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### *Absence, Non-existence, and Particular Beings or Objects*

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interfaces (Kai von Fintel & David Beaver)

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## Absence, Non-existence, and Particular Beings or Objects

Building upon, refining and refuting some of Schoubye's systematic considerations in "Descriptions, Truth Value Intuitions, and Questions,"<sup>1</sup> I propose a tiered system that explains when and how the notions of absence, non-existence, and particular beings or objects could determine whether or not a sentence is always deemed false. This holds prior to any implementation of the theory of prosodic focus or conversational moves, and does not entail Schoubye's false intuition hypothesis (FIH).

Schoubye, in proposing his FIH, has trouble fitting it to produce intuitions of falsity or truth in out-of-context sentences, and he himself points this out.<sup>2</sup> This is no surprise since his hypothesis is built upon notions of context. My proposed system is limited to those certain types of sentences that incorporate notions of or directly refer to absent or non-existent beings or objects. Context, given our world among possible worlds, should have little to do with producing a false intuition when encountering a sentence that incorporates the features just mentioned.

### 1. Absence

In terms of absence within my proposed system, I see two categories, 1) Absence in General and 2) Absence in Particular.

--**Absence in General:** With Absence in General, a sentence that proposes that an object exists in a definite space where no object at all exists will be deemed false.

On page 587 of "Descriptions, Truth Value Intuitions, and Questions," sentence (5), Schoubye notes that this sentence "The King of France is sitting in that chair" is false but offers no system to explain why this is so.

In the case of Absence in General, where there is actually *no one* sitting in that chair, the falsity of the sentence would hinge upon this absence, rather than the notion of the non-existence of the King of France.

Similarly, for example, the sentence "Batman is sleeping in that bed" will be deemed false not because Batman does not exist, but rather because the existent bed that is being referred to is empty; it is this emptiness, this absence of anything or anyone at all that takes precedence here when intuitively evaluating for truth value.

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<sup>1</sup> A.J. Schoubye, "Descriptions, Truth Value Intuitions, and Questions," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 32 (2010): 583-617.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 610-13, 615.

--**Absence in Particular:** With Absence in Particular, a sentence that proposes that an object exists in a definite space where only that object can exist and that object does not exist will be deemed false. For example, the sentence "Peter still has his nose" ("his", of course, referring to the nose of the same Peter) will be deemed false if said of Peter after he has had an accident that has rid him of his nose.

It is the absence of his nose in particular that makes this sentence false, and, as such, differentiates it from Absence in General in that the particularity of the absence is what is evaluated when evaluated for truth value.

Additionally, if the sentence from above, "Peter still has his nose," is changed to "The King of France still has his nose" ("his" referring to the nose of the same King of France), then the situation is changed regarding the system for truth evaluation; this sentence, incorporating "The King of France", would be deemed false due to Non-existence (see section 2). For, with Absence in Particular, the falsity of the sentence lies with the absence of a particular object made in reference to an existent being or object.

## **2. Non-existence**

On page 587, sentence (2) of the article in question, Schoubye has the famous sentence "The King of France is bald," as squeamish, basically agreeing with Strawson's anti-Russellian view of the sentence as being neither true nor false due to the non-existence of the King of France. I am not in agreeance with this, and have a more nuanced systematic model of why this may be so, incorporating examples where non-existence would actually lead to a sentence being evaluated as true, given certain grounding conditions.

Additionally, "The King of France is sitting in a chair," sentence (7) on page 587, I find to be false, rather than squeamish as Schoubye has it, for a non-existent entity definitively and intuitively cannot sit in a chair, unless we are constructing a fictional narrative.

The same goes for sentence (8) on page 587, "The King of France owns a pen," and any other sentence that has a non-existent entity in any state of activity in or active relationship to the real world. This also includes deeming those sentences as false which have reports of non-existent entities with intensional attitudes towards existent entities (e.g. "The King of France hates your mother.").

This reasoning is an extension of von Fintel's verification/falsification model<sup>3</sup> and directly addresses Schoubye's complaint that a model of this type is inherently limited in predicting "robust intuitions of falsity."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> K. von Fintel, "Would You Believe It? The King of France is Back! (Presuppositions and Truth-Value Intuitions)." In Marge Reimer and Anne Bezuidenhout, editors, *Descriptions and Beyond* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 2004, 315-41.

<sup>4</sup> Schoubye, 591.

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If the object or person referred to does not exist, then the falsity of the sentence “The King of France still has his nose” lies in the fact that there is no King of France that currently exists. So, the falsity of this sentence lies in non-existence of the entity referred to.

Other examples of sentences that would be deemed false under Non-existence include: “The Tooth Fairy is sitting in a chair,” and for that matter “The King of France is sitting in a chair,” and “The King of France is bald.”<sup>5</sup> Some one who is non-existent cannot have the attribute of being bald, much less have a full head of hair.

All purported attributes of and comments made of non-existent entities must be false, given our world. The extent of falsity in Non-existence cases is one of the highest degree of possibility, for if one was to say “President Nixon is bald,” it would be false under Non-existence (he is deceased and the sentence, as a result, cannot even be possibly evaluated) but if one said, “Obama is bald,” one would be able to evaluate the sentence because Obama currently exists and the sentence would have a false value.

Non-existence, however, does not trump Absence in General with regards to an evaluation of a sentence as false. However, the sentence “The King of France is sitting on that unicorn” is obviously false, but, in this case it is not false due to Absence in General (there is no one sitting on that unicorn, however, there is no unicorn either); the unicorn is non-existent along with the King of France. Here, the evaluation of the sentence as having a false value is due to the non-existence first-and-foremost of the unicorn.

If one were to replace “The King of France” with “Obama” in the above sentence, making “Obama is sitting on that unicorn,” the sentence would still be false due to Non-existence. But if one said, “The King of France is sitting on that sofa” (when no one was sitting on that sofa), the falsity of the sentence would be due to Absence in General, as explained in section 1.

So, if a sentence exhibited elements of both Absence in General and Non-existence, the false value intuition of that sentence would be due to Absence in General element.

If a sentence exhibited elements of Absence in General, Non-existence, and Particular Beings or Objects (explained in section 3), exemplified in the sentence “The King of France painted that painting, the ‘Mona Lisa’,” and there was no painting in the location that was being pointed to, the sentence would have a false value intuition due to the Absence in General element, the fact that the location pointed to was void of a painting at all.

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<sup>5</sup> Any theories that incorporate the importance of prosodic focus, exemplified in the sentence, “The King of France is BALD,” are pre-empted given my proposed system.

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Whenever Absence in General is present, my proposal is that sentences are intuitively deemed false due to it, above and beyond any other element of Non-existence or Particular Being or Object that may be present.

If the sentence exhibited only Non-existence (and not Absence in General or Particular Being) and had one occurrence of it (whether it be in the subject [noun phrase] position or direct object position), such as in “The King of France is bald” and “That table is reserved for the King of France,” the false value intuition of that sentence would be due to the Non-existence occurrence.

If the sentence exhibited only Non-existence (and not Absence in General or Particular Being) and had two occurrences of it (in both the subject [noun phrase] position and direct object position), the false value intuition of that sentence would be due to the non-existent entity in the direct object position, regardless of whether the non-existent direct object is definite or indefinite (as in the previous example, “The King of France is sitting on that unicorn,” and “The King of France is eating unicorn meat”).

However, there are special cases where Non-existence in a sentence can be associated with a true value intuition. It seems that these special cases are restricted to sentences that have attributes or characteristics as their only concern and have as their subject a non-existent entity that is known in our world as a common-grounded fictional character.

The sentence “Santa Claus is fat” is evaluated as true given the common-grounded understanding that Santa Claus, even though a non-existent entity (to adults), has the attribute of being fat. The sentence “Santa Claus is skinny” would this be viewed as false.

Another sentence example is “A unicorn has a horn projecting from its forehead,” which would intuitively be deemed as true by definition. This special case status does not apply to any sentences that would include the non-existent King of France since there is no common-grounded understanding regarding the King of France’s particular attributes and he is not a known fictional character in our world.

Perhaps, on some other possible world the King of France currently exists, or is non-existent but has a common-ground footing such as our world’s Santa Claus; in this case, the sentence “The King of France is bald” would have the possibility of being accepted as having a true value, given the King of France’s specific attributes in that world.

One might offer up the sentence “The King of France is male” in an effort to provide a refutation, saying that this sentence carries a true value intuition. However, although it is true by definition of the word “king” that all “kings” are male, the “King of France”, since he is non-existent and not found in our fictional parlance, cannot have an attribute attached to him. Any reference to the “King of France” as “he” or “him” here and in general is done for practical reasons only.

### **3. Particular Beings or Objects**

In our world, the sentence “The King of France was the architect of the Empire State Building” is clearly false. This sentence may be viewed as an answer to the question “Who was the architect of the Empire State Building?”, however, in order to evaluate if this sentence is false, it is sufficient that the sentence is viewed out-of-context since the issue is an epistemological one.

The reason why the sentence is false is not because the King of France did not exist when the architectural blueprints of the Empire State Building were being drawn, but because there was a particular being that did exist who was actually the architect and this is a known-and-established fact.

I propose that when elements of Non-existence and Particular Beings or Objects are both found in a sentence, the sentence will be evaluated as false due to the element of Particular Beings or Objects. Any change in prosodic focus here should produce no change in intuitions of falsity.

Under the notion of Particular Beings, the sentence “The King of France is sitting in that chair” would intuitively be deemed false if there is an existent particular being sitting in that chair. However, in this case, it would not be necessary to know who the particular being occupying the chair was, just that it could not possibly be the King of France because he is non-existent, and who else, in a metaphysical sense, could there be sitting in that chair but a particular being.

This is in contrast to the sentence “The King of France is sitting in that chair” when there is no one sitting in that chair, where Absence in General is the reason why the sentence would be evaluated as false.

An example of a sentence that would be deemed as false under the notion of Particular Objects would be—“The famous bell that is located in Philadelphia is the Lenin Bell”—with the “Lenin Bell” mistakenly there instead of the “Liberty Bell” (there is no known bell in Philadelphia by the name of the “Lenin Bell” [it is non-existent], so no one would even be able to claim that it was the famous bell in Philadelphia).

### **Conclusion**

Schoubye’s FIH and the systematic considerations that arise out of it do not adequately take into consideration out-of-context sentences with regards to true or false intuition evaluations; since Schoubye’s system relies heavily on the activation of prosodic focus and conversational moves, it is not surprising that his system does not address this topic very well, even though there is an effort on Schoubye’s part to do so.

The tiered system that I have proposed, when it comes to sentences that include elements associated with Absence, Non-existence, and/or Particular Beings or Objects, could be used to determine whether or not sentences of these

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types are always deemed false, prior to any application of prosodic focus or conversational moves.

Exceptions, under my notion of Non-existence, include sentences that contain non-existent “beings” such as Santa Claus (as in the sentence “Santa Claus is fat,” which is deemed to be true), for Santa Claus has been common-grounded to have certain attributes and also to perform certain actions. Any sentences with non-existent, yet common-grounded, “beings” that contain propositions within the limits of their certain associated common-grounded attributes and actions, as exemplified under my system, would be deemed true. The major issue with the most famous sentence “The King of France is bald” is that the “King of France” has not been common-grounded with any attributes or actions, and this has not been addressed or rectified by Schoubye under FIH or its connected system.

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