

# BELIEVE IT: THE KING OF FRANCE STILL REIGNS

Adam Rigoni  
University of Michigan

## Introduction

In this paper I will examine and criticize Von Fintel's theory in "*Would you Believe It? The King of France is Back*,"<sup>1</sup> which attempts to explain many people's truth-value intuitions vis a vis sentences containing non-referring definite descriptions. First, I will provide background information needed to understand what motivated Von Fintel's account. Second, I will reconstruct Von Fintel's theory. Third, I will put forward my objection to Von Fintel's explanation of the independence of counter evidence and offer an addition to Von Fintel's theory that will solve this problem.

## I: Background

The truth-value determinacy of sentences containing non-referring definite descriptions<sup>2</sup>, such as

- (1) The King of France is bald.
- (2) The King of France is wise.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Henceforth abbreviated as *Would You Believe It?*

2 Here, and throughout the paper, I ignore phrases like "The whale" in the "The whale is a mammal" where we have a generic use of the definite description. These are largely considered a separate issue and have no bearing on my project in this paper.

3 Somewhere in the dialectic between Russell and Strawson the example used changed from (1) to (2). Both are essentially the same with regards to the characteristics relevant in this paper, but I've listed both for ease of reference.

has long been disputed amongst philosophers of language. Russell famously thought that the truth conditions for such a sentence, or more precisely, the truth conditions for the propositions expressed by such a sentence are (i) there exists one, and only one king of France and (ii) that one is bald<sup>4</sup>. Or more formally, if "b(x)" is a predicate meaning "x is bald" and "k(x)" is a predicate meaning "x is the king of France" then "The king of France is bald," expresses this proposition:  $\exists x [k(x) \ \& \ \forall y [k(y) \ e \ (y=x)] \ \& \ b(x)]$ .

Russell therefore held that "The king of France is bald," expresses a false proposition<sup>5</sup> as it fails to mean the first truth condition, because there does not exist a king of France. For Russell, truth-value gaps are to be avoided as they violate the law of excluded middle: By the law of excluded middle, either 'A is B' or 'A is not B' must be true. Hence either 'the present King of France is bald' or 'the present King of France is not bald' must be true.<sup>6</sup>

Russell is here criticizing Frege's view that such sentences are truth-value indeterminate nonsense. He writes, "One would suppose [on Frege's view] that 'the King of France is bald,' ought to be nonsense; but it is not nonsense since it is plainly false [emphasis added]."<sup>7</sup> Here Russell's appeal to truth-value intuition, emphasized in the quotations, is manifest.

Strawson disagrees with Russell's intuition and analysis. He argues, in *On Referring*, that it is not sentences, but uses of sentences by a speaker in a conversational context, that are true or false. To use (1) or (2) in a

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4 See *Principia Mathematica*, 67-68; *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, 167-180

5 Later in the paper I write of sentences *being* true or false as opposed to *expressing* true or false propositions. Nothing I intend to discuss hinges on this, and a strict Russellian may substitute the latter for the former if he is so inclined.

6 Russell, *On Denoting*.

7 *Ibid.*

conversational context, certain background facts must obtain, namely, that the King of France exists. These are the facts that are implied or presupposed by the use of the sentence. But the absence of these background facts does not make the sentence false, as Russell believes. What happens instead is that the question of falsity never arises and the sentence is truth-value indeterminate.

Strawson writes:

[Using (2) is] to imply that there is a King of France. But this is a very special and odd sense of 'imply'. 'Implies' in this sense is certainly not equivalent to 'entails' (or 'logically implies'). And this comes out from the fact that when, in response to this statement [i.e. (1)], we say (as we should) 'There is no king of France', we should certainly not say we were contradicting the statement that the King of France is wise. We are certainly not saying that it is false. We are, rather, giving a reason for saying that the question of whether it is true or false simply does not arise.<sup>8</sup> (emphasis Strawson's)

Here Strawson is plainly denying Russell's assertion that (1) is plainly false. For clarity of terminology it should be noted that Strawson is here using "implies," but later,

Strawson (1952, 1954) does use the term presupposition and defines it as Frege (1892/1970:69) does: A presupposes B iff A is neither true nor false unless B is true. This has come to be known as the semantic conception of presupposition.<sup>9</sup> Yet Strawson does not deny Russell's assertion completely. He allows that some uses of non-referring definite descriptions do generate intuitively false sentences. He gives the examples along the same lines as these:

- (3) My friend went for a drive with the King of France.
- (4) The Exhibition was visited yesterday by the King of France.<sup>10</sup>

So now there are sentences using non-referring definite descriptions that are clearly judged false, e.g. (3) and (4), and others about which Russell and Strawson have conflicting intuitions regarding their truth-value, e.g. (1) and (2). Let us call the former "clearly false" and the latter "squeamish" following Von Fintel and Strawson, because we are "squeamish" about assigning a truth-value.

This gives rise to the question of whether truth-value intuitions are of any use in determining the semantic status of these phrases. Strawson clearly thinks that in the case of (2) our intuition is one of a truth-value gap. He writes:

Suppose he [who uttered (2)] went on to ask you whether you thought that what he had just said was true, or was false...I think you would be inclined, with some hesitation, to say that you didn't do either.<sup>11</sup>

Yet Russell denies this same intuition, writing:

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 1959: 243-4)<sup>12</sup>

Strawson and Russell are not alone in their intuitions. Von Fintel clearly sides with Strawson in *Would You Believe It?*, while I have largely Russelian intuitions. It seems that

<sup>8</sup> Strawson, *On Referring*, 345-346

<sup>9</sup> Reimer and Bezuidenhout, *Descriptions and Beyond*, 262

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 263

<sup>11</sup> Strawson, *On Referring*, 345

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Von Fintel, *Would You Believe It?*, 273

direct truth-value intuitions just cannot help us sort this matter out. This is the conclusion that Von Fintel (*Would You Believe It?*), Soames (1976: 169) and Thomason (1990:327)<sup>13</sup> have reached as well.

The next candidate for deciding this matter was based on examining presuppositions and how they behave, with a focus on existence presuppositions. It should be noted, as Bach has pointed out, that if “presupposition” is used in the semantic sense, as it is used by Strawson, i.e. A presupposes B iff A is neither true nor false unless B is true, then we have already assumed Russell is incorrect.<sup>14</sup> Even to use presupposition in a loose sense, as the information needed to felicitously use a phrase in conversation, begs the question against Russell because, for him, if there is no object referred to by a definite description, the sentence could be used as felicitously as any other false sentence. What we might want to say is that by “existence presupposition” we mean the condition that the referent of a definite description exists; this is a truth condition for Russell, but a semantic presupposition for Strawson and Von Fintel. Another way of putting this is that for Russell, (I) asserts both that (i) there is a king of France and (ii) he is bald, while for Strawson (I) presupposes (i) there is a king of France and asserts that (ii) he is bald. The point is that for Russell (i) and (ii) should exhibit the same behavior.

Russell’s intuition loses plausibility when scrutinized under Von Fintel’s “Hey, wait a minute test.” The “Hey, wait a minute test” is one Von Fintel uses to determine what the conversational presuppositions are. For example:

- (4) The King of France drives a Mercedes. If a speaker, A, uttered (4) to a listener, B, B might legitimately object:
- (4#) Hey, wait a minute. I had no idea France was still a monarchy.  
But B could not legitimately object:
- (4') Hey, wait a minute. I had no idea he drove a German car!

Hence the dialogue could go:

- A: The King of France drives a Mercedes.
- B: Hey, wait a minute. I had no idea France was still a monarchy

But it could not go:

- A: The King of France drives a Mercedes.
- B: Hey, wait a minute. I had no idea he drove a German car.

Now we can see that (i) behaves differently than (ii) in conversation.

This criticism gets even stronger when one considers the projection of presuppositions. The projection of presuppositions occurs when the presuppositions of a phrase containing a definite description stay with it when it is embedded within a larger sentence structure, while the assertions made by the phrase are not carried over. Consider:

- (5). I hope that the king of France is bald.  
One could, in conversation, reasonably criticize me for not making sense by saying:
- (#5) Hey, wait a minute. I had no idea that France was still a monarchy.  
But it would not be reasonable for someone to criticize me by saying:
- (5'). Hey, wait a minute. I had no idea that he was wise.

<sup>13</sup> For the relevant Soames and Thomason passages, see Von Fintel, *Would You Believe It?*, 274

<sup>14</sup> Reimer and Bezuidenhout, *Descriptions and Beyond*, 263

When you hope that  $X$ , where  $X$  is an embedded clause, you are obviously not asserting  $X$ , so it is illegitimate to complain that the truth of  $X$  is unknown to you (or that you believed it to be false<sup>15</sup>). Hence (5') would be a bizarre objection to make. But (5#) is a legitimate objection because (i) is relevant in making sense of the sentence. Hence (i) differs from (ii) in that (i) is relevant to understanding (5), i.e. it is projected, while (ii) is not. Moreover, (i) is relevant in cases in which the truth of  $X$  is not, which suggests that (i) has a relevance different from a truth condition.

This objection can be evaded while maintaining that there are no truth-value gaps. The objection is pragmatically, i.e. conversationally, based, so Russell and like-minded philosophers could merely say that what makes sense in a conversation is not a good guide to actual truth-values<sup>16</sup>. As Von Fintel notes, there are analyses, e.g. Karttunen and Peters' system (see: Karttunen and Peters 1979), that assume a Russellian two-value semantics and in which pragmatic presuppositions are encoded at an independent level (Would you Believe It?, p. 271).

Thus, it is very odd that Von Fintel grounds his assumption of truth-value indeterminate, i.e. 'gappy', semantics on the basis of how well it functions as a basis for a theory of presupposition behavior. He writes:

One says that a sentence has the semantic presupposition that  $p$  iff the proposition it expresses does not assign a truth-value to the states of affairs where  $p$  does not hold. I will work with a Frege-Strawson semantics for definites:

<sup>15</sup> For example, B is not a legitimate objection in this case:

A. I hope that my girlfriend is happy.

B. Hey, wait a minute. Your girlfriend is not happy.

<sup>16</sup> I do not here wish to engage in a debate about how committed Russell was to base his semantics off of practical concerns. It is enough that his two-value semantics could be maintained in spite of the objection.

(6)<sup>17</sup> The  $P$  is  $Q$  expresses a partial proposition which is defined only for worlds in which there is a unique  $P$  and which is true only in a world  $w$  if the unique  $P$  in  $w$  is  $Q$  in  $w$ .

...This semantics is not one that we can argue for on the basis of raw truth-value intuitions. Rather it's advantages lie in how well it can be used to derive the pragmatic facts about presupposition.<sup>18</sup>

But in the note cited above, he acknowledges that we could have Russellian semantics with an independent level at which pragmatic facts about presupposition can be encoded. There is no reason Von Fintel's presupposition theory could not be encoded at that level and therefore no reason his theory could not be used within a (two-leveled) system of Russellian semantics. Perhaps his claim is that we need a system to deal with presuppositions, which differ from truth-conditions, at some level and that a pure, single-level Russellian system will not allow us to.<sup>19</sup> Yet this is a weaker claim, and it seems that Von Fintel's theory does not accomplish as much as he would like.

Thus the semantic status of phrases like (1) and (2) is still very much up in the air, but another, perhaps more easily answered, question remains: Can we systematically explain the varying truth value intuitions philosophers such as Strawson had about sentences like (3) and (4)? Is there some underlying mechanism at work and, if so, what is it? It is this question that Von Fintel's theory purports to answer directly and, I think, succeeds.

<sup>17</sup> The numbering here is Von Fintel's, not mine. It has no bearing on the numbering in this paper.

<sup>18</sup> Von Fintel, *Would You Believe It?*, 272

<sup>19</sup> I will not pursue this objection any further because it is ancillary to the thrust of Von Fintel's project, as I see it, which is discussed in the preceding paragraph.

### III: Von Fintel's Project

Von Fintel's main goal is to create a theory that explains why most people think a sentence like:

3) My friend went for a drive with the king of France. is false, while they are squeamish about saying a sentence like (1) The King of France is bald. is false. Note that we are here talking about truth-value judgments, which may or may not be helpful guides to actual truth-value. Von Fintel's concern here is with why people reject some sentences with non-referring definite descriptions outright as false but are squeamish about others.

Before Von Fintel constructs his theory, however, he shows, as he should, why previous analyses are incorrect. One tempting way of explaining people's truth-value judgments is to say that they correspond to the presence or absence of existence presuppositions<sup>20</sup>.

The idea is that sentences about which we are squeamish, like (1), have existence presuppositions, while sentences we reject as clearly false, like (3), do not. The theory goes on to claim that we can see which sentences carry existence presuppositions by looking at whether the definite description is in the topic position or in the focus position. If the definite description is in the topic position, then there is an existence presupposition, the failure of which results in us feeling squeamish about assigning it a truth-value. If the definite description is in the focus position, then there is no existence presupposition, and we then judge the sentence clearly false when the presupposition fails to obtain.

It will be helpful<sup>21</sup> to clarify just what

the topic-focus distinction is. The topic of a sentence refers to information that can be considered background information, as it is already common ground between the participants in a conversation.<sup>22</sup> The focus of a sentence refers to the new information presented in the sentence. A clear explanation is given by Reimer and Bezuidhout:

"In English, for example, the subject expression is usually, though by no means invariably used to mark the topic. The predicate expression is then used to make some sort of comment on the topic [the focus aspect of the distinction is sometimes called the "comment" instead of a "focus"]. It-clefting is another device for indicating [the focus aspect of] topic-focus structure. 'It was Mary who visited London' and 'It was London that Mary visited'... are associated with different information structures. In the former case it is already established that someone went to London, and the new information being asserted is that Mary was that person. In the latter case, it is already established that Mary visited some place, and the new information being asserted is that London is that place.<sup>23</sup>

To their examples I add one that does not involve it-clefting:

(6) Adam is hungry.

Here "Adam" is in the topic position, as he is part of the background while the new information, i.e. what is in the focus position, is that he is hungry. Substituting a non-referring definite description in for "Adam" we get a sentence in which the definite description is in topic position, hence it carries and existence presupposition that fails, and thus it makes us squeamish to assign a truth-value to it:

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20 Von Fintel notes (*Would You Believe It?*, 277) that this theory is propounded by Reinhart (1981, 1995); Hajicova (1984); Gundel (1977); Horn (1986); Lambrecht (1994); Erteschik-Shir (1997); and Zubizarreta (198)

21 It is also necessary for those who, like myself before

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reading *Would you Believe it?*, have never heard of the distinction before,

22 Reimer and Bezuidenhout, *Descriptions and Beyond*, 264

23 *Ibid.*, 264

- (7) The King of France is hungry.

This theory accurately predicts our truth-value intuitions in some cases. In (1) “the King of France” is in the topic position and thus there is an existence presupposition we have squeamish feelings about. Yet (3) seems less clear. It appears that the definite description is in the focus position, and the common truth-intuition is that it is clearly false. But does it really lack an existence presupposition?

This is where Von Fintel’s objection comes in. Even granting that (3) lacks an existence presupposition which accounts for our rejecting it as clearly false, he has other examples that most would reject as clearly false, but which have an existence presupposition<sup>24</sup>:

- (8) A: The king of France attended the APEC conference this week.<sup>25</sup>

B: Hey, wait a minute— I had no idea France is still a monarchy.

B’: # Hey, wait a minute— I had no idea that he was at that conference.<sup>26</sup>

Here A makes a claim that most would reject as clearly false. But B legitimately criticizes it by pointing out the lack of a commonly acknowledged referent for the definite description, “the King of France.” B’, on the

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24 It should be noted that this objection only works if one accepts that the “Hey, wait a minute” test accurately indicates which sentences have presuppositions. One could deny the test, but then he would be in a position to have to explain why the absence of certain conditions, which could not be presuppositions nor truth conditions, can be criticized in this way in conversation. An extended discussion of the merits of Von Fintel’s test would be long and tangential at this point, I will assume its accuracy.

25 I have altered Von Fintel’s numbering here and in preceding numbered sentences so it corresponds to the numbering of sentences in this paper. Cf. footnote 9.

26 Von Fintel, *Would You Believe It?*, 277

other hand, illegitimately criticizes him for asserting information that is not common knowledge between the two of them. Because B’s objection is legitimate, (8) has an existence presupposition. But this contradicts the topic/focus theory.

Von Fintel has counterexamples for cases in which the sentence containing the non-referring definite description is embedded in a larger construction, including:

- (9) I hope that the king of France attended the APEC conference this week.<sup>27</sup>

One could, in conversation, legitimately object to (9) by saying

- (9’) Hey, wait a minute— I had no idea France was a monarchy.

Hence, by the “Hey, wait a minute” test, (9) has an existence presupposition as well, despite the fact that the non-referring definite description occurs in an embedded clause.

Yet recall the previous discussion of (3). Recall that it was uncertain whether or not (3) had an existence presupposition, but was clear that the non-referring definite description was in the focus position. Perhaps the topic-focus distinction by itself, without any corresponding presupposition information, is enough to explain our truth-value intuitions.

Alas, Von Fintel has a counter example to this as well:

- (10) I had breakfast with the king of France this morning. He and I both had scrambled eggs.<sup>28</sup>

In the second sentence of (10) the definite description, or the pronoun that goes in for

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27 *Ibid.*, 277

28 *Ibid.*, 277 (Von Fintel’s superscript “F”s have been omitted because I am not using that notation)

it, is in the topic position, but the sentence is still rejected as clearly false.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the topic-focus distinction is utterly useless in helping us explain people's truth-value intuitions. Von Fintel then turns to an analysis given by Lasersohn, upon which Von Fintel's own analysis is closely based. Von Fintel presents what is essentially Lasersohn's theory, but within a simpler framework.<sup>30</sup> I will not bother going through all the reconstructions and revisions Von Fintel does in examining the theory. Instead I will outline it and present its final form using the epistemic revision that completes the reconstruction.

The idea is that we reject sentences with non-referring definite descriptions as clearly false when we can assign the truth-value independently of knowledge about the non-existence of the relevant referent. Lasersohn writes:

[a statement of the aforementioned sort] can...be judged false, provided the context makes it possible to determine that the statement could not possibly be true regardless of whether the term has reference or not... Why is it that someone who points at an empty chair and says The King of France is sitting in the chair seems to be saying something false? I would like to suggest it is because even if we suspend our knowledge that there is no King of France, there is no way of consistently extending our information to include the proposition that the King of France is sitting in that chair. Such an extension is impossible because we know the chair to be empty. In contrast, if we suspend our know-ledge that there is no King of France, our information may then be extended to include the proposition that the King of France is bald (1993:115).<sup>31</sup>

29 Or so Von Fintel claims. I'm not sure that the second sentence is any more clearly false than (1), but there is no use nitpicking about intuitions and Von Fintel has apparently done some empirical research (Von Fintel, *Would You Believe It?*, 293) to support some of his claims, although not this one in particular.

30 Von Fintel, *Would You Believe It?*, 280

31 *Ibid.*, 280

A simpler way of understanding this is to think of it in terms of even if -conditionals. Consider:

- (11) Even if there is a king of France  
(which there isn't), he is still not bald.
- (12) Even if there is a king of France  
(which there isn't), he is still not sitting  
in that chair/that chair is still empty.<sup>32</sup>

We are likely to assent to (12) but not to (11) and hence we judge "the king of France is sitting in that chair" to be clearly false and feel squeamish about "the king of France is bald."

Von Fintel formalizes this system into a rule for rejection of a sentence as clearly false<sup>33</sup>. I will here have to introduce some of his notion because Von Fintel distinguishes between what he calls pragmatic truth and falsity, which he denotes by "TRUTH" and "FALSITY," and semantic truth and falsity, which he denotes by "1" and "0".<sup>34</sup> For Von Fintel this is important because he is assuming Frege/Strawson semantics and hence all sentences with non-referring definite descriptions are semantically truth value indeterminate, even those we would reject as clearly/pragmatically false. For Von Fintel some FALSE sentences are semantically neither true nor false. For a Russellian, FALSE sentences are merely a subset of semantically false sentences, i.e. those assigned "0." I find this use of numbers and capitalized letters confusing so I will simply write "pragmatically

32 *Ibid.*, 283

33 Bearing in mind that is a system for pragmatic, conversational rejection. Just because we do not reject a sentence as clearly false, does not touch on whether it is semantically false. We could still have the semantics independent of the pragmatics *a' la* Karttunen and Peters' system (Karttunen and Peters 1979). See pages 7-8 of this paper.

34 Von Fintel, *Would You Believe It?*, 280

false” where Von Fintel would write “FALSE” and “pragmatically true” where Von Fintel would write “TRUE.” Accordingly, I will write “semantically true” where he would write “1” and “semantically false” where he would write “0.”

More notation is needed to get to the formalization. Let D stand for a given body of information, modeled as a consistent set of propositions. We accept sentences as true or reject them as false with respect to this body of information. Let S stand for a sentence. Let p stand for a proposition that is presupposed by S, e.g. “the King of France exists.” We also need an epistemic revision process that goes as follows:

Common-sense epistemic revision  
 Remove  $\neg p$  from D. Remove any proposition from D that is incompatible with p. Remove any proposition from D that was in D just because  $\neg p$  was in D. Add p to D. Close under logical consequence.<sup>35</sup>  
 Let D\* be the result of revising D in the above way. The procedure for rejection as pragmatically false is then:

### Rejection

Reject S as pragmatically false with respect to D if and only if for all worlds w compatible with D\*, S is semantically false.

Note that in any world compatible with D\*, S will have a definite truth value because its presuppositions are fulfilled in D\*, by definition of D\*.

Lasersohn’s theory will accurately predict some of our intuitions. For example:

- (13) The king of France is sitting in the chair next to me.

is rejected as pragmatically false because the information (in proposition form) that the chair next to me is empty remains in D\*. Conversely, (1) is not rejected as pragmatically false, because the information that the king of France is not bald is not available in D\*. With (1) we don’t reject it, but we certainly can’t accept it, and hence we feel squeamish about it.

Unfortunately, there are counter-examples to this theory as well. Von Fintel offers two examples:

- (14) The King of France is on a state visit to Australia this week.  
 (15) (Coming across an abandoned cell phone on a park bench) This cell phone was left here by the king of France.<sup>36</sup>

Most people reject (14) and (15) as pragmatically false, but under Lasersohn’s theory they should be squeamish about them, because our reason for believing the king of France is not in Australia and that he did not leave the cell phone is that the king of France does not exist.<sup>37</sup> (15) is especially damaging because it fails Lasersohn’s even-if conditional test too:

- (16) Even if there is a king of France (which there isn’t), this cell phone was left by someone else.<sup>38</sup>

We would not accept (16) as being pragmatically true (nor semantically true for that matter).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 283

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 285

<sup>37</sup> More specifically in the cell phone case, that no king of France existed when cell phones did.

<sup>38</sup> Von Fintel, *Would You Believe It?*, 285

The question then is, what differentiates (I) from (I4)? Von Fintel's insight, upon which his theory is based, is this:

In the case of (I6) but not of (I), there is a contextually salient entity whose properties (known or not known) are in principle enough to falsify the sentence. In (I) there is no contextually salient entity mentioned (other than the king of France) whose properties could establish that (I) is false. In (I6), Australia is made salient and can thus furnish an independent foothold for falsification.<sup>39</sup>

In other words, we can make use of information, the only basis for which is that there is no king of France, if we could, in principle, obtain that same information independent of the king's non-existence, from a source that is contextually salient. This is formalized in a modification of the procedure for epistemic revision found on page I4:

- Von Fintel's Conversational Revision
- Remove  $\neg p$  from D.
- Remove any proposition from D that is incompatible with p.
- Remove any proposition from D that was in D just because  $\neg p$  was in D, unless it could be shown to be true by examining the intrinsic properties of a contextually salient entity.
- Add p to D. Close under logical consequence.<sup>40</sup>

Call the result of revising D in the above manner D!. The procedure for rejecting a sentence as pragmatically false is then:

Rejection

Reject S as pragmatically false with respect to D if and only if for all worlds w compatible with D!, S is semantically false.

Von Fintel does not specify "what counts as a contextually salient entity of the right kind and what exactly it means to say that the intrinsic properties of that entity are enough to falsify the sentence."<sup>41</sup> Von Fintel says, as an approximation, that "contextually salient entities will be those mentioned in the sentence" and that he will not have much else to say about this (Ibid). Herein lies a problem, but I want to ignore this for now. It is important, first, to see how the theory works, for I think it is essentially correct and it works well.

The theory can explain, for example, why (I) makes us squeamish but sentences like the following do not:

- (I7) Among the bald people in the world is the king of France.
- (I8) The king of France is one of the bald people in the world.

(I) does not make salient, nor even mention, the set of bald people in the world. Von Fintel notes, "the predicate bald is not even a referring expression" (Von Fintel, *Would you Believe it?*, p.286). Conversely (I7) and (I8) do make such an entity salient, and on the basis of the king of France not being a member of the set of all bald people in the world, we can reject them as pragmatically false.

For Von Fintel, a contextually salient entity does not have to be an entity of the usual kind. He gives examples of claims about

particular episodes, which most would reject as pragmatically false, such as:

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 286

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

(19) The king of France is jogging now.<sup>42</sup>  
I suppose the idea is that this makes salient the set of events happening right now. The properties that count as intrinsic are also broad, as Von Fintel uses this as an example of a sentence we would reject as pragmatically false that his theory accounts for:

(20) The king of France owns this pen.<sup>43</sup>  
Apparently previous owners falls under the intrinsic properties of the pen in question. The rejection of (15) as pragmatically false would be explained in the same way.<sup>44</sup>

Von Fintel further goes on to claim that the contextually salient entity need not be mentioned in any sentence. He writes:

The contextually salient entity may not have to be mentioned in the same (or any) sentence. David Pesetsky (pers. comm.) reports that The King of France is bald can be judged false [i.e. rejected as pragmatically false] if made in the presence of a list that enumerate all the reigning monarchs of the world together with their hairstyle. (Von Fintel, *Would you Believe it?*, p.287)

This claim is important to bear in mind because he unknowingly contradicts it later and my objection is based on a similar thought.

So far, so relatively good. But Von Fintel has to explain how independent the

counter evidence has to be from the failed presupposition. Von Fintel<sup>45</sup> points out that (1) and (21) The man who Sandy went out with last night is bald [assuming there is no man Sandy went out with last night]<sup>46</sup>.

Both make salient entities whose intrinsic properties could falsify the sentence, i.e. France and Sandy, respectively, yet both, he claims, make us squeamish. Compare these sentences with (14), which we reject as pragmatically false:

- (1) The King of France is bald.  
Counter Evidence: France does not have a bald king
- (21) The man who Sandy went out with last night is bald [assuming there is no man Sandy went out with last night].  
Counter Evidence: Sandy did not go out with any man last night.
- (14) The king of France is on a state visit to Australia this week.

Counter Evidence: Australia is not being visited by the king of France this week.

In each case, the only reason we have to believe the counter evidence to be true is that the existence presupposition of the definite description fails. Von Fintel's solution is this:

The counter-evidence in (14) is in principle epistemically independent of the offending [read: non-obtaining] presupposition. While we believe it to be true just because we believe the presupposition to be false, we could conceivably show it to be true while not showing the presupposition to be false.

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42 *Ibid.*, 287

43 *Ibid.*

44 There is a problem for Von Fintel in that he later uses the example of "The King of France heard about the car accident on the turnpike last night" (Von Fintel, *Would you Believe it?*, 289) and claims that we feel squeamish about it because the intrinsic properties of the car crash do not include who heard about it. Yet if the intrinsic properties of "this pen" extend to past ownership, then it seems arbitrary that the intrinsic properties of "the car accident" do not extend to who heard about it. I wish to ignore this here, as I frankly do not have an explanation nor solution for it.

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45 Von Fintel, *Would You Believe It?*, 287

46 I am not at all convinced that this example makes us squeamish. In fact, I think it can be rejected as false. But I will grant Von Fintel that it does for now.

We could travel to Australia and see what's going on.

In contrast, the potential counter evidence in (1) [and (2I)] is not epistemically independent of the non-existence of the king of France [or the man who went out with Sandy], even in principle. As soon as we show that France does not have a bald king, we will have show that France does not have a king at all.<sup>47</sup>

But this solution fails and the claims it is based on are simply wrong.

#### IV: The Objection and Solutions

Before I demonstrate why Von Fintel is wrong, it should be pointed out that if his analysis is correct, then he has still flatly contradicted a claim he made just three pages earlier in the article. If the counter-evidence must be able to, in principle, falsify the sentence without showing the presupposition to be false, then David Pesetsky's list that enumerates all the reigning monarchs of the world together with their hairstyle<sup>48</sup> would not be acceptable counter-evidence. For if we looked at such a list, we would see that the king of France was not on it and thus would have shown that he does not exist, i.e. that the presupposition has failed.

Von Fintel is wrong here because his claim that we could not show, by examining France, that the king of France is not bald without showing that France does not have a king, is false. We must distinguish between "showing" and "examining." Von Fintel sometimes writes of getting counter evidence by showing it to be true, as if "showing" were some activity in the world, e.g. "We travel to Australia

and see what's going on."<sup>49</sup> But at other times, when he is writing his formal rules, he writes of getting counter evidence by "examining" intrinsic properties, where "examining" seems more like an abstract mental exercise.<sup>50</sup> My objection is that whether we "show" the evidence to be true or get the evidence from "examining" properties his claim is still false.

We could "show" that the King of France is not bald by going to France and seeing what is going on, without showing that there is no King of France. We could see a poster with pictures of every king of France, without dates of their reigns, and notice that there is no bald guy in the picture. The same information could be represented on a list, much like Petesky's, where every king of France (without dates) and their hairstyle is listed. The evidence could be more manageable: It could be a picture entitled "The Last 5 Kings of France" or one of "All Kings of France since 1700", or the same information on a list. It could even be a picture of the most recent King of France<sup>51</sup>. If we don't see a bald man on any of these pictures or lists, we would have evidence to falsify the assertion that the King of France is bald. We would not, however, have shown that there is no King of France. So, on Von Fintel's theory, we should not be squeamish in this case, but we clearly are not.

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49 *Ibid.*, 290

50 *Ibid.*, 286, 290

51 It might be objected that in some of these cases, namely ones with the most recent king, we would be falsifying based on a false assumption. That is, we would be falsifying on the assumption that the most recent king is the current king. I am not sure that this weakens the objection because I'm not certain if that assertion is false given that the king of France exists. In any case, we could read a plaque, perhaps at a museum, that states that France has never had a bald king. Now this leaves no room for incorrect identity statements, but still shows Von Fintel to be mistaken.

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47 Von Fintel, *Would You Believe It?*, 290

48 *Ibid.*, 287

But perhaps the whole idea of “showing” as some action we undertake is bizarre and the “real” analysis deals with “examining.” Yet an examination of the intrinsic properties of France could still show that there is no bald king, without showing that there is no king at all. I will suppose that the properties we examine are in the form of propositions. Any of the following propositions will suffice:

- P1. France has never had a bald king.
- P2. None of the last 5 kings of France has been bald.
- P3. Since 1700, no king of France has been bald.

Now it may be objected that these propositions are not “intrinsic.” But on what grounds is this based? If propositions identifying past owners are intrinsic properties of a pen, then I see no reason why these are not intrinsic properties of France. The Sandy example, (21), can be dealt with the same way:

- P4. Sandy never dates bald men.  
One way of getting out of this is to claim that we cannot just selectively examine intrinsic properties. Instead, we have to examine all the intrinsic properties. Call this the total knowledge solution. Now the total knowledge solution seems to help us, because surely if we knew all the intrinsic properties of France, under Von Fintel’s broad interpretation of intrinsic, we would know that France is not a monarchy.

But the total knowledge solution fails because now Australia in (14) is in the same boat as France in (1). Total knowledge of intrinsic properties could extend to things like laws, and Australia might have a law that if

France has a king in 2006, then they paint all their government buildings blue. But we would also know that all their government buildings are not blue, and no painting projects are under way. Then, by *modus tollens*, we know that there is no king of France. It could also be that Australia celebrates a national holiday called “End of the French Monarchy Day,” that celebrates the end of the French Monarchy. Surely total knowledge of the intrinsic properties of Australia includes what holidays its citizens celebrate.

But perhaps this objection to the total knowledge solution seems strange, because Australia does not have such a law nor celebrate such a holiday. Let me present a clearer example:

- (22) The Russian Tsar is on state visit to Ukraine this week.

Now this exactly parallels (14) and hence should be rejected as pragmatically false. But countries in the USSR, before it collapsed of course, celebrated “The Great October Socialist Revolution” or “Revolution Day” (now called “The Day of Accord and Reconciliation” in Russia) on November 7<sup>th</sup>, which commemorates the 1917 Russia Revolution that disposed the last Russian Tsar. So it is a property of Ukraine that it used to celebrate this holiday. If one were to be a smart-aleck and claim that intrinsic properties only refer to current conditions, then he would be at a loss to explain (i) why past owners are intrinsic properties of a pen and (ii) why this same sentence, uttered in 1960 when Ukraine was part of the USSR and did celebrate the holiday, would be rejected as pragmatically false then but not now.

In lieu of the failure of the total knowledge solution, I put forth my own. I propose that we should simply exclude entities that occur as part of the definite descriptions from being

contextually salient entities that we can use to falsify the sentence. That is to say, phrases that function as adjectives on the noun-head of the article “the” cannot be contextually salient entities that can be used to falsify the sentence. Consider “of France” in (1); there “France” is part of a genitive adjectival phrase modifying “the king.” Hence France cannot be used as an entity to falsify the sentence. Conversely, “Australia” in (14) and “Ukraine” in (22) can be used for falsification.

Now this solution accounts for all the same intuitions that Von Fintel’s does, but it solves the problem of the independence of counter-evidence. Yet it could be objected that the solution is arbitrary and ad hoc. In response to this, I point out that Von Fintel’s whole system is constructed as a result of modifying Lasersohn’s to account for problems with his own. I also point out that adjectives and adjectival phrases that are part of the definite description are part of what we assume when we assume that the existence presupposition holds. Consider:

- (24). The Jewish King of France is bald.  
 Here, part of what we presuppose is not just that there is a king of France, but that he is Jewish. It seems natural that the parts of what compose a non-referring definite description cannot be used to falsify it when we suppose that the whole phrase refers.

I want to flesh out my solution a bit more with regards to relative clauses. Consider:

- (25) The King of France, who is eating pancakes in Australia, is bald.

Now (25) mirrors (21)—the Sandy sentence— and should therefore make us squeamish. If it does, then I have nothing to

add to my proposal that will interest you. But I, myself, feel that this sentence can be rejected as pragmatically false. I feel that same way about (21). My reasons are, in (25) we could find out that no bald people are eating pancakes in Australia, just as (21) we could find out that Sandy never dates bald men. To accommodate my intuitions, which do not correspond to Von Fintel’s, I add an exception to my exclusionary rule so: Contextually salient entities that we can use to falsify the sentence cannot be a part of the definite description, unless they are a part of clause that is embedded within the definite description. I openly acknowledge that this is ad hoc, but it is only necessary to accommodate my own peculiar truth intuition.

My solution allows for Pesetsky’s list of the reigning monarchs to stand, because a list that is external to the sentence is obviously not part the definite description. Unfortunately Pesetsky’s assertion and Von Fintel’s endorsement of it are incorrect. My solution cannot be used in place of Von Fintel’s rule that the counter evidence must be such that it could be shown to be true while at the same time the presupposition is not shown to be false. My solution by itself could not account for the following:

- (26) The king of France is one of the current reigning monarchs.

Nothing in my solution rules out the set of current reigning monarchs as a contextually salient entity. Yet this sentence is surely one that makes most squeamish. This is because there is no way to show that the king of France is not part of the set of reigning monarch while this showing that the king of France exists. So my proposal is in addition to, not in place of, Von Fintel’s other rules for independence of counter evidence.

Finally, there are two ways of reading my exclusionary rule, between which I will remain neutral. Consider:

(27) The king of France lives in France.

If most people reject this sentence as pragmatically false, then my solution will be that entities made salient within the definite description cannot be used as contextually salient entities in the relevant sense, unless they are made salient again, outside of the definite description. If this sentence makes most people squeamish, as I am inclined to think it will, then my solution will be that entities made salient within the definite description cannot be used as contextually salient entities in the relevant sense, regardless of whether they are made salient in another part of the sentence.

V: Summary:

It is clear from the previous discussion of alternatives, e.g. topic focus, Lasersohn's, that Von Fintel's system for explaining our truth-value intuitions is the best one available. Still, it suffers from some flaws, primarily stemming from a poor explanation of the independence of counter evidence and of what counts as a contextually salient entity that can be used to falsify the sentence. Yet, these problems can be remedied by excluding entities made salient within the definite description. Thus his system can still be an effective explanation of our truth-intuitions.