

Philippe Côté-Boucher

UCLA

Beyond the King of France: Alternative Ways to Look into Existence Presuppositions

So-called "truth value gaps"--where a sentence cannot readily be judged true or false by speakers--have been considered the defining symptom of presupposition failure (Frege 1892, Strawson 1967). However, these judgements are notoriously difficult, and while truth and falsity have a reasonable intuitive import, "neither" is simply not amenable to naive intuitions in the same way.

Focusing on existence presuppositions, I propose a novel paradigm which poses no task of truth-value evaluation to get at what I argue is the source of those problematic intuitions. This is achieved by ways of i) reducing the relevant concept of existence to a special case of what has been called 'givenness,' a more local property, and ii) employing non-asserted contexts, such as interrogatives, and sentences embedded under certain propositional attitude verbs (hope, wonder) to probe for felicity judgements.

(i) allows us to naturally expand this research to the whole class of indefinites and weak quantifiers, while freely using non-fictional common nouns. (ii) effectively removes the burden of evaluating the test sentences for their truth, since by definition sentences with no asserted content do not have a truth-value.

Using this paradigm, I present a case for Diesing (1992)'s original hypothesis that individual-level--contra stage-level—predicates presuppose something of their argument, i.e. the existence of their restrictor in a local sense. In light of this, I propose a semantic definition of I-level predicates strictly based on this feature. This result casts doubt on approaches that try to do without mention of the I-/S-level distinction, such as Lasersohn (1993)'s, and von Stechow (2004)'s.

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