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Abstract

German:

Die nachfolgende Masterarbeit setzt sich mit der Frage auseinander, ob Sätze, welche etwas Falsches präsupponieren, als falsch oder vielmehr als weder wahr noch falsch angesehen werden sollten. Zentral ist hierbei die Unterscheidung zwischen der pragmatischen Theorie der Präsupposition (diese wertet derartige Sätze als falsch und vertritt die Überzeugung, dass Präsupposition ein kommunikatives und kontextabhängiges Phänomen sei) und der semantischen Theorie, welche solchen Sätzen den Wahrheitswert *Weder-wahr-noch-falsch* zuordnet und die Ansicht vertritt, dass Präsupposition vor allem durch die Bedeutung bestimmter Wörter entsteht. Die Arbeit ist hierbei in einen non-empirischen und einen empirischen Teil unterteilt: Der nicht-empirische Aspekt der Arbeit stellt die wichtigsten Argumente für die pragmatische und die semantische Theorie vor und bewertet diese. Während im Zuge der Arbeit eingeräumt wird, dass es durchaus überzeugende Argumente zugunsten der pragmatischen Theorie der Präsupposition gibt, gelangt die Analyse dennoch zur Überzeugung, dass die Punkte, welche für die semantische Theorie sprechen, letztlich überwiegen.

Der empirische Teil dagegen beruht auf einer Studie, in welcher 58 kompetente Englischsprecher*innen in fünf Szenarien mit Präsuppositionsversagen zu ihren Wahrheitsurteilen befragt wurden. Ziel der Befragung war es, herauszufinden, ob die intuitiven Urteile der Befragten eher den Vorhersagen der pragmatischen Theorie oder eher jenen der semantischen entsprechen. Die Ergebnisse der Studie sind hierbei nicht eindeutig, insofern, als sich zwar eine leichte Tendenz in Richtung der semantischen Theorie der Präsupposition beobachten lässt, die Unterschiede aber in allen fünf Szenarien relativ gering ausfielen. In den Szenarien 1 bis 3, welche sich mit definiten Deskriptionen auseinandersetzten, favorisierte eine knappe absolute Mehrheit der Befragten die Antwortmöglichkeit, wonach die Äußerung weder wahr noch falsch sei. In den Szenarien 4 und 5 hingegen erzielte keine der zur Verfügung stehenden Antwortmöglichkeiten eine absolute Mehrheit, wobei die relative Mehrheit der Antworten wiederum auf *weder wahr noch falsch* entfiel.

English:

The following master's thesis has the aim to investigate, whether sentences that suffer from presupposition failure are to be regarded as false or rather as neither true nor false. In this regard, it is important to distinguish between the pragmatic and the semantic account of presupposition: The former predicts that such sentences are neither true nor false (and holds the opinion that presupposition is a phenomenon that arises mainly due to communicative intentions and context), whereas the semantic view predicts truth-value gaps in such scenarios (and takes presupposition to be a result of the literal meaning of words). This thesis is divided into a non-empirical and an empirical part: The non-empirical aspect presents and evaluates the most important arguments for and against the pragmatic and the semantic account of presupposition. While this thesis grants that there are some decent arguments in favour of the pragmatic view, it ultimately comes to the conclusion that the arguments that support the semantic account of presupposition outweigh them.

The empirical part, on the other hand, is based on a study among 58 competent speakers of English. In the survey, participants were confronted with five different scenarios in which an utterance with presupposition failure occurs and they are supposed to provide their intuitive truth-value judgements. The aim of the study was to find out whether the intuitive truth-value judgements are more closely aligned with the pragmatic account of presupposition or rather with the semantic view. The results of the survey are ambiguous, insofar as the truth-value judgement *neither true nor false* was only slightly more popular than *true* or *false*. In scenarios 1 to 3, which all featured utterances containing definite descriptions, the majority of participants regarded the sentence as neither true nor false. In scenarios 4 and 5, however, *neither true nor false* only received a plurality of the votes, with a significant number of people taking the sentence to be true or false.

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Presuppositions: A Semantic Phenomenon After All?

1) Introduction and outline

The present king of France is bald. This odd sentence is one of the most-debated ones in the entire history of linguistics and philosophy of language. This sentence strikes us as infelicitous, given that it appears to falsely assume that France is governed by a monarch. At the same time, *The present king of France isn't bald.* sounds no less suspicious and one gets the feeling that it still assumes that France is a monarchy. This phenomenon, where in a sentence something is being implicitly taken for granted, is known as *Presupposition* in the literature. How this phenomenon ought to be understood is the question that this thesis tries to address.

Today, presupposition is one of the central notions in semantics and philosophy of language. In spite of the vast literature on the topic, there is still - even after many decades of research in that area - considerable disagreement about the exact nature of this linguistic phenomenon.

When Frege popularised presuppositions in his groundbreaking *On Sense and Reference*¹ (Frege, 1892), it appeared as if it was generally taken for granted that presupposing is something that words do in virtue of their conventional meaning, i.e. presupposition was seen as a phenomenon that falls under the purview of semantics.

Essentially, Frege's theory of presupposition was that certain expressions such as proper names (e.g. "London" or "Alexander The Great") and definite descriptions (e.g. "The owner of this car") are conventionally associated with the background assumption that there is something in the world that is picked out by the term. In cases where this assumption is not fulfilled, i.e. when there is no city called London or where nobody owns this car, Frege thought, this leads to a semantically defective sentence which expresses no proposition and is thus neither true nor false (Frege, 1892). Frege's theory has been tremendously influential - especially in analytic philosophy of language, but also among linguists.

¹ Originally, the essay was written in German and was published under the title *Über Sinn und Bedeutung* (Frege, 1892). For purposes of simplicity, the English version of the essay will be quoted throughout this thesis.

Throughout the last decades, however, there has been a rapid shift in the literature, especially since Stalnaker (1973) introduced the idea of a common ground to the field. Nowadays, it is often assumed that presuppositions do not arise due to the meaning of words, but rather due to pragmatic principles that govern communication (cf. Grice, 1975, p. 25). The article by the highly renowned *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on presuppositions, for example, seems to implicitly take it for granted that the pragmatic account of presuppositions is the correct one (Beaver et al., 2024).

Despite its massive popularity among semanticists and philosophers of language alike, there are significant challenges for this account and the arguments in its favour do not always hold up to scrutiny when closely examined. Thus, the intent of this thesis is to defend the view that the semantic view of presuppositions put forth by Frege has been right all along, as it provides a better explanation of the data than the pragmatic account by Stalnaker and others.

Essentially, this thesis is split into a non-empirical and an empirical part. The non-empirical part will provide an overview of the topic and of the existing literature on presuppositions, will present and describe some of the most widespread and most intriguing cases where presuppositions arise in ordinary sentences and will finally critically evaluate the arguments for and against the semantic and the pragmatic view of presupposition. In doing so, existing arguments from the literature will be assessed, yet additionally the thesis also aims to provide novel considerations in favour of the semantic account.

The empirical part of the thesis is a study that was conducted among 58 competent speakers of English (the subjects were L1 speakers of English as well as students at the Department of English and American Studies at the University of Vienna) and intended to find out whether the truth-value intuitions of the participants are more in line with the predictions of the semantic account (which predicts that sentence with presupposition failure are neither true nor false) or rather match what the pragmatic view would predict (that such sentences have a determinate truth-value, i.e. False² or True). After the methodology and the items that were used in the survey are explained, the findings of the study will be presented and evaluated. Finally, potential limitations of the study are considered.

² Following the conventions in contemporary philosophy of language, the names of truth-values are capitalised throughout this thesis.

All in all, it can be said that the data suggests that participants' truth-value judgements were slightly more in line with the predictions of the semantic account, yet it has to be kept in mind that due to the limited sample size and the limited number of items no *ultimate* conclusions can be drawn from this study.

2) Important theoretical concepts

Given the technical nature of the topic, it is of utmost importance to clarify some of the major terms that are going to be relevant throughout the rest of this thesis. This will be done in the following two sub-chapters.

2.1 Pragmatics and semantics

As this thesis focusses heavily on comparing the pragmatic and the semantic account of presupposition, it is required to get clear on what it means for a phenomenon to be *pragmatic* or *semantic* in nature. Intuitively³, pragmatics can be characterised as dealing with *utterances* (i.e. individual tokens of sentences, written or spoken), whereas semantics is the study of sentence *types* (Korta & Perry, 2025) and their conventional meaning (Davies, 1995). Sometimes it is also said that pragmatics deals with the *context* of what we say - a suggestion found in Stalnaker (1970). This way of making the distinction is, however, problematic, as semantics also sometimes has to consider the context in which a statement was made. For example, whether sentences such as “I am typing” are true or not is clearly a matter of semantics, yet such sentences are clearly context-dependent given that “I” is an indexical (Braun, 2015).

The distinction between pragmatics and semantics can best be understood by looking at the work of Paul Grice, who has been very influential in this regard: Grice's theory was that in order for a sentence to mean P it has to be the case that, as a matter of general practice, whenever someone utters that sentence, they thereby want to get the other person to believe that P by recognising their communicative intentions (Grice, 1957). “Your dog is barking”, on this

³ Throughout this thesis, whenever it is claimed that something is “intuitively” the case, such claims are merely meant to report *my own* intuitions. Naturally, intuitions of others might diverge from mine.

account, has its meaning because competent speakers of English usually utter it when they have the intention to inform the person to whom they are speaking that their canine pet is barking. Semantic meaning is thus settled, on this picture of language, via the mental states of the relevant community of people in ordinary circumstances.

Additionally to this semantic aspect of language, Grice posited that there is a further layer to communication which does not depend on linguistic facts, but rather depends on general non-linguistic principles of rationality: Grice posited that there are four maxims that underlie all human communication: The maxim of quantity, the maxim of quality, the maxim of manner and the maxim of relation⁴ (Grice, 1975, pp. 26-30). Pragmatic effects, according to Grice, are supposed to arise due to these maxims, which competent language users implicitly take for granted.

For example, the sentence “John’s girlfriend is his sun and stars” - as a matter of pure semantics - entails⁵ that John is dating a gigantic ball of gas. As one of Grice’s maxims - the maxim of quality - states that one should only utter what is true, the listener can infer - from the obvious absurdity of the literal meaning - that the statement is meant to be taken non-literal, i.e. metaphorically.⁶ Something very similar happens with questions which are disguised commands (“Could you be quiet now?”), with irony (“What great weather we have today!”) or with cases where someone changes the topic in order to imply something that they do not want to state directly (“He always tries his best” as a response to the question “Is he talented?” usually implies that the person is not talented). Grice calls this phenomenon *conversational implicature* (Grice, 1975, p. 26) and according to him the entirety of pragmatics can be explained by it. Not everyone accepts Grice’s maxims - Sperber & Wilson (1986), for example, propose that implicatures should be understood solely in terms of relevance. In fact, there exists an enormous amount of literature responding to Grice. Still, there is widespread agreement among philosophers that conversational implicature is a real and important phenomenon that is central to pragmatics as a whole.

⁴ These four maxims essentially state that a speaker should choose their utterances such that they are of appropriate length, truthful, understandable and relevant to the purposes of the conversation (Grice, 1975, pp. 26-30)

⁵ To say that a sentence entails another one means that necessarily, if the former is true, then so is the latter (Beall et al., 2024)

Another important aspect of pragmatics is the idea that participants of a conversation always take certain things for granted (Lewis, 1979) even if they are not outright stated and that this background assumptions constantly evolve throughout any written text or dialogue. This idea, as will be elaborated in the chapter on the work of Robert Stalnaker, is central to the pragmatic account of presupposition (Stalnaker, 1973).

Finally, there is one further way how the distinction between pragmatics and semantics is commonly made in contemporary linguistics and philosophy of language: Especially in formal semantics, it is often taken for granted that the literal meaning of a sentence is equivalent to the circumstances under which it would be true (Davidson, 1967). For example, the influential work by Kratzer and Heim postulates that the meaning of words and sentences is nothing over and above the possible worlds in which their truth-value would be *True* (Kratzer & Heim, 1998). On this picture, the goal of formal semantics is to specify the exact conditions under which any sentence of a language would count as true, whereas pragmatics tries to explain why our utterances sometimes communicate something *more* than mere truth-conditions. This picture is complicated, however, by Grice's idea that some expressions of English have so-called *conventional implicatures* associated with them (Potts, 2005, p. 35): For example, Grice thought that "S is X and Y" and "S is X but Y" have the exact same truth-conditions (Grice, 1975, p. 25), yet the latter sentence implies that X and Y are in some sense contradictory (as an example: "He has a PhD in theoretical physics, but is rather dumb" seems to imply that being dumb is unexpected for anyone who has a PhD in theoretical physics). On Grice's picture, conventional implicatures are part of semantics (because their meaning does not depend on individual utterance, but rather on *general* facts about the intentions of competent speakers of English), yet these implicatures - according to Grice - do not affect the truth-conditions of a sentence. Thus, if we accept a Gricean picture of language, then it would be a mistake to believe that semantics is solely concerned with the truth-conditional aspect of linguistic meaning.

2.2 Presupposition

It is quite challenging to provide necessary and sufficient conditions of what it means to be a presupposition. This is because a definition should be theory-neutral and should not make any substantial assumptions about the phenomenon with which some semanticists or philosophers of language who are studying the phenomenon would disagree. To see this, consider "A

presupposition occurs whenever a sentence implicitly takes something for granted without literally stating it” as a potential definition. At first glance, this might appear to be a satisfying definition. However, this definition is in fact problematic for the simple reason that there are certain theories of presupposition (such as Stalnaker’s, cf. sub-chapter 5.4 of this thesis) that hold the view that presupposing is a feature of *utterances*, not of sentences (Karttunen, 1973).

The definition provided by the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, which defines presuppositions as “the phenomenon whereby speakers mark linguistically information as being taken for granted, rather than being part of the main propositional content of a speech act” (Beaver et al., 2024), is more suitable. It takes no stance on whether it is the speaker’s intentions/beliefs or rather the meaning of the terms themselves which lead to the occurrence of presuppositions.

In addition to providing this brief definition, we can explain the meaning of the term “presupposition” by pointing out certain semantic properties that all presuppositions have in common. One of the most striking features of presuppositions is that they survive negation⁷. This can easily be seen by comparing two sentences, one of which contains a presupposition and one which does not.

- 1) There is intelligent life in distant galaxies.
- 2) Mary knows that her husband is cheating on her.

When one negates 1) and 2), one notices something interesting: The sentence “There isn’t intelligent life in distant galaxies” clearly does not presuppose that intelligent life exists or that there are several galaxies (we can see this by recognising that the proposition expressed by the sentence would be obviously true even if one day intelligent life does no longer exist, or if one day the Milky Way is the only galaxy in the universe), whereas the sentence “Mary doesn’t know that her husband is cheating on her” presupposes that her husband is in fact cheating (this is why “Mary doesn’t know that her husband is cheating on her - and her husband would never do that, anyway” would presumably strike one as intuitively defective). One can observe something similar with other kinds of presuppositions:

⁷ This aspect, among other things, distinguishes presuppositions from entailments: Entailments do not survive under negation (Beaver et al., 2024).

- 3) The brother of John is friendly.
- 4) It was John's brother who ate all the biscuits.

The negation of both of these sentences presupposes that John has a brother and that *someone* ate all the biscuits. Thus, we can see that it is characteristic of presuppositions that they remain constant under negation. Something similar, as pointed out by Beaver et al. (2024), happens when one embeds a presupposition in the antecedent of a conditional or in a question:

- 5) If the brother of John is friendly, then I want to meet him.
- 6) Is the brother of John friendly?

One can see that embedding sentence 3) keeps the presupposition that has been identified above, i.e. that John has a brother, constant. It would be rather bizarre, for example, to say "I don't know whether John has any siblings. Yet still I wonder: Is the brother of John friendly?"

The term that is used by semanticists and philosophers of language to describe this phenomenon is *projection* (Langendoen & Savin, 1971). It is one of the major goals of any theory of presupposition to explain why, where and under what exact circumstances presuppositions project in embedded contexts. What significantly complicates matters is that presuppositions do not survive in *all* circumstances where they are negated, as pointed out in Gazdar (1979). One might take, for example, the following pair of sentences:

- 7) The prime minister of country X is charismatic.
- 8) Either country X has no prime minister, or the prime minister is charismatic.

Imagine a circumstance where you saw some head of state make a brilliant speech on the television, yet you are not entirely sure whether his title is prime minister or president. In that case, it would be perfectly appropriate to assert 8). What is noticeable is that 8) does *not* presuppose that country X has a prime minister, even if 7) presupposes exactly that and even if 7) is embedded in 8). This example demonstrates that presuppositions do not generally survive when they are embedded in disjunctions (i.e. sentences of the form *P or Q*). Something analogous happens in the consequent of conditionals:

- 9) If country X has a prime minister, then the prime minister of X is charismatic.

Once again, 9) does not have the same presupposition as 7). It is the job of a theory of presuppositions to explain why this difference in embedding behaviour exists and to provide an underlying mechanism that predicts in which cases presuppositions project.

One final case to consider is what happens when a sentence is embedded in a belief-operator such as “S thinks that...” or “S believes that...”. A lot of literature exists on this specific aspect of presuppositions (cf. Heim, 2002 and Elbourne, 2010) and now there seems to be substantial agreement that sentences such as “John believes that the prime minister is charismatic” do not presuppose that there *is* a prime minister, but only that John *believes* that there is one (Karttunen, 1974). Once again it is the task of semanticists and philosophers of language to provide a general theory why it is that “The prime minister is charismatic” presupposes the existence of a prime minister in unembedded contexts, but suddenly presupposes something different when embedded in a sentence that expresses someone’s belief.

3) Research questions and hypotheses

The previous chapters introduced the topic, defined the term “presupposition” and gave an overview of the literature related to this phenomenon. Now that this has been done, this chapter presents the research questions that this thesis tries to answer.

As mentioned in the introduction, the thesis is divided into an empirical part and a non-empirical part. Each part tries to answer a separate research question:

RQ1: Which view of presuppositions provides a better explanation of all the linguistic data that needs to be explained by a theory of presupposition?

RQ2: Which view of presuppositions is more in line with the intuitive truth-value judgement of competent speakers of English?

RQ1 is meant to be answered in the chapters 7 and 8, which critically evaluate the most important arguments for and against the semantic and the pragmatic view of presuppositions.

RQ2, on the other hand, can only be answered via an empirical study, which is presented in chapter 9.

At the outset of the writing process, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H1: The semantic view of presuppositions offers a significantly better explanation of the linguistic data that needs to be explained by a theory of presupposition.

H2: The intuitive truth-value judgements of competent speakers of English are more in line with the predictions of the semantic view of presupposition.

Essentially, these hypotheses predict that the semantic view does better in two separate ways: On the one hand, it is supposed to have more arguments in its favour and on the other hand it is also hypothesised that its prediction that sentence with presupposition failure are neither true nor false lines up with the intuitions of the participants in the study. To find out whether H1 and H2 turn out to be correct or not is one of the major aims of this thesis.

What needs to be kept in mind, of course, is that both H1 and H2 cannot be *conclusively* answered with a single thesis. H1 can only be answered tentatively because the evaluation of all the arguments for and against the semantic and the pragmatic view is ultimately based on *my* personal judgements - while this thesis strongly intends to be as objective and as fair as possible, the risk of personal bias needs to be considered and cannot be understated.

The reason why H2 cannot get a definitive answer, on the other hand, is that both the number of participants (58 competent speakers of English) and the number of items (five sentences with presupposition failure) is limited - it would thus be a mistake to think that this study can provide conclusive information about the judgements of *all* English speakers about *all* cases of presupposition failure. Still, I am of the opinion that this thesis provides a valuable addition to the existing literature on the topic and that it is one small step towards a more definitive answer to several questions about the nature of presuppositions.

4) Phenomena to be explained

Before evaluating the arguments for and against the semantic and pragmatic interpretation of presupposition failure, I intend to provide a brief overview of different cases of presupposition in this chapter. This list is by no means exhaustive, but these types of presupposition seem to me to be among the most striking, most widespread and most illustrative examples. These different types of presupposition are the data that needs to be explained by any decent theory of presupposition - it is clearly not enough to only be able to explain part of the data, as it would be highly desirable to have a theory that can be applied to all cases of presupposition. While it would be logically possible to have a theory of presupposition that explains some of the phenomena via pragmatics and others via semantics, postulating such a theory would seem to violate what is known as *Grice's Razor* among semanticists, i.e. the methodological assumption that meanings ought not be multiplied beyond necessity (Hazlett, 2007, p. 669).

4.1) Definite descriptions

Given that the definite article is one of the most commonly used words in the entire English language, definite descriptions are almost certainly the most widespread type of presupposition. As already indicated in the previous section, definite descriptions have been identified as presupposing devices ever since Frege first wrote about them in *On Sense and Reference* (Frege, 1892). Definite descriptions of the form “The X is F⁸” presuppose, uncontroversially, the existence of X. Whether such descriptions additionally presuppose or entail uniqueness (as in Russell, 1905), or whether they rather presuppose familiarity (as in Heim, 2002) is hotly debated among semanticists and philosophers of language alike. For the purposes of this thesis, it will be assumed that the traditional view - that definite descriptions encode uniqueness, not familiarity - is correct. However, not very much depends on this assumption - the main point that is relevant is that definite descriptions of the form “The X is F” either presuppose (on the semantic view of presupposition) or entail (on the pragmatic view) that there is in fact an X which satisfies the description. If there is no X, then the sentence involving the description is intuitively felt to be in some sense defective (either due to being blatantly false or due to being neither-true-nor-false, depending on one's theory of presupposition failure).

⁸ As is common in philosophy of language, the letter F will be used throughout this thesis to stand for any arbitrary predicate. The letter X represents objects, whereas the letter Y stands for actions.

What is noteworthy is that presuppositions do not just arise with definite descriptions that refer to one single object, but also with plurals:

10) The children are having fun.

Imagine 10), uttered while one of the children is enjoying themselves in the playground, while another child is crying. Then it seems that we neither want to mark this sentence as True nor as False. Clearly the sentence does not seem true, due to the crying child. However, the sentence also does not appear to be false: To see this, consider its negation “The children aren’t having fun”. This negated sentence certainly does not strike us as true, due to the happy child. What can be drawn from this example is that plural definite descriptions have the presupposition that they are homogenous (von Stechow, 1997), which means that any sentence of the form “The Xs are F” presupposes that *all* Xs are F and that any sentence of the form “The Xs are not F” presupposes that *all* Xs are not F. When *some, but not all* Xs are F, the sentence intuitively strikes listeners as defective.

4.2) Factives

Another type of presuppositions arises with so-called *factives* (Beaver et al., 2024). Factives are verbs that take “that”-clauses as their complement and entail that the content of the “that”-clause is in fact true. This can be illustrated via the following examples:

11) John believes that Sydney is the capital of Australia.

12) John knows that Sydney is the capital of Australia.

While 11) is a perfectly fine sentence (as you can believe something that is not the case), the sentence 12) is infelicitous. The explanation for this infelicity is that it is part of the definition of knowledge that the proposition that one knows is true, i.e. you cannot “know” things which are not the case. So by saying that John knows that Sydney is the capital of Australia I am not merely saying something that is not true, but I additionally make it sound as if *I myself* falsely take Sydney to be the capital of the country.

That factives like “know” contain presuppositions can be demonstrated most easily via negation: “John doesn’t know that Sydney is the capital of Australia” makes it sound as if Sydney were the capital, but John is not aware of it. It can also be illustrated with questions that contain factive verbs (Beaver et al., 2024):

13) Has he ever noticed that his son smokes cigarettes?

Clearly this sentence presupposes that the son smokes, which can be seen via the infelicity of the following brief exchange:

14) A: I wonder whether John is a smoker.

B: Me too. I wonder if his dad has ever noticed that he smokes cigarettes.

B’s utterance sounds extremely odd. The reason for this is that he initially concedes that he is unsure whether John actually smokes, thereby directly contradicting the presupposition that arises due to the factive “notice”.

Other cases of factives are memory-related terms “forget” or “remember”. What is remarkable about these two terms is that the negation of one of them seems to presuppose the truth of the other:

15) I did not forget to water the plants.

16) I remembered to water the plants.

17) I did not remember to water the plants.

18) I forgot to water the plants.

In ordinary contexts, it appears to be the case that 15) and 16) are synonymous, just like 17) and 18) are. What this suggests is that “I did not forget X” presupposes the truth of X, while “I did not remember X” also presupposes the truth of X.

Once again, there are different ways to explain this phenomenon: Whereas the proponent of the semantic view of presuppositions thinks that the apparent equivalence between “not: forget” and “remember” is encoded in the meaning of the words, the advocate of the pragmatic view

would presumably argue that 15) does not literally imply 16), but that it would simply be pragmatically odd to assert 15) without, at the same time, being willing to assert 16).

4.3) Proper names

Another paradigmatic example of the occurrence of presuppositions are proper names, i.e. words that are meant to refer to particular persons, cities or countries. Once again it was Frege who gave the most influential linguistic example of this phenomenon: Namely, he pointed out that the sentence “Kepler died in misery” seems to presuppose the existence of a historical person called Kepler (Frege, 1948, pp. 221-222). Importantly, Frege did not think that the name “Kepler” *asserts* that any such person existed, but rather implicitly takes it for granted. He does not simply assert this, but provides an elegant argument for it: Frege points out that if it were true that “Kepler died in misery” had “The name ‘Kepler’ refers to someone” as part of its assertoric content, then the negation of “Kepler died in misery” should not be “Kepler did not die in misery”, but rather the following:

19) *Kepler did not die in misery or the name “Kepler” has no reference.* (Frege, 1948, p. 221)

But, so the thought goes, this seems intuitively incorrect: By saying that “Kepler died in misery” is not true, one seems to commit oneself to the thought that Kepler *has* a reference and that *of the person being referred to* it is false that their death was miserable. This suggests that there is an existence presupposition associated with any proper name, i.e. it is presupposed that the name is non-empty.

Russell (1905), decades after Frege, also wrote on the semantics of proper names. He came to the radical conclusion (for mainly epistemological reasons which need not concern us for the purposes of this thesis, but cf. Ludlow, 2022) that names are not, as Frege thought, referring expressions, but are rather disguised definite descriptions (which, on his theory, do not refer). The idea is that names like “Kepler” are equivalent to descriptions such as “The most famous German astronomer in history”. Therefore, according to the truth-conditions that Russell gives for definite descriptions in *On Denoting* (1905; further outlined in sub-chapter 5.2), the sentence “Kepler did not die in misery” would be equivalent to something like “It is not the case that

there existed exactly one most famous German astronomer of whom it is true that he died in misery”. So in a counterfactual world where there was no Johannes Kepler this sentence would come out *true* according to Russell’s theory, whereas according to Frege’s view it would count as neither true nor false due to presupposition failure.

Another noteworthy aspect of the debate around the presupposition of proper names concerns the treatment of fictional characters. Frege’s theory has the consequence that sentences such as “Harry Potter fell in love with Ginny Weasley” are neither true nor false (as there is no Harry Potter), whereas Russell regards such sentences as simply false. This seems to be an unfortunate result for both theories: Utterances containing the names of fictional characters are ubiquitous, so it would seem surprising if none of them were ever true. Or in other words: Why would it be the case that our fictional discourse presupposes (or asserts) something that is clearly not the case? There are two main solutions to this problem in the literature: The first one postulates a hidden “According to the fiction...” operator at the beginning of such sentences (Kroon & Voltolini, 2023). This would arguably have the consequence that the above-mentioned sentence about Harry Potter would count as true, given that it is correct that according to the fiction of Harry Potter he fell in love with Ginny Weasley. One major problem for this view, however, are sentences like the following (inspired by Kroon & Voltolini, 2023):

20) Harry Potter is a famous fictional character.

For 20) the operator theory gets the wrong truth-conditions: It is simply false that *according to the Harry Potter fiction* Harry Potter is a famous fictional character. *According to the Harry Potter fiction*, Harry is not fictional but a man in flesh and blood.

The second main view postulates no hidden operators, but rather denies the apparent datum that Harry Potter does not exist. On this view, all sentences about Harry Potter refer not to some concrete being, but rather to an *abstract* entity (van Inwagen, 1977). The main problem for this view is that it really seems like Harry Potter does *not* exist (Kroon & Voltolini, 2023) and that it appears like a very radical step to deny this.

The upshot of this short discussion is that neither Frege nor Russell handle fictional characters particularly well, insofar as they either have to postulate a widespread error theory (none of our positive statements about Harry Potter and other fictional characters are true) or have to adopt

one of the above-mentioned hypotheses about fiction, which both appear to be rather problematic. Nevertheless, both Frege and Russell can explain why discourse about fictional characters is still meaningful, despite strictly speaking never being true: The reason for this is that while there might be no corresponding object in the world, the name “Harry Potter” still has a definite description (e.g. “The wizard who is best friends with Ron and Hermoine”) associated with it (Kroon & Voltolini, 2023). And this description can have cognitive significance even if there is no Harry Potter.

We can thus see that the theories of both Frege and Russell do badly in some respects, but well in others, when it comes to the analysis of proper names. The ultimate question, it seems to be, is whether it is more in line with our linguistic intuition to regard “Harry Potter fell in love with Ginny Weasley” as neither true nor false (which would support Frege’s presuppositional theory) or rather as outright false (which would favour Russell’s view).

4.4) Aspectual and implicative verbs

Presuppositions also occur in connection with verbs which are referred to as “aspectual” - in the case of “stop” or “finish” (Beaver et al., 2024) - and “implicative” - in the case of “manage” or “dare” (Karttunen 1971, pp. 340-341). It seems that “They stopped doing X” presupposes that someone X-ed at an earlier moment (e.g. “They haven’t stopped smoking yet” presupposes that the person has previously been a smoker).

Interestingly, the verb “manage” seems to have two presuppositions: It appears to be the case that “They managed to X” has the same truth-conditions as “They did X”, but additionally it seems to presuppose that a) they tried to X and b) X-ing was difficult/required effort (Nadathur, 2015, p. 6). The latter can be seen via the oddness of the following sentences⁹:

21) *Accidentally, John managed to get drunk.

22) *John managed to get an A, which frankly anyone could have done.

^{9 9} Following standard conventions in linguistics and in the philosophy of language, the asterisk is meant to indicate that the sentence is in some way or other semantically defective.

21) and 22) both sound infelicitous, as they violate the former presupposition of “manage” and the latter one, respectively (Nadathur, 2015, p. 6).

4.5) Clefts

One of the most prominent examples of presuppositions are so-called *clefts* (Beaver et al., 2024). One can distinguish between different types of clefts, which all presuppose different things. Among the more widespread ones in English are *It-Clefts* and *Wh-Clefts*.

It-Clefts, which have the form “It was X who did Y”, seem to presuppose that *someone* did Y (Beaver et al., 2024). An illustrative example of this phenomenon is the following:

23) **It wasn't John who ate the biscuits - in fact, no one did.*

The reason why this sentence sounds odd is because the cleft presupposes that someone ate the biscuits, which the later part of the sentence explicitly denies.

Wh-Clefts, which generally start with the word “what”, have a related, but slightly different presupposition (Prince, 1978), as illustrated by the following sentence:

24) *What the team needs in order to win the league is a new striker.*

This sentence presupposes that there is *something* that the team needs in order to win the league. This can be easily seen by forming the negation of 24): “What the team needs isn't a new striker.” still implies that there is at least one thing that is needed instead, such as a new midfielder.

Finally, there are clefts such as “It is not that I dislike teaching”. Such a cleft seems to presuppose that there is either something else that I dislike (if the focus is on the word “teaching”) or that I have another attitude towards teaching - if the focus is on the word “dislike” (Delahunty, 1995, pp. 341-344). What is noteworthy about all clefts is that their presupposition seems to be remarkably difficult to cancel (Beaver et al., 2024) - it is hard to think of *any* context where “It wasn't X who did Y” does not lead to the obvious inference that someone did Y.

4.6) Iteratives

Paradigmatic examples of adverbs or adverbial phrases that indicate repetition and that thereby lead to presuppositions are “too” or “as well” (Beaver et al., 2024). This can be illustrated via the following examples:

25) John was in love with Lisa, too.

26) John did his homework as well.

If 25) is uttered in a context where John is the only person who has fallen in love with Lisa, then this sentence strikes us as infelicitous at best and as simply incoherent at worst. This is because “too” seems to take it for granted that John is not the only one who fancies Lisa and it is thus not at all clear how to evaluate the sentence in a context where this presupposition is not fulfilled (Beaver et al., 2024).

Something very similar happens in the case of 26), where the sentence seems utterly nonsensical when uttered in a context where John was the *only* student who did his homework. On the one hand, one might be inclined to regard the sentence as true, given that the main claim of the sentence - that John did his homework - is true. On the other hand, one would usually be very hesitant to call this sentence true, as it would seem that one thereby implicitly commits oneself to the existence of another student who did their homework.

In the cases of “too” and “as well”, the negation test for presuppositions is not successful: “John wasn’t in love with Lisa, too” is ungrammatical because “too” is a so-called “Positive Polarity Item” that cannot occur in negated sentences (Penka, 2016, pp. 20-21). However, the interrogation test strongly suggests that these words are indeed presuppositional:

27) Was John in love with Lisa, too?

Sentence 27) is perfectly grammatical and has the exact same presupposition as 26), namely that there is another person that loves Lisa (Beaver et al., 2024). This suggests that “too” is a presupposition trigger, despite not being able to occur in negated sentences.

4.7) Focus

What is remarkable is that presuppositions cannot only be triggered via the usage of certain words, but can even arise due to paraverbal factors such as word or sentence stress (Beaver et al., 2024). This can be illustrated via the following two sentences¹⁰:

28) He didn't book his flight to Tokyo.

29) HE didn't book his flight to Tokyo.

Clearly, both 28) and 29) presuppose that there is a flight to Tokyo, due to the usage of the word "his flight", which is a disguised definite description (Ludlow, 2022). However, it appears to be the case that 29), in addition, has another presupposition: Namely, that someone *did* book their flight to Tokyo. The contrast can be seen by imagining a scenario where there was a flight to Tokyo, but *every* member of the relevant group forgot to book it. In this imagined scenario, it seems clear that 28) would be clearly true of every male member of that group.

In contrast, 29) does not seem obviously true at all in this case, as can be seen via the infelicity of the following:

30) *HE didn't book his flight to Tokyo. In fact, NO ONE OF US did.

Examples like these suggest that putting emphasis on certain words in a sentence triggers the presupposition that there is a contextually relevant alternative to the word that is emphasised (Beaver et al., 2024). It can be seen that this is true not just for pronouns or proper names, but is true in general:

31) John brought A GUITAR to the party.

32) John brought a guitar to THE PARTY.

31) seems to presuppose that John brought *something* to the party (presumably, but not certainly, an instrument), whereas 32) appears to presuppose that John has a guitar which he brought *somewhere*.

¹⁰ In the following examples, capital letters indicate that the capitalised word is stressed

That these examples are genuine cases of presupposition and not merely other pragmatic phenomena can be seen by using the negation test that is commonly used to identify presuppositions (cf. sub-chapter 2.2):

33) John didn't bring A GUITAR to the party.

34) John didn't bring a guitar to THE PARTY.

33) still presupposes that John brought something and would usually be followed by something such as "Rather, he brought a violin". 34) still has the presupposition that John has a guitar which he brought somewhere and might be followed by phrases such as "Instead, he brought it to school". What this suggests is that a mere change in focus can lead to the same presuppositional effects as those that arise from the usage of particular words.

At first glance, this might seem like excellent evidence in favour of the pragmatic account of presupposition. This is because intonation is normally a feature that is strongly associated with pragmatics and is seldomly connected to semantics. After all, it is clearly true that certain paraverbal features such as saying something in a sarcastic tone have no effect on truth-conditions - one cannot make a true sentence *literally* false by merely saying it in an annoyed kind of way while rolling one's eyes.

However, it would be much too quick for the advocate of the pragmatic account to declare victory: It is a well-known fact about the English language that stress can indeed affect truth-conditions:

35) That is a terrible offense!¹¹

The truth-conditions of 35) clearly depend on word stress: If one stresses the first syllable of the word "offense", then the sentence is true when someone committed a crime - if the second syllable is stressed, however, the sentence is true when an American football team struggles to get enough touchdowns.

¹¹ This sentence uses the American spelling of "offense", as the term "offence" is not commonly used in British English to refer to the attack of a sports team.

It can thus be seen that there are uncontroversial examples where the literal truth of a sentence depends on paraverbal features - this suggests that it is not obviously implausible to think that the presuppositions that arise due to focus are also a semantic phenomenon.

5) Historical research

In the upcoming sub-chapters, the most important historical works related to the research on presuppositions are presented. These works are highly relevant for the purposes of this thesis, insofar as the contemporary theories of presupposition are still highly influenced by Frege, Russell, Strawson and Stalnaker.

5.1) Frege's *On Sense and Reference*

In his influential paper *On Sense and Reference* (Frege, 1892) Frege was the first philosopher of language to make the distinction between the “sense” of an expression and its corresponding “reference”. What exactly Frege meant by “sense” is vigorously debated among Frege scholars, but most semanticists and philosophers of language seem to be in agreement that the sense of a word is something like its “mode of presentation” (Frege, 1892, p. 37). Essentially, the idea is that the sense of the word tells us, how we conceive of a certain expression in our minds.

Frege regarded sense as the basic, most important part of any expression – the reason for this being that the sense of a word determines its reference, i.e. the actual thing it picks out in the world. For example, the expression “the chancellor of Austria” currently has Christian Stocker as its referent because Stocker is the entity in the world which satisfies the sense that is expressed by the definite description.

Importantly, Frege thought that making the distinction between sense and reference allows us to explain why certain expressions which intuitively lack a referent in the actual world are still meaningful. Frege himself gives the example of the mythical figure Odysseus: Even if the term “Odysseus” has no referent (because Odysseus does not in fact exist), the name still conveys meaning to anyone who is familiar with the myth. The reason why the term can still be meaningful is because Frege takes there to be a sense associated with the word “Odysseus” – maybe something like *the tragic hero in Homer's Iliad* (Homer, 1990) – that we can grasp. (Frege, 1892, pp. 41-42). When one keeps this Fregean picture of language in mind, it is easy

for one to see the implications for our theory of definite descriptions: Frege, on the one hand, thought that descriptions without referent can a) be perfectly meaningful in virtue of the sense that they express, but b) cannot be evaluated for truth because they do not refer to anything in the world. When we have a definite description such as “the current king of Austria”, we are looking for some entity in the world which could fulfil the sense associated with the phrase, yet we are not able to find one. This means that, according to the Fregean picture, any sentence such as “The current king of Austria is intelligent” is strictly speaking neither true nor false, as it tries to apply a predicate (being intelligent) to some entity which happens to not exist.

Frege never used the term “presupposition failure” (nor did he use the term “presupposition” itself), but the following passage from *On Sense and Reference* illustrates that he thought that definite descriptions presuppose the unique existence of something that satisfies the description and that, further, the fulfilment of this presupposition is required in order for the entire sentence to have a truth value in the first place:

What is the position now with regard to the reference? Have we a right even to inquire about it? Is it possible that a sentence as a whole has only a sense, but no reference? At any rate, one might expect that such sentences occur, just as there are parts of sentences having sense but no reference. And sentences which contain proper names without reference will be of this kind. The sentence ‘Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep’ obviously has a sense. But since it is doubtful whether the name ‘Odysseus,’ occurring therein, has reference, it is also doubtful whether the whole sentence has one. Yet it is certain, nevertheless, that anyone who seriously took the sentence to be true or false would ascribe to the name ‘Odysseus’ a reference, not merely a sense; for it is of the reference of the name that the predicate is affirmed or denied. Whoever does not admit the name has reference can neither apply nor withhold the predicate. But in that case it would be superfluous to advance to the reference of the name; one could be satisfied with the sense, if one wanted to go no further than the thought. If it were a question only of the sense of the sentence, the thought, it would be unnecessary to bother with the reference of a part of the sentence; only the sense, not the reference, of the part is relevant to the sense of the whole sentence. The thought remains the same whether ‘Odysseus’ has reference or not. The fact that we concern ourselves at all about the reference of a part of the sentence indicates that we generally recognize and expect a reference for the sentence itself. The

thought loses value for us as soon as we recognize that the reference of one of its parts is missing. (Frege, 1892, pp. 41-42)

Frege himself was not concerned with presuppositions in other contexts, but in principle his idea of sense and presupposition failure can be applied to other phenomena than definite descriptions as well.

In one way, the Fregean theory of meaning that has been outlined in this chapter has many attractive features: It explains the intuitive meaningfulness of non-referring descriptions such as “the current king of Austria” and it further explains why intuitively a sentence such as “The current king of Austria is intelligent” strikes many of us not as false (which would imply the truth of the corresponding negated sentence “The current king of Austria isn’t intelligent”, which is certainly not a true sentence), but as simply semantically defective.

That being said, it is fair to say that ever since Russell published *On Denoting* (Russell, 1905) – a paper whose content will be discussed in the next sub-chapter - the Fregean view is no longer the mainstream view of definite descriptions. One of the reasons for this development is the feeling among many that all well-formed sentences of English should have a definite truth value, which is either “true” or – in case it is not true – “false” (cf. chapter 7.1 on the law of excluded middle). Or in other words, the idea presumably is that “not true” and “false” are synonymous and that any sentence which does not have the truth value “true” should thereby automatically receive the truth value “false” (Russell himself took this view in *On Denoting*, 1905). While Frege’s theory violates this intuition (“The current king of Austria is intelligent”, according to Frege, is not true, yet also not false), Russell’s theory of definite description delivers exactly this verdict. Additionally, there are certain sentences, which – despite suffering from presupposition failure – seem to be flat out false. Kai von Fintel, for example, gives examples such as the present king of France sitting in one’s chair (von Fintel, 2004), which – according to von Fintel – people intuitively evaluate as false, not as lacking a truth value.

5.2) Russell’s *On Denoting*

On Denoting (1905) was written by Bertrand Russell during a time when proper names and definite descriptions were badly understood. Russell’s goal was to provide a logical analysis of

definite descriptions, which not only illuminates the linguistic phenomenon, but thereby also defends the law of excluded middle, which states that for any proposition P It is either the case that P or the case that not-P (Russell, 1905, p. 485). The law of excluded middle is a central part of so-called classical logic (Shapiro & Kissel, 2022), which is still – more than 100 years after *On Denoting* was published – by far and away the most popular system of logic among philosophers (Bourget & Chalmers, 2020), so Russell apparently felt that it was important for his analysis to vindicate this principle.

Russell rejected Frege’s distinction between sense and reference (Speaks, 2024) and therefore could not rely on the sense of a word to explain its meaningfulness. This means that if definite descriptions were referential terms – as Frege took them to be – then, for Russell, any non-referring description such as “the current king of Austria” would have to be strictly meaningless. As the consequent of this conditional (i.e. that “the current king of Austria” is a meaningless string of words) is clearly untenable, Russell instead rejected its antecedent (namely that definite descriptions are meant to refer). Whereas Frege took definite descriptions to be paradigmatic examples of reference, Russell abandons this idea completely and treats them as quantifier phrases instead (Russell, 1905, pp. 481-482).

First, Russell came up with an analysis for so-called indefinite descriptions – these are simply descriptions which are headed by an indefinite article and are not about any specific entity. His analysis was that “A dog is running” essentially means “There exists an x such that x is a dog and of x it is true that x is running” (Russell, 1905, p. 480).

Russell’s innovative idea was to apply this analysis to definite descriptions as well, with the only difference that definite descriptions additionally assert that only one x exists (Russell, 1905, pp. 481-482). So, to illustrate the point, “The dog is running” – on the Russellian analysis – does not refer to any specific dog, but its logical form is rather something like “There exists an x such that x is a dog, of x it is true that x is running and everything that is a dog is identical to x” (Russell, 1905, pp. 481-482).

It should be clear to see how this idea drastically diverges from the Fregean view and has enormous implication for the analysis of presuppositions: Whereas Frege thought that definite descriptions presuppose the unique existence of a certain entity, for Russell there really is not any semantic presupposition in the first place: The description does not presuppose unique existence, but rather *asserts* it (Russell, 1905, pp. 481-482). And clearly, if one asserts

something that is not the case in reality, then one has uttered a falsehood – thus, the Russellian analysis takes all sentences containing definite descriptions such as “the current king of Austria” to be outright false.

Russell, with this analysis, managed to accomplish both of his aims: He clarified the phenomenon and offered an analysis, which – if true – would vindicate the law of excluded middle. It is therefore not surprising that the paper became very influential among linguists and philosophers of language. For the purposes of this thesis, the main point is that if this highly popular analysis of definite descriptions were to be true, then any apparent cases of presupposition failure in definite descriptions would be a mere pragmatic illusion and not a genuine feature of semantics.

There are, however, potential criticisms that can be made of Russell’s analysis, some of which can be found in P.F. Strawson’s *On Referring* (Strawson, 1950), which will be the focus of the next sub-chapter. One piece of criticism comes from the idea that Russell’s theory, as mentioned, validates the law of excluded middle. Russell, of course, saw this as particularly desirable, but this has the rather astonishing consequence that all sentences of the form “The X is F” which are not true can be transformed into true sentences which say “The X is not F”. One might consider once again the sentence “The current king of Austria is intelligent”, which – according to Russell’s theory – is false. Russell’s analysis then delivers the verdict that the corresponding negation “The current king of Austria is not intelligent” is true. Of course, though, this prediction appears to deviate from common intuitions, precisely because the sentence seems to presuppose something that is not fulfilled, namely that there is a current king of Austria. Anyone who uttered the sentence “The current king of Austria is not intelligent” would ordinarily be understood as attributing the property of not-being-intelligent to some king. Russell himself thought that this intuition can be explained away by offering two different readings of the sentence: While Russell himself did not use these terms, these two potential readings are nowadays known as *wide-scope* and *narrow-scope* reading or as *external* and *internal* negation in the linguistic and philosophical literature. (Beaver et al., 2024)

The narrow-scope reading is so-called because negation takes narrow scope with regards to the rest of the sentence. Returning to our familiar sentence, we thus get “There exists an x such that x is king of Austria and it is not the case that x is intelligent”, which is equivalent to attributing non-intelligence to some king.

Russell agreed that this reading of the sentence clearly is not true. However, Russell thought that there was a hidden second meaning, one where the negation operator takes wide scope (Beaver et al., 2024). This leads to the reading “It is not the case that there exists an x such that x is king of Austria and such that x is intelligent”, which is true. Russell thought that, when correctly distinguishing between the (false) narrow-scope and the (true) wide-scope reading, one can see that his analysis actually makes the correct prediction, contrary to initial appearance (Beaver et al., 2024). This thesis will defend the view, however, that the wide-scope reading is not at all natural and possibly non-existent.

5.3) Strawson’s *On Referring*

Strawson was the first to point out that the Russellian analysis of definite descriptions leads to seemingly bizarre truth-value judgements in certain scenarios. Strawson, in *On Referring*, imagines a case where you have a room with two tables and someone then says that the table is covered with books (Strawson, 1950). If the Russellian analysis were correct, then this would be equivalent to “There exists an x such that x is a table, of x it is true that x is covered with books and everything that is a table is identical to x ”. But, of course, given that the imagined room has two tables and not just one, the sentence would then have to be false. This seems to diverge radically from our linguistic practices, though: If someone uttered the sentence “The table is covered with books” in a room with two tables, we would intuitively not react by saying “That’s false!”, but with something like “Which table are you talking about?”.

Strawson then goes on to make the point that what this shows us is that a sentence containing a definite description takes something for granted, in this case that there is a uniquely salient table – or in other words: it presupposes something (Strawson, 1950). Russell responded to Strawson in *Mr. Strawson on Referring* (Russell, 1957), among other things, by pointing out that ordinary language is often vague and confused and that one therefore ought to prefer his philosophically rigorous analysis, which gives precise truth-conditions. (Russell, 1957, pp. 385-387)

Russell is very explicit when he says about Strawson’s reluctance to call sentences like “The present king of France is wise” false the following: “This is a purely verbal question [...] For my part, I find it more convenient to define the word ‘false’ so that every sentence is either true or false” (Russell, 1957, p. 388).

Finally, Russell points out that ordinary language – in the right context – actually favours his analysis: “Suppose, for example, that in some country there was a law that no person could hold public office if he considered it false that the Ruler of the Universe is wise. I think an avowed atheist who took advantage of Mr. Strawson’s doctrine to say that he did not hold this proposition false, would be regarded as a somewhat shifty character”. (Russell, 1957, p. 389) Essentially, Russell is trying to say that it would make more sense, from an atheistic worldview, to treat “God is wise” as false, rather than as neither true nor false.

One can thus see that Russell did not make use of any sophisticated linguistic arguments to defend his thesis, but rather motivated his thesis via pragmatic reasoning (i.e. it would be beneficial to philosophy were we to adopt his analysis).

5.4) Stalnaker’s common ground

When it comes to presuppositions, Russell and Frege were by far the most significant contributors to the literature in the first half of the 20th century. In the second half of the 20th century, however, it was unquestionably Robert Stalnaker who made the biggest contribution to the field. Stalnaker is firmly in the camp of philosophers who believe that presuppositions are a pragmatic phenomenon (cf. Stalnaker, 1970 and Stalnaker, 1973). What is remarkable about Stalnaker’s contribution to the literature is that he was not satisfied with merely claiming that the phenomenon can be explained via pragmatics, but that he rather gave a rigorous analysis of the underlying mechanism in order to motivate his view.

Central to Stalnaker’s analysis of presuppositions is the idea of a common ground: Essentially, Stalnaker is of the opinion that every communicative process takes for granted certain things – which is what he calls the common ground of a conversation – and that sentences, if uttered, are meant to add further information to this common ground. (Stalnaker, 1970) So, for example, if I mentioned in a conversation with my principal that I have a younger brother, then the proposition that I have a sibling would then have become part of the common ground between my principal and me. More formally, Stalnaker thought that the common ground consists of “a body of information that is presumed to be shared by the parties of discourse” (Stalnaker, 2014, p. 2). Stalnaker thought that it is typical of assertion that it is the kind of speech act that “serves to restrict the common ground” (Stalnaker, 2014, p. 2), which would mean that whenever we

are asserting something we are thereby eliminating certain possibilities. Thus, the sentence “I have a brother”, if uttered by me, would thereby eliminate all possible worlds in which I do not have siblings from the common ground.

One can now see how this relates to the phenomenon of presupposition: Presupposition failure, on Stalnaker’s theory, occurs whenever someone wants to make something part of the common ground that the other parties of the conversation are not yet willing to accept (Stalnaker, 1973). Notably, this is an entirely pragmatic phenomenon, in the sense that it is tied to the practical activities of human beings and not to the meaning of the words themselves. So, for Stalnaker, the reason why “The current king of Austria is intelligent” strikes us as deficient is not (pace Frege) that some linguistic rule has been violated, but rather because the sentence tries to make Austria being a monarchy part of the common ground, which we are not willing to accept due to our world knowledge. By using the definite description it seems like the speaker takes for granted that Austria is ruled by a king, which is incompatible with the hearer’s view of the world, and for Stalnaker *this* is the origin of the oddness of the sentence.

Stalnaker’s view of definite descriptions (Stalnaker, 1970) can be summarised as follows, then: The strict truth-conditions of the sentence are the ones given by Russell in *On Denoting* (1905), i.e. the sentence “The current king of Austria is intelligent” is true if and only if there is exactly one intelligent Austrian king and is false otherwise. In addition, however, Stalnaker is also interested in what makes a sentence felicitous to utter – and here, he thinks, we need to appeal to the common ground and not just to truth-conditions. In a sense, then, Stalnaker closely aligns himself with the Russellian view of language and his work on the common ground has given defenders of Russell another tool that can be used to defend the view that all sentences containing definite descriptions are either true or false. His theory would – if true – allow them to reduce all intuitions related to presupposition failure to pragmatic processes and thereby avoid the implication of the semantic view that presupposition failure leads to truth-value gaps.

What is remarkable about Stalnaker’s theory is that, if it were true, it would not only provide an explanation for the oddness of sentences such as “The current king of Austria is intelligent”, but of presupposition failure *in general*. If Stalnaker’s account is an accurate representation of the English language, then the semantic approach is essentially useless: Anything that Frege tried to explain via reference failure and truth-value gaps, Stalnaker would rather explain as

falseness combined with pragmatic oddness due to a violation of general communicative principles.

It is thus easy to see why Stalnaker's picture of presupposition failure has been so attractive to many linguists and philosophers of language: His theory seems to be independently motivated (as it is obviously true that people take certain things for granted whenever they speak with each other) and, if true, it would explain a lot of phenomena that have previously troubled linguists and philosophers alike. However, as this thesis tries to argue, there are substantial problems with Stalnaker's theory, which makes it doubtful whether his approach is ultimately successful.

5.5) Recent developments

In recent years and decades, the pragmatic account seems to have become more popular than the semantic one - at least according to my impression of the literature on the topic. One of the main reasons for this is the work of Stephen Neale, who has defended the Russellian account of definite descriptions in several influential works (Neale, 1990) along with Barbara Abbott (Abbott, 2008). Additionally, Stalnaker's account has been very influential, which is expected given that he is one of the most influential living analytic philosophers.

That being said, there are still several semanticists and philosophers of language who defend an account that is Fregean in spirit - arguably the most influential among them being Kai von Fintel (2004) and Paul Elbourne (2013). Karen Lewis defends a hybrid view, according to which Russell was right that definite descriptions are quantificational, but which still postulates truth-value gaps in case of presupposition failure (Lewis, 2022).

5.6) Summary of the two main accounts

Overall, it can be said that the current literature on presuppositions is divided between two radically different views: The semantic account and the pragmatic one. The central idea behind the semantic view is that presuppositions are a phenomenon that arises due to the very meaning of the words themselves. In the case of Frege's view, for example, the presupposition of proper

names and definite descriptions comes from the fact that they are meant to be singular terms, i.e. terms which pick out a specific object in the world. As explained in the section on *On Sense and Reference*, it follows from his fundamental views about semantics that whenever such a term does not refer, then neither does the sentence as a whole. Advocates of the semantic view, whether Fregean or not, generally think that whenever presupposition failure occurs, the resulting sentence is neither true nor false because it is in some way defective.

The pragmatic view, on the other hand, tries to explain presupposition not via a semantic mechanism, but rather with general cooperative principles, such as the ones postulated by Paul Grice (1975). Proponents of this view have the opinion that presupposition failure makes a sentence *unassertable*, but not defective (Beaver et al., 2024). If this view is correct, then presupposition failure never leads to sentences which lack a determinate truth-value.

6) On linguistic intuitions

Given that this thesis strongly relies on intuitive judgements about the truth-value of particular sentences, it seems reasonable to spend some time on evaluating how intuitions should be evaluated. While intuitions are generally accepted as a useful methodology (Pust, 2024), the method of relying on intuitions has also received criticism by philosophers (Field, 1989). However, as epistemologist Michael Huemer points out in *Knowledge, Reality and Value*, it is hard to see how one is supposed to get to *any* belief without relying on some intuition or other, e.g. when it comes to basic axioms (Huemer, 2021).

In linguistics, intuitions seem *especially* important. This is because, plausibly, there are no facts about linguistics which do not directly depend on our judgements. Why, for example, is the sentence “*A car John is given” ungrammatical? Arguably it is ungrammatical because speakers of English, if they are confronted with the sentence, intuitively take it to be malformed. If one day all English speakers were to agree that the sentence is perfectly grammatical, then it would appear misguided to think that it would still be ungrammatical. After all, it is hard to see what could possibly ground the truth of grammatical rules except for the mental states or dispositions of English speakers. What this example shows is that there is a particularly tight connection between intuitiveness and truth when it comes to linguistics, which in turn suggests that any thesis on semantics ought, among other things, appeal to what seems intuitively true.

What makes the endeavour more challenging is that it is often difficult to see whether our intuitions truly track truth-values or are rather concerned with something else. For example, Grice¹² argued that sentences such as “He is smart and educated” and “He is smart, but educated” have the exact same truth-conditions (Grice, 1975, p. 25), despite initial appearance. Examples such as these show that it is often hard to tell whether our intuitive judgements latch onto *truth* or are rather influenced by other unrelated factors.

It is the task of semantic theorising to systematise our intuitions and try to come up with a theory that best explains our intuitive judgements. This can be done either by a) providing a theory that directly validates all our intuitively judgements or b) by formulating a theory that diverges from our truth-value intuitions, but provides an explanation why our intuitions are systematically mistaken. In some sense, then, the pragmatic account of presupposition can be seen as a version of b): Proponents of this account are often willing to admit that their postulated truth-conditions are slightly counterintuitive, yet they try to explain away this divergence by appealing to some pragmatic mechanism (e.g. Stalnaker, 1970). The semantic view of presupposition, on the other hand, is essentially a version of the a) strategy: People like Frege or Elbourne (2010) start with the intuitive judgement that sentences such as “The present king of France is bald” seem to be obviously neither true nor false and based on this intuitive judgement they then formulate a theory of presupposition which predicts these judgements.

Both the a) and the b) strategy seem to have a genuine place in linguistics - some phenomena might be better explained via the former strategy, whereas others might be better explained using the latter. In any case, it is not at all clear that either a) or b) clearly ought to be preferred when it comes to the analysis of presuppositions - both approaches have significant advantages and disadvantages and ultimately it simply comes down to which theory performs best when one considers several factors such as simplicity, internal coherence and explanatory power. It is thus important to consider a very wide range of data, which is exactly what this thesis does.

¹² The idea is that both sentences are true if and only if both of the conjuncts are true. The only difference between them is that “but” conventionally implicates that there is a contrast between the first and the second conjunct. (Grice, 1975, p. 25)

7) Arguments against the semantic view

In the following sub-chapters, some of the most pressing arguments that have been given against the semantic view of presupposition are presented and potential responses are given on behalf of the proponent of this account.

7.1) The law of excluded middle

One of the major motivations for accepting the pragmatic account of presuppositions is that it allows one to keep the law of excluded middle (LEM), whereas it is unclear whether the semantic account does the same. Russell, for example, explicitly wrote *On Denoting* in order to defend LEM (Russell, 1957, p. 388). Given that this argument strikes me as one of the best ones in favour of the pragmatic account of presuppositions, this thesis will spend a considerable amount of time to address this worry.

LEM is one of the central principles of classical logic - the logic generally taught in Western philosophy departments and the one endorsed by a clear majority of philosophers (Bourget & Chalmers, 2020) - says that for any statement either that statement is true or it is not (Cooper, 1978, pp. 161-162). However, it needs to be clarified what is meant by “statement” in this context: Essentially, one might offer two different versions of LEM - a propositional and a sentential version:

LEM-P: For all propositions P, either P or not-P

LEM-S: For all sentences S, either S or not-S

What exactly propositions are is difficult to state in theory-neutral terms, as there is massive disagreement about their nature (McGrath & Frank, 2024). However, what all accounts of propositions have in common is that they define propositions as the kind of thing that people can believe or doubt and the kind of thing that sentences of different languages can have in common (McGrath & Frank, 2024): For example, “Schnee ist weiß” and “Snow is white” are clearly different sentence types, but it seems that there is something that they both have in common: Namely, that they express the proposition that snow is white (McGrath & Frank,

2024). Thus, it can be said that - whatever else propositions might be - they are language-independent entities that represent how the world might be. That any such entities exist has of course been denied by some philosophers of language (e.g. Quine, 1960), but for the purposes of this thesis this debate need not concern us - after all, if there were no propositions, then LEM-P would be *trivially* true on both the pragmatic and the semantic account and could therefore not be an argument against the semantic view in the first place.

Given this minimal understanding of propositions, LEM-P appears to be overwhelmingly plausible: Intuitively, there should always be a definite fact whether a belief that someone has about the state of the world is true or not. Denying this would imply that the world is literally indeterminate in a deep sense, which seems hard to make sense of. Additionally, it seems obvious given the meaning of “not” in English that if it is not the case that proposition P is true, then the proposition not-P thereby *has to be* true. One could imagine, for example, having an exhaustive list of all currently true propositions. If “The number of stars in the Milky Way is even” is not on said list, then it seems like one should immediately infer that “The number of stars in the Milky Way is not even” has to be on the list.

Overall, LEM-P appears to be a correct metaphysical principle, which is why it has been so popular among philosophers of logic and philosophers of language. Therefore, it would be a desideratum of any theory of presuppositions that it allows us to keep LEM-P. At first glance, it seems that the semantic account - especially the one given by Frege - would violate this principle, as it says that “The current king of Austria is intelligent” is neither true nor not-true.

However, it has to be kept in mind that - when evaluating LEM-P - we are not talking about *sentences* but about *propositions*. What this implies is that the semantic account is compatible with LEM-P as long as sentences such as “The current king of Austria is intelligent” do not express propositions. Remarkably, it seems to make perfect sense for Frege to take this view, given his other commitments in the philosophy of language: Frege was a populariser of the principle of compositionality (Pickel & Szabo, 2025), which roughly states that “the meaning of a complex expression is determined by its structure and the meanings of its constituents” (Pickel & Szabo, 2025). This allows Frege to say that whenever *any* part of an expression fails to refer, this has the consequence that the *entire* expression thereby does not refer (Hawkins, 2021). And it seems highly plausible that if an expression does not refer, then it also does not express a proposition.

Thus, it can be said that the defender of the semantic view has the following response to the argument from LEM-P: They can accept the truth of the principle, but can deny that their account leads to a violation of it. While their view entails that “The current king of Austria is intelligent” is a *sentence* that is neither true nor false, it is hard to see why they should accept that it is a *proposition* that is neither true nor false (because it is not a proposition in the first place).

The previous paragraph argued that the semantic account can handle the first version of the argument from LEM. However, there still remains the question what a defender of the semantic view should say about the other version - the one, where LEM is taken to quantify over *sentences*, not propositions. Trivially, all semantic accounts of presupposition violate LEM-S. What all these accounts have in common, after all, is that they take sentences of the form “The X is F” to be neither true nor false whenever there is no X. This means that the following conditional is true: If LEM-S is true, then the semantic account of presupposition is false.

But why think that the antecedent of said conditional, i.e. that LEM-S is true, holds? While LEM-P appeared highly plausible because it was talking *about the world*, LEM-S is significantly less attractive as it does not make a claim about mind-independent reality but about *our language*. It is hard to see why one should take it to be a logical truth that man-made language always needs to settle truth one way or the other. This is especially clear when one looks at sentences that are obviously defective: Imagine someone who utters “She has already left” straight out of the blue, without any further context and without anyone else being around. Surely it would be absurd to say that either “She has already left” or “She hasn’t left yet” are true in that scenario. Rather, what one should say is that this sentence is defective (because it lacks the necessary context to fix the referent of the pronoun “she”) and therefore is neither true nor false, despite following all the syntactic rules of English. This, of course, would mean that LEM-S is false. Defenders of the semantic view, then, can argue that sentences with presupposition failure are defective in a similar kind of way as “She has already left” is.

At this point, one might want to respond to the argument on behalf of the defender of LEM-S in the following manner: It could be argued that when we say that every sentence needs to be either true or false, what we actually mean is that every sentence *where the context is sufficiently clear* has a determinate truth-value. One could then argue that pronouns are deictic expressions (Rühlemann & O’Donnell, 2014, pp. 331-333), i.e. ones which rely on linguistic or extra-

linguistic context which is sometimes not provided, whereas the same thing cannot be said of sentence such as “The present king of Austria is intelligent”, which are clearly not context-sensitive in that kind of way. One could, then, formulate a slightly adapted principle which is not vulnerable to the above-cited counterexample:

LEM-S*: For all non-deictic¹³ sentences, either S or not-S

At first glance, this does not seem like an unreasonable response: If the modified principle LEM-S* were correct, then it could be used as an argument that sentences with presupposition failure need to be either true nor false, given that such sentences are usually not deictic (one does not need non-linguistic context to settle the reference of “The current king of Austria is intelligent”, for example, its truth depends merely on whether there is exactly one king of Austria or not). However, the problem for the defender of this objection is that there are counterexamples even to LEM-S*, namely sentences which appear to be neither true nor false, yet which do not rely on a lack of sufficient context: For example, one might think that the so-called *Liar Paradox* (Glanzberg, 2001) is a formidable challenge to the principle that every non-context sensitive sentence is either true or false:

36) *This sentence is false.*

What makes 36) so tricky is that it seems that if one admits that it expresses a proposition, then one gets a proposition that is both true and false: If the proposition expressed by the sentence is true, then the sentence truly says of itself that it is false, which entails that the sentence is both true and false. If, however, the proposition expressed by the sentence is false, then what the sentence says - that it is false - must be true, which once again entails a contradiction. (Beall et al., 2025). In the literature on this paradox there are some philosophers who have simply embraced the seemingly absurd conclusion that a sentence can be both true and false at the same time in the same way (cf. Priest, 2006 for a prominent example of this view). That being said, the vast majority of academics who have written on the topic are not willing to accept the existence of true contradictions (Bourget & Chalmers, 2020). Therefore, one very prominent

¹³ By “non-deictic” I simply mean sentences that do not contain expressions which are such that the context determines their reference. “She has left already” would thus not fall under LEM-S*, given that - at least in this particular example - the reference of “She” can only be settled via extra-linguistic context, e.g. by pointing or glancing at someone in the room.

solution to the paradox is to claim that the sentence does not express a proposition and is thus neither true nor false (Beall et al., 2025). This view is not only endorsed by Huemer in his book *Paradox Lost* (Huemer, 2018), but also by the highly influential Saul Kripke (1975). What people who advocate for this solution sometimes say is that 36) is “ungrounded” (Beall et al., 2025) and it appears like this is exactly what advocates of a semantic view of presuppositions should say about sentences such as “The present king of Austria is intelligent”: These sentences are *ungrounded*, thus express no proposition and consequently cannot be said to be either true or false.

So far, two major reasons have been given to think that the law of excluded middle is probably false for sentence, as opposed to propositions. One further reason to think that LEM-S* is not valid comes from counterfactual conditionals: Counterfactual conditionals are “If A, then B” statements which a) use the subjunctive mood and b) have an antecedent which is false in the actual world (Starr, 2025). There is debate among philosophers of language and among linguists how exactly counterfactuals ought to be analysed, but there is a widespread agreement that any sentence of the form “If A, then B” is about what happens in relevant possible worlds where A is true.

A paradigmatic example of an English counterfactual would be “If Edgar Allan Poe had not lived, then the history of English literature would have been quite different” - the sentence tells us what *would* have happened, had the past been different, and intuitively we have to evaluate what happens in other possible worlds (ones where Poe never lived) in order to determine the truth-value of said sentence.

As philosophers of language have noticed (Quine, 1950), it appears to be the case that such counterfactuals are sometimes hard to evaluate:

37) If Bizet and Verdi had been compatriots, Bizet would have been Italian.

38) If Bizet and Verdi had been compatriots, Bizet would have been French.

Both 37) and 38) are due to Quine (Shaffer, 2016, p. 55) and it appears to be the case that there is no reason to prefer either consequent over the other, despite the consequent of 37) and 38) being mutually exclusive. We can rephrase 38) as follows, in order to make the contradiction implicit:

39) If Bizet and Verdi had been compatriots, Bizet would not have been Italian.

It seems clear that there is no reason to prefer 39) over 37) or vice versa. The reason for this is that our linguistic conventions and the context of the utterance underdetermine how the consequent should be evaluated, conditional on the antecedent (Shaffer, 2016, pp. 57-58). This should seem intuitively obvious, as there is just as much reason to think that Bizet should change his nationality if he were to have the same nationality as Verdi (which would make sentence 37 true) as there is reason to think that Verdi should change his nationality in order to accommodate Bizet's (which would make it the case that sentence 39 is true). As hard as one tries, there does not seem to be any clear reason to prefer one of these sentences over the other.

David Lewis used this example to argue for the following: Any counterfactual of the form "If A, then B" is only true if *all* of the closest A-worlds are B-worlds (Lewis, 1973). This view would entail that *neither* 37) nor 39) are true, given that some A-worlds are B-worlds and some A-worlds are non-B-worlds. Lewis' view violates a principle called conditional excluded middle (CEM), which says that for any counterfactual either "If A, then B" or "If A, then not-B" is true (Shaffer, 2016, p. 55). There are numerous reasons to think that rejecting CEM is a bad idea:

First, Lewis' view would entail that 37) has a probability of 0 (Mandelkern, 2018). However, it seems much more natural to think that this conditional actually has a probability of 0.5, given that there are two options which are equally likely. Secondly, as von Fintel (1998) observed, quantified conditionals behave exactly like one would expect if CEM were true:

40) No student would pass if he goofed off.

41) Every student would fail if he goofed off. (both sentences are from Higginbotham 1986)

As von Fintel notes, 40) and 41) seem to be equivalent (von Fintel, 1998). The issue for Lewis' view, which denies CEM, is that it does not predict this (cf. Mandelkern, 2018): If Lewis were right about counterfactuals, then 40) would mean "No student is such that in all closest worlds where they goof off they pass" and 41) would mean "Every student is such that in all closest worlds where they goof off they fail". The issue is that 40) could be true, while 41) is false, when there is a student who passes in *some* closest worlds where he goofs off, but fails in others.

These two considerations show that Lewis' account of counterfactual is problematic and that philosophers of language and semanticists would be wise to accept CEM instead (Mandelkern, 2018).

The only prominent account of counterfactuals of which I am aware that validates conditional excluded middle is Stalnaker's (1968). His theory essentially says that a counterfactual of the form "If A, then B" is true whenever *the single closest* A-world is a B-world and is false whenever *the single closest* A-world is a non-B-world (Shaffer, 2016, pp. 57-58). This theory validates CEM because it assumes that for every antecedent A, there is always one particular world that is closer to the actual world than any other world. Stalnaker's theory thus has the positive feature of validating CEM, a principle that we have independent reasons to accept (Mandelkern, 2018). However, Stalnaker's view of counterfactuals has another implication: If there is no single closest A-world - as is the case in the Bizet/Verdi example - then the entire counterfactual comes out as *neither true nor false*. The reason for this is basically this: According to Stalnaker's theory, the antecedent tries to fix a single world which is closest to the actual world - therefore, if there is no such closest world, then the evaluation of the counterfactual does not even get off the ground and is therefore indeterminate (Shaffer, 2016, p. 58). One might illustrate the point via another example: There is a fair lottery, scheduled to happen in a world of which we know that it is indeterministic. Right before the draw occurs, John - who is meant to randomly draw a ticket from the box - considers the following two counterfactuals:

42) If I were to draw a ticket, then I would draw an even number.

43) If I were to draw a ticket, then I would not draw an even number.

It seems evident that there is no reason whatsoever to think that the "John draws an even number"-world is any closer to the actual world than a "John draws a non-even number"-world, especially assuming indeterminism about that world. Stalnaker's theory would thus predict that both 42) and 43) are neither true nor false, as it is indeterminate which world is closest to our world. All this is meant to illustrate is that if one accepts Stalnaker's theory of counterfactuals, then one has a *further* reason to think that sentences are sometimes neither true nor false. The proponent of LEM-S* would therefore not only need to show that the denial of LEM-S* is not the correct solution to the liar paradox, but would *additionally* need to demonstrate that Stalnaker's very popular theory of counterfactuals is incorrect.

To summarise, the semantic view can be defended against both LEM-P and against LEM-S, albeit with very different strategies: The defender of the semantic view can accept LEM-P and argue that their theory can validate it, while they cannot accept LEM-S but can argue that we have no reason to think LEM-S (or its modified version, LEM-S*) is true and that there are in fact excellent reasons to think it is false.

7.2) Alleged cases of cancellability

When one familiarises oneself with the literature on presuppositions, one gets the impression that the argument that is presented in this section is the one that convinces most semanticists and philosophers of language of the pragmatic view (cf. Beaver et al., 2024). The argument could be formalised in the following premise-conclusion form:

P1) If the semantic account of presupposition is correct, then presuppositions arise only due to the meaning of words.

P2) The meaning of words cannot be cancelled.

C1) Therefore, if the semantic account of presupposition is correct, then presuppositions cannot be cancelled.

P3) Presuppositions can be cancelled.

C2) Therefore, the semantic account of presupposition is not correct.

The argument is obviously valid, in the sense that the truth of all the premises entails the truth of the conclusion. But the question remains whether all three premises are in fact true.

P1) seems tautological: The semantic account of presupposition is *defined* that way - there is clearly no possibility to reasonably reject this premise. P2) seems just as secure: The meaning of the term “house” or of the term “sing” remains constant independently of what other words

follow these words¹⁴. Also, P2) follows straightforwardly from compositionality (Pickel & Szabo, 2025), which is a principle that Fregeans have independent reason to endorse¹⁵.

Given that both P1) and P2) appear to be on very solid ground, it is clear that the disputed premise is P3). Advocates of the pragmatic account of presupposition try to motivate this premise by giving examples where a presupposition allegedly gets cancelled by providing additional information. Beaver et al, for example, provide the following example:

44) In this court, it isn't the knave that steals the tarts: The king employs no knaves precisely because he suspects they are responsible for large-scale tart-loss across his kingdom. (Beaver et al., 2024).

This example focusses on the definite description "The knave", yet it is rather easy to construct similar examples for different kinds of presupposition:

- 45) Lucy doesn't know that her boyfriend is cheating on her - after all, you can only know something that is true.
- 46) I never stopped smoking - after all, I never started in the first place.
- 47) I don't remember having given you permission to do that - that's because it never happened.

At first glance, 59) to 62) all seem like sentences which contain a presuppositional term ("know", "stopped" and "remember", respectively), yet where the context appears to cancel the respective presupposition. If it were true that these sentences are normal true English sentences which do not rely on any special mechanism, then this would prove that P3) is true. And if P3) were true, then the falsity of the semantic view of presupposition would deductively follow.

¹⁴ One might want to respond, on behalf of the semantic account, that sometimes the meaning of a word *does* depend on context, e.g. when we are trying to figure out whether we are talking about a river bank or a bank that is a financial institute. However, this is clearly not a case of *cancellation* of meaning - the context simply tells us which word is being used in the first place. Just because words are spelt the same way, does not mean that they are one and the same word.

¹⁵ Compositionality is essentially the thesis that all sentence meanings are the product of the individual words in the sentence and their syntactic arrangement (Pickel & Szabo, 2025). If this thesis is true, then all words contribute the same meaning in all sentences in which they arise.

Fortunately for the advocate of the semantic view of presupposition, it just seems false that these are normal sentences of English that do not rely on any special mechanism. It has been pointed out by Laurence Horn that sentences like 45) to 47) are not cases of truth-functional negation, but are rather a special kind of negation: They are instances of what Horn calls “metalinguistic negation” (Horn, 1985, p. 121). The point of metalinguistic negation is that it does not deny the *truth* of a sentence, but rather objects to the *phrasing* (Horn, 2025). This can be best illustrated via the following example:

48) You didn’t eat *some* of the cookies - you ate *all* of them. (Horn, 2025)

“You ate some of the cookies” is true if and only if there exists an *x* such that *x* is a cookie and you ate *x*. This means, of course, that if someone ate all of the cookies they thereby also ate some of them¹⁶. We should interpret 48), therefore, not as saying “It is not the case that: You ate some of the cookies”, but rather as something like “Using the phrasing ‘some’ is misleading”.

One way to recognise the usage of metalinguistic negation is, as Horn points out, intonation: Whenever metalinguistic negation occurs, the focus is put on the word whose usage is being challenged (Horn, 1985). It is now easy to see that 45), 46) and 47) all seem to be cases of this phenomenon: When someone utters 46), for example, the focus would be on the word “stopped” and the sentence would most naturally be understood as implying something like “It is very strange that you used the word ‘stopped’, given that I am not a smoker”.

The upshot of all this is that sentences such as 45) to 47) cannot be used to motivate the Russellian theory of definite descriptions because they are not genuine cases of wide-scope negation, but are rather examples of a niche linguistic phenomenon that can easily be accommodated by the semantic view of presupposition. After all, it is always possible to object to the *phrasing* of an utterance, independently of the meaning of the words involved - thus, examples like these can tell us nothing about the meaning of presuppositions.

¹⁶ At least if the domain contains cookies. If there were 0 cookies, then “I ate all the cookies” does not entail “I ate some of the cookies” in classical logic. The reason for this is that “All *Xs* are *Y*”, in classical logic is equivalent to “For all things, either the thing is not an *X* or it is *Y*” (Shapiro & Kissel, 2022), which would be true in a scenario where there are no cookies.

To sum up, this section introduced an argument from seemingly plausible premises to the conclusion that the semantic view of presuppositions has to be mistaken. However, as I have hopefully illustrated, the advocate of the semantic account is well within their rights to deny premise 3 of said argument.

7.3) Apparent context-sensitivity

Another argument that is sometimes used to motivate the pragmatic view of presupposition is the argument from context-sensitivity: Essentially, it is argued that there are linguistic environments in which presuppositions are not triggered as usual (Karttunen, 1973), which is supposed to be a challenge for the semantic view (Beaver et al., 2024).

Examples by Beaver et al illustrate the point:

49) If it's the knave that stole the tarts, then I'm a Dutchman (Beaver et al., 2024).

50) Either Fred didn't leave, or else Mary knows that he left (Beaver et al., 2024).

It appears as if 49) does not presuppose that there is a knave (despite containing a definite description) and as if 50) does not presuppose that Fred left (despite containing the factive “knows”). To generalise, it appears to be the case that presuppositions do not arise in the antecedents of conditionals and in disjunctions. The data seems clear and the defender of the semantic view would be wise not to deny it. However, it is not at all clear that the data is actually problematic for the account: After all, it is well-known that in sentences of the form “If P, then Q” and “Either P or Q” P is not asserted.

To see this, let us first consider conditionals: There are several theories of indicative conditionals (Edgington, 2017), but the most prominent ones are the possible worlds account (Lewis, 1973) and the material implication account, defended among others by Frank Jackson (1979). On the possible world account, “If P, then Q” means something like “In the closest world where P is true, so is Q”¹⁷ (Stalnaker, 1968), while on the material implication account it simply means “Either not-P or Q” (Jackson, 1979). It should be clear to see that on both accounts, by saying “If P, then Q” you are not thereby committing yourself to the truth of P.

¹⁷ As mention in chapter 7.1, there is disagreement among possible worlds theorists whether there is (always) a single closest possible world or not. This, however, is not relevant to the current point.

Something similar can be observed for disjunctions: Clearly anyone who asserts that either Sydney or Canberra is the capital of Australia does not commit themselves to Sydney being the capital of Australia.

Now the question arises: Why would we expect, on the semantic account of presupposition, that presuppositions occur in *unasserted* contexts? It is hard to see why that would be the case. The semantic account predicts that if you *assert* a definite description, then, necessarily, a presupposition is triggered. That such a presupposition does not arise when the sentence is unasserted is not at all surprising on the view - after all, the Fregean view is that definite descriptions trigger presuppositions because they intend to refer to something in the actual world. But if the definite description is not asserted, then its purpose does not appear to be to refer to something in the actual world - rather, its purpose seems to be to demonstrate a certain logical relationship, e.g. between the antecedent and the consequent.

7.4) An argument from simplicity

While it is not directly stated in the literature, one can assume that one of the main reasons for preferring the pragmatic account of presupposition over the semantic account is that it is in some sense the simpler hypothesis. That simplicity is a virtue of a theory has been commonly accepted among philosophers for a long time (Baker, 2022), going at least as far back as Aristotle (1941), and semanticists are also generally interested in finding simple theories - for example, Grice argued that one should prefer theories which posit less semantic ambiguity (Hazlett, 2007, p. 669). Famously, this idea is captured by *Occam's razor*, which essentially states that, all other things being equal, the hypothesis which posits fewer things is the one that ought to be preferred (Baker, 2022).

It is easy to make the case that the pragmatic account of presupposition indeed posits fewer things: This is because the pragmatic view says that a seemingly semantic phenomenon can actually be reduced to communicative principles which we *already* need to assume for *independent* reasons (Stalnaker, 1970). The semantic account, on the other hand, postulates that in addition to the truth-conditional meaning of a word and in addition to general communicative principles, there is one further thing that needs to be accounted for: The semantic presupposition

that is supposed to be encoded in certain words. If the semantic account is correct, then language is significantly more complex than it would be, were the pragmatic view true.

This argument for the pragmatic account appears quite strong. However, what needs to be kept in mind is that appeals to Occam's razor only work if both theories explain the data roughly as well as each other - it would make no sense to prefer a simpler theory, even if it cannot adequately account for all the data. Kent Holsinger points out:

“Since Occam's Razor ought to be invoked only when several hypotheses explain the same set of facts equally well, in practice its domain will be very limited [...] Cases where competing hypotheses explain a phenomenon equally well are comparatively rare.”
(Holsinger, 1981, pp. 144-145)

What this means is that in order for this to be a convincing argument, it first needs to be established that the pragmatic view fits the data just as well as the semantic account. This, of course, is exactly what the advocate of the semantic view denies and it is exactly that against which this thesis argues.

To summarise, it can be said that the argument from simplicity is a very reasonable one, but that the proponent of the semantic account should only be concerned with it if they cannot establish that their view explains the data significantly better than any pragmatic theory. Semanticists such as Paul Elbourne recently have tried to meet that burden by trying to provide counterexamples against the pragmatic view (Elbourne, 2018).

8) Arguments for the semantic view

Now that the main arguments against a semantic account of presupposition have been presented, the upcoming sub-chapters present some of the arguments for the semantic view that strike me as most promising. What has to be kept in mind, naturally, is that all these arguments are controversial and rest on potentially disputable premises, which certainly makes it reasonable to disagree with them if one has other commitments or intuitions.

8.1) Quantified definite descriptions

While it strikes many people as intuitively odd to think of sentences such as “The current king of Austria is intelligent” as false, there are still several philosophers and linguists who endorse the Russellian truth-conditions of such sentences, which say that any sentence of the form “The X is F” are strictly equivalent to “There exists exactly one X and that thing has the property of being F”. While such a sentence certainly do not strike me as false, it is not that difficult to get oneself into the mind-frame where one endorses the Russellian truth-conditions for such sentences. As Paul Elbourne has pointed out, however, things get worse for the Russellian when one looks at embedded definite descriptions:

In fact, it is a quite regular phenomenon of natural language that definite descriptions are embedded in quantificational phrases such as “No X has done Y”, “Every X has done Y” or “Many Xs have done Y”. The specific example that Elbourne gives to challenge the Russellian account of presuppositions is the following:

51) No boy sold the dog he had bought. (Elbourne, 2018, p. 1600)

What Elbourne points out is that if the pragmatic, Russell-inspired account of definite descriptions were correct, then 51) would be truth-conditionally equivalent to 52):

52) No boy had bought exactly one dog and sold it. (Elbourne, 2018, p. 1600)

The problem for the Russellian account is that, as Elbourne points out, in a scenario where none of the boys have bought a dog in the first place, 52) is obviously true, whereas 51) does not strike one as correct (Elbourne, 2018, p. 1600). Elbourne does not mention this in his paper, but what is remarkable is that this contrast between 51) and 52) remains even if one tries to add additional material in order to make 51) less awkward:

53) *No boy sold the dog he had bought - after all, the dog sale had been closed.

Intuitions might diverge when it comes to 53), but in my estimation this sentence does not only seem odd, but it simply does not sound *true*.

Elbourne then mentions that Russellian might want to explain away the oddity of 51) by appealing to pragmatic mechanisms (Elbourne, 2018, pp. 1600-1601). However, says Elbourne, this will not do: This is because 51) and 52), if the Russellian is right, say the exact same thing - so if we intuitively judge 52) to be true, then we should do the same for 51) if they truly meant the same thing. (Elbourne, 2018, pp. 1600-1601)

Another potential response that Elbourne considers is the following: The Russellian could say that sentences of the form “The X is F” are, as Russell said, truth-conditionally equivalent to “There exists exactly one X and that thing has the property of being F”, but that it additionally has the (pragmatic) presupposition that the person who is confronted with the sentence is *familiar* with X (Elbourne, 2018, pp. 1602-1608). The problem, as Elbourne points out, is that this defence does not work for this particular example, as there is no specific boy and no specific dog to which the sentence refers and it would thus be strange for there to be a familiarity presupposition. (Elbourne, 2018, p. 1604)

Overall, it seems as if sentence 51) is a formidable challenge to the Russellian view of definite descriptions¹⁸. And, of course, any argument against Russell’s view of descriptions thereby poses a challenge for the pragmatic account of presuppositions, as advocates of this view tend to appeal to Russell’s theory to explain away the need for semantic presuppositions in sentences containing definite descriptions. Even worse, there are other, more complex examples that seem even more devastating to the Russellian view. Inspired by Elbourne, I constructed the following scenario to challenge Russell’s theory of definite descriptions:

On Monday, a teacher T is ill, so on that day her class has a substitute teacher instead. T does not care whether the substitute teacher gives homework to the class or not, but she strongly *expects* her to. On Tuesday, T enters the class and sees that no one has handed in their exercise books. Exasperated, she utters the following sentence:

54) I am disappointed that no one in this class did the homework they had.

Afterwards, the class representative assures T that there was no homework in the first place. T calms down and responds:

¹⁸ The Fregean view of presuppositions entails that “No boy sold the dog he had bought” would be neither true nor false in this scenario.

55) I am not disappointed anymore.

If the Russellian view of definite descriptions were correct, then 54) would be equivalent to “I am disappointed that no one in this class had exactly one homework that they did. But if this were the correct meaning, then T’s utterance 55) would not make any sense: If T were genuinely disappointed that no one had exactly one homework (that they did), then the information that there was no homework should not ease her disappointment - in fact, it should do the exact *opposite* and should make her even *more* angry, as her suspicion that no one did exactly one homework would then be confirmed.

One objection that might come to mind is the following: Maybe 54) should not be read as “I am disappointed that: No one had exactly one homework that they did”, where the definite description has narrow scope, but rather as “There was exactly one homework and I am disappointed that: No one in this class did it”, in which case “the homework they had” would have wide scope. This objection, at first glance, might seem promising. The problem with the response, though, is that it still gets the intuitive truth-conditions of the sentence wrong: This is because, if the wide-scope reading were the correct one, then 54) would simply be false, given the details of the case - after all, the first conjunct (“There was exactly one homework”) is an incorrect claim. But surely this has to be mistaken, as the falsity of 54), as uttered by T, would absurdly entail 56):

56) T isn’t disappointed that no one did the homework they had.

Whatever one thinks of the nature of presuppositions, surely it is false that - given the stipulations of the case - this is a true sentence. 56) would be naturally read as saying that there *was* homework but that T does not care that no one did it, which could not be further from the truth¹⁹. Therefore, it ought to be concluded that the wide-scope solution to the problem fails.

¹⁹ The Russellian might appeal to conversational implicature here, essentially saying: “Strictly speaking, 54) is true, but it would be highly misleading to utter it”. In response to this imagined counterresponse I want to say that it is *always* possible to appeal to pragmatic factors to explain away an apparent counterexample - in this particular case this strategy strikes me as simply implausible because the sentence seems so *obviously* false, whereas in the original “The king of France is bald” case the pragmatic defence appears significantly more promising.

Another, perhaps more promising, response could go as follows: To say that T is disappointed that P²⁰ is equivalent to saying that T would desire that not-P. This seems like a highly plausible analysis of the term “disappointed”. This implies that, in the present scenario, T’s disappointment expresses as desire for *there being homework AND²¹ for students having done said homework*. Then, as soon as T is informed that there was no homework, she recognises that her desire cannot be fulfilled, as the first conjunct - there being homework - is known to be false. And *this* fact, then, is supposed to explain why she stops being disappointed in her class. This objection is by far the most convincing one with which I could come up on behalf of the Russellian. That being said, there seems to be a significant issue with this response, as well: If it really were true that T’s desire were for *there being homework AND for students having done said homework*, then it should partly satisfy T if she learned that there *was* homework. To illustrate the point: If I have a desire for *there being elections AND for these elections to be fair*, then I should be partly satisfied upon learning that the first conjunct - that there are elections - is true. Yet, in the given scenario it is - by stipulation - *not* true that T would be satisfied upon being informed that there was homework: That is because it is stated explicitly that she did not care in the slightest whether the substitute teacher gave homework or not.²²

While the Russellian view struggles to explain this scenario, the Fregean view of definite descriptions handles it splendidly: Frege would say that when T utters 54), she does not express that she *wanted* there to be exactly one homework (which would be in contradiction to the stipulated scenario, as T according to the description of the case she explicitly does not care whether the substitute teachers gives the students homework or not), she rather *presupposes* it. She takes it for granted, given her background assumptions. Then, after being informed that there was no homework, she gives up said presupposition, which explains why her disappointment suddenly vanishes.

²⁰ In this analysis, “T” still stands for the teacher and “P” stands for any arbitrary proposition

²¹ The capitalisation of the logical operator AND follows the convention in analytic philosophy of logic and philosophy of language

²² At this point, the Russellian might respond that sometimes it does not make sense to be partly satisfied with the first conjunct unless the second conjunct is also fulfilled. For example, one might argue that it would not make sense to be partly satisfied with there being elections if one knew that the elections will be unfair. However, this case is not analogous to the scenario in question: The reason why one ought not be partly satisfied with there being elections in this case is because one would then *know* that the second conjunct (the elections being fair) is false. Yet the point is that T would not be happy about there being homework *even if* she did not know that the second conjunct (the students having done the homework) is false.

Thus, one can see that quantified descriptions pose a strong challenge to the Russellian view of definite descriptions and thereby also to the pragmatic view of presupposition. It seems that the view struggles to explain both Elbourne's "No boy sold the dog he had bought" sentence and the sentences that are uttered by T in my imagined scenario. The Fregean view, on the other hand, correctly predicts that such sentence cannot be felicitously described as "false", which appears to be a decent argument in favour of the view.

8.2) An analogy with demonstratives

All other things being equal, one should expect words which occur in very similar circumstances to be analysed in very similar ways. The reason for this is that it would seem inexplicable why words would occur in almost identical syntactic locations despite having a radically different semantics. This general principle can be used as an argument in favour of the semantic account of presupposition: Ever since Kaplan's influential work on indexicals (Kaplan, 1989) essentially everyone contributing to the literature on the topic agrees that words such as "This" or "That" are referential terms, i.e. they refer to one specific object (Braun, 2015). Slightly more controversial is the status of complex demonstratives of the form "That X", as in "That horse is really fast!": The more common and traditional view is that these terms are also referential terms (Braun, 2015), although there are some philosophers of language who argue that they are actually quantificational (King, 2001). It would be quite odd if it were the case that simple demonstratives are referential, whereas complex ones are not. This can be seen via the following pair of sentences:

57) That is not how you do it!

58) That way is not the correct way to do it!

If King's quantificational view were right, then 57) and 58) would have a radically different semantics despite essentially being synonymous (cf. Braun, 2015). Therefore, I would argue that one should accept the view that both simple and complex demonstratives are referential terms. Assuming that this view is accepted, one can then make an argument in favour of Frege's view of definite descriptions and thereby against Russell's. This can once again be illustrated via a pair of sentences:

59) That horse over there is fast.

60) The horse over there is fast.

59) and 60) appear to be basically synonymous for all practical purposes, so we would assume that they have a similar semantics. So if “That horse over there” is referential, then so must be “The horse over there”. But if “The horse over there” is referential - not quantificational - then Russell’s account of definite descriptions is false and Frege’s view is vindicated. Of course, it is possible to reject Russell’s view of definite descriptions and to still believe that presuppositions are a mere pragmatic phenomenon - but it is hard to see why one should not think that sentences like “The horse over there is fast” are neither true nor false if the definite description tries to attribute a property to a specific object that does not, in fact, exist.

Clearly the argument that has just been presented relies on several controversial premises, which the advocate of the Russellian view of definite descriptions might justifiably reject. Still, it strikes me as an argument that has so far been neglected.

8.3) Failure of uniqueness

Throughout this thesis, the main argument against the pragmatic view of presupposition - at least when it comes to definite descriptions - was that it gets the wrong truth-conditions whenever the descriptions claims that there is an X but there is *none*. However, the opposite situation - where there are not too few, but rather too *many* Xs - appears just as challenging: As mentioned before, the standard Russellian truth-conditions for any sentence of the form “The X is F” are “There is exactly one X which has the property of being F”. This means that whenever there is more than one X, the sentence will automatically count as false - after all, it is impossible for there to be two Xs and exactly one X at the same time.

Abbott (2008) and Ludlow (2022) point out that there are cases where this seems intuitively mistaken²³:

²³ Although it is worth mentioning that both Ludlow and Abbott do not take such examples to show that the pragmatic view of presupposition is incorrect - in fact, they both seem to ultimately endorse the view

61) Russell was the author of *Principia Mathematica*, in fact there were two (Ludlow, 2022).

It is not at all clear how to evaluate this sentence. That being said, one might be tempted to say the following: This sentence assumes something - that there was a unique author of the book *Principia Mathematica* - which happens to be false and thus the entire sentence misses the point, as it tries to attribute a property to a singular object which does not exist. This would be the interpretation of the semantic view - it would take 61) to be neither true nor false.

The pragmatic view, on the other hand, would say that this sentence is strictly speaking false, yet should never be asserted due to its highly misleading nature. Based on 61) alone, it is hard to decide which theory makes the better prediction. However, when one evaluates other sentences, things might become clearer:

62) John is the tallest person in class.

In a scenario where there are two students - John and Michael - are both exactly 185 centimetres tall, the pragmatic account would predict the falsity of 62). This, however, might strike one as mistaken: After all, the falsity of 62) would entail the truth of "John *isn't* the tallest person in class". The latter sentence, in turn, would in ordinary contexts seem to imply that there is someone who is taller than John - which happens to be false in the above-mentioned scenario. If one shares this intuition, one therefore has one further argument to reject the Russellian account of definite description and thereby also the pragmatic account of presupposition.

8.4) Incomplete descriptions

The following argument is one of the most popular ones against the Russellian view of definite descriptions, yet it could be argued that it is not nearly among the most convincing ones. Essentially, the argument goes like this: If Russell's theory of definite descriptions is correct, then any sentence of the form "The X is F" is strictly equivalent to "There exists exactly one X which has the property of being F". The problem, according to this argument, for the Russellian analysis is that in many ordinary cases the description is so vague that it is impossible to find a unique object that satisfies the description (Hornsby, 1977). The problem was first pointed out

by Strawson, who pointed out that we often utter sentences such as “The table is covered with books”²⁴ (Strawson, 1950), which would be equivalent to “There is exactly one table and that table is covered with books” on Russell’s analysis. The problem is that it is obviously false that the world contains exactly one table - that is the so-called problem of incompleteness (Ludlow, 2022).

At first glance, this problem might not seem particularly convincing. The reason for this is that it is well-known that there is such a thing as quantifier restriction in natural language (Stanley & Szabo, 2003). Basically, this mechanism occurs when the context constrains the domain over which a quantifier such as “every” or “many” quantifies. The following example illustrates the point:

63) Every student has handed in their thesis already.

It seems obvious that even though this sentence does not explicitly state that we are merely talking about a restricted class of students, this is exactly what the sentence says: The truth-conditions of 63) seem to be such that the sentence is true if and only if there was no student *in this class* that has not handed in their thesis, which means that the sentence can be true even if there are students in *other* classes who have not finished their thesis yet. This shows that quantifier restriction is an independently motivated phenomenon (Stanley & Szabo, 2003). Yet, if the Russellian view of definite descriptions is correct, then definite descriptions are quantifiers as well, which means that the mechanism of quantifier restriction can potentially be used to explain away these apparent counterexamples. Essentially, this response would entail that whenever we utter “The table is covered with books” what we actually say is something like “[Considering only the tables in this room:] The table is covered with books”, which would mean that - despite initial appearances Russell’s theory actually gets the truth-conditions of this sentence *right* (Ludlow, 2022).

It is not clear, though, whether this response in fact succeeds. The reason why it might not succeed is pointed out by philosopher of language Devitt (2004): He argues that 63) and “The table is covered with books” are importantly dissimilar, in the sense that the latter - but not the former expresses a singular thought, i.e. tries to express a thought about a *particular* object in

²⁴ For the purposes of this examples it will be assumed that the contextually salient room that contains a table has *exactly one* table in it and obviously it will be assumed that there is more than one table in the entire world.

the world (Ludlow, 2022). It is not at all clear why quantifier restriction should occur in such circumstances - after all, someone who utters the sentence wants to talk about a thing and not about a (restricted or non-restricted) domain.

Another potential challenge comes from sentences such as 64):

64) I put the book on the book (Ludlow, 2022).

In ordinary English, this is a perfectly grammatical sentence. Yet if the above-mentioned response on behalf of Russell were right, then this sentence would essentially be equivalent to “[Considering only the books in this room:] There is exactly one book that I put on exactly one book”, which gets us the wrong truth-conditions, as this paraphrase could be true even if there were only one book in this room and if - per impossible - you put that book onto itself. Yet surely this is false: Our linguistic intuitions tell us that 64) is true if and only if you took one book and put it on top of *another* book. In response, the Russellian might want to say that the domain of the quantifier can change *throughout* a sentence (Ludlow, 2022). However, it is not at all clear whether this is genuinely possible, especially given that there does not seem to be any independent motivation to posit such a possibility.

8.5) Informative presupposition

The pragmatic account of presupposition - at least on its most popular form - relies on Stalnaker’s idea of the common ground (Stalnaker, 1970). What such a theory would, at least *prima facie*, predict is that one can felicitously use a presupposing term only if the information that it presupposes is already known to the participants of the conversation. The problem for the view is that this prediction turns out to be inaccurate: As Barbara Abbott has pointed out, there are obvious cases where a presupposition adds new information to the common ground:

65) A: John is very attractive. B: Yes, and his wife is lovely, too. (Abbott, 1999, p. 1422)

The response by B is perfectly felicitous - even in a context where A did not know that John has a wife. Defender of Stalnaker’s view of presupposition are, of course, aware of this objection and have a response: Following Lewis, they believe that presuppositions can be

accommodated by the listener, as long as the new information can be easily understood given the context (Lewis, 1979). The issue with this response is that it seems to make the wrong predictions, too. There are sentences where the new information is easily accommodated, yet the sentence intuitively still seems infelicitous:

66) (uttered by someone who does not know whether John has any children)

Is your child male, John? (a similar example is due to Ludlow, 2022)

If the Russellian theory of definite descriptions were correct, then this sentence would be strictly equivalent to asking whether the proposition “John has exactly one child and that child is male” is true. Given that it is a perfectly normal question to ask someone whether they have a child, it should be very easy to accommodate the presupposition. Yet, it intuitively feels as if 66) is a very odd thing to say: By uttering 66) one already takes for granted that John has a child - thus, in any context in which one does not know whether John has a child, the utterance appears defective (Ludlow, 2022). This seems at odds with the predictions of the pragmatic view of accommodation.

The semantic view of presupposition, however, has a sufficient explanation for this phenomenon: The reason why 66) strikes us as odd is that it features the term “your child”, which - given that it is a disguised definite description (Ludlow, 2022) - triggers a presupposition as a matter of its *semantic* features. The pragmatic account, on the other hand, struggles to explain this phenomenon without thereby giving up presupposition accommodation, which is a mechanism that is *independently* needed to defend the view against the argument from informative presuppositions.

It is noteworthy, as well, that if the Russellian view of definite descriptions were on the right track, then “Yes, I have a child”, as uttered by John, should be a *partial* answer to 67). Yet, this does not seem to be the case, as pointed out by Ludlow (2022) - “Yes, I have a child” does not even seem like a partial answer; rather, it seems to miss the entire point of the question. Again, the Fregean view handles this case better: On Frege’s view, definite descriptions are not quantificational, but rather *referential* - therefore, the account predicts that the *quantified* proposition “There exists an x such that x is a child of mine” cannot be an answer to 67), not even partially.

9) Empirical study

The upcoming sub-chapters provide an overview of the existing empirical literature on the topic, explain the underlying methodology of my study and finally present and discuss the findings of the survey that has been conducted in order to answer RQ2.

9.1) Previous empirical research

The literature on truth-value judgements about sentences with presupposition failure is not particularly extensive - the majority of the literature is not focussed on truth-value judgements by non-linguists. However, there are still several existing studies that are worth mentioning: Abrusan and Szendrői (2013) have found that judgements about sentences with presupposition failure are highly dependent on both topicality (i.e. whether the definite description is at the beginning of the sentence or rather in predicative position) and verifiability (i.e. whether speakers can empirically confirm that “The X is F” cannot be true). This suggests that participants are often not tracking the strict truth-value of a sentence, but are influenced by other factors. It seems hard to see, after all, how it could make a difference to the truth-value whether a sentence is of the form “The X has done Y”, as opposed to being phrased as “Y has been done by the X” - putting an active sentence into the passive voice generally does not affect its truth-conditions.

Generally speaking, the results of said study favoured the predictions of the Russellian view of definite descriptions, yet there is reason to think that there were methodological flaws with this study: For example, Kriz and Chemla point out that the study gave students the option to choose “can’t say”, as opposed to “neither true nor false”, which misleadingly phrases the issue in epistemological terms (Kriz and Chemla, 2015, p. 4). It is also worth pointing out that a separate study came to a rather different conclusion, with multiple subjects evaluating sentences involving presupposition failure as neither true nor false (Serchuk et al., 2011).

Schwarz and Tiemann (2017) have conducted a study which came - by observing reaction time and eye movement of the participants - to the conclusion that sentences involving presupposition failure lead to a high cognitive load for participants, which the authors of the

study take to be as evidence favouring the Discourse Representation Theory²⁵ (Kamp, 1995), but which seems also perfectly explainable by the semantic view of presupposition.

Zehr (2014) conducted a study which involved showing pictures to participants and them having to answer presupposition-laden questions about these pictures. The study came to the remarkable conclusion that participants rarely ever judged sentences of the form “The X is not F” as true in cases of presupposition failure, which directly contradicts the predictions made by the Russellian view of definite descriptions (Zehr, 2014, pp. 112-113).

Finally, Kriz and Chemla (2015) were able to show that for sentences of the form “The Xs are F” there indeed seems to be a strong homogeneity presupposition, which leads many speakers to intuitively judge such sentences as neither true nor false in cases in which the presupposition is not fulfilled.

9.2) Survey participants

Now, that the arguments for and against the semantic account have been thoroughly evaluated and an overview of the empirical literature on the topic has been given, the upcoming chapters present the empirical part of this thesis.

The survey, which was created using GoogleForms, was distributed to competent speakers of English, who are all currently residing in Austria. Overall, 58 people participated in the survey, of which 29 identify as women, 26 identify as men and 3 identify as non-binary. 36 of the participants indicated that they are “not a native speaker, but a competent speaker of English”, whereas 22 participants indicated that English is their L1. All the participants of the study are either students at the Department of English and American Studies or are students at other departments at the University of Vienna. There was no noteworthy correlation between either the participants’ gender or their L1 and their answers. Thus, in the discussion of the findings there will be no mention of gender- or L1-related differences. All participants were informed that, by filling out the survey, they are partaking in a study for the master’s thesis “Presuppositions: A Semantic Phenomenon After All?”. They were also informed that consent

²⁵ Kamp’s Discourse Representation Theory is a version of the pragmatic view of presupposition, in the sense that it makes presuppositions dependent on communicative context, as opposed to word meaning (Kamp 1995).

that their answers be used in this study may be withdrawn at any times, which no participant decided to do.

9.3) The survey items

In the survey, participants are presented with five different briefly-described scenarios, each of which end with the utterance of a specific sentence. Each of these sentence contains a presuppositional term and, given the description of the scenario, it is clear that the respective presupposition is not fulfilled in the given context. Participants are then asked to evaluate whether the sentence has the truth-value True, False or whether the sentence is rather neither true nor false. At the outset, it is clarified that judgements are meant to be made “within a few seconds” and that participants should “stick with the first answer” that comes to their mind - this is meant to ensure that participants answer the question pre-theoretically, i.e. without reflecting on the nature of presuppositions and of truth-values in general. The research question, after all, asks whether the *intuitive* judgements of participants align with the semantic view - and intuitions, per definition, are not based on theoretical considerations (Kagan, 1989, p. 15). Additionally, participants are told that they shall only consider the literal content of the sentence and not whether it would be prudent to utter the sentence - after all, *any* view of presupposition agrees that it is imprudent to utter a sentence that suffers from presupposition failure.

The first scenario goes as follows:

Everything is just like in the actual world when it comes to Austrian politics: Austria is a representative democracy, there has not been a monarch in the country ever since the end of World War One. While walking through the streets of Vienna, you suddenly meet a tourist, who is seemingly uninformed about Austrian politics. At one point, the tourist utters the following sentence:

“The current²⁶ king of Austria is intelligent.”

²⁶ The addition of „current“ is important because if the sentence were “The king of Austria is intelligent” participants might be tempted to answer the sentence about a *dead* emperor, in which case the sentence would not be useful for distinguishing between the semantic and the pragmatic account of presupposition.

In this sentence, the presupposing term is “The current king of Austria”, which is a definite description that has no referent in the actual world and thus suffers from presupposition failure. If Frege is right, this sentence is neither true nor false - if Russell is right, it is simple false (because, according to him, the sentence is equivalent to “There exists exactly one current king of Austria and that king has the property of being intelligent”, which is obviously incorrect). The sentence is, of course, a modern adaption of Russell’s famous sentence “The present king of France is bald.”²⁷

Afterwards, participants are confronted with the second scenario:

John is the father of four children. Currently, two of the children are happy, whereas the other two children are sad. Suddenly, John’s wife utters the following sentence:

“The children are happy right now.”

Again, the sentence contains a definite description. In this case, however, the definite description is not singular but plural. Once again, the Russellian view of definite descriptions predicts that this sentence is false - this is because, according to Russellians, it basically says that there exists a sum of all children and that all the children in that sum have the property of being happy (Brogaard, 2007, pp. 60-61), whereas the Fregean interpretation predicts a truth-value gap.

The third scenario, then, goes as follows:

There is a teacher who was ill on Monday. On Tuesday, her class informs her that the substitute teacher did not give them any homework. In response, the teacher utters the following sentence:

“No student in this class did the homework they had.”

Just like in the first two scenarios, the sentence contains a definite description. The difference to the last examples, however, is that in this case we have a quantifier scoped over the

²⁷ The sentence was adapted in order to make the sentence more relevant to a 21st century, primarily Austrian, group of participants

description - Paul Elbourne thinks that examples such as these are particularly hard to handle for the pragmatic account, as explained in sub-chapter 8.1 (Elbourne, 2018).

The fourth scenario is this one:

John hates cigarettes and has never smoked a single cigarette in his entire life. While spending time with his friends, one of them suddenly utters the following sentence:

“John hasn’t stopped smoking yet.”

In this example, the presupposition trigger is not a definite description, but rather the aspectual verb “stopped”, which presupposes that John once was a smoker. The semantic account of presuppositions once again predicts that this sentence is to be evaluated as neither true nor false, whereas on the pragmatic account this sentence would be true (because, on this view, the sentence is truth-conditionally equivalent to saying that there is no time at which John went from being a smoker to being a non-smoker, which is clearly correct given the described scenario).

Finally, the fifth scenario has the following description:

John and his girlfriend are quizzing each other about capitals of the world. When asked about the capital of Portugal, John is unable to answer. His girlfriend then makes the following remark:

“John doesn’t know that Vienna is the capital of Portugal.”

In this case, the presupposition is triggered by the factive “know”, which falsely presupposes that Vienna is indeed the capital of Portugal. The semantic account once again predicts a truth-value gap due to presupposition failure, whereas the pragmatic account would take this sentence to be true (as they take the sentence to be equivalent to something like “It is not the case that John justifiably *and correctly*²⁸ believes that Vienna is the capital of Portugal”, which is true, given that you cannot correctly believe something that is false).

²⁸ This analysis of the sentence is based on the analysis of knowledge as justified true belief, which might strictly speaking be false, as shown by Gettier (1963). However, the correct analysis of knowledge is irrelevant to the

The five scenarios were selected for specific reasons. First of all, it is deliberate that all of the first three scenarios feature a sentence which contains a definite description. The reason for this, on the one hand, is that most papers or academic books that compare the semantic with the pragmatic account have tended to focus on definite descriptions. On the other hand, a further reason is that it might be the case that some sentences containing definite descriptions are easier to handle for the pragmatic account than others: If Elbourne is right, then the pragmatic account struggles in particular with explaining the truth-value intuitions of sentences that contain not only a definite description, but also a quantifier (such as “No X”), which has scope over the description. One of the major aims of studies is to evaluate whether this assumption by Elbourne is correct and in order to make this evaluation it is essential to have several sentences that contain definite descriptions. The fourth and the fifth scenario are meant to ensure that other presupposition triggers except for definite descriptions are considered as well. The reason why “stopped” and “know” were chosen is because these are both very common verbs and intuitively both of them seem to lead to sentences which strike us as neither true nor false.

After them having answered the questions about the five scenarios, participants then had the opportunity to make further comments about these scenarios in an open-ended question (“Further comments on scenarios 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5”). As the potential answers were limited to “true”, “false” and “neither true nor false” for all of these scenarios, it seemed important to provide the participants with the opportunity to further elaborate on their answers. There was no explicit guidance on *what* the participants of the study were meant to elaborate on - this was meant to ensure that they have the freedom to state *whatever* comes to their mind with regards to these five scenarios. However, it has to be mentioned that the open-ended question was optional, as it would not have been prudent to force the participants to answer a question on which they might not have any thoughts in the first place, and the vast majority of participants decided to skip this question.

Finally, it was also considered that there might be cases where participants might not have obvious intuitions in favour of *either* of the answers that can be chosen. Therefore, participants - before taking the survey - were asked to choose *whichever option best fits their initial judgement*, even if they might not be completely convinced of their decision. This seems like a

point: It seems that the pragmatic account predicts that the sentence in the fifth scenario is strictly speaking true, independently of one’s exact definition of the word “know”.

sensible decision, given that this survey is meant to capture linguistic intuitions and it is well-known that such intuitions are seldomly clear and often rather messy. To demand that participants have a definitive reaction to either of these sentences would thus be antithetical to the main point of this study.

9.4) Instructions

Before the participants were confronted with the scenarios, they were given the following instructions:

In the following survey, you will be confronted with **five scenarios**. After each scenario, you shall evaluate whether the given sentence is **true, false or neither true nor false**. Your answers should be based on your **initial intuition**, which means that, ideally, you should answer within a few seconds and you should stick with the **first** answer that comes to your mind. Please only evaluate the **literal** meaning of the sentence (= you are not supposed to consider whether it would *make pragmatic sense* to utter these sentences, the only thing that is relevant is the strict truth-value). In case you have no clear intuition, please pick the option that fits best with your instinctive reaction.

As can be seen, participants were encouraged to answer based on intuition alone. This is meant to ensure that people's answers reflect their pre-theoretical judgements and are not based on distorting factors. Then, participants were reminded that we are interested in the strict truth-value of the sentence. This comment was included to discourage participants from counting misleading statements as false or from counting strange-sounding sentences as automatically neither true nor false.

Given that truth is notoriously difficult to define and there is tremendous disagreement about its nature amongst philosophers (Bourget & Chalmers, 2020), participants were given no indication what exactly it means for something to be "true" or "false". This seems unproblematic, given that every competent speaker of English should have an intuitive notion

of what it *means* for something to be true/false²⁹. The term “neither true nor false” is a theoretic term that is not used in ordinary language. However, anyone who has an understanding what it means for something to be true/false, should thereby be able to infer what it means for something to be neither of these.

9.5) Findings

In this section, the truth-value judgements about the five different scenarios will be presented. An evaluation, what potential conclusion might be drawn from these results happens in the following chapter.

Scenario 1:

In the scenario where a tourist falsely assumes that Austria is a monarchy and utters “The current king of Austria is intelligent”, a slight majority of participants (31 people, which amounts to 53%) evaluated the utterance as neither true nor false. “false” received slightly less votes (26 people; 44,8%) and one person, for unknown reasons, judged this sentence to be “true”.

Scenario 1: Everything is just like in the actual world when it comes to Austrian politics: Austria is a representative democracy, there has not been a monar...nce: “The current king of Austria is intelligent.”

58 Antworten

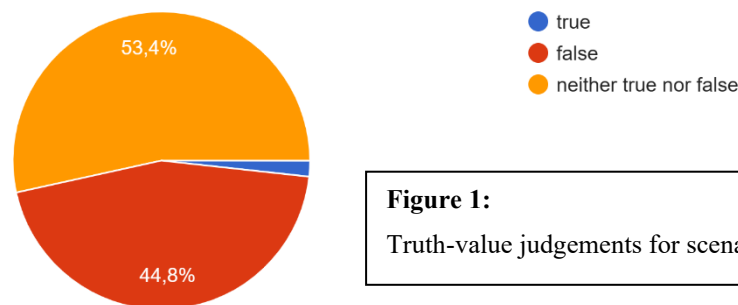


Figure 1:
Truth-value judgements for scenario 1

²⁹ Although it has to be mentioned that one of the respondents stated that, for them, it was “hard to tell what is meant by ‘true’” (cf. appendix) and another participant pointed out that they do not think a sentence’s truth can be evaluated independently of evaluating its appropriateness, cf. appendix.

Scenario 2:

In this scenario, a family father who has two happy and two sad children utters “The children are happy right now”. Again, the judgement “neither true nor false” received a slight majority of the votes (30 people chose this option). What is particularly striking about this scenario is that both “false” (18 votes) and “true” (10 votes) received a sizeable number of votes. Thus, “false” and “true”, taken together, amount to almost half of the votes.

Scenario 2: John is the father of four children. Currently, two of the children are happy, whereas the other two children are sad. Suddenly, John’s wife utters sentence: “The children are happy right now.”

58 Antworten

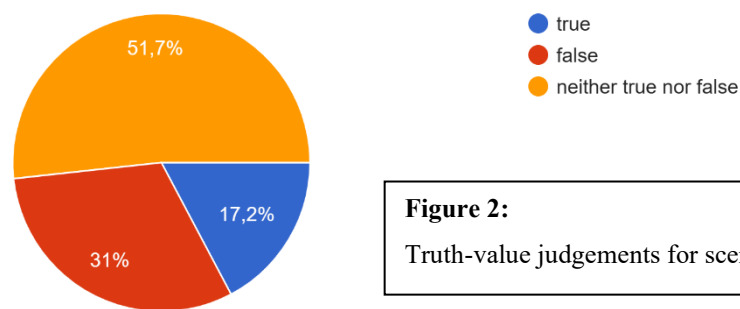


Figure 2:

Truth-value judgements for scenario 2

Scenario 3:

In this scenario, a teacher utters “No one did the homework they had” on a day where no homework has been given. The judgements are remarkably similar to scenario 2, with “neither true nor false” having a slight majority (30 votes) and with both “false” and true” receiving a significant number of votes (17 and 11, respectively).

Scenario 3: There is a teacher who was ill on Monday. On Tuesday, her class informs her that the substitute teacher did not give them any homework.... student in this class did the homework they had.”

58 Antworten

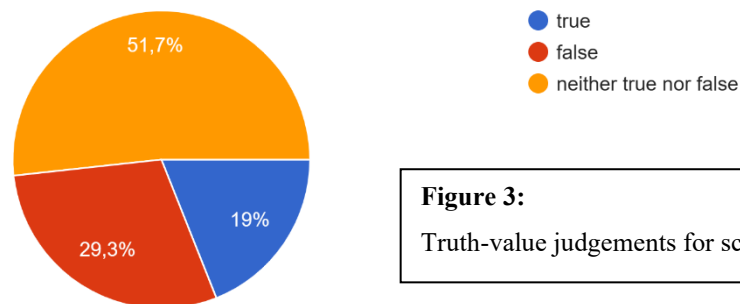


Figure 3:

Truth-value judgements for scenario 3

Scenario 4:

In this scenario, someone says about the non-smoker Joan that she has not stopped smoking yet. In this scenario, no option received the majority of the votes. While “neither true nor false” was chosen by 24 participants and thus received a plurality of the votes, the truth-values “false” and “true” combined received almost 60% (25,9% and 32,8%, respectively).

Scenario 4: Joan hates cigarettes and has never smoked a single cigarette in her entire life. While spending time with her friends, one of them sudden...ing sentence: “Joan hasn’t stopped smoking yet.”
58 Antworten

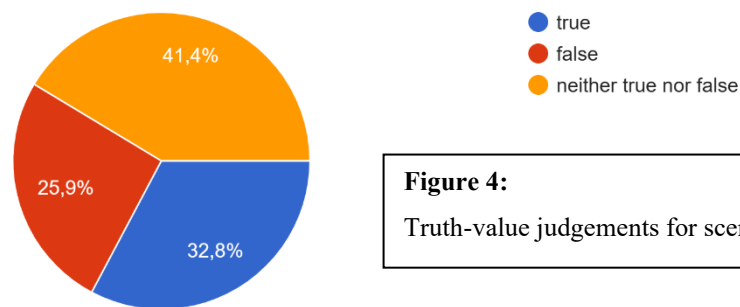


Figure 4:

Truth-value judgements for scenario 4

Scenario 5:

Finally, in this scenario someone utters the sentence “John doesn’t know that Vienna is the capital of Portugal”, while being unaware of basic geographics. The results closely resemble those of scenario 4: A plurality picked “neither true nor false” (43,1%), followed by “true”, which received 36,2%, and by “false” (20,7%).

Scenario 5: John and his girlfriend are quizzing each other about capitals of the world. When asked about the capital of Portugal, John is unable to ans...oesn’t know that Vienna is the capital of Portugal.”
58 Antworten

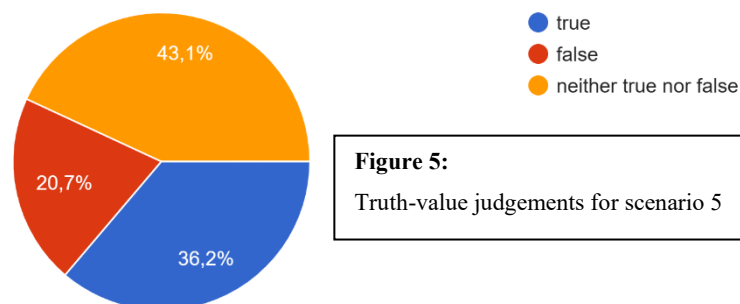


Figure 5:

Truth-value judgements for scenario 5

9.6) Discussion

The major aim of this study was to investigate whether it is indeed the case - as initially hypothesised (cf. H2 in chapter 3) - that truth-value judgements intuitively align with the semantic view of presupposition, which evaluates sentences with presupposition failure as neither true nor false. From the outside, it had been clear that this study would not be able to *conclusively* answer this question, given its limited sample size and given that it is impossible to create scenarios to test truth-value judgements for *all* types of presupposition. Still, cautious conclusions can be drawn:

First of all, it has to be said that for each of the five scenarios there is either no majority (this is the case in scenarios 4 and 5) or only a very slim majority (scenarios 1 to 3). Secondly, it is noteworthy that scenario 1 - the one that is inspired by the “The present king of France” sentence, which started the entire debate between Fregeans and Russellians - is especially contested: While “neither true nor false” did indeed receive the majority of the votes here, it only did so by a very small margin. What this suggests is that for sentences containing (singular, non-quantified) definite descriptions people seem to be split into two almost equally large camps; one of them favouring Frege/Elbourne and one of them favouring Russell/Stalnaker.

Different conclusions can be drawn from this: Potentially, one could interpret this split as evidence that there is ultimately no deep fact of the matter when it comes to the truth-value of such sentences (Enoch, 2009). After all, the best explanation for persistent disagreement often is that there is no fundamental truth about the domain in question, e.g. when people are arguing whether chocolate ice cream tastes objectively better than chocolate cake. The best explanation for persistent disagreement about the taste of food really appears to be that reality does not settle which type of food is objectively preferable.

However, I would argue that such a view should be rejected in this case: The reason for this is that there surely *has to be* a fact of the matter whether definite descriptions are referential or quantificational, just like there is a syntactic fact that “the” functions as a definite article in English. Certainly, if they were quantificational, as Russell claimed they are (Russell, 1905), then it would follow straightforwardly that any sentence about the current king of Austria is simply false. On the other hand, if they are referential, then it seems that there has to be a fact of the matter what happens if a term fails to refer, i.e. a fact that tells us whether such a situation

leads to falsity or not. A picture of the world where it is literally indeterminate whether some sentence with a referring expression is false or not strikes me as objectionable; after all, one of the main aims of language is to picture the external world, so it would be rather surprising if the language did not settle what happens in cases where a sentence tries to picture something non-existent.

If one assumes that there *is* a fact of the matter whether such sentences are false or not, as I will do in the remainder of this chapter, then one ought to provide an explanation why there is still so much disagreement. It is possible to provide two radically different kinds of explanation, depending on whether one intends to defend the semantic or the pragmatic view:

In defence of the semantic view one could say that the reason why so many people evaluate such sentences as “false”, despite them being literally neither true nor false, is for pragmatic reasons - this is essentially the view defended by von Fintel (2004). Maybe, for example, such people think that uttering “The king of Austria is intelligent” suggests a lack of education and they assume that the sentence must thus be false, given that it is based on an objectionably uneducated assumption. Potentially, the data could also be explained via the fact that some people might take “not true” and “false” to be synonymous. If this were so, then it would clearly follow that “The king of Austria is intelligent” is false. One reason to think that this might be so is that in ordinary contexts “not true” and “false” *are* indeed co-extensive - as argued in the chapter on the law of excluded middle (cf. sub-chapter 7.1), when it comes to any well-formed proposition one can indeed infer “This proposition is false” from “This proposition is not true”. Whereas, if Frege is right, the sentence “The king of Austria is intelligent” does not express a proposition and is therefore an exception to the normal rules of truth and falsehood.

One participant gave a particularly illuminating explanation in that regard:

My first reaction is “false”, but my considered position is “not even false.” I think my brain first asks “true or not true” and uses “false” to mean “not true”. Only on reflection does it occur to me that there could be other ways of being “not true”. I especially thought scenario 2 was clever. It’s not true that all the children are happy. But it’s not false that some of the children are happy (cf. appendix).

In defence of the pragmatic view, on the other hand, one could argue that many people answered “neither true nor false” because they would be utterly baffled, were they confronted with it in

real life. Perhaps, the defender of the pragmatic account could argue, such sentences are strictly speaking “false”, but are sometimes interpreted as neither true nor false because they violate the fundamental norms of communication. This interpretation can be motivated by once again appealing to Stalnaker’s theory of the common ground, which is supposed to be one of *the* major foundations everyday conversation. It would not be overly surprising if someone evaluated a sentence as non-truth-evaluable based on pragmatic factors if a fundamental aspect of communication was violated.

Obviously, given my sympathies for the semantic view, I am more inclined to favour the former interpretation of the data over the latter. That being said, I concede that this preference is only based on the fact that in my estimation there are *other*, independent reasons to prefer the semantic view, as argued in previous chapters. If one does not share this commitment, then it strikes me as perfectly reasonable for that person to adopt the latter interpretation of the data instead.

The scenario containing the plural definite description “The children” brought interesting results, insofar as all three options got a significant number of votes. What this suggests is that many respondents share the intuition that such definite descriptions, as a matter of their semantics, presuppose that either all or none of the Xs have a certain property, whereas almost as many apparently think that there is no such semantic presupposition and that such sentences are either true when at least one of the Xs has the property (this seems to be the most reasonable interpretation of people who answered “true”) or are simply false whenever at least one of the Xs does not have the property (Sharvy, 1980), as is the case in scenario 2.

The results that I would regard as most noteworthy are the ones for scenario 3: A clear plurality (in fact, a slight majority) of the participants, as predicted, favoured “neither true nor false”. What was not expected, however, was that a significant number of respondents - 11 people - regarded the sentence “No one did the homework they had” as “false”, which is predicted neither by the Russellian view of definite descriptions nor by Frege’s account - or by any other widespread account of descriptions, for that matter.

While it is clear to see why a Russellian would evaluate such a sentence as true (by interpreting it as “No one had exactly one homework that they did”, which is indeed an accurate description of scenario 3), it is far less clear how this sentence could possibly be false. The reason for this

is that in order for this sentence to be false, it would have to be the case that “No one did the homework they had” were strictly equivalent to “Everyone didn’t do the homework they had”, *with the latter being interpreted in such a way that it entails the existence of homework*. The issue is that this does not logically follow: From “There does not exist an x such that x had exactly one homework that they did” one cannot validly infer “For all x , x is such that they had exactly one homework that they did not do”.

Still, there is one way to get the false reading: Namely, if one interprets the negation as taking narrow scope with respect to the definite description, i.e. if one reads “No one did the homework they had” as saying “There is exactly one homework and it is not the case that there is an x such that x did do it”. In principle, this reading is available to the Russellian, given that - according to Russell - definite descriptions can either take narrow scope or wide scope with respect to operators or quantifiers. However, there seem to be strong reasons to prefer the wide-scope reading, given the context in scenario 3: The context makes it clear that the teacher knows that there was no homework, therefore it seems unnatural to interpret her as saying “There is exactly one homework”. For this reason, the judgement “false” appears to be more in line with the standard Russellian analysis, which explains why more participants decided to choose this option.

Concluding the discussion of the three scenarios that featured definite descriptions, it can be said that in all of them “neither true nor false” was the most popular option, suggesting considerable sympathy for the semantic account of presupposition. However, what the judgements also suggest is that there are also many people with truth-value intuitions that align with the pragmatic view.

The results for scenario 4 are more concerning for the advocate of the semantic view: Out of 58 participants, only 24 judged this sentence to be neither true nor false. Once again, the significant number of “false” judgements is difficult to interpret: If it were false that Joan has not stopped smoking yet, as 15 participants thought, then it would follow that Joan *has* stopped smoking already, which seems to contradict the description of the scenario. One explanation could be that these participants interpreted “Joan has stopped smoking” as equivalent to “Joan does not smoke”. That Joan does not smoke is, after all, indeed the case in scenario 4. What this might suggest is that these respondents did not evaluate the strict truth-value of the sentence, but rather made a (potentially subconscious) pragmatic judgement that having stopped smoking and not

smoking are equivalent *for practical purposes* (e.g. because they both help avoiding lung cancer) and should therefore be treated similarly despite not being semantically equivalent.

One of the participants, in fact, explicitly confirmed this interpretation by stating “In 4, if she never smoked then it’s false that she smokes” to motivate their choice (cf. appendix).

The judgement “true” seems to be in line with the standard pragmatic account of presupposition (on this view it is true, albeit misleading, to say that Joan has not stopped smoking yet because you cannot stop something that you have never begun³⁰) and received roughly a third of the votes, which demonstrates that intuitions favouring the pragmatic account of presupposition appear to be rather widespread - not just when it comes to definite descriptions, but also when it comes to aspectual verbs such as “stop”.

Finally, scenario 5 once again showed a rather even split between the option predicted by the semantic account - “neither true nor false” - and the one predicted by standard pragmatic accounts - “true”. One of the respondents who picked “true” made their reasoning explicit, stating that “knowledge is a justified true belief, the statement is not true so it cannot be knowledge”.

What is once again rather surprising is that roughly a fifth of the participants chose the option “false”, which would strictly entail the truth of “John knows that Vienna is the capital of Portugal”. Just like in scenario 4, a pragmatic explanation for the data seems promising here: It might be that these respondents picked “false” because they judged that John is not epistemically blameworthy for not believing a false proposition. Potentially, these people thought that by answering “true” they would imply that there is a true proposition that John fails to know.

Overall, it can be said that just like in the scenarios involving definite descriptions, the scenarios involving “stop” and “know” indicated that “neither true nor false” is the most popular of the three available options; but this was very narrowly so: In fact, the difference between the answer predicted by the semantic view and the answer predicted by the pragmatic account is even narrower in these two scenarios than in the previous ones.

³⁰ This reasoning is explicitly pointed out by one of the respondents, cf. appendix

9.7) Limitations

There are two reasons why this study, while valuable, is limited: First, due to the fact that the sample size is limited to 58 participants, the margin of error is correspondingly higher than it would be with a significantly larger sample size. Secondly, the study is limited in the sense that it features only three different types of presupposition: definite descriptions, aspectual verbs and factives. It might be that other types of presupposition, such as iteratives, would lead to different results. That being said, it appears to be the case that for many people intuitions are consistent across different types of presupposition. For example, almost all of the participants who picked “neither true nor false” in scenario 4 also thought that the utterance in scenario 5 is neither true nor false. This makes it reasonable to assume that the results would not be radically different for types of presupposition that were not included in the study.

Another thing that ought to be kept in mind is that the truth-value judgements of speakers cannot ultimately settle the debate between the semantic and the pragmatic view, but can rather only be suggestive. The reason for this is that it is in principle possible that speakers have other linguistic commitments which entail that their given answer is wrong *by their own lights*. For example, one could imagine someone who judged “He ate most of the cookies” false in a scenario where *all* of the cookies were eaten (example due to Horn, 2025). From this it would not follow that in their idiolect “most” does not mean “more than half”. Rather, one could - and possibly should - conclude that the person in question was distracted by other non-relevant factors (e.g. that it would be misleading to assert “most” if you could say “all” instead) and therefore did not appreciate the actual meaning of “most” when answering the question. This means that even if the results of the study had clearly favoured the semantic view over the pragmatic one or vice versa, the other account would thereby not have been disproven, but would simply have to find *some* plausible way to accommodate the data.

10) Conclusion

This thesis' aim was to investigate whether the semantic view of presupposition, which recently seems to have slightly fallen out of favour, can be vindicated. In order to do so, the thesis was split into two parts: an empirical and a non-empirical one. The non-empirical part evaluated the major arguments for and against the semantic and the pragmatic view and came to the conclusion that, while there are considerations that point in both directions, the defender of the semantic account has strong responses available to defend themselves against the challenges from the pragmatic view, whereas some of the data seems hard to accommodate for the pragmatic account. What remains clear, however, is that an evaluation of such arguments is ultimately based on person-based factors such as intuitions or independent linguistic commitments and therefore can reasonably vary from person to person. For example, one might be more inclined to accept the semantic view if one already accepts a Fregean picture of language on other grounds.

The empirical part of the thesis was based on a study among 58 competent speakers of English and tried to answer the question whether truth-value judgements about sentences with presupposition failure align with those predicted by the semantic view. My hypothesis before conducting the study was that this would be the case, i.e. that a majority of participants would choose “neither true nor false”.

Overall, it can be said that this hypothesis was partly confirmed and partly disconfirmed: It was confirmed in the sense that in scenarios 1 to 3 “neither true nor false” indeed received a (slight) majority of the votes. For scenarios 4 and 5, however, “neither true nor false” only received a plurality of the votes, as opposed to a majority. What this might suggest is that the truth-value judgements about definite descriptions fit rather well with the semantic account of presupposition, whereas truth-value judgements involving aspectual verbs or factives could be considered more challenging for the account.

What certainly remains clear is that, as expected, this thesis has not been able to provide *conclusive* evidence either for or against the semantic view of presupposition. Thus, further research needs to be done in order to decide whether the data ultimately favours the account,

all things considered, or whether it ought to be given up in favour of a pragmatic account of presupposition.

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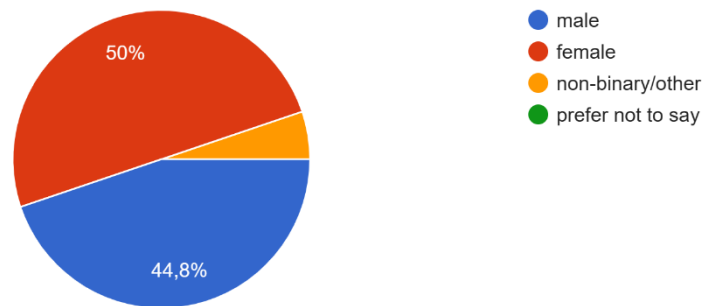
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12) Appendix

Participants' gender:

With each gender do you identify?

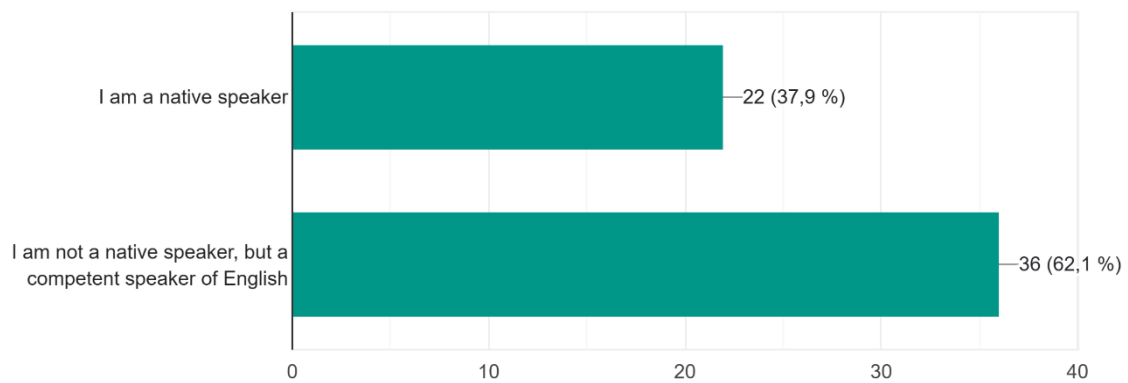
58 Antworten



Participants' L1:

My connection with the English language is as follows:

58 Antworten



Open-question answers:

I noticed my gut response was more "technically correct" for 3 and I wonder if it's because I've been a teacher

My first reaction is "false", but my considered position is "not even false." I think my brain first asks "true or not true" and uses "false" to mean "not true". Only on reflection does it occur to me that there could be other ways of being "not true". I especially thought scenario 2 was clever. It's not true that all the children are happy. But it's not false that some of the children are happy.

Quite hard for me to even make sense of the claim that we are supposed to only consider the strict truth value. After all, I don't think we have unfiltered access to truth values of sentences. We MUST use, among other things, our sense of appropriateness....but i tried

In case you're interested in reasoning / conceptualizing each case. 1c because object king of Austria does not exist. 2b false because the children according to sets would be all 4 children, it's not an illogical leap to include "all", it is necessary by the generality of the collective name for the set of interest. 3b false because treating homework quantitatively, no student can be shown to complete less homework than assigned, this all children completed all the homework they was assigned (if not treating homework quantitatively then would be identical to 1c because yesterday's homework object does not exist, 4a because to stop smoking one must first start, John has neither started nor stopped smoking yet in his lifetime. 5c knowledge is a justified true belief, the statement is not true so cannot be knowledge. I cannot be judged to have or not have "untrue knowledge"

hard to tell what is meant by "true"

3 seems a matter of "not enough information to determine"

My intuition is that statements which make an accurate claim but clearly make that claim while maintaining a false premise, like 1, 3, and 5, are false.

For 2 I want to say, "partly true;" but since partly true is at least somewhat true I picked "true." In 4, if she never smoked then it's false that she smokes; but true that she smokes if she "hasn't stopped smoking yet" so I went with "false" since she doesn't smoke at all.

all the sentences don't make sense, so cannot be true/false

In scenario three there isn't any information about the sub. Did he/ she tell them what homework was? Is it somewhere stated? In a document or something? Or did the students complete it during the lesson so all the work was done?

Information for participants:

True, false or neither true nor false?

In the following survey, you will be confronted with **five scenarios**. After each scenario, you shall evaluate whether the given sentence is **true, false or neither true nor false**.

Your answers should be based on your **initial intuition**, which means that, ideally, you should answer within a few seconds and you should stick with the **first** answer that comes to your mind.

Please only evaluate the **literal** meaning of the sentence (= you are not supposed to consider whether it would *make pragmatic sense* to utter these sentences, the only thing that is relevant is the strict truth-value).

In case you have no clear intuition, please pick the option that fits best with your instinctive reaction.

Please note that by filling out this survey, you thereby grant permission that your answers may be used as part of a study for the master's thesis "Presuppositions: A Semantic Phenomenon After All?" at the University of Vienna. You can revoke permission to include your data at any point - please contact a01547474@unet.univie.ac.at in order to do so.

For further information, please click the following [link](#)