X   PRESUPPOSITION AND EMPTY NAMES

Non-Catastrophic Presupposition Failure

Frege and early-Strawson argued that sentences containing terms (names or descriptions) that fail to refer lack truth-values. Russell thought that those containing non-denoting descriptions are false. But even those who embrace the Frege/Strawson line have to concede that there seem to be a class of sentences with non-denoting descriptions that are simply false; and moreover in some way their falsity doesn't stem directly from the fact that they contain non-denoting terms. Contrast:

(1) The King of France is bald

(2) My friend went for a drive last week with the King of France

Following Yablo, call cases like (2) case of 'non-catastrophic presupposition failure'; it is non-catastrophic in the sense that it doesn't wreck the communicative intent of the speaker.

Three tests

Traditionally, the test for presupposition is lack of truth-value if it is not met. But that test begs the question against the phenomenon we are considering here. So we need some other tests:

Sentence: 'I'm picking my guru up at the airport'; Presupposition: 'I have a guru'; tests:
   (i) 'Hey, wait a minute, I didn't know that you had a guru';
   (ii) what is denied, hoped, regretted etc: 'I hope I'll pick my guru up at the airport' doesn't entail 'I hope I have a guru';
   (iii) projection: 'I don't have to pick up my guru after all' still entails 'I have a guru'.

We might think that our intuitions about the truth and falsity of certain sentences are direct evidence for their truth or falsity. Or we might think that our intuitions are too unreliable for that. Nevertheless they need some explanation; we need some explanation of what von Fintel calls 'a pragmatics of assent and rejection'. When we talk about truth and falsity from now on, we'll mean it in this weak sense, not assuming that this is 'deep' truth and falsity.

Topic

One possibility: the difference between (1) and (2) is that in the former 'The King of France' is in topic position (it is what the sentence is *about*), whereas in the latter 'My friend' is in topic position. Maybe only non-denoting descriptions in topic position give rise to truth-value gaps. But consider:

(3) The King of France is sitting in that chair

Von Fintel

Intuitive idea: a sentence with a false presupposition is false if we would judge it false even if we came to believe that the presupposition were true. (NB this isn't the same as saying that it would be false even if the presupposition were true: maybe that chair is the French Throne, so if the King of France did exist, that is just where he'd be sitting.) More precisely: consider a sentence S with a presupposition π. Suppose that the speaker is speaking against a background of information D, according to which π is false. In determining the truth value of S, we first revise D, and then we see whether D would entail the falsehood of S. Von Fintel considers four proposals for how to do the revision:

(i)   remove not-π from D
        remove any proposition from D that is logically incompatible with π
        add π to D
        close under logical consequence

Problem: suppose I have examined all of the existing kings, and have concluded that they are all not-bald. So D contains 'All kings are not bald'. Then (1) would come out false.

(ii)   remove not-π from D
        remove any proposition from D that is logically incompatible with π
        remove any proposition from D that was in D just because not-π was in D
        add π to D
        close under logical consequence

Problem: 'The King of France is on a state visit to Australia this week' is typically judged false. But having removed so much from D, I have nothing left there that rules it false. So we have to restrict the set of things that we took out of D: von Fintel's proposal is to leave in the set of judgments that we could get by considering some salient (existing) entities:

(iii)   remove not-π from D
        remove any proposition from D that is logically incompatible with π
        remove any proposition from D that was in D just because not-π was in D, unless it
        could be shown to be true by examining the [intrinsic] properties of a contextually
        salient entity
        add π to D
        close under logical consequence

Nice consequence: 'The King of France is one of the bald people in this world' now gets ruled false, since this makes the class of bald people in this world into a salient entity.

Problem: why couldn't we now show that (1) is false, by examining France, and showing that it is true that it has no king. So, modify again:

(iv)   remove not-π from D
         remove any proposition from D that is logically incompatible with π
         remove any proposition from D that was in D just because not-π was in D, unless it
         could be shown to be true by examining the [intrinsic] properties of a contextually
         salient entity without at the same time showing that π is false.
         add π to D
         close under logical consequence

Yablo

Don't try just to capture the false sentences with non-denoting descriptions. Try to explain a
host of different sentences that we take to be false or true despite failing presuppositions (e.g.
the Donnellan sentences). But focus just on the false:

   A The lodger next door offered me twice that sum—False (there is no lodger next door)
   B The author of Principia Mathematica also wrote Principia Ethica—False
   C All ten solar planets are inhabited—False
   D The man drinking a martini is a philosopher—False (the man in question is an engineer)
   E My cousin is not a boy any more—False (my female cousin is eight years old)

Basic idea: what is true or false is that which is said *in addition* to the presupposition. Or in
other words, in evaluating what is true or false in a sentence S independently of the
presupposition π, think what would have to be added to the presupposition to entail S.

So if the presuppositions are

   A There is exactly one lodger next door
   B There is exactly one author of Principia Mathematica
   C There are exactly ten solar planets
   D That man (Daniels) is the man drinking a martini
   E My cousin is a male human being

The asserted contents are:

   A Some and all lodgers next door offered me twice that sum
   B Some and all Principia Mathematica authors also wrote Principia Ethica
   C All solar planets are inhabited
   D That man (Daniels) is a philosopher
   E My cousin is an adult.

All of these are false. Might we say then that we judge a sentence S with a false presupposition
π to be false just in case its asserted content is false; and we judge it true just in case its asserted

content is true? That would be too quick, since then it seems that every such sentence would be either true or false: in arguing that there is non-catastrophic presuppositional failure, we seem to have reached the conclusion that there is no catastrophic presupposition failure. Yet our starting point was that there is: it is what is exhibited in (1).

Yablo's response is to do things in two stages. A sentence S *makes a claim* just in case, if its asserted content is true, then the asserted content of ~S is false. Otherwise it fails to make a claim. Statements that fail to make a claim suffer catastrophic presupposition failure. That is what happens to (1): its asserted content is: 'Any French Kings are bald'; and the asserted content of its (narrow scope) negation is: 'Any French Kings are not-bald'. But those are both true. So (1) is neither true nor false.

In contrast, sentences that do make a claim will be judged true or false depending on whether their asserted content is true or false. Or more precisely, since there might be more than one sentence that could serve the role of asserted contented, depending on whether the conjunction of asserted contents are true or false. (That's not quite the terminology that Yablo uses: he calls the conjunction the asserted content, and calls the conjuncts from which it is constructed the π–free extensions; but the idea should be reasonably clear.)