

Existence Predicate (Discourse Semantics)

Since Strawson (1950), the existence predicate has been a source of embarrassment in any theory of 'presupposition' (see *Presupposition*) holding that definite determiners (such as the article *the*, or the zero article in proper names) structurally induce an 'existential presupposition' (see *Existential Presupposition*). The problem is that a true sentence like *Pegasus does not exist* would presuppose the existence of Pegasus but assert the opposite. A solution is proposed within the framework of 'discourse semantics,' (see *Discourse Semantics*), where definite determiners do not require existence of the object referred to but only the availability of an address in the 'discourse domain' for the definite term to denote. Existential presuppositions are derived from the property of the governing predicate of being extensional with respect to the term in question. Most lexical predicates are extensional with respect to all their terms. A predicate P^n is fully extensional where the truth of a sentence $P^n(t_1, \dots, t_n)$ or $\sim P^n(t_1, \dots, t_n)$ entails that all n terms refer to really existing objects. Some predicates are not, or not fully, extensional. Predicates like *fictitious* or *imaginary*, for example, are nonextensional with respect to their subject terms since, obviously, a sentence formed with these predicates is true where the subject term referent does not exist. And predicates like *talk about* or *look for* are partly extensional. They are extensional with respect to their subject term but nonextensional (intensional) with respect to their object term, since one can, for example, talk about Pegasus or the Loch Ness Monster.

Definite terms in extensional positions must select their 'denotation,' (see *Denotation in Discourse Semantics*) i.e., the discourse address to land on, in the truth-domain (see *Discourse Domain*), but definite terms in nonextensional positions are free to select their denotation in any (intensional) subdomain. Thus, given a subdomain containing bits of classical mythology, including stories about Pegasus, a sentence *Pegasus is fictitious* allows the subject term *Pegasus* to select its denotation in the subdomain that contains an address for Pegasus. Likewise for the predicate *exist*. When *exist* is constructed with a definite subject term this term is free to look for its denotation in any given intensional subdomain. The incremental effect (see *Incrementation*) of *exist* consists in the creation of a copy of the intensional address in the truth-domain (the domain to which a speaker commits himself).

The extension of *exist* can be given as shown in example (1) (see *Lexical Conditions*). The convention of asterisking nonextensional term positions is adopted allowing the corresponding linguistic terms to look for a denotation in a subdomain.

$$\sigma(\text{exist}) = \{e^* \mid e \text{ is physically real}\} \quad (1)$$

(See Seuren (1985: 247–55, 429, 430) for further details.)

See also: Accommodation and Presupposition.

Bibliography

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- Strawson P F 1950 On referring. *Mind* **50**: 320–44

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