

Intuitions in Question

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1 Existence Asserted vs. Existence Presupposed

- Existential (Russell)
- Presuppositional (Frege/Strawson)

[...] all sorts of factors may conspire to deter the native speaker from *saying* that a given utterance is true or false, but that is hardly enough to show that the utterance lacks a truth-value. (Neale, 1990, p.28)

1.1 Aim

- Provide a systematic explanation of the divergence of intuitions.
- Show that some putative semantic intuitions are not semantically relevant.
- Show that a presuppositional analysis is better equipped to explain the data.

2 Contrasts - Feel the Pull!

- (1) The king of France is bald. (Strawson, 1964)
- (2) The king of France is a skinhead.
- (3) The king of France is a bald nazi.

(2) and (3) elicit robust intuitions of falsity, or at the very least, a strong pull towards falsity. It's clear that there is a significantly marked difference in our intuitions about (1) and (2)-(3).

- (4) The king of France is sitting in that chair. (Lasersohn, 1993)
- (5) The king of France owns that pen. (von Fintel, 2004)
- (6) The king of France is sitting in a chair.
- (7) The king of France owns a pen. (von Fintel, 2004)

Prima Facie Problem: These sentences appear to suffer from the same defect.

¹FOCUS-focus — cf. Kadmon (2001).

SWEPFs (*Sentences With Existential Presupposition Failure*)

= Squeamishness F = Falsity

- (1) # The king of France is bald.
- (3) ^F The king of France is a bald nazi.
- (7) # The king of France owns a pen.
- (5) ^F The king of France owns that pen.
- (8) # The king of France heard about Goldbach's conjecture.
- (9) ^F The king of France proved Goldbach's conjecture.
- (10) # The king of France always enjoys a croissant in the morning.
- (11) ^F The king of France always enjoys some human flesh in the morning.
- (12) # The king of France walked his dog last night.
- (13) ^F The king of France ate his dog last night.
- (14) # The king of France is [BALD]_f.
- (15) ^F [The king of FRANCE]_f is bald.¹

2.1 Accommodation Theories

Falsification/Verification procedure (Lasersohn, 1993; von Fintel, 2004; Yablo, 2006). Temporary *accommodation* permits an evaluation of the content. Cases where accommodation yields a proposition that the speaker can falsify correlate with robust intuitions of falsity. Inability to falsify the proposition corresponds to squeamishness.

Formal Explication: Belief revision. If the result of adding the presupposition+content is inconsistency, the sentence elicits intuition of falsity. This yields correct predictions for the paradigm cases: (1) and (5).

Problems:

- Problematic reliance on known facts (or facts that can in principle be known, cf. von Fintel (2004))
- Exclusive focus on sentences asserted 'abruptly and out of context'.

- iii. Problematic reliance on propositions - i.e. deriving inconsistencies requires propositional contents (but variations occur even with no change in propositional contents)
- iv. Conceptually misguided?

3 SWEPPs in Context

Only minimal contextual framing is required to transform a sense of squeamishness into a robust intuition of falsity. Why?

- (1) # The king of France is bald.
- (7) # The king of France owns a pen.
- (10) # The king of France always enjoys a croissant

(16) Context I

The famous hair-dresser, Pierre, is organizing a fashion show, where the hair-models are all European royalty. Incidentally, minimalism is the new black in hair-style fashion, so Pierre is trying to determine whether he can convince some royalty to go bald for the show. As he's deliberating, he turns to you and his other assistants and says: I can't think of any royals who would agree to go bald just for the sake of the fashion show, and I can't think of any who is already bald. You guys get on this immediately. Whoever finds a solution gets to go to the fashion show. Another assistant standing next to you exclaims: The king of France is bald.

Result: Robust intuition of falsity for (1).

(17) Context II

A salesman from the company Froggy Croissants is attempting to persuade you that your high-end bakery should start selling croissants from Froggy Croissants. You're sceptical and say: 'The problem is this. Our customers are primarily wealthy snobs with poor taste who only buy products which are trendy or hip. So,

unless Paris Hilton or some other celebrity is eating croissants on a regular basis, we won't be able to sell them. The salesman retorts: 'I take your point, but you see, our product is extremely popular in France. For instance, the king of France always enjoys a croissant in the morning.

Result: Robust intuition of falsity for (10).

4 Discourse and Questions

SWEPPs which elicit either falsity or squeamishness have different impacts on the discourse. SWEPPs judged false seem not to wreck the discourse, whereas squeamish SWEPPs do. However, they share a common characteristic: failure to update the common ground.

Central Hypothesis: SWEPPs evaluated in relation to a question under discussion (QUD) are judged false. E.g. if conditions (a) and (b) below are satisfied, the SWEPP elicits an intuition of falsity.²

The False Intuition Hypothesis (FIH)

- (a) The sentence is a CONSONANT³ response to a QUD.
- (b) The question is not known to have no true answers.

4.1 Discourse Structure

Proposal in Roberts (1998, 2004).⁴

I assume that the primary goal of discourse is communal inquiry – the intention to discover with other interlocutors "the way things are", to share information about our world. [...] The linguistic counterpart of an inquiry is a question. Thus, we might take questions to be formal objects that reflect interlocutors' intentions in conducting discourse. (Roberts, 2004, p.208).

Discourses: Contain at least one question under discussion (QUD) which is accepted by the discourse participants.

²These conditions are independently motivate: speakers should strive to obey condition (a) when engaging in discourse, and speakers should engage in discourses only if condition (b) is satisfied.

³To be explicated...

⁴This model integrates questions as formal objects in the contextual framework proposed in Stalnaker (1970, 1974, 1978, 1998, 2002).

⁵Roberts' proposal relies on a semantics for questions which combines elements from Hamblin (1973) and Groenendijk and Stokhof (1984).

Discourse Goal: To answer the QUD.

Discourse Strategy: Attempt to answer the QUD, the primary question by answering subquestions. A subquestion is defined as a question entailed by the primary QUD.⁵

(18) What did Mary eat?

- $$(18) \left\{ \begin{array}{l} s_1 \text{ Did Mary eat clams?} \\ s_2 \text{ Did Mary eat popcorn?} \\ s_3 \text{ Did Mary eat chocolate?} \\ \vdots \\ s_n \text{ Did Mary eat pizza?} \end{array} \right.$$

Relevance (Roberts): A conversational move m is relevant to the QUD if and only if m introduces (at least) a partial answer to the primary question or is part of a strategy to answer the primary question.

Consonance (Schoubye): A conversational move m is *consonant* only if the assertion could straightforwardly be interpreted by the interlocutors as intending to answer a QUD. In other words, for a conversational move to be consonant, it's not required that it provides an answer the QUD.⁶

Why do we need consonance? Assuming a Hamblin-style semantics for questions, no SWEPF qualifies as an answer to a QUD. Nevertheless, an assertion of a SWEPF can certainly be intended to address (and can be interpreted as addressing) a question. Such cases contrast assertions, where the assertion could not be interpreted as addressing the QUD (on any reasonable interpretation). Consonance is designed to capture this contrast. Here is a crude illustration.

(19) What is Mary's research on?

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| a. Mary studies linguistics. | +relevant / +consonant / +felicitous |
| b. Sociology bores Mary. | +relevant / +consonant / +felicitous |
| c. It's on the mathematician who proved
Goldbach's Conjecture. | -relevant / +consonant / +felicitous |

⁶Let $\mathbf{A} = \{p \mid p \text{ is a true or a false answer to the QUD}\}$. If $\mathbf{CM}_1 = \{m \mid m \text{ is an assertion of } p \text{ where } p \in \mathbf{A}\}$ and $\mathbf{CM}_2 = \{m \mid m \text{ is consonant}\}$, and $\mathbf{CM}_3 = \{m \mid m \text{ is appropriate/felicitous}\}$, then $\mathbf{CM}_1 \subset \mathbf{CM}_2 \subset \mathbf{CM}_3$.

⁷Cf. Scha (1983); von Stechow (1991); Krifka (1991, 2001).

- | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| d. I don't know. | -relevant / -consonant / +felicitous |
| e. Mary ate carrots. | -relevant / -consonant / -felicitous |

Hypothesized Explanation: Non-defective discourses contain QUDs with true answers. When engaged in discourses relevant conversational moves either provide answers (partial or complete) or otherwise augment the discourse strategy. All other conversational moves are irrelevant. But in the cases under consideration, we're always (by stipulation) aware of reference failure; the SWEPF provides no answer (in the relevant sense) to the QUD. Result: the SWEPF is irrelevant. As are other not true *answers* to the QUD. A consonant assertion of a SWEPF and consonant assertions of straightforwardly false answers – viz. false answers which do not suffer from reference failure — have the same discursive status: they're interpreted as proffered answers. Plausible inference: SWEPFs are simply treated on a par with other incorrect *answers* — they're treated as false.

4.2 Predictions

The FIH provides a straightforward explanation of the changes in truth value intuitions observed with the contextualized SWEPFs above. Two additional examples.

- (20) a. Who is on a state visit?
b. ^F The king of France is on a state visit.
- (21) a. No monarch cares about Russian literature.
b. ^F The king of France read Anna Karenina

5 Focus Effects

- (22) ^F [The king of FRANCE]_f is bald.
(23) ^F [The king of FRANCE]_f owns a pen.
(24) ^F [The king of FRANCE]_f always enjoys a croissant in the morning.

The Semantics and Pragmatics of Focus: Focus divides the content of an expression into two parts, the background and the focus – also called *given* and *new*, cf. e.g. Prince (1981) and Schwarzschild (1999).

5.1 Structured Meanings

For expository purposes, I use a *Structured Meanings*⁷ account of questions and focus. A Hamblin-style semantics for questions and a Rooth style semantics for focus, viz. *Alternative Semantics*, yields equivalent results (for the cases under consideration here).

Wh-Questions: *Wh*-questions denote properties, viz. sets of individuals. We can thus represent these as functions from individuals to truth values. The denotation of a *wh*-question is thus obtainable by lambda-abstraction on the *wh*-phrases.

- (25) a. What did Mary eat?
 b. $\lambda x.Mary\ ate\ x$ ← λ -abstracting on the *wh*-phrase

Focus Effects: Focus-induced interpretations of sentences are obtained by lambda-abstraction on the denotation of the focus-marked constituents. This produces the focus-induced *structured meaning*. Illustration.

- (26) a. Mary ate CLAMS.
 b. $\langle Background, Focus \rangle$
 c. $\langle \lambda x.Mary\ ate\ x, clams \rangle$ ← λ -abstracting on the focus

Question-Answer Congruence: Sentences with FOCUS-focus marked constituents serve as felicitous responses to *wh*-questions only when the focused constituent corresponds to the *wh*-phrase.⁸ Example.

- (27) What did Mary eat?
 a. Mary ate [CLAMS]_f.
 b. *Mary [ATE]_f clams.
 c. * [MARY]_f ate clams

Upshot: This yields a procedure for determining precisely which questions a focus-marked sentence can felicitously answer. For it to be felicitous, the denotation of the question (a function) must be identical to the function obtained by lambda-abstraction on the focus, viz. set equivalence. We have an equivalent result in *Alternative Semantics*.

⁸Cf. Rooth (1996); Kadmon (2001); Beaver and Clark (2008) for discussion.

5.2 Focus and Non-Referring Definites

This yields a straightforward explanation of the intuitions discerned earlier.

- (28) a. [The king of FRANCE]_f is bald.
 b. $\langle \lambda x.x\ is\ bald, the\ king\ of\ France \rangle$ ← λ -abstracting on the focus
 c. $\lambda x.x\ is\ bald$ ← derived function
 d. Who is bald? ← the relevant question
- (29) a. [The king of FRANCE]_f owns a pen.
 b. $\langle \lambda x.x\ owns\ a\ pen, the\ king\ of\ France \rangle$ ← λ -abstracting on the focus
 c. $\lambda x.x\ is\ bald$ ← derived function
 d. Who owns a pen? ← the relevant question

Contrast Cases:

- (30) # The king of France is [BALD]_f
 (31) # The king of France owns [a PEN]_f
 (32) # The king of France always enjoys [a CROISSANT]_f in the morning.

Does the (FIH) make correct predictions for these cases? Yes.

- (33) a. The king of France [is BALD]_f.
 b. $\langle \lambda R.The\ king\ of\ France\ is\ R, bald \rangle$ ← λ -abstracting on the focus
 c. $\lambda R.The\ king\ of\ France\ is\ R$ ← derived function
 d. The king of France is what? ← the relevant question
 (what is the king of France like?)
- (34) a. The king of France owns [a PEN]_f.
 b. $\langle \lambda P.The\ king\ of\ France\ owns\ P, a\ pen \rangle$ ← λ -abstracting on the focus
 c. $\lambda P.The\ king\ of\ France\ owns\ P$ ← derived function
 d. The king of France owns what? ← the relevant question
 (what does the king of France own?)

(33-34) fail to satisfy condition (b) of the (FIH). The relevant question is known to have no true answers.

6 Non-Contextualized SWEPPs - The original starting point.

Does the notion of *evaluating sentences as asserted abruptly and out of context* make sense? Not really.

Explaining Squeamishness: Squeamishness is default: When the sentence cannot be anchored in the discourse, we don't know how to evaluate it — it's defective!

Explaining Falsity I: Focus tends rightward (with no forced intonation, high pitches tend rightward.) This explanation can't cover everything though.

Explaining Falsity II: A Tentative Proposal: It's quite possible that evaluators are liable to interpret SWEPPs as addressing a specific question if that question is somehow pertinent to their interests.

(35) ^F The king of France hates your mother.

On the most easily accessible interpretations, (35) is felicitous responses to one of the two questions in (36)..

- (36) a. Who hates your mother?
b. Who does the king of France hate?

7 Conclusive Remarks

- (a) A systematic treatment of conflicting intuitions.
(b) It delivers where the accommodation theories cannot.
(c) It provides evidence that falsity intuitions fail to track semantic status.

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