ZOLTÁN VECSEY*

IS THERE A UNIFORM EXPLANATION
FOR STRAWSONIAN CONTRAST CASES?

Abstract

Strawson once observed that sentences containing non-referring definite descriptions tend to elicit different types of intuitive responses from language users. While some of these sentences elicit a sense of squeamishness, others elicit a robust sense of falsity. Strawson explained this type of response difference in terms of presupposition and topicality. In the last decades, Strawson's approach has been often criticized on the ground that it cannot provide a uniform explanation for all possible occurrences of non-referring definites. In this paper, I examine two recent Strawson-inspired projects and argue that they also fall short of providing a uniform explanation of the data. In the final section, I briefly delineate an alternative approach, which seems to have greater explanatory power than its rivals.

Keywords: reference-failure, definite description, presupposition, topicality, intuitive truth-value judgment

1. NON-REFERRING DEFINITES
AND INTUITIVE TRUTH-VALUE JUDGMENTS: STRAWSON'S VIEW

Reference-failure can come in various forms and from various sources in everyday uses of language. Sometimes the speaker possesses identifying knowledge of a particular object, *o*, and utters a declarative sentence involving an expression which may be taken as purporting to refer to *o* in that situation, but the hearer lacks the relevant piece of knowledge. Another case is when the hearer is in principle in a position to identify the intended object but the referring expression used by the speaker is vague, ambiguous, or misleading

* MTA-DE-SZTE Research Group for Theoretical Linguistics, 6726 Szeged, Középfasor 5/A, Hungary, e-mail: vecseyz@freemail.hu.

in other ways. Although these cases provide uncontroversial examples of failed reference, the failure is not a radical one. In no-reference cases where either the hearer's knowledge state or the speaker's expression choice is the cause of the failure, an essential condition for successful reference is still satisfied: there is an object that can be identified and referred to by a suitably situated third-party agent. When this condition is not met; i.e., there isn't any object to be referred to, the discursive exchange between the speaker and the hearer breaks down in a more radical way. Of course, the speaker may take herself to refer to something and nothing prevents the hearer from claiming that the speaker's utterance was successful. These judgments would be definitely incorrect, however. Even a third-party intervention could not save the situation. It does not really matter what the discursive position of the agent is: in the absence of identifiable objects, genuine reference is impossible.

In his paper *Identifying Reference and Truth-Values* (1964), Peter Strawson explored an interesting aspect of this type of radical reference-failure. Strawson's main target here was a heated debate that arose between two groups of philosophers of his time. Members of the first group, including Bertrand Russell and Michael Dummett, held that if an utterance suffers from radical reference-failure, then the resulting statement should be rejected as false. Members of the second group, such as Willard Van Orman Quine and John Austin, argued, in contrast, that utterances involving expressions that lack identifiable referents are neither true nor false. Although Strawson's sympathies are undoubtedly with the latter view, the truth-value gap theory, he articulates a careful and nuanced position in this debate.[1]

The careful manner with which he presents his arguments is motivated by a methodological observation. For Strawson, it seems clear that when one investigates examples of non-reference in isolation from their possible context of use, the truth-value gap theory is more attractive than its rival. He recognizes, however, that if one takes a broader methodological perspective and pays attention to certain contextual factors, then the truth-value gap theory will begin to lose its initial attractiveness. As an illustration, consider the following pair of sentences both involving the non-referring definite description "the king of France":

(1)   # The king of France is bald.

(2) ^{F} New Zealand was visited yesterday by the king of France.

---

[1] In an earlier paper, Strawson (1950) offers several arguments to support the truth-value gap theory. These arguments pertain primarily to the logic of assertions, leaving out of consideration the contextual and pragmatic circumstances in which speakers normally make assertions.

Can a literal and serious utterance of (1) be evaluated for truth or falsity when it occurs in a discourse initial position? At least two considerations suggest that the answer may be "no." First, note that, by using a definite like "the king of France," the speaker typically presupposes that there exists an identifiable person to whom the description is uniquely applicable. This does not mean that the speaker intends to assert the existence of someone. Instead, the main purpose of the assertive utterance of (1) is to inform the hearer that the person in question possesses the property of baldness. Now, given that there is no such person as the king of France, the definite generates a presupposition failure and thus, as Strawson aptly puts it, "the whole assertive enterprise is wrecked" (1964: 106). Therefore, the question of whether the utterance is true or false does not arise at all. Second, it should also be noted that the presence of existence presuppositions depends significantly on the topic-comment structure of declaratives. Strawson's contention is that only topical definites are presuppositional, and since it is natural to read (1) as purporting to introduce information about its topic, the king of France, the definite is certainly topical in this sentence.[2] Taking these two observations together, one can explain why the hearer feels "squeamish" when asked to assign a classical truth-value to (1). Following the notation of Kai von Fintel (2004), "#" is used above to indicate that utterances of (1) tend to elicit a sense of squeamishness.

The truth-conditional evaluation of (2) leads to a quite different result. In (2), the definite has non-topical status and, if Strawson's second observation is correct, this implies that its default existence presupposition is suspended. An utterance of this sentence can then be interpreted as asserting something about its topic, New Zealand; namely, that it was visited yesterday by the king of France. Since there is no such king, New Zealand cannot possess this property and thus the hearer will most probably judge the assertion to be false rather than truth-valueless. In accordance with this, the symbol "*F*" above indicates that utterances of (2) tend to elicit a sense of falsity.

As noted, Strawson considers the theoretical importance of the contrast between examples like (1) and (2) carefully. Although he does not explicitly say so, it may be inferred from his words that he warns us not to confuse intuitive truth-value judgments with semantic truth-value assignments. Con-

---

[2] One can hypothesize that the topical status of a sentential constituent depends primarily on its grammatical position. On this hypothesis, only argumental definites are topical. When definites are predicates (or parts of predicates), they are non-topical. It is worth mentioning, however, that Strawson uses the term "topic" in a broader, discourse-based sense. Topicality in this broader sense means roughly that speakers and hearers can detect an antecedent center of interest in their discourse context, and they are aware that this center of interest has a significant effect on what they are talking about.

versational data gathered from everyday usage may inform us as to how and why intuitive truth-value judgments vary from case to case but they are not necessarily helpful for deciding the semantic status of sentences. If this is indeed so and intuitive truth-value judgments provide no decisive evidence for semantic hypotheses, then one might question why we should investigate them at all. Strawson's answer is that the observable patterns and regularities of speakers' judgments may serve to show, albeit indirectly, that both the truth-value gap theory and the falsity theory are reasonable accounts of radical reference-failure (cf. 1964: 104-105).

The last remark assumes that examples of radical reference-failure are completely separable into two classes, say *a* and *b*, such that the elements of *a* (indirectly) support the truth-value gap theory and the elements of *b* (indirectly) support the falsity theory. Of course, Strawson is aware that this assumption has to be justified, so he devises a testing procedure (cf. 1964: 117). The test proceeds in the following manner. If an utterance *u* seems to suffer from radical reference-failure and you want to know how to evaluate *u* for truth or falsity, describe it as follows. Start with *"The speaker was saying . . . ,"* and continue with an interrogative pronoun, adjective, or adverb introducing a dependent clause which specifies the topic of the original utterance. If the non-referring expression is still present in the clause, then the uttered sentence belongs to class *a*. If the non-referring expression is eliminated from the clause, then the uttered sentence belongs to class *b*.

Let us see how the procedure works on our chosen examples. When applied to sentence (1), the test gives the expected result:

(3)   *The speaker was saying* what the king of France was like.

The non-referring definite "the king of France" is still present in the dependent clause of (3), which shows that (1) belongs to class *a*. By applying the test to sentence (2), one also gets the expected result:

(4)   *The speaker was saying* who New Zealand was visited by yesterday.

The non-referring definite is eliminated from the dependent clause of (4), which shows that (2) belongs to class *b*. At first sight, then, it would appear that Strawson's testing procedure is an effective means of sorting out referentially defective sentences that support the truth-value gap theory (elements of class *a*) from those that do not (elements of class *b*). There are some cases, however, that are much harder to test than (1) and (2). Consider the following sentence:

(5)   ?Middlemarch was visited yesterday by the king of France.

By testing (5), one obtains (6):

(6)   *The speaker was saying* who Middlemarch was visited by yesterday.

The problematic constituent of this example is "Middlemarch."[3] "Middlemarch" is a proper name of a fictional town and, as such, it fails to refer to anything real. Perhaps (5) has no coherent reading at all, because it contains not only a referentially defective predicate but also a referentially defective argument. It is not simply the case that, because of this double deficiency, "the whole assertive enterprise is wrecked." Rather, it appears that (5) is inappropriate for making an assertion in the first place. But (6) suggests otherwise. According to (6), the topic of (5) is Middlemarch. Therefore, by uttering this sentence, the speaker asserts that Middlemarch, the fictional town, has a certain property — namely, that it was visited yesterday by the king of France. For reasons already mentioned, Middlemarch cannot have such a property. But, then, there is some intuitive pull for the hearer to regard this assertion as false rather than truth-valueless or incoherent.[4]

Since it is strongly questionable whether (5) can elicit a sense of falsity, Strawson's testing procedure does not work well in this particular case. Moreover, the case of (5) seems to be generalizable to a larger set of sentences. The root of the problem is that, while *The-speaker-was-saying* transcriptions are sensitive to the topic-comment structure of the sentences to be transcribed, they are utterly insensitive to the referential properties of the topical constituents of these sentences. This is why the referentially defective "Middlemarch" behaves in the transcription of (5) as if it were a genuinely

---

[3] I admit that (5) may sound highly artificial for the hearer/reader. This example was chosen because it is easily comparable to (2). But if needed, (5) could be replaced by any of its more natural sounding alternatives which instantiate the schema "[*non-referring proper name*] was visited yesterday by [*non-referring definite*]."

[4] As an anonymous reviewer remarks, some theories of fiction accept that Middlemarch may be visited by the king of France. If one conceives literary works as modally flexible in their intrinsic properties, then it can be claimed that George Elliot could have written a sequel to *Middlemarch* in which there was such a visit. This is an accurate remark, but it is irrelevant to the present point. The problem with (5) is not that it does not take into consideration the possible versions of the story of *Middlemarch* but that it is not an assertion. In order to make more clear that Strawson's testing procedure does not work, we need only replace "Middlemarch" with a genuinely empty name such as Salmon's "Nappy" (cf. Salmon 1998). Consider (5') and (6'):

(5')   Nappy was visited yesterday by the king of France.

(6')   *The speaker was saying* who Nappy was visited by yesterday.

Since "Nappy" is a necessarily empty name, (6') cannot be understood as an assertoric report.

referring proper name. And this is why the test's result suggests, misleadingly, that the transcribed sentence can be judged false.

On the basis of the above discussion, one might conclude that the Strawsonian testing procedure can handle "easy" contrast pairs like (1) and (2) successfully, but the strategy is not general enough to provide a *uniform* explanation for all possible patterns in intuitive truth-value judgments.

Proponents of the Strawsonian account might be tempted to reply to this critique by saying that the proposed explanation would work even if the suspicious testing procedure were omitted from it. What is of primary importance, so the reply might continue, is that we explain patterns in intuitive truth-value judgments in terms of presupposition and topicality. Strawson's paper gives clear instructions as to how to proceed and this could lead us to the required explanation. There are indeed some researchers who try to defend Strawson's account in this way,[5] but the majority view is that the explanatory relation between presupposition, topicality, and intuitive truth-value judgments is more complicated than he originally conceived.

In the following sections, I examine two recent Strawson-inspired projects that offer a finer-grained account of the contextual factors that affect intuitive truth-value judgments. I argue that these proposals also fall short of providing a *uniform* explanation of the data. In the final section, I briefly delineate an alternative, non-contextual approach, which seems to have greater explanatory power than its (contextualist) rivals.

2. SEPARATING INTUITIVE JUDGMENTS
FROM PRESUPPOSITIONS AND TOPICALITY

When confronted with a sentence which contains a non-referring definite, one either feels a sense of squeamishness or a sense of falsity. As mentioned above, Strawson makes two claims about the possible sources of these opposite reactions. The first is that definites presuppose the existence of a uniquely identifiable object. When the presupposition fails radically, the question of truth or falsity cannot even arise, and thus the sentence will elicit a sense of squeamishness. The second is that only those definites generate presuppositions which are in topical positions. From this, it follows that non-topical definites lack existence presuppositions. If this is true, then one might predict that declarative sentences with non-referring definites in non-topical position will regularly be judged as false.

---

[5] See, for example, Atlas (2004) and Bezuidenhout (2016).

Von Fintel (2004) rejects both claims as unmotivated. He rejects the first Strawsonian claim by arguing that there is no strong correlation between the discernible patterns of truth-value judgments and the presuppositions made by speakers. More specifically, von Fintel argues that both members of the following contrast pair presuppose the existence of the French king:

(7)   # The king of France is wise.

(8)   *F* Last week, my friend went for a drive with the king of France.

(7) is predicted to elicit a sense of squeamishness because the existence presupposition of the definitive description "the king of France" fails. So far, so Strawsonian. But, according to von Fintel, even if (8) sounds false, it seems to trigger the same existence presupposition. Uninformed hearers of (8) may express their astonishment that France is still ruled by a king — a clear sign that a felicitous utterance of this sentence requires that there be an appropriate referent answering to the definitive description "the king of France."

The same lesson could be drawn from the reading of certain relative clauses with embedded definites. Here is an example:

(9)   *F* I know that my friend met with the king of France earlier today.

One can safely predict, I think, that an utterance of (9) would elicit a "robust" intuition of falsity. Despite this, the existence presupposition remains, again, active, projecting out of the that-clause. Therefore, what holds for (8) also holds for (9). If someone hears (9) without knowing much about current politics, they may be astonished that France still has a king. On my view, this kind of objection is effective against Strawson's first claim, according to which patterns of intuitive truth-value judgments correlate quite closely with the presence or absence of existence presuppositions.

Von Fintel rejects the second Strawsonian claim by pointing out that the topic-comment analysis does not lead to an exceptionless generalization about truth-value intuitions. It is simply not the case that topical non-referring expressions always elicit a sense of squeamishness. Here is a counterexample (von Fintel 2004: 279):

(10)   *F* I had breakfast with the king of France this morning. *F* He and I both had scrambled eggs.

One can reject the first sentence in (10) as false without hesitation. Notice, however, that the follow-up sentence should also be judged as false. From a Strawsonian perspective, this is unpredicted because the anaphoric pronoun "he" purports to refer back to its antecedent — the king of France — in a topical position. Thus, the follow-up sentence is expected to evoke a squeamish judg-

ment. This is a wrong prediction, which shows that the topical (or comment) status of non-referring expressions is in fact not a determining factor for the judgments hearers make about the assumed truth-values of utterances.

Before going on to consider von Fintel's own positive proposal, let me make a brief remark on the last example. By uttering the first sentence, the speaker asserts that she possesses the property of having had breakfast with the king of France on the day of the utterance. Since the definite "the king of France" has no referent, the sentence elicits a sense of falsity. Assuming, as is natural, that, after the first utterance, both the speaker and the hearer are aware that the definite is referentially defective, the following question arises: what is the assertive point of the follow-up sentence? Given that the speaker uses the pronoun "he" to back-refer to a mutually known non-existent person, it is hard to see how her utterance could qualify as an assertion. The only reasonable explanation that comes to mind is that (10) is part of a make-believe game where the speaker pretends that there is a French king and tells a story about this pretend person. Yet this explanation is troubling in the present case because utterances in make-believe games are not genuine assertions but merely pretend assertions. Moreover, if (10) were uttered within the scope of a pretense, both sentences would be regarded as true rather than false.[6]

Fortunately for von Fintel, since there are other, more acceptable examples which demonstrate the inadequacy of the topic-comment analysis, the inappropriateness of (10) does not undermine his argument.[7] The important question is, rather: how can one explain the felt difference between Strawsonian contrast cases, *if not in terms of presuppositions and topicality*? Von Fintel introduces his own proposal with the following sentence pair (2004: 285):

(11)   # The king of France is wise.

(12) ^{F} The king of France is on a state visit to Australia this week.

Suppose the hearer is certain that the definite description in (11) and (12) suffers from radical reference-failure. How can it happen, then, that she feels a sense of squeamishness in the first case, but arrives at an intuitive truth-value judgment in the second case? Von Fintel contends, alluding to an idea that goes back to Peter Lasersohn (1993), that the answer lies in the *epistemic* circumstances under which the hearer's reactions are produced.

Take (12) first. An utterance of this sentence generates an epistemic context in which an existing object — the referent of the proper name "Australia"

---

[6] Although for slightly different reasons, Ebert and Ebert (2010) and Bezuidenhout (2016) also find von Fintel's example (10) unpersuasive.

[7] See example (12) below, which is also cited from von Fintel's paper.

— is made explicitly salient. In principle, the knowable properties of this object can function for the hearer as a "foothold" for rejecting the sentence. By collecting all the relevant political facts about Australia, the hearer could ascertain that the king of France will not be present in that state this week. In this way, the sentence can be rejected as intuitively false without taking into consideration that the definite description "the king of France" invokes a failed presupposition. The contextually salient object, Australia, might therefore be thought of as constituting an independent foothold for rejection.

The situation is markedly different in the case of (11). The sentence mentions only the king of France and it is rather clear that this (non-existent) object cannot provide an epistemically independent foothold for rejection. The hearer might try to reject (11) by thinking that France does not have a wise king, but this thought would be equivalent to the thought that France does not have a king at all. Thus, she would reject the sentence because its existence presupposition fails. On this ground alone, however, she cannot arrive at an intuitive truth-value judgment. According to von Fintel, this explains well why (11) gives rise to squeamishness.

Generalizing from this case, von Fintel's explanation takes the following form. A sentence containing a non-referring expression elicits an intuition of falsity when two conditions are met: (i) there must be a salient object in the epistemic context of the sentence which can function as an independent foothold for rejection, and (ii) the speaker has to assert something false about that object. If these conditions are not met, the sentence elicits a sense of squeamishness.

Yet such an explanatory strategy has limitations. It is easy to find sentences that do not behave as von Fintel's theory predicts. Consider, for example, (13), which seems intuitively false:

(13)   *F* The king of France was observed through this window.

Since (13) mentions a particular window, condition (i) is met: there is a salient object in the epistemic context of this sentence which can function as an independent foothold for rejection. But what of condition (ii)? Von Fintel says that hearers reject sentences as intuitively false by examining the *intrinsic* properties of a contextually salient object. This cannot work in the present case. It is certainly not an intrinsic property of the window that the king of France was observed through it. If such a thing is a property at all, it is perhaps an extrinsic one, or, more likely, it is a mere Cambridge property. But even if this issue were settled, it would still be difficult to see how the hearer can come to know that, by uttering (13), the speaker asserted something false

about the window in question. In other words, it remains entirely unclear what kind of fact would be responsible for the intuitive falsity of (13).

Note that (13) presents a serious difficulty for von Fintel's explanatory strategy because it is not a unique or isolated example. It belongs to a class of sentences whose members have the structure *non-referring definite + observational predicate + prepositional demonstrative phrase*. Every sentence with this structure is liable to elicit a sense of falsity, but they do not seem to satisfy condition (ii). If this is so, then von Fintel's theory is untenable because it cannot provide a uniform explanation for contrasting sentence pairs like (1)-(2) and (11)-(13) above.

3. THE QUD ANALYSIS

According to Anders Schoubye (2009), the most relevant factor that affects intuitive truth-value judgments in cases of radical reference-failure is always a contextually salient question. In contrast to von Fintel, who considered his illustrative examples mainly in isolation, Schoubye tries to show that truth-value intuitions are strongly context-dependent. The background theory on which his proposal is based is the *question under discussion (QUD) analysis*. The QUD analysis has its roots in the dynamic pragmatic tradition, initiated by such works as (Stalnaker 1978) and (Roberts 1996).

Discourses are conceived as being structured by question/answer relations within the framework of QUD models.[8] The core insight is that speakers and hearers take part in a communal inquiry where their primary aim is to establish how things are in their immediate and broader environment. From a linguistic point of view, an inquiry can be best conceived as a question. Adherents of the QUD analysis go on to argue, on this basis, that the primary aim of discourse participants is to address and answer certain questions.

Schoubye's main contention is that the QUD analysis is an appropriate means for understanding when utterances involving non-referring definites intuitively appear to be false. By way of illustration, let us suppose that the sentence below has been uttered in a situation where the addressee is deprived of any contextual information:

(14)   #The king of France owns a pen.

---

[8] QUD models have been applied to a wide range of phenomena in the recent literature. Beaver et al. (2017) report on some of the central findings of these models.

The addressee would probably see herself as being unable to make a truth-value judgment if (14) were heard in isolation. Some amount of information about the context would change the situation substantially, however. Imagine someone wanting to compile a list of every contemporary king who owns a pen. Imagine further that all participants in the discourse are aware that the conversation is centered on that theme. If (14) were uttered in such a context, it would certainly elicit an intuition of falsity (cf. Schoubye 2009: 593). What has actually changed is that (14) may now be regarded as a possible answer to the (explicitly or implicitly) salient QUD: *Which king is a pen owner?*

At this point, one might wonder how a sentence involving a non-referring constituent may qualify at all as a felicitous answer to a QUD. There are some persuasive arguments which suggest that this is not a serious concern. It should be recognized, first, that an utterance may count as a cooperative act in a particular conversation even if it cannot provide a direct (or indirect) answer to the current QUD. Speakers may occasionally have erroneous beliefs about their own conversational situation. They may wrongly believe, for example, that the presupposition of a definite description is satisfied in the common ground. Or they may believe that the QUD to which they try to give an answer pertains to a particular object, *o*, while in fact there is no such object. But the norm of cooperativity is independent of the content of speakers' beliefs: one may misidentify some aspect of the conversational situation without being therefore uncooperative. In line with this, it is also worth mentioning that an utterance like (14) can be said to be cooperative just in case the speaker intends to answer the QUD and the hearer can recognize that the speaker attempted to give an answer to the QUD. Notice, again, that the speaker's utterance need not be appreciated as a direct (or indirect) answer to the question being addressed. Instead, the real requirement is that if the presupposition of the non-referring constituent were accommodated, then the utterance would have to give a direct (or indirect) answer to the salient QUD. The last example can serve as a nice illustration of this requirement: if the existence presupposition of the definite "the king of France" were accommodated to the common ground, then (14) would indeed give a direct answer to the question *Which king is a pen owner?*

Cooperative utterances which are intended as answers and recognized as such, and which satisfy the above requirement, may be labelled as *consonant* responses to QUDs. Not all consonant responses are capable of eliciting an intuition of falsity, however. When a QUD is meaningless in the sense that it has no true answers, a consonant response will not unavoidably give rise to a falsity judgment. Thus, on Schoubye's view, utterances of declaratives with non-referring nominal constituents will be regarded as intuitively false only if

(i) they are consonant responses to a relevant QUD and (ii) the QUD itself has true answers. Conversely, in cases where such utterances are not related to a QUD, squeamishness will typically be evoked.

The easiest way to check the explanatory power of this proposal is to go back to some previously analyzed examples. Recall that, on von Fintel's view, (15-b) can be treated as intuitively false because the sentence mentions an object, Australia, which can function as an independent foothold for rejection. The QUD analysis leads to the same result in this case:

(15)   a. QUD = Which monarch is on a state visit?

              b. *F* The king of France is on a state visit to Australia this week.

(15-b) can be taken as a consonant reply to (15-a), and, obviously, (15-a) is a question to which one can give a true answer (depending on current political events in the world). Therefore, on Schoubye's theory, (15-b) is predicted to elicit a sense of falsity. This appears to be the right result.

As we have seen, the perplexing epistemic status of (16-b) poses a serious difficulty for von Fintel's rejection account. One of the strengths of the QUD analysis is that it is able to explain why utterance tokens of this sentence type appear intuitively false.

(16)   a. QUD = Which persons were observed through this window?

              b. *F* The king of France was observed through this window.

In a situation in which, for one reason or another, a particular window stands in the center of interest, (16-b) may be intended (and recognized also) as a consonant speech act. One might assume here that the QUD pertains to a particular state of affairs, which is composed from a non-empty set of persons and the property of being observed through the window. The obtaining of this state of affairs guarantees that (16-a) has true answers; i.e., that there are some persons who instantiate the property in question. Under these circumstances, an utterance of (16-b) would elicit a sense of falsity.

(15) and (16) showed how felt truth-values can be explained in extensional cases. The QUD analysis can also be applied, within certain limits, to the interpretation of sentence types which involve intensional contexts. (17) can serve as an example (cf. Schoubye 2009: 609):

(17)   a. QUD = Who does Mary fear?

              b. *?* Mary fears the king of France.

The situation is rather complicated because a true (and consonant) answer to the question (17-a) requires that there be something Mary fears. But "Mary

fears . . ." construes an intensional context without the usual ontological commitments. Of course, Mary may believe that the king of France exists, and thus (17-b) could be judged true although such a king does not actually exist. Something like this happens in games of make-believe. If Mary participates in a game of make-believe where one of the rules is that there is a dreadful French king, then it can be said that it is make-believedly true that she experiences fear. A more plausible interpretation might hold that Mary knows that the king does not exist. In this case, (17-b) can be read extensionally. From this point of view it, can be judged false, which satisfies the assumptions of the QUD analysis. Although some of the details would require more clarification, I think it is not implausible to claim that Schoubye's explanatory strategy applies to a wider class of phenomena than that of von Fintel's.

Unfortunately, the QUD analysis has also limitations. It is easy to find sentences that can be uttered as consonant responses to contextually salient QUDs, the QUDs have true answers, but the responses, notwithstanding, appear intuitively *true*, not false. For instance, such sentences may occur in conversations about issues of existence. As an illustration of this type of situation, consider (18-a-b):

(18)   a. QUD = I am uncertain aboutwhat exists and what does not. Could you cite a few examples of non-existent things?

              b. ^{T} The king of France is a non-existent thing.

According to Schoubye's criteria, (18-b) is a consonant speech act to the QUD of (18-a). One might object that the QUD of this example concerns non-existent things and it is not self-evident whether such questions can be answered at all. Indeed, many think that there is an inherent tension in the concept of a non-existent thing. The difficulty is thought to be an ontological one: existence is seen as a constitutive property of things, which calls into question the legitimacy and coherence of the category of non-existent things.

In spite of this difficulty, issues of existence are often discussed in everyday life. There can be no doubt that the aim of the conversation in (18) is to establish how things are in the world. Let us assume that the hearer regards the speaker as a reliable source of information. Thus, in spite of the fact that the definite "the king of France" fails to refer, the hearer may interpret (18-b) as asserting something about the world. And, given that in this case, the QUD pertains to a certain type of things (namely, non-existent ones), the assertion may be judged to be true. Consequently, the hearer's intuitive truth-value judgment should be denoted here by ^{T}.[9]

_____

[9] It should be stressed that we are not concerned here with the vexed problem of nega-

Note that the Strawsonian warning is still in place: intuitive truth-value judgments about non-existents such as (18-b) cannot be taken as providing decisive evidence concerning semantic truth-value assignments. But the point of the present critique is independent of this warning. It is merely that *non-existence claims with non-referring definites* provide clear counterexamples to the QUD analysis. The upshot is that Schoubye's theory, though successful in epistemically difficult situations, is also unable to offer a uniform explanation for Strawsonian contrast cases.

4. THE MEANING COMPATIBILITY HYPOTHESIS

As an alternative hypothesis, I suggest that intuitive truth-value judgments concerning Strawsonian contrast cases depend exclusively on factors that are *semantically* relevant within the context of utterance. More precisely, my proposal is that the narrow context of utterance already contains those pieces of semantic information that can serve as the basis for hearers' truth-value judgments. On this proposal, the epistemic circumstances and the question/answer relations of the wide context are only of secondary theoretical importance.

For present purposes, let us define the notions of wide context and narrow context in the following manner. The wide context of an utterance consists of those factors of context that determine assignments of truth-values. These are the properties of the world state with respect to which the utterance is evaluated. On the other hand, the narrow context of an utterance consists of those factors that determine reference.[10] Those factors include the lexical meaning of sentential constituents together with their rules of composition and the mechanisms by which these constituents acquire their referents.

In addition, let us define the semantic relations of meaning compatibility and meaning incompatibility for sentential constituents in the following way.[11]

---

tive existentials. In the relevant literature, even in the field of dynamic approaches to meaning, negative existentials such as "The king of France does not exist" are treated as *individual* statements which are based on controversial assumptions concerning the semantics of empty noun phrases. In contrast, (18-a-b) represents a discourse unit where the non-existence claim can be interpreted only as an answer to a question. What is at stake here is this broader conversational context, where the interpretability of "The king of France is a non-existent thing" is governed primarily by pragmatic considerations.

[10] The notion of narrow context is defined in a similar way by Andreas Stokke (2010).

[11] A historical note: the semantic notion of meaning incompatibility was coined by Jerrold Katz (1999). Katz used this notion of compatibility to argue for his theory of the analytic/synthetic distinction.

CONSTITUENT COMPATIBILITY: If a simple declarative contains a non-referring definite in argument position, then the argumental part stands in a meaning compatibility relation to the predicate part if and only if the predicate, by its lexical meaning, does not denote a property that can be instantiated only by existing objects. When the non-referring definite occurs in predicate position, then the predicate part stands in a meaning compatibility relation to the argumental part if and only if the latter does not lexically refer to an existing object.

CONSTITUENT INCOMPATIBILITY: If a simple declarative contains a non-referring definite in argument position, then the argumental part stands in a meaning incompatibility relation to the predicate part if and only if the predicate, by its lexical meaning, denotes a property that can be instantiated only by existing objects. When the non-referring definite occurs in predicate position, then the predicate part stands in a meaning incompatibility relation to the argumental part if and only if the latter refers lexically to an existing object.

These theoretical notions are important for understanding how semantic factors might elicit speaker's intuitive truth-value judgments. But, if we are seeking a uniform explanation, we should take into consideration a third possibility. This is the case where it remains undecidable how the meaningful parts of simple declaratives are related to each other. This last notion can be defined as follows.

UNDECIDABLE CASES OF COMPATIBILITY: If a simple declarative contains a non-referring definite in argument position and the predicate, by its lexical meaning, denotes a property that is neutral with respect to actual existence, then it is undecidable whether there is a meaning (in)compatibility relation between the major sentential constituents. The same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for the predicate occurrences of non-referring definites.

By themselves, these definitions may not be very informative, so let us revisit some of our previous examples. First, take first the non-existence claim containing "the king of France":

(19) ^{T} The king of France is a non-existent thing.

   Most hearers would presumably judge that (19) expresses something true. The question is still the same: how can this phenomenon be explained? The

present hypothesis is that hearers are prepared to accept (19) as true because, in processing the utterance, they detect meaning compatibility between the major sentential constituents. In the narrow context of (19), the definite "the king of France" purports to refer to a particular person and the complex predicate "non-existent thing" denotes a property this person may have. At the level of composition, there is no detectable conflict between the constituent parts of this sentence: the lexically encoded meaning of the predicate is perfectly compatible with the fact that the definite merely purports to refer.

Now consider a case with the opposite outcome. As we have seen, utterances of (20) are liable to elicit an intuition of falsity. According to von Fintel and Schoubye's view, this sentence will be rejected as false on the basis of the available (epistemic or discursive) counter-evidence about Australia's political life.

(20) ^{F} The king of France is on a state visit to Australia this week.

The present hypothesis agrees with this conclusion, but for a different reason. On my view, (20) will be rejected as false even by those who are completely ignorant about Australia's political life. Of course, in order to understand (20), hearers do need to possess a sufficient amount of relevant background information about France and Australia. But this is irrelevant to our problem. What is relevant is the lexical semantic competence with the major constituents of (20). If a hearer understands the lexical meaning of the complex predicate "is on a state visit to Australia this week," then she will know that this predicate denotes a property that can be instantiated only by existing objects. In other words, she will know that the meaning of the predicate is associated with or related to the presence of an identifiable visitor which is incompatible with the referential defectiveness of "the king of France." The general hypothesis here is that only such sentences allow intuitive falsity judgments which are composed of lexically incompatible constituents. In processing a sentence like (20), hearers detect a meaning conflict between the argument and the predicate and thereby reject the utterance as false.

As has already been mentioned, Strawson's original observation was that the topical definite generates a presupposition failure in (21) and therefore the utterance of this sentence is unable to elicit robust truth-value intuitions.

(21)   # The king of France is bald.

Once again, the present hypothesis agrees with Strawson and others that (21) may elicit a sense of squeamishness. But it explains this phenomenon differently. It explains the puzzling effects of (21) in terms of meaning compatibility. More precisely, it says that the predicate "bald" denotes a property that is neutral with respect to actual existence. Instances of this property character-

ize objects irrespective of their ontological status. Obviously, fictional characters might also be characterized as bald by using parafictional sentences.[12] So the lexical meaning of "bald" does not require in itself that there be a person to whom "the king of France" refers.

Alternatively, one might say that while the predicate "is on a state visit to Australia this week" is overtly *existence-involving*, the predicate "bald" lacks this distinctive feature. It does not follow from this that the lexical meaning of "bald" cannot be construed so that it involves the existence of a certain object.[13] By using an extremely fine-grained analysis, one can perhaps contend that the property of baldness presupposes the presence of certain sorts of hormones and/or non-working hair follicles. This analysis would show that, regarding its most basic lexical representation, "bald" is an existence-involving predicate, too. Although the above idea has some plausibility, it may be questioned on two counts. First, "bald", as it is used in normal everyday conversations, does not denote a property that involves hormones and/or hair follicles; instead, it stands for the (vague) property of having little or no hair. Second, and more importantly, in predicating baldness of someone or something, one is grammatically predicating baldness of the subject of the sentence. Accordingly, when the question arises whether the predicate is existence-involving or not, the answer depends on whether it requires actual existence of the subject of the sentence. I think one cannot detect such a requirement in the conventional lexical meaning of "bald".

It can be said, then, that "bald" and "the king of France" stand in a neutral semantic relation to each other in the narrow context of (21). They are neither compatible nor incompatible with each other in the sense defined above. The sentence "The king of France is bald" represents an undecidable case of meaning compatibility, and this, in turn, explains why those who process this sentence may feel a sense of squeamishness.

In view of the relative simplicity of the above examples, it is not too difficult to extrapolate how the same analysis would be carried out in other cases. To repeat, the general hypothesis is that observable patterns in intuitive truth-value judgments are to be explained *uniformly* in terms of meaning compatibility.

---

[12] Parafictional sentences convey the same content as fictional sentences but do not occur in literary works. Here is an example: "Samuel Pickwick is a bald man with circular spectacles." Although this sentence is not part of Charles Dickens' novel *The Pickwick Papers*, it characterizes the character Samuel Pickwick just as the novel does. It is important to stress that, in contrast to fictional sentences, parafictional sentences have real truth conditions. For more on this, see Voltolini (2006).

[13] Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this issue.

The proposed account has two advantageous features, at least if compared with von Fintel's view or the QUD analysis. The first concerns the methodological immediacy of the applied explanation. Narrow context, as it is understood here, is presumably the most direct source of truth-value intuitions. It contains all the required factors — the uttered sentences and the relevant meaning properties of their constituent parts — which are needed to elicit intuitive responses on the part of hearers. Neither the epistemic rejection view nor the question/answer analysis is able to examine the sources of intuitive judgments in such a direct way. Another advantageous feature is that the meaning (in)compatibility relations we are interested in are easily discernible using standard semantic procedures. This is not true of the two rival accounts, both of which require us to make additional, non-semantic assumptions about the available data.

These features — i.e., the immediacy and simplicity of the explanatory strategy — are broadly theoretical virtues which may enhance, to a certain extent, the persuasiveness of the proposed account. Yet one might still wonder why either semanticists or philosophers of language should be interested in providing a uniform explanation for intuitive truth-value judgments. On my view, Strawson's earlier opinion on this issue may be reaffirmed with a small alternation: once their eliciting mechanisms are understood sufficiently well, intuitive judgments may reveal, at least indirectly, that there is more than one reasonable account of radical reference-failure.[14]

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Atlas J. (2004), "Descriptions, Linguistic Topic/Comment, and Negative Existentials" [in:] *Descriptions and Beyond*, A. Bezuidenhout, M. Reimer (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 342-360.

Beaver D., Roberts C., Simons M., Tonhauser J. (2017), "Questions under Discussion: Where Information Structure Meets Projective Content," *Annual Review of Linguistics* 3, 265-284.

---

[14] Unfortunately, the literature on (Strawson 1964) leaves completely out of account an important metatheoretical question. Specifically, nothing is said about how hearer's intuitive judgments can be treated as data for theoretical hypotheses. Since the publication by Schütze (1996), there is a lively debate in theoretical linguistics concerning the role of data in theory construction. The most systematic attempt to date to address this problem was made by András Kertész and Csilla Rákosi (2012, 2014). They developed an argumentation theoretical framework in which data are thought of as supplying the theory with plausibility values. In future work, I plan to explore the metatheoretical aspects of Strawsonian truth-value intuitions within this framework.

Bezuidenhout A. (2016), "Presupposition Failure and the Assertive Enterprise," *Topoi* 35(1), 23-35.

Ebert Ch., Ebert C. (2010), "On Squeamishness of the Royal Kind" [in:] *Language and Logos. Festschrift for Peter Staudacher on his 70th Birthday*, T. Hanneforth, G. Fanselow (eds.), Studia Grammatica 72, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 149-159.

Katz J. J. (1999), "On the General Character of Semantic Theory" [in:] *Concepts: Core Readings*, E. Margolis, S. Laurence (eds.), Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 125-149.

Kertész A., Rákosi Cs. (2012), *Data and Evidence in Linguistics: A Plausible Argumentation Model*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kertész A., Rákosi Cs. (2014), "Introduction" [in:] *The Evidential Basis of Linguistic Argumentation*, A. Kertész, Cs. Rákosi (eds.), Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1-15.

Lasersohn P. (1993), "Existence Presuppositions and Background Knowledge," *Journal of Semantics* 10, 113-122.

Roberts C. (1996), "Information Structure in Discourse: Towards an Integrated Formal Theory of Pragmatics" [in:] *OSU Working Papers in Linguistics.* Vol. 49, J.-H. Yoon, A. Kathol (eds.), Columbus: Ohio State University, 91-136.

Salmon N. (1998), "Nonexistence", *Noûs* 32(3), 277-319.

Schoubye A. J. (2009), "Descriptions, Truth-Value Intuitions, and Questions," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 32, 583-617.

Schütze C. T. (1996), *The Empirical Base of Linguistics: Grammaticality Judgments and Linguistic Methodology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Stalnaker R. (1978), "Assertion," *Syntax and Semantics* 9, 315-332.

Stokke A. (2010), "Intention-Sensitive Semantics," *Synthese* 175(3), 383-404.

Strawson P. F. (1950), "On Referring," *Mind* 59(235), 320-344.

Strawson P. F. (1964), "Identifying Reference and Truth-Values," *Theoria* 30(2), 96-118.

Voltolini A. (2006), *How Ficta Follow Fiction*: *A Syncretistic Account of Fictional Entities*, Dordrecht: Springer.

von Fintel K. (2004), "Would You Believe It? The King of France Is Back! (Presuppositions and Truth-Value Intuitions)" [in:] *Descriptions and Beyond*, A. Bezuidenhout, M. Reimer (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 315-342.