

I Do Not Exist.

Problems for Dynamic Semantics*

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Abstract

According to *dynamic semantics*, *what is said* by an utterance of a sentence is determined by how the common ground is affected by the acceptance of such utterance. It has been claimed that *dynamic semantics* offers an account of what is said by an utterance in a context that excels that of traditional *static semantics*. Assertions of negative existential constructions, of the form ‘X does not exist’, are a case in point. These assertions traditionally pose a problem for philosophers of language. A recent proposal, owed to Clapp (2008), argues that *static semantics* is unable to solve the problem and offers a *dynamic semantics* account that promises to succeed. In this paper I want to challenge this account and, more generally, the scope of the *dynamic semantics* framework. I will offer a counterexample, inspired by “answering machine” uses of indexical and demonstrative expressions, to show how *dynamic semantics* fails. I conclude by considering the merits of both *static* and *dynamic* accounts.

Keywords: negative existential constructions; what is said; presuppositions; accommodation; correction.

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YO NO EXISTO.

PROBLEMAS PARA LA SEMÁNTICA DINÁMICA

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Resumen

Al aceptar una declaración dentro de una conversación se modifica el terreno común de la misma. Según la *semántica dinámica* la manera en que sucede esta modificación determina *lo que se dice* mediante la declaración. Se ha afirmado que esta explicación de la *semántica dinámica* supera a la explicación tradicional de la *semántica estática*. La aseveración de construcciones existenciales negativas, de la forma 'X no existe', constituye un caso en cuestión. Tradicionalmente estas aseveraciones han planteado un problema para los filósofos del lenguaje. En una propuesta reciente, Clapp (2008) argumenta que la *semántica estática* es incapaz de resolver este problema y ofrece, en su lugar, una explicación supuestamente exitosa desde la *semántica dinámica*. En este trabajo pretendo desafiar a esta explicación y, de manera más general, poner en duda el alcance del marco explicativo de la *semántica dinámica*. Presentaré un contraejemplo, inspirado en usos del tipo "máquina contestadora" de expresiones indíxicas y demostrativas, para mostrar cómo fracasa la *semántica dinámica*. Concluyo considerando los méritos de ambas explicaciones, la *estática* y la *dinámica*.

Palabras clave: construcciones negativas existenciales; lo que se dice; presuposiciones; acomodación; corrección.

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1. The Problem of Negative Existential Constructions

Negative existential constructions are sentential structures of the form 'X does not exist' where 'X' is a noun phrase. Competent speakers commonly use these constructions to convey something true and informative. Yet, it is not obvious how it is that they manage to do so. If the construction is truth-evaluatable, then 'X' must have a referent. However, if 'X' has a referent, then 'X does not exist' must be false. So, it seems, negative existential expressions can never be true. Consider (1):

- (1) Hamlet does not exist.

One can see the problem from the opposite direction. Suppose (1) is true, then there is no Hamlet. But, if there is no Hamlet, then how can we say something true about him?

In a recent paper, Clapp (2008) argues for two theses. First, it is argued that any satisfactory account of how speakers use negative existential constructions "must countenance, and not attempt to explain away" what appears to be a paradoxical feature of such uses, namely, that "utterances of negative existentials *do* deny their own presuppositions" (Clapp, 2008: 1423). Second, and this is perhaps Clapp's central claim, we can only make this paradoxical feature compatible with an explanation of how these utterances manage to be true and informative if we let go *static semantics* in favor of *dynamic semantics*. In this paper I will argue against this second thesis.

2. Static vs. Dynamic Semantics

According to Clapp (2008) static semantics is the view that *what is said* by an utterance of a sentence is determined by the semantic values of its component expressions, relative to a context, and its syntactic structure. Among many others, this view has the virtue of offering a very simple way of determining whether a given utterance is true or false, for what is compositionally determined is a set of truth-conditions, and so the utterance will be true if the said conditions are met and false otherwise.

Unfortunately, *static semantics* also seems to have a disadvantage, as it cannot offer a truth-evaluatable content for an utterance unless

it is given all the needed elements, namely, semantic values for all component expressions and a relevant syntactic structure. Thus, *static semantics* cannot offer a truth-evaluable content if, for example, one of the component expressions is lacking a semantic value in the relevant context. Intuitively, this is the case of negative existential constructions. Whenever they are used truly and informatively, the context is such that the noun phrase 'X', intuitively, has no semantic value.

Fortunately, says Clapp (2008), *dynamic semantics* can solve our problems (see Stalnaker, 1978; Lewis, 1983; Heim, 1983). *Dynamic semantics* differs from *static semantics* in two important ways. It offers a different account of *what is said* by utterances of sentences:

Utterances take place against a *common ground* of information, which is identified as the context of utterance, and the semantic content of an utterance —*what is said*—is a matter of *how the utterance affects the common ground*. The semantic content of an utterance, what is said, is thus the *difference* between the common ground *before* the utterance and the common ground *after* the utterance (Clapp, 2008: 1430).

And, consequently, it has a different notion of what it is for an utterance of a sentence to be true:

When an interpreter judges whether or not an assertive utterance is true or false, (...) she is judging whether or not the resulting common ground squares with her broader belief set (Clapp, 2008: 1430).

Briefly put, according to *static semantics* the content of an utterance of a sentence is the proposition that corresponds to the compositionally determined truth-conditions of the sentence relative to the context of utterance. This content is true/false depending on whether the said truth-conditions are met. According to *dynamic semantics* the content of an utterance of a sentence is the difference between the common ground *before* and the common ground *after* the utterance. This content is not itself evaluated for truth. It is the *utterance itself* that is considered to be true if the common ground *after* the utterance accurately represents the interpreter's belief set.

What is the *common ground* then? To answer this question we must first understand the notion of *presupposition*. Clapp (2008)

follows Stalnaker (1974 and 1978) in distinguishing between *semantic* and *speaker* presuppositions. The former are the result of semantic relations between sentences and their semantic contents, while the latter are contextual relations that hold between *speakers* and sentences. *Semantic presuppositions* are propositions the truth of which is required for the proposition expressed by a statement to have a truth-value. "The presuppositions of a proposition, according to this definition, are necessitated by the truth, and by the falsity, of the proposition" (Stalnaker, 1974: 48). *Speaker presuppositions* are "propositions the truth of which the *speaker* takes for granted as part of the background of the conversation" (Stalnaker, 1978: 84).¹ The notion of *speaker presupposition* is central to dynamic semantics, as it is a set of such presuppositions that constitutes the *common ground*.

A proposition is presupposed if the speaker is disposed to act as if he assumes or believes that the proposition is true, and as if he assumes or believes that his audience assumes or believes that it is true as well. Presuppositions are what is taken by the speaker to be the *common ground* of the participants in the conversation (Stalnaker, 1978: 84).

From now on, it is this account of *presupposition* that I will make use of.

2.1. Against *static semantics*

Clapp (2008) argues that only *dynamic semantics* can explain how utterances of negative existential constructions manage to be true and informative. This is so because, if one accepts *static semantics*, "there are only two general strategies of response" (Clapp, 2008: 1423). These are labeled "Meinong's strategy" and "Russell's strategy". Unfortunately for *static semantics*, both such strategies fail. Before considering Clapp's objections against these strategies, it is important to note that there is a third general strategy of response that friends of *static semantics* may follow. These are the so-called "metalinguistic strategies", suggested by

¹ It should be clear that all *semantic presuppositions* of a sentence, in a context where it is competently used to make an assertion, would constitute *speaker presuppositions* of the assertion. The opposite does not hold, as there may be *speaker presuppositions* that are not semantic in nature.

Stalnaker (1978) and proposed by Walton (2000), with different versions developed by Sainsbury (2005) and Everett (2003).² I will consider these strategies in section 5.

Meinong's strategy claims utterances of negative existential constructions are to be interpreted literally, as predicating the property of nonexistence or inexistence to the referent of the noun phrase 'X' (e.g., 'Hamlet'). On this view, such uses express something true if the referent is in fact nonexistent or nonexistent, and false if it is an existent entity. There are multiple reasons one might have for rejecting this strategy, its lack of parsimony being a prominent one. Clapp (2008) offers a different "fundamental" objection. For him, utterances of negative existential constructions are simply "not about, and make no *reference* to esoteric entities" (Clapp, 2008: 1424).

Russell's strategy claims that negative existential constructions are quantificational in nature. On this view, utterances of negative existential constructions deny that there is a unique thing satisfying the descriptions associated to the noun phrase 'X'. This quantificational interpretation is meant to avoid the esoteric entities problem of Meinong's strategy, since there is only quantification and no reference (denotation) on this view. Clapp (2008) identifies another "fundamental problem", this time having to do with the presuppositional commitments of Russell's strategy. The problem is, according to Clapp (2008), "that definite descriptions, like all NPs, carry presuppositions." These are either familiarity or referential presuppositions (or both). If this is so, then Russell's strategy predicts that all utterances of negative existential constructions that, intuitively, convey something true in fact suffer from presupposition failure. This is so because, by definition, any context where such an utterance may be true is a context that does not satisfy either of these presuppositions.

Briefly put, Russell's strategy fails not because of its reference to esoteric entities, but because even though they may be quantificational expressions, definite descriptions carry presuppositions that cannot be satisfied by the context where a negative existential is uttered. If so, then all uses of negative existential expressions are bound to be infelicitous (at best) or simply lack a truth-value (if the unsatisfied presupposition turns out to be semantic in nature).

² Clapp (2008) fails to consider these accounts as genuine options for static semantics, even though they are so.

In what follows I will assume that Clapp (2008) is correct about the above-mentioned *static* strategies. Let me now present Clapp's (2008) own *dynamic* strategy.

3. Corrective Assertions: The dynamic account

Recall that on the *dynamic semantics* framework, the content of an utterance of a sentence is the difference between the common ground *before* and the common ground *after* the utterance, and that to evaluate the truth of an utterance is to consider if the resulting common ground accurately represents the interpreter's belief set. To see how this works, let us consider a more detailed example. Suppose there is a conversation about the interplay between destiny and self-determination in Shakespeare. Suppose, further, that one of the participants in the conversation insists in deriving important practical lessons from Shakespeare's works. In such a context, one may opt out by asserting something like (2).

(2) Let's not forget that Hamlet doesn't exist.

Clapp (2008) proposes that the content of such utterance of (2) be determined by means of a two-step procedure, initiated from a given set of presuppositions shared by the participants (i.e., the common ground). The first step asks us to accommodate the use of a referential expression, together with the presuppositions it carries, into the common ground. This is something the speaker is willing to do in order to felicitously utter (2). Thus, the common ground first includes the referential use of 'Hamlet' and the accompanying existential presupposition that Hamlet exists. The second step consists of a *correction* of the common ground that has included such presuppositions. This correction is achieved once the assertion of the negative existential construction is accepted.

Thus, once the speaker has uttered (2), and her assertion has been accepted, she will have successfully changed the common ground into one that rejects the presupposition that Hamlet exists. This change, from a pro-Hamlet to an anti-Hamlet common ground, constitutes the content of the speaker's utterance of (2). Furthermore, if accepted, the utterance will be true since the resulting common ground accurately represents the speaker's belief set—she believes that Hamlet does not exist. Briefly put, according to Clapp (2008) utterances of negative

existential constructions are a *corrective* kind of speech act by means of which speakers manage to fix the common ground by endorsing her audience's presuppositions just so that they can reject them afterwards.

In what follows I will present a counterexample to this account. But let me first recall some features of the English pronoun 'I'.

4. Problems for the Dynamic Account

On the received view, the first person pronoun of English is such that all of its referential uses are semantically predetermined (see Frege, 1997; Evans, 1985; Perry, 1979; Lewis, 1980; and Elbourne, 2008 among others). The semantic nature of the English indexical expression 'I' is commonly assumed to be such that all competent uses of it do and must refer to the speaker.

Kaplan (1989) offers what is perhaps the best-known account of indexical and demonstrative expressions. On this view, the English pronoun 'I' is semantically associated with a character (e.g., the speaker in the context of utterance) that accompanies each use of the expression in order to pick a semantic value relative to a context. An important feature of this account is that it offers a stable semantics, free from the influence of speaker intentions. Yet "answering machine" cases present a challenge to traditional, semantically stable, accounts of the semantics of 'I' (see Cohen and Michaelson, 2013).

An utterance of (3) is recorded at time t_1 , yet it is heard at a different time, t_2 . Intuitively, when heard at t_2 , the utterance says something true.

(3) I am not here now.

Unfortunately, the semantically stable account predicts that (3) is necessarily false, no matter when it is heard. According to the view, 'I', 'here', and 'now' semantically refer to the speaker, the place and the time of the utterance. By definition, the speaker is always at the place and time of the utterance. It follows that all utterances of 'I am here now' are true, from which it follows that all negations of it, such as (3) are false.

The literature includes a great variety of proposals intended to explain how (3) may be true. Some (see Cohen, 2013; Michaelson, 2013) are rather conservative, in allowing for different characters to be part of the semantics of indexical expressions while still trying to

maintain pragmatic intentions out of the semantic value. Other views explicitly endorse the relevance of pragmatic intentions in determining the content of indexical expressions (see Predelli, 1998, 2002, and 2011; Weatherson, 2002). There are also views that appeal to second order rules (conventions) to explain how it is that the content shifts in these cases (see Corazza, Fish and Gorvett, 2002; Gorvett, 2005).

Whichever solution to the “answering machine” problem turns out to be correct, we are bound to admit that indexical and demonstrative expressions such as ‘I’, ‘here’, and ‘now’ must somehow adapt their semantics to the context in order to pick out the appropriate referent, which need not always be the speaker of the utterance, the time, or the place of the utterance. This may be owed to overriding pragmatic intentions of the speaker, to conventional second order rules associated with referential uses, or to shifting characters of the semantics of ‘I’. For the purposes of this paper, the result is the same. ‘I’ can be used to refer to someone (something) else than the speaker of the utterance at the time and place of the utterance. With this in mind, let us go back to utterances of negative existential constructions.

4.1. I do not exist

Consider the following scenario. Harry is a rather peculiar person. He enjoys working as a Santa Claus impersonator for the holidays at different public venues. Every now and then a remarkably obnoxious child appears, causing Harry to reconsider his goals. When such a thing happens, Harry feels the need to be honest and tell the truth. One day he is dealing with a rather stubborn and smart girl. After Harry has told her explicitly that Santa is nothing more than fiction, the girl replies with (4).

(4) Ch: But how can you not be real? I can see you right there.

Harry feels cornered, so he goes straight to the point by uttering (5).

(5) H: The truth is, I do not exist. Your parents have consistently lied to you. What you see is just a costume.

In so doing, Harry has managed to convey p by simply uttering (6).

p: Santa does not exist.

(6) I do not exist.

The reading of (6), as conveying a true informative content similar to *p*, is clear and intuitive within the context of Harry's utterance. Harry's use of '*I*' must involve some semantic shift; it cannot refer to the speaker of the utterance (i.e., Harry) for it would otherwise be false.³ Accounts of how this shift might take place abound (see above). In this case in particular it seems clear that the speaker manages to refer to the contextually salient fictional character Santa.

Can the dynamic semantics account offered by Clapp (2008) explain how Harry's utterance of (6) manages to be both true and informative? For this to be the case, it must be that the acceptance of Harry's utterance reduces the common ground (i.e., it is informative) and that the resulting common ground accurately represents Harry's belief state (i.e., it is true). As I will show, Clapp's proposal can only meet the first goal, as it does show how the common ground is reduced, but the resulting common ground fails to accurately represent Harry's belief state.

4.2. First Problem: The Indexical Negative Existential

Recall the two-step account of utterances of negative existential constructions. Prior to Harry's assertion of (6), there is a shared set of presuppositions. Harry wants to opt out of this conversation by asserting '*I* do not exist'. To do so, first step, he makes use of '*I*' referentially, thus adding the presupposition that '*I*' has a referent and the presupposition that the speaker exists. Now, if Harry is to follow Clapp's (2008) two-step correction he should make sure that the presupposition that Santa exists is part of the common ground. So far it only seems to be part of his' audience's presuppositions. How can Harry do this?

Here is a rather intuitive, just-so, explanation of how Harry could do so. Harry is aware that his audience does presuppose that Santa exists. So he cooperates with that presupposition and (somehow) signals that he

³ True informative utterances of '*I* do not exist', such as Harry's in (6), seem to be just another "answering machine" case. They exhibit the same apparently paradoxical features of true informative utterances of '*I* am not here now'. According to traditional semantics, an assertion of (6) is always false, since assertions of '*I* exist' are always true, for the speaker of the assertion must exist in order for the assertion to take place. Yet, it is clear that such uses manage to be both true and informative.

shares such presupposition precisely by means of using 'I' referentially while making it clear that he intends to refer to Santa with his use. So let us say that, first step, by making a clear and obvious use of 'I' to refer to Santa, Harry manages to accommodate the presupposition that Santa exists. Now the common ground does include a presupposition that Harry wants to correct away.

But let us not be hasty with this dynamic semantics. We should pause and ask how it is that Harry manages to presuppose that Santa exists by using 'I' to refer to Santa if not by also presupposing that Santa is the speaker of the assertion? In other words, unless Harry also agrees to play along and presuppose that he, Harry himself, is Santa, it seems impossible for him to merely (i.e. directly) presuppose that Santa exists. Harry's audience, the obnoxious child, shares this latter presupposition too. She pretty clearly insists that Harry is Santa, and she makes this clear when she utters (4) prior to Harry's assertion of (5).

(4) Ch: But how can you not be real? Look I can see you right there.

(5) H: Look! The truth is, I do not exist. Your parents have consistently lied to you. What you see is just a costume.

Now we have a complete picture of the common ground prior to Harry's assertion of the negative existential construction 'I do not exist'. The common ground does include the presupposition that Santa exists, the very presupposition that Harry aims at with his correcting speech act by uttering the negative existential construction. But it does not only include this presupposition. It also includes some other presuppositions, like the presupposition that Harry is the speaker, the presupposition that Harry is Santa, and thus the presupposition that Santa is the speaker. It is against this set of shared presuppositions (i) to (iv) that the assertion of the negative existential construction is meant to do its work by reducing it.

Set of Presuppositions of (5):

- (i) Santa exists.
- (ii) Santa is the speaker.

- (iii) Harry exists.
- (iv) Harry is Santa.
- (v) The speaker exists.
- (vi) 'I' has a referent.
- (vii) Harry is the speaker.

The problem for dynamic semantics should be obvious by now. Harry wants to correct the common ground, and so he utters 'I do not exist'. If his assertion is accepted, second step, the resulting common ground will exclude presupposition (i). This is something that Harry wants. But there will be more reduction, as many other presuppositions are tied to (i). Presupposition (i) gets excluded from the common ground once the assertion of (5) is accepted only because the common ground already includes both presupposition (i) and (ii). Yet (ii) is already part of the common ground *in virtue of* the fact that, again prior to the assertion of (5), presuppositions (iii) and (iv) are also included. It is this latter presupposition (iv) that is both essential and problematic for dynamic semantics. It is essential because without it Harry simply cannot refer to Santa by using the indexical expression 'I' and, hence, cannot achieve his goal of eliminating (i) from the common ground by uttering 'I do not exist'. It is problematic, and seriously so, because it ties presuppositions (i) and (iii) together. If presupposition (iv) (i.e., that Harry is Santa) is part of the common ground, then whatever happens to Santa must happen to Harry as long as (iv) is still in the common ground.

More specifically, if the common ground excludes presupposition (i) (i.e., that Santa exists) then it must also exclude presupposition (iii) (i.e., that Harry exists), because (iv) (i.e., that Harry is Santa) *is* part of the common ground. This is clearly a bad result. The goal of Harry's assertion is to modify the common ground so that it rejects the presupposition *that Santa exists*, not the presupposition *that the speaker exists*, much less the presupposition *that Harry exists*. The resulting common ground does not offer an accurate representation of Harry's belief state. So, according to dynamic semantics, Harry has not managed to assert something true, even though it may be informative—after all, the common ground has been reduced.

Notice that this bad result would be avoided if the common ground was to include presuppositions (i) and (iii) only—i.e., that Santa exists and that Harry exists. If such were the case, the speaker could easily get rid of one of them without the other; e.g., she could get rid of the presupposition that Santa exists while keeping the presupposition that Harry exists. Unfortunately, as I said before, such a common ground is simply not one where the speaker can reject (i) by uttering ‘I do not exist’, for that to happen we need to presuppose that Santa is the speaker —i.e., Harry in the present example.⁴

4.3. Second Problem: The Demonstrative Negative Existential

To make sure that this is not an exceptional case against dynamic semantics, let me further elaborate the example so that it includes demonstrative expressions. The result, as will be clear, is the same. Suppose that, as part of the same conversation with Harry, the obnoxious child insists in defending her pro Santa views. So right after Harry’s assertion of (5), the child replies by uttering (7) while pointing at Carl, who happens to be dressed as an elf and enjoys impersonating Alabaster Snowball.

(5) H: The truth is, I do not exist. Your parents have consistently lied to you. What you see is just a costume.

(7) Ch: That cannot be right. Look, even Alabaster exists.

In an effort to stay calm while defending his point, Harry utters (8) while pointing at Carl:

(8) He does not exist either.

Intuitively, Harry has managed to convey q, a true and informative content, while uttering (8).

q: Alabaster Snowball does not exist.

⁴ Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting this observation.

The dynamic semantics account of Harry's assertion of (8) should be familiar by now. Prior to Harry's use of the demonstrative 'He', the common ground does not include the presupposition that Alabaster Snowball exists. The obnoxious child does believe that such is the case, but Harry does not agree. Harry wants to fix this situation. To do so he first uses 'He' to refer to Carl in an attempt to refer to Alabaster Snowball. He succeeds in doing so and in so doing he accommodates the presuppositions *that Alabaster Snowball exists, that Carl is Alabaster Snowball, and that Carl is the demonstrated individual*. By adding such presuppositions Harry has managed to prepare the common ground for his corrective goal. He can now go on to assert the negative existential construction in (8), the acceptance of which will get rid of the presupposition *that Alabaster Snowball exists*, as Harry hopes, but also of the presupposition that Carl exists, given that it is presupposed that Carl is Alabaster. The resulting common ground is *not*, of course, the one that Harry is aiming at with his assertion of (8), for it dramatically fails to represent his belief set.

5. Metalinguistic Static Semantic Accounts

As I said in section 2, there is a third general strategy of response for *static semantics*, one that Clapp (2008) fails to consider. This is the metalinguistic strategy. The central claim guiding metalinguistic strategies is the thesis that negative existential constructions are used to make assertions concerning language itself, in particular, they are used to assert something about the very referential expression involved in the assertion, namely, that it has no referent. As I will show, these views avoid the "fundamental problems" presented by Clapp (2008) against *static semantic* strategies, while at the same time having no trouble to account for the answering machine examples presented in section 4.

Metalinguistic proposals claim that an assertion of (1) conveys (1*) or something equivalent:

- (1) Hamlet does not exist.
- (1*) 'Hamlet' has no referent.
- (1**) Uses of 'Hamlet' fail to refer.
- ...

To see how these accounts work let me consider two of them, Stalnaker's (1978) pragmatic reinterpretation account and Walton's (2000) account of the predicate 'exists' as a metaphorical one.

5.1. Metalinguistic Pragmatic Reinterpretation

After presenting his two-dimensional pragmatic account of assertion, Stalnaker (1978) offers an account of negative existential assertions as one more case of a successful application of his two-dimensional pragmatic (or metasemantic) model:

[F]or true negative existential statements, it seems that proper names must play a different role in the determination of the proposition expressed from the role they play in ordinary predicative statements.

Perhaps a negative existential statement says, simply, that there is no individual standing in the right causal relation to the speaker's use of the name (Stalnaker, 1978: 92-93).

According to Stalnaker (1978) the metalinguistic interpretation of (1) into something like (1*) is the product of a pragmatic mechanism of reinterpretation (i.e., Stalnaker's diagonalization procedure). Once we run the traditional *static* distribution of semantic values to (1) we may realize that the resulting propositions are all pragmatically unacceptable, either because they are trivial (i.e., necessarily false) or ambiguous (i.e., they change from context to context). Thus, reinterpretation is forced upon us. There is one proposition available which is both informative and not-ambiguous, this is the proposition according to which "there is no individual standing in the right causal relation to the speaker's use of the name", in this case 'Hamlet'.

It is not difficult to see how this view can be extended to account for the answering machine examples in section 4. Consider the indexical negative existential in (5) and its metalinguistic interpretation in (5*).

(5) H: The truth is, I do not exist. Your parents have consistently lied to you. What you see is just a costume.

(5*) H: There is no individual named ‘Santa’. Your parents have consistently lied to you. What you see is just a costume.

Take the assertion ‘I do not exist’ in (5), according to *static semantics*, the proposition it expresses is necessarily false. All uses of ‘I’ refer to the speaker, and the speaker must exist in every context of use for there to be such use. Thus, the proposition determined by the *static semantics* of ‘I do not exist’ is pragmatically unacceptable. An interpretation is forced upon the audience. Now, we will fail if we reinterpret the speaker’s use of ‘I’ as referring to Santa, for such interpretation would take the speaker to presuppose that Santa exists and, hence, the resulting proposition would still be necessarily false. Given that the context includes the presupposition that the speaker is Santa, there is an alternative proposition available in the context. This is the proposition according to which there is no individual standing in the referential relation with the name ‘Santa’. This proposition is informative, and it gets the truth-conditions right for the speaker’s use of (5).

5.2. Existence as Metaphor for Referential Success

Walton (2000) proposes a different account. On this view, it is the predicate ‘exists’ that is special in that it does not predicate a property of an object, but success or a lack of it to certain attempts to refer:

To say that Neptune or Falstaff exists (...) is to say that attempts to refer of a certain kind are successful. To say that Neptune or Falstaff does not exist is to say that such referring attempts do not succeed. (...) The impression that Falstaff and Neptune are what we speak of is explained by the fact that we are pretending that this is so—or rather, we pretend to refer successfully by means of the names and to attribute properties to the referents.

In pretending to refer by means of the names, the speaker displays, shows, demonstrates, the kind of attempted reference she is talking about. In attaching the predicate “exists” or “does not exist”, she declares the kind of attempted reference indicated by the use of the name to be successful or unsuccessful; she *avows* or

disavows attempts to refer of that kind (Walton, 2000: 82).

So, according to Walton (2000), (1) expresses the speaker's disavowal of referential uses of 'Hamlet'. Thus, to say that 'Hamlet does not exist' is to say something like d:

d: Hamlet: that was not a successful attempt.

This metalinguistic account certainly has none of the problems identified by Clapp (2008) against *static semantic* accounts. It makes no reference to esoteric entities, and it has no presupposition-failure problems, as evidenced in Russell's strategy. On Walton's account (2008) the speaker's use of the name in an existential construction is metalinguistic. It may carry existential and referential presuppositions associated to the referential attempts, but it is presupposed that a name exists and that a given expression (e.g., 'Hamlet') refers to it. Both presuppositions are satisfied by the context. The predicate 'exists', in turn, expresses either an avowal or a disavowal of such referential attempts. There is no gap in semantic values assigned to 'Hamlet does not exist'. It simply expresses the proposition d.

This account offers a straightforward explanation of answering machine cases of negative existential constructions. They directly disavow attempts to refer of the kind of the pretense. When Harry utters (5) *I do not exist*, he pretends to be Santa and disavows any attempts to refer of the kind Santa. When Harry utters (8) *He does not exist either*, he pretends that Carl is Alabaster and disavows any attempts to refer of the kind Alabaster Snowball.

5.3 Further Alternatives

Aside from Stalnaker's (1978) and Walton's (2000) explicitly metalinguistic accounts, recent views on the semantics of empty names may prove to be useful for a *static semantic* response to the problem of negative existentials. Take, for example, Sainsbury's (2005) theory of reference without referents (RWR).

According to RWR all proper names, whether empty or not, have two semantic values (see Sainsbury, 2005: 45-46). On the one hand, they may (or may not, if empty) have a referent. On the other hand, they all have (and cannot fail to have) what Sainsbury (2005) calls a "referential

condition". This referential condition states that the given name 'N' refers to its referent *o* if and only if *o* is identical to N. On this view, all proper names (whether they have or lack a referent) have at least one level of semantic content, namely, the second level of referential condition. It is in this sense that there can be reference—i.e., meaningful referential use of a name—with referents—i.e., without esoteric entities being referred to by fictional or otherwise empty names.

Even though it is not explicitly presented as such, Sainsbury's (2005) account can be viewed as a metalinguistic one. The "referential condition" level of semantic content to which the theory appeals is, explicitly, a metalinguistic one as it states *about the relevant name 'N'* that it has such and such referential condition. It is this semantic level that accounts for the semantic content and, thus, truth-evaluability of assertions involving names without referents on Sainsbury's (2005) view, including his account of successful uses of empty names in negative existential constructions such as (1).

Aside from the two levels of referential semantic content for names, Sainsbury (2005) proposes a double criterion of truth-evaluation for statements involving proper names. According to this criterion, statements involving empty names are false if and only if (i) they fail to have a referent; or (ii) their referent fails to have the property referred to by the relevant predicate. Since all empty names fail to have a referent, all simple (i.e., non-negated) assertions involving empty names are false. Such is the case of positive existential constructions involving empty names such as 'Hamlet exists'. The statement itself is meaningful in virtue of the referential condition associated to 'Hamlet', yet it is false in virtue of the fact that 'Hamlet' lacks a referent.

It should be clear how Sainsbury's (2005) proposal explains the truth of a negative existential construction such as (1)

(1) Hamlet does not exist.

An assertion of (1) is meaningful because it states a metalinguistic referential condition concerning the name 'Hamlet', and it is true in virtue of the fact that it is the negation of a false statement, namely the statement that *Hamlet exists*. Briefly put, an assertion of (1) asserts that 'Hamlet' has such and such referential conditions and that such conditions fail to be met.

This account can also be extended to explain the problematic answering machine cases of negative existential assertions. When Harry utters (5) he pretends and so he is presupposed to be Santa:

(5) H: The truth is, I do not exist. Your parents have consistently lied to you. What you see is just a costume.

On Sainsbury's view of reference, this use of 'I' will be taken to have the same two levels of semantic content that proper names have. Presumably, this use of 'I' will state that, for something to be the referent of such use of 'I', that thing must be identical to Santa. If so, then an assertion of (5) simply states that such conditions fail to obtain, asserting something like (5**)

(5**) H: There is no individual that meets the referential conditions of my use of 'I', namely, no individual that is identical to Santa. Your parents have consistently lied to you. What you see is just a costume.

6. Final Remarks

Unlike negative existential constructions involving proper names and definite descriptions, indexical and demonstrative negative existential constructions require the accommodation of *extra* presuppositions, that is, more than just the existential and referential presuppositions typically carried by uses of noun phrases across contexts. These *extra* presuppositions are needed to guarantee that appropriate reference is achieved. Unfortunately for *dynamic semantics*, these presuppositions can only do their much needed job by connecting the presuppositions the speaker would like to get rid of (e.g., *that Santa exists* or *that Alabaster exists*) with other presuppositions the speaker would like to keep (e.g., *that Harry exists* or *that Carl exists*). From the point of view of *dynamic semantics*, it would be ideal if the common ground could only include the presupposition *that Santa is the speaker* without including the presupposition *that Harry is Santa*. That, however, is not possible. A common ground with only those presuppositions does not constitute a context where Harry, the speaker, may use the English pronoun 'I' to refer to and say *anything* about Santa.

It seems correct to follow *dynamic semantics* in claiming that the common ground plays an important, perhaps even necessary, role in

determining linguistic meaning. But it would be a mistake to follow *dynamic semantics* all the way into thinking that the presupposition dynamics should be understood as representing *what is said* by an utterance, or that the resulting common ground may be said to be true because it represents the speaker's belief state. At least with respect to indexical and demonstrative negative existential constructions this is simply not the case. Messing with the common ground does not seem to be the goal but the means to succeed in saying what is intended. Speakers seem to take advantage of the common ground dynamics in order to achieve something that would otherwise be difficult to attain. Speakers benefit from the accommodation of presuppositions to get their audiences to hone in on the content they have in mind. Once they achieve this goal, the resulting shape of the common ground becomes less relevant.

If what I have said were true it would be surprising if these were peculiarities of indexical and demonstrative negative existential assertions only.

As theorists we face two alternatives. On the one hand we can follow a general metalinguistic strategy combined with *static semantics* to explain all negative existential assertions. I presented three distinct alternative metalinguistic accounts in section 5. It is not clear why Clapp (2008) does not consider the metalinguistic strategy for *static semantics* in his defense of the alternative *dynamic* model. Some of them, like Stalnaker's (1978) and Walton's (2000), may be rightly considered to be underdeveloped proposals. Others, like Sainsbury's (2005), cannot be so easily dismissed. Either way, the challenge for *static semantics* is, at most, that of fully developing an already existing account (see Sainsbury, 2009 for a review; see Everett, 2003; Sainsbury, 2005; and Friend, 2011 for recent proposals).

On the other hand we can follow Clapp (2008) and stick to *dynamic semantics* while claiming that indexical and demonstrative negative existential assertions are exceptional. The problem for this view is that the call for an exception offers no explanation of the phenomena. *Dynamic semantics* would still be forced to appeal to *static semantics* to account for such exceptional cases.

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