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

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Outline

1. Truth-value gaps
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.

Both perfect inferences in implicit reasoning.

Presupposition or entailment?
Inferring existence

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Presupposition or entailment?
Truth-value gaps

Inference is not content

Beyond definites and truth

Experimental evidence

Conclusions
Similarly, if I believe/aspire to believe (1) or (2):

1. The King of France is bald.
2. The exhibition was visited yesterday by the King of France.
Similarly, If I believe/aspire to believe (1) or (2):

1. The King of France is bald.
2. The exhibition was visited yesterday by the King of France.

\[ \sim \rightarrow \text{The KOF exists.} \]
But if I'm inclined to believe (3) is false:

1. The King of France is bald.
2. The exhibition was visited yesterday by the King of France.
3. [F] The KOF exists.

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

1. The King of France is bald.
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Truth-value gaps

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

\[\neg\neg [\#] \text{ The King of France is bald.}\]
\[\neg\neg [F] \text{ The exhibition was visited yesterday by the King of France.}\]

(3) [F] The KOF exists.

Truth-value gaps

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

\[\sim \] [\#] The King of France is bald.
\[\sim \] [\F] The exhibition was visited yesterday by the King of France.

(3) [\F] The KOF exists.

Truth-value gaps

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

\[ \sim \rightarrow [\#] \text{ The King of France is bald.} \]
\[ \sim \rightarrow [F] \text{ The exhibition was visited yesterday by the King of France.} \]

(3) [F] The KOF exists.


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.)
[F] The exhibition was visited yesterday by the King of France.

- Look for salient entity
- Interpret the KOF
- Interpret the exhibition
- Was the KOF a visitor?

Conclusion: T
Epistemic paths to the KOF

[#] The King of France is bald.

- look for salient entity
- interpret the KOF
- Did he visit the exhibit?
  - T/F

Beyond the King of France
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?

(1) Some Southern California pragmaticists are dancing.
(2) Some Southern California pragmaticists are good dancers.

⇒ Southern California pragmaticists exist.
Existence inference, what art thou?

(1) Some Southern California pragmaticists are dancing in this room.
(2) Some Southern California pragmaticists are good dancers in this room.

 '~/Southern California pragmaticists exist are in this room.'
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
- a derivative tool for the natural language logician.
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- If that is so, existence in the traditional sense is reduced to either
  - a special case of givenness ("absolute givenness"); or
  - a derivative tool for the natural language logician.
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)

the term ‘existential import’ is really a misnomer, or at the very least, highly misleading. [...] what [a] presupposition does, or is supposed to do, is recover a suitable referent from the context.
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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.
Beyond the KOF and truth

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- As Diesing (1992) reported, weak quantifiers behave as strong in certain grammatical contexts, i.e. when they are arguments to I-level predicates.
Beyond the KOF and truth

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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- 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: $2 \times 2$ 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.
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?
Truth-value gaps

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Acceptability judgement (7)

Condition

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

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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.
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.
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.