Beyond the King of France
Alternative ways to look into existence presuppositions

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Outline

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2. Inference is not content

3. Beyond definites and truth

4. Experimental evidence

5. Conclusions

Inferring existence

(1) Some Southern California pragmaticists are dancing.

(2) Some Southern California pragmaticists are good dancers.

⤳ Southern California pragmaticists exist.

- Both perfect inferences in implicit reasoning.
- Presupposition or entailment?

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But if I'm inclined to believe (3) is false:

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Epistemic paths to the KOF

Von Fintel (2004), building on Lasersohn (1993):

> Truth-value gaps due to reference failure occur because there is no way of checking the truth or falsity of a proposition at issue other than examining the would-have-been referent itself.
>
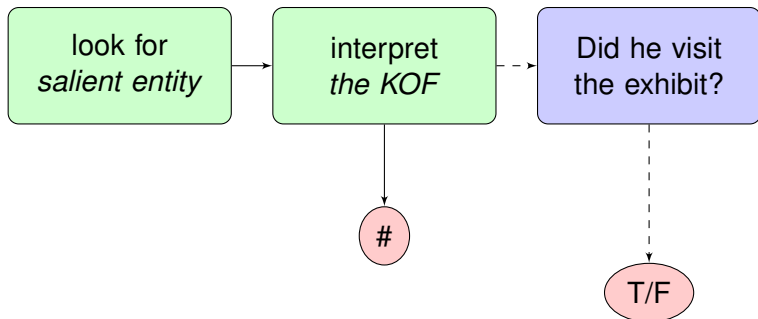> (There is no independent epistemic path to evaluation.)

Epistemic paths to the KOF

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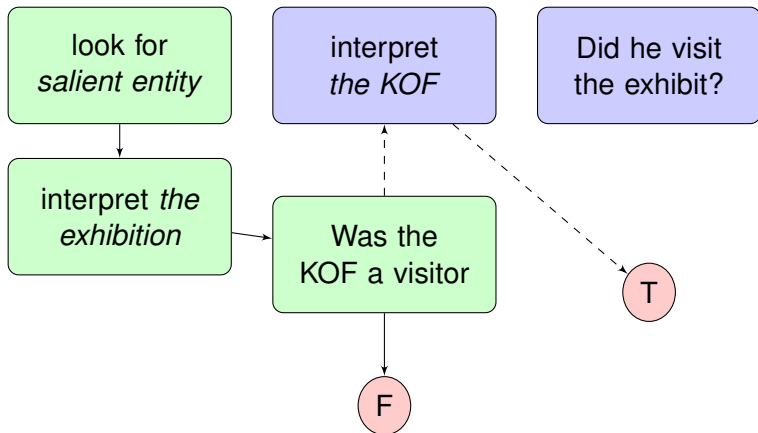
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Epistemic paths to the KOF

In summary, for von Fintel/Lasersohn:

- All definites trigger a semantic presupposition.
- The #/F contrast is a consequence of the pragmatic procedure of truth evaluation.
- If rejection can proceed without examination of a non-referring expression, presupposition failure is avoided.
- The S-/I-level predicate distinction is not crucial.

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Existence inference, what art thou?

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(1) Some Southern California pragmaticists are dancing **in this room**.

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Existence inference, what art thou?

- We can relativize the notion of existence to a specific context. Call this *givenness* for the time being.
- If that is so, existence in the traditional sense is reduced to either
  - a special case of givenness ("absolute givenness"); or
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Existence inference, what art thou?

- Further, such inferences, whether they come about as entailments or presuppositions, are not *linguistic content*—overt or covert—in any way.

- Existence presuppositions are a byproduct of interpreting given (sets of) individuals. 'Presupposition as anaphor' theory, anyone?

Geurts (2007)

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- I have already shamelessly used indefinites in my examples. I think they participate in #/F contrasts as well.
- As Diesing (1992) reported, weak quantifiers behave as strong in certain grammatical contexts, i.e. when they are arguments to I-level predicates.

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- First: set up an epistemic state where the presence of individuals with the property *x* in a given context is explicitly not given, but possible.
- Then: test for the felicity of a non-assertive inquiry about *x* in the context.

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(1) I'll be mad if any pragmaticist is dancing in this room, because pragmaticists are not allowed.

(2) # I'll be mad if any pragmaticist is a good dancer in this room, because pragmaticists are not allowed.

- The oddness of (2) cannot literally be the result of truth assessment.
- Even in comparing the non-embedded, declarative versions of those sentences, it's not obvious that (1) involves a *salient entity* that (2) is lacking.

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Experimental evidence

- Production experiment was conducted with 20 participants from the McGill student population (from all majors).
- Purpose: to test potential obviating effect of intonation on non-felicity.
- Design: 2×2 factorial, one condition shown to each participant in pseudorandom order.
- Two contexts: given, where presence of x in context was understood; antigiven (at-issue), where presence was actively doubted.
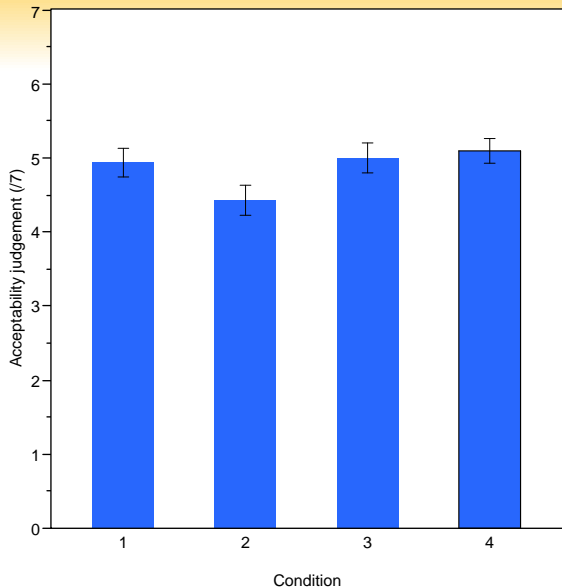- Two sentences: one using ILP, and one using SLP.

Experimental evidence

Sample item: Antigiven context

Your friend just started a new job as a tour guide in Niagara Falls. He tells you about his hectic day, and how he had a hard time keeping his 50-people herd together. The fact that many spoke decent English was a relief. You read in the newspaper that tourism from Russia is on the increase.

You're curious as to whether Russian tourists were in your friend's group. So you decide to ask him.

- S-level: Did any Russian tourist cause trouble?
- I-level: Did any Russian tourist speak English?

1. Antigiven × S-level
2. Antigiven × I-level
3. Given × S-level
4. Given × I-level

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I-levelness

- Non-felicity in antigiven contexts correlates perfectly with a familiar feature of ILPs: the absence of an existential reading for their external argument.

- If, as I claim, the #/F contrast shares its roots with this non-felicity, then an explanation for it should come with an explanation of ILP sentences.

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Back to definites

- And definites? Does their use necessarily imply existence or contextual presence?
- Ask a friend who just came back from CUSP:
  - Did {your favorite pragmaticist/Bill} say anything brilliant?
  - Was {your favorite pragmaticist/Bill} brilliant?

Fin.