Handout 6

Nonexistent Objects?

1. The topic:

Natural language permits apparent reference to nonexistent objects.

Issues

[1] Under what circumstances is that possible?

[2] Does it really involve entities that are nonexistent?

[3] If so, how should one make sense of them?

[4] What ranges of predicates can attribute or deny existence of entities?

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2. Apparent reference to nonexistent objects (= intentional objects)

2.1. Existence predicates

(1) a. The golden mountain does not exist.

   b. Pegasus does not exist.

(2) a. The third world war has not occurred yet.

   b. The demonstration never took place.

Characteristic property of existence predicates

Existence predicates do not presuppose the existence of the subject referent, unlike 'ordinary' predicates:

(3) a. ??? The golden mountain is not very high.

   b. ??? Pegasus can fly.

'Ordinary' predicates *entail the existence of their arguments.*

2.2. Intentional verbs

Verbs of thinking, conceiving, planning, describing, and imagining

(4) a. John thought about a unicorn.

    b. John imagined a unicorn.

Verbs of talking, mentioning and referring:

(5) a. John was talking about Sherlock Holmes.

    b. John was referring to the person described in the novel.

    c. The guide describes a building that does not exist.

Intentional predicates are likewise not existence-entailing.

Intentional verbs are to be distinguished from intensional transitive verbs:

(6) a. John is looking for a unicorn.

    b. John needs at least two assistants.

Distinguishing intensional transitive verbs from intentional verbs:

[1] The 'any will do test:

(7) a. John needs a unicorn, any will do.

    b. ??? John is thinking about / mentioned / described a unicorn, any will do.

[2] Proforms

Intensional transitive verbs

(8) a. What does John needs?

    b. Whom does John need?

(9) What is John looking for, an assistant?

Intensional verbs take special quantifiers as complements.

Intentional verbs

(10) a. John was referring to the woman described in the article.

    b. Whom was John referring to?

    b. ?? What was John referring to?

(11) a. John imagined a woman with green hair.

    b. What / ?? Whom did John imagine?

Intentional verbs take ordinary quantifiers or special quantifiers as complements

[3] Existence

Intensional readings of *owe, buy, recognize, find, hire, …*

(12) a. John owes Bill a bottle of wine.

    b. John bought a bottle of wine on the internet

    c. John recognized a genius when he saw his wife solve the problem.

Characteristic of intensional transitive: non-specificity

Characteristic of intentional verbs: possible nonexistence of argument

Connection between intentional and intensional transitive verbs

Compatibility of content with sufficiently unspecific imagination:

(13) a. John imagined a castle.

    b. John wants a castle.

(14) a. John wants what he imagined.

    b. John imagined what he wants.

Intensional transitives generally describe objects (searches, desires, needs, debts etc) with satisfaction conditions.

This permits the 'object' of a search being identical to an actual object:

(15) This is the house John was looking for.

Not so for imaginations:

(16) ??? This is the house John imagined.

2.3. Noun complements

(17) a. the myth of the golden mountain

    b. the example of a unicorn

    c. the figure of Hercules

    d. the plan of a major anthology on the topic

2.4. Prepositions

(18) a. a book about Aphrodite

    b. a story about the golden mountain

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3. Quantification over nonexistent objects

Natural language generally allows quantification over nonexistent objects

<u>Quantification over intentional objects</u>

(19) a. There is some things John thought about that do not exist.

    b. There are objects of thought that do not exist.

<u>Quantification over past objects</u>

(20) There are historical buildings that no longer exist.

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3. Intentional objects and fictional characters

3.1. Fictional characters

Attribution of existence possible:

(21) a. The fictional character Sherlock Holmes exists.

    b. Sherlock Holmes exists.

(22) a. The mythical figure Pegasus exists.

    b. Pegasus exists.

<u>Nuclear predicates</u>

Is a detective, lives on Bond Street

Extranuclear predicates:

Was created by Conan Doyle, is a fictional character

Fictional characters can bear extranuclear properties

Fictional characters as *abstract artifacts* (Thomasson 1999): not in space, not physical

3.2. Planned events

<u>Plans, projects, organized future events</u>

 (23) a. The plan exists.

    b. The project already exists.

    c. ? The planned demonstration exists.

The *existence* of a planned event as an abstract artifact needs to be distinct from its *realization*.

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4. Approaches to apparent reference to nonexistent objects

[1] Allow names to be empty

<u>The empty name theory</u>

Names in true negative existential are empty (Sainsbury, Salmon)

(24) *Pegasus exists* is true iff *Pegasus* is not empty.

Negation as metalinguistic negation: deny the truth of the existence statement

(25) a. Pegasus does not exist.

    b. It is not true that Pegasus exists.

[2] Allow nonexistent entities as semantic values

<u>The Meinongian view</u>

There are things that do not exist.

<u>Different versions of Meinongianism</u>

- Nonexistent objects are merely possible objects. (Priest)

- Nonexistent objects are 'generated' by unsuccessful or pretend referential acts. (McGinn 2000, Moltmann 2015)

<u>Quantification, Reference, and Existence</u>

Quantifiers such as *a, some, two, several*, and *there is /are* are neutral regarding existence and non-existence.

The use of 'referential' singular terms (names, definite descriptions) is neutral regarding existence and non-existence.

Existence is expressed by the existence predicate *exist* (in English).

Ordinary predicates are existence entailing.

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5. Further data bearing on the semantic options

Against the empty name theory:

(26) a. The church *mentioned* in the guide does not exist.

b. There is a house John *described* that does not exist.

c. Mary *described* a man that does not exist.

Intentional verbs:

(27) a. There are people that John thought about / read about / heard about that do not exist.

b. There are buildings described in the book that do not exist.

c. There are buildings that were built in the last century that no longer exist.

Against nonexistent objects being just possible objects

Not every non-referring description 'generates' a nonexistent object:

(28) a. ?? The church in the village does not exist.

b. ?? There is a house that does not exist.

c. ??? Mary talked to a man that does not exist.

Anaphora

(29) a. The castle John described is small, but nice. It is definitely not grand.

b. The mathematical object that John imagined is impossible. It is both round and square.

Conclusions

[1] Nonexistent objects act as semantic values and are needed for the compositional semantics of sentences with intentional verbs (*imagine, conceive, think about, refer to, mention, intend*).

[2] Nonexistent objects do not come for free do: they depend on the description of a quasi-referential act in the sentence, or at least an implicit reference to such an act.

Quasi-referential acts

Unsuccessful or pretend referential mental or linguistic acts

Subject position

(30) a. ??? The blue apples in this room do not exist

b. The golden mountain / Pegasus does not exist.

Implicit reference to a quasi-referential act associated with subject position.

<u>The view suggested by the linguistic data</u>

Nonexistent objects are entities that are *dependent* on quasi-referential acts or mental states.

<u>A way of conceiving of the difference between intenstional objects and fictional characters</u>

Intentional objects:

The non-intended products generated by (mental or verbal) acts of referring with a description and attributing properties to what the description is meant to refer to

Fictional characters:

'Existent' entities that are the *intended products* of pretend acts of reference

<u>Linguistically reflected difference between the two sorts of entities</u>

Application of existence predicates and other predicates conveying external properties

 (31) a. The fictional character Hamlet / Hamlet exists.

      b. Hamlet does not exist.

<u>Summary</u>

Intentional objects of various sorts play a role in semantics, but they do not come for free, but require the presence of mental or linguistic acts in the semantic structure of the sentence. Intentional (nonexistent) objects may be conceived as (ontologically) dependent on such acts: as *abstract artifacts intentionally produced by such acts* or

as *entities non-intentionally generated by such acts*.

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6. Existence Predicates

<u>The standard view in philosophy</u>

Existence is a *univocal concept.*

<u>An alternative view</u>

Existence divides into different modes of being

<u>Some modes of being (recent, contemporary views)</u>

[1] Fundamental entities, natural entities - derivative entities, composite entities, entities introduced by abstraction

[2] Ontologically independent entities – ontologically dependent entities, e.g. holes, shadows

[3]Time- and space-relative existence (ways of persistence)

Older views of modes of being (phenomenology, existentialism etc)

[1] The mode of being of being experienced (phenomenology)

[2]The particular mode of being of conscious individuals or free agents (Augustin, existentialism)

6.2. Existence-related expressions in natural language

Natural language quantifiers and modes of being

The very same quantifiers are used for all sorts of entities, at least in European languages.

Modes of being are not distinguished by different quantifiers!

In natural language, different modes of being are expressed by different *existence predicates*.

6.3. Existence Predicates in natural languages

[1] Natural languages generally do not display a single existence predicates, but different existence predicates for different types of entities.

[2] Existence predicates in English come with time- and location-relative variants.

Exist in English

Restricted to material and abstract objects and inapplicable to events

Not particularly good when applied to a person (on the time-related use):

(32) a. The book exists.

    b. The round square does not exist.

    c. ??? The party exists.

    d. ??? The accident John mentioned did not exist.

    e. ? John's child still exists.

Existence predicates for events

Occur, happen and *take place*

(33) a. John's party is taking place.

    b. The accident John mentioned occurred / happened.

(34) a. The murder occurred / ??? existed.

    b. John's speech took place this morning / ??? existed.

Obtain, hold as existence predicates in English

Apply to 'condition'-like entities: (nonworldly) facts, states, situations, conditions, rules, laws

Exist may also apply to those entities

Not applicable to material objects, persons, abstract objects of the sort of mathematical objects.

 (35) The fact / The situation /The state / The condition / law / rule he describes obtains /

    holds / exists.

Further existence predicate in English: *is valid* (for laws)

(36) a. The law is valid / exists.

    b. That law is no longer valid / no longer exists.

How many existence predicates in a given natural language?

Nosu (Burmese language) reported to display 13 different existence predicates (Walters 2006).

6.4. Revised criterion for a predicate being an existence predicate

Existence predicates may yield true sentences with negation and a singular term that does not have an actual, 'presently existing' referent, but would satisfy the sortal restriction of the existence predicate:

(37) a. A (intransitive) predicate P is an *ordinary predicate* iff for any world w and time t, for

    any singular term T, if T does not stand for an actual entity in w, then neither

    [T *not* P]$^{w,\,t}$ = true nor [T *not* P]$^{w,\,t}$ = false.

    b. An (intransitive) predicate P is an *existence predicate* iff for any world w and time t,

    for any singular term T, if T would satisfy the sortal restrictions of P and does not

    stand for a (present, actual, nonintentional) entity in w, then [T *not* P]$^{w,\,t}$ = true.

Potential existence predicates

 (38) a. The president of France does not exist.

    b. ??? The president of France does not live.

Occur as an existence predicate and as an ordinary predicate

(39) a. The accident John mentioned did not occur.

    b. The letter occurs twice in the sentence.

    c. The letter did not occur in the sentence.

6.5. The distinction between *exist* and *occur* in English and other European languages

General facts

Exist and *occur* display sortal restrictions even on an 'absolute' use;

combine with temporal or location modifiers under particular conditions.

Endurantist view about persistence of material objects through time

Standard formulation (Wiggins 1980, Lewis 1986, ..):

An object exists at a time t means it is *wholly present at* each moment of t.

Existence at a time t: *complete presence* at all the moments of t.

Problem with 'complete presence':

Not all material parts need to be present at each moment of an object's life span.

Standard condition applies only to entities like sums

Weaken conditions on 'complete presence'

Not all material parts need to be present, but sufficiently many 'functional parts', essential features, the 'way' of composition, …

Four-dimensionalism

Objects and events are both space-time regions with spatio-temporal subregions as parts.

Three-dimensionalism:

Objects cannot have temporal parts, but only spatial parts.

Objects *exist in* time and are *extended in* space

Events can have temporal parts; they are *extended in* time and in space, but do not *exist in* time or space.

Events perdure through time

At each time of an event's duration, there is a temporal part of the event at that time.

(40) a. The house existed last week, yesterday, and this morning.

  b. ??? The protest occurred yesterday morning, yesterday evening, and this morning.

Lexical meaning of *exist* and *occur* (Version 1)

 (41) a. For an entity x that cannot have temporal parts,

    exist is true of x at a time t in a world w iff for any moment t' of t, (the whole of) x

    is present at t' in w.

  b. For an entity x that can have temporal parts,

    occur is true of x at a time t in a world w iff for any proper part t' of t, only a proper

     part of x is present at t' in w.

The actionsart of *exist* and *occur*

Nominalizations:

The existence of the building describes a state,

The occurrence of the protest describes an event (e.g. can be sudden, quick)

Davidsonian view of events (and states) as implicit arguments of verbs:

Exist takes states ('existences') as event arguments,

occur takes events ('occurrences') as event arguments.

The lexical meanings of *exist* and *occur* (Version 2)

Occur applied to an event e describes another event that consists in the transitions among the 'presences' of the parts of e at relevant subintervals that belong to the duration of e.

 Exist when applied to an object x describes a state that is the presence of 'the whole' of x during the time in question:

(42) a. For an entity x that can have temporal parts, a worlds w and and an interval t,

    $\langle e, x \rangle \in [exist]^{w,t}$ iff e consists in the presence of (the whole of) x in w at t' for any

     moment t' of t.

  b. For an entity e that can have temporal parts, a world w and an interval t,

    $\langle e', e \rangle \in [occur]^{w,t}$ iff e consists of transitions from the presence of e'' in w at t' to

    the presence of e''' in w at t'' for any minimal parts e'' and e''' of e' for which there

    are subsequent subintervals t' and t'' of t at which e'' and e''' take place

6.6. The existence predicates *obtain* and *hold*

Obtain and *hold* apply to facts, states, states of affairs, situations, laws, conditions (to which *exist* can also apply):

(43) This fact / state / situation / law unfortunately obtains / holds.

Obtain does not apply to <u>material objects or events</u>:

(44) a. ??? The building John described does not obtain / hold.

    b. ??? The protest obtained / did not obtain.

Obtain does not apply to other abstract objects such as mathematical objects:

(45) ??? This property / triangle / number obtains.

<u>What is special about facts, situations, states?</u>

Facts, situations, and states are not 'in' the world, but 'at' the world, obtained by abstraction things going on in the world.

(Strawson, <u>Kim's (1980) conception of states ('events')</u>)

<u>Time- and location-relative *obtain* and *hold*</u>

Time-relative *obtain* and *hold*:

(46) The situation / state / law / condition still obtains.

Location-relative *obtain* and *hold*:

(47) a. The state of emergency declared a week ago still obtains in some parts of the country.

    b. The law still obtains in some countries.

    c. These conditions obtain only in some cities.

    d. This ritual still holds in some parts of the country.

<u>Complete presence of a condition, situation, state at a location</u>

All the constituting sub-condition are fulfilled at the relevant time / location.

<u>Notion of part applying to states, conditions, laws etc:</u>

parts as abstract parts : constitutive subconditions.

<u>Fulfillment conditions for the subconditions can vary</u>

Laws: declarative act targeting particular times.

Situations: things going on at the time, at the location in virtue of which the situation-defining conditions obtain.

6.5. Validity as a mode of being

German *bestehen* 'obtain'

<u>Attitudinal objects</u>

(48) a. Es besteht die Hoffnung, dass es regen werde.

'There is the hope that it will rain.'

   b. Die Hoffnung besteht, dass es regnen werde.

'The hope exists that it will rain.'

(49) a. Es besteht die Annahme, dass S.

It obtains the assumption that S.

   b. Die Annahme besteht, dass S.

The assumption obtains that S.

<u>Modal objects</u>

(50) a. Die Moeglichkeit besteht, dass Hans gewaehlt wird.

'The possibility exists that John will be elected.

  b. Das Angebot besteht, die Villa zu mieten.

'The offer exists to rent the villa.'

<u>Laws, habits, and rules</u>

(51) a. Das Gesetz besteht, dass S

'The law obtains that S.'

  b. Hier besteht die Gewohnheit, dass man morgens Kaffee trinkt.

here obtains the habit that one drinks coffee in the morning

Is valid and *obtain* in English:

(52) a. Her claim is still valid.

  b. The law is valid / obtains.

  c. The offer / invitation is still valid.

<u>Not all attitudinal objects can have validity (in the relevant sense)</u>

Not result-like objects: judgments, conclusions

Not descriptive objects: remarks, observations

(53) a. ?? The judgment is valid.

    b. ?? Joe's remark is valid / obtains.

Only attitudinal and modal objects whose production involves a *declarative speech act*

Validity vs existence

Apparent equivalence

(54) a. The law still exists.

    b. The law still obtains

    c. The law is still valid.

Statements of existence and validity are not always equivalent

 (55) a. The old rule is invalid.

    b. ??? The old rule does not exist.

Validity for artifacts that have a material base

Invitations:

(56) a. The invitation was sent out.

    b. The invitation is no longer valid.

    c. ? The invitation no longer exists.

Coins, stamps

(57) a. The coin is no longer valid.

    b. ??? The coin no longer exist.

(58) a. The stamp is no longer valid.

    b. ??? The stamp no longer exists.

Coins and stamps with ongoing existence, but not validity

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