When undefinedness goes missing: The case of presupposition failure

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Normally we expect presupposition failure to lead to what has sometimes been called sqeamishness: speakers are hesitant about assigning truth values to these sentences. Starting with observations about certain judgment asymmetries observed with presupposition failure made by Strawson (1950), see (1), I will discuss two classes of approaches designed to deal with them.

(1) a. The king of France is bald.   (undefined)
     b. The Exhibition was visited by the king of France yesterday.   (false)

One approach (Lasersohn 1993, von Fintel 2004, Elbourne 2013) to predict whether speakers are squeamish or whether they simply treat the utterance as false champions verification and argues that in cases where presupposition failure obtains, speakers judge an utterance to be false if the utterance could not have been true even if the presupposition had been satisfied. The second class of approaches (Strawson 1950, 2008 a.o.) takes information structure to be the main driver of these asymmetries — the rationale being that presupposition failures for topics lead to irreparable failure because the contribution becomes essentially intelligible. For presupposition failure in comment position, on the other hand, falsity obtains.

I will argue that both classes of approaches face empirical problems, and that some amount of synthesis between their foundational insights is needed. In addition, I will present an experiment plan designed to establish the generality of this asymmetry phenomenon, especially with regard to a largely undiscussed domain in this respect: homogeneity effects.

References

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