Existential Presupposition

Existential presuppositions are the most prominent among the various categories of presupposition (see *Presupposition*) recognized in modern times. They were (re)discovered by Frege (1892), who proposed the principle of a compositional calculus on linguistic structures yielding a truth-value. Thus, the truth-value of a structure like *The man walks* in a model where the extensions of the predicate *walk* and the definite term *the man* are defined, can be calculated by checking if the individual referred to is or is not in the extension of *walk*, i.e., the set of those entities that walk. If so, the sentence is true; if not it is false. The extension of the predicate *walk* is thus a function from individuals to truth-values. What now if the term *the man* fails to refer, i.e., there is no man in the model? Then the predicate extension receives no input and no output results, so in that case the sentence remains without a truth-value. But this offends against the Aristotelian Principle of Strict Bivalence, which says (a) that all (uttered) sentences always have a truth-value, and (b) that there are precisely two truth-values, 'true' and 'false.' Moreover, the negated sentence *The man does not walk* is true on at least the reading which is equivalent to 'it is not the case that the man walks.' The negation operator would thus yield truth from a noninput. Frege's reply to this difficulty varies over the years. Sometimes he seems to acquiesce in lack of truth-value, but at times he also considers the possibility of assigning the null set as reference object to nonreferring definite terms. But this solution is deficient in that substitution *salva veritate* should then assign truth to a sentence like *The present king of France is a subset of all sets*, since *The null set is a subset of all sets* is also true.

To solve this, Russell (1905) proposed his celebrated Theory of Descriptions, analyzing a definite term like *the man*, in principle, in terms of the existential quantifier (for details see *Presupposition*). Strawson (1950 inter alia), however, rejected Russell's analysis and reverted to the Fregean position of the truth-value gap, thereby leaving unanswered the problem of the truth of *The man does not walk* when there is no man.

Since Strawson (1950), it has become customary to speak of 'existential presupposition' when *a sentence carries an entailment of existence with regard to the referent of a definite term, while the same sentence negated still carries an invited inference of such existence.* It has also become customary to regard the definite determiner (article) as the inducer of existential presuppositions. This, however, is incorrect, as appears from sentences like *The man is fictitious* or *Bert keeps talking about the present king of*

France, which neither entail nor presuppose that there is a man or a king of France, respectively. It seems more correct to assume that existential presuppositions derive from conditions set by individual predicates for the extensions of their terms. When a predicate requires real existence of a term extension for truth, as is normally the case, then it is *extensional with respect to that term* (see *Lexical Conditions*), and it generates an existential presupposition for that term. Some predicates, however, are nonextensional (intensional) with respect to a term. Examples are *fictitious*, which is intensional with respect to its subject term, or *talk about*, which is intensional with respect to its object term. Definite terms in such positions do not generate existential presuppositions.

It seems an inevitable consequence of presupposition theory that a nonreferring term in a discourse-integrated sentence must still be considered to have an extension, for example, that which is fictitious or that which is talked about. Such extensions do not *exist* but must be assumed to have some other ontological status. Presupposition theory is thus at odds with positivist ontologies (e.g., Quine 1953) that admit only of existence, excluding all other categories of being.

See also: Discourse Domain; Discourse Semantics; Lexical Conditions; Presupposition.

Bibliography

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