondly*, I supplement the Strawsonian account with an explanation of (T<sub>1</sub>). I argue that (T<sub>1</sub>) is based on the fact that ‘the king of France’ is used referentially iff *S* is used to say something about the king of France; otherwise, the definite description is used predicationally or quantificationally. We can formulate this thesis more precisely as follows:

(T<sub>2</sub>) A definite description *D* contained in a sentence *S* has a semantic value of type *e* iff *D* is the topic expression in *S*; otherwise, *D* has a semantic value of type  $\langle e, t \rangle$  or type  $\langle et, t \rangle$ .

(T<sub>2</sub>) can explain the varying presuppositional behavior of ‘the king of France’ as follows:

- (i) In (1) the topic expression is ‘the king of France’ and the comment expression is ‘bald’. Thus, the semantic value of ‘the king of France’ should be of type *e*, i.e. an individual, and the semantic value of ‘bald’ of type  $\langle e, t \rangle$ , i.e. a set of individuals. Thus, (1) is true if the individual denoted by ‘the king of France’ belongs to this set of individuals and false if it does not. Since there is no individual denoted by ‘the king of France’, (1) is neither true nor false.
- (ii) In (3) the topic expression is ‘Obama’ and the comment expression is ‘the king of France’. Thus, the semantic value of ‘Obama’ is of type *e* and the semantic value of ‘the king of France’ is of type  $\langle e, t \rangle$ . More particularly, if there is a unique king of France, the semantic value of ‘the king of France’ is the set that contains him as the only element; otherwise, it is the empty set. Thus, (3) is true if Obama belongs to the empty set; otherwise, (3) is false. Since Obama does not belong to the empty set, (3) is false.
- (3) In (4) the topic expression is ‘exists’ and the comment expression is ‘the king of France’. Thus, the semantic value of ‘exists’ is of type  $\langle e, t \rangle$  and the semantic value of ‘the king of France’ is of type  $\langle et, t \rangle$ , i.e. a set of set of individuals. More particularly, if there is a unique king of France, the semantic value of ‘the king of France’ is the set of his properties; otherwise, it is the empty set. Thus, (4) is true if the set of existing individuals belongs to the empty set; otherwise, (4) is false. Since the set of existing individuals does not belong to the empty set, (4) is false.

*Thirdly*, I argue that although ‘the king of France’ can receive different interpretations, it is not an ambiguous expression like ‘bank’. For, contrary to expressions like ‘bank’, the different interpretations are related to each other via type-shifting rules that can operate on one and the same meaning to yield different interpretations. As I explain, the postulation of type-shifting rules for definite descriptions is motivated independently from the fact that it can accommodate their varying presuppositional behavior (cp. Partee (1986)).

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