**Empty Names, Presupposition Failure and Metalinguistic Negation**

I will present a new metalinguistic account for negative singular existence statements in which an empty name occurs and defend it from various prima facie issues.

**Word count: 6,963 Characters (with spaces): 42,121**

When it comes to empty names, we have reached little consensus. Still, we seem to all agree that our semantics should assign truth to (at least one reading of) negative singular existence statements in which an empty name occurs. In order to stay neutral on what names are empty, let’s add one to English: ‘Gnoniem’. Our starting point is that there should be at least one reading of

1. Gnoniem does not exist

that comes out true. We all have a strong intuition that (1) is true (Everett 2007, 56; Thomasson 2003b, 215), it is a datum (van Inwagen 2003, 146), it is obviously (Braun 1993, 452), evidently true (Salmon 1998, 277). Because we all agree on this datum, the reasoning usually goes, we should also agree on a desideratum for any semantics: it should be possible to use an empty name in a true sentence even before considering complex cases, such as attitude attributions. For our purposes, the key word is ‘use’. While it is usually taken to be ‘obvious’ (Evans 1982, 344) that the name is used in (the true reading of) (1), I will show that ruling out that the name is mentioned is harder than has been thought. I will start from suggesting a metalinguistic account of (1), which is different from the usual metalinguistic approach heavily criticized in the literature. I will then show that the objections moved to the usual account do not hit the new account. Moreover, I will reply to objections that might be taken to arise concerning specifically my view. The conclusion will be that since there is a viable metalinguistic account of (1), contrary to a widely shared opinion, we are not entitled to take sentences such as (1) to obviously create a desideratum for any semantics for empty names as *used*.

**1. The new metalinguistic account**

In this paper we will assess whether it is possible explain the intuition that (1) is true by holding either that the true reading of (1) is

1. Not ‘Gnoniem exists’,

or that (2) is the true metalinguistic counterpart of (1) our intuition is in fact about. (2) is only a handy way to make the mention explicit. What is crucial is to see the negation occurring in (2) as metalinguistic (Horn 1989, §6), i.e. the material falling in the scope of the negation is mentioned and (2) expresses something along the lines that ‘Gnoniem exists’ is objectionable. With metalinguistic negation the objection can be based ‘on any grounds whatever’ (Horn 1989, 363), in particular on presuppositional failure (Carston 1996, 316-318; Geurts 1998, 302-303; Horn 1989, 392) and this is why (2) is true. For proper names presuppose that there is a referent[[1]](#footnote-1):

Speakers and hearers normally presuppose that the proper names they use have referents. Even if you are not previously familiar with how I use the word “Jane”, if I tell you that Jane lives next door, you will take for granted that there is such a person as Jane. The inference is presupposition-based, as shown by the fact that it is equally appropriate if I tell you that Jane does not live next door. (Sainsbury 2018, 81)

We can then fully specify the proposal as follows: either (1) has a use and a mention reading and its true reading is (2), where ‘Gnoniem exists’ is objected to correctly on the grounds of presupposition failure, or our intuitions about (1)’s truth are in fact about the true (2).

A metalinguistic account of the truth of (1) is appealing. First, it commits us to neither particular accounts of existence nor of proper names. Moreover, it is ontologically appealing. While it naturally combines with a parsimonious ontology and with the idea that all true negative existence statements are to be accounted for metalinguistically, the account might in fact be appealing also for defenders of more generous ontologies, who might be happy to hold that, in some true negative singular existence statements, names are used and refer to objects that do not exist. My ‘Gnoniem’ was completely made up and we can even suppose that I introduced it by mistake, as in the case of Kroon’s ‘Max’ (2003, 156): I uttered a word which I did not intend to be a name, you mishear it as a name, the name catches on and now we have the empty ‘Gnoniem’. Hence, one might hold, ‘Gnoniem’ cannot correspond to an object, as there is no object we can have cognition of, representations, presentations or ideas about (Meinong 1904, 76; 92). Still, (1) is true and then a metalinguistic account of (1) is appealing even for defenders of generous ontologies.

A metalinguistic account of (1) has already been suggested (Frege 1906, 191; Thomasson 2003a, 141; 2004, 217; van Inwagen 2003, 146).[[2]](#footnote-2) According to it, (1) is somehow equivalent to

1. ‘Gnoniem’ does not refer.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This account is different from the one I am suggesting. First, while according to the usual account only the name is mentioned, according to our new account the full ‘Gnoniem exists’ is. Secondly, only the traditional account, in taking only ‘Gnoniem’ to be mentioned, should take ‘to exist’, as it occurs in (the true reading of) (1), to contribute something along the lines of what ‘to refer’ designates. Finally, the two accounts share the idea that the truth of (1) is to be somehow *accounted for* in terms of the emptiness of ‘Gnoniem’. But only on the traditional account are (1) and (3) somehow equivalent, in terms of sharing truth-conditions (Thomasson 2003a) or expressing the same proposition (van Inwagen 2003, 146), while on the new account the emptiness of ‘Gnoniem’ is the reason why it is correct to object to ‘Gnoniem exists’.

While these differences might look negligible, we will see that they are crucial. Many objections have been put forward against the usual view and because of them, it is widely considered incorrect. As we will now see, none of those objections shows that our view is incorrect.

**2. The usual objections**

**2.1 Ad hoc**

It is often lamented that the usual metalinguistic view is ad hoc, making empty names somehow special (Crimmins 1998, 33; Evans 1982, 344; Everett 2007, 59; 75-76; Kroon 2000, 98).

It is clear that this objection does not apply to our proposal, as the phenomena we are relying on are general. Since metalinguistic negation is not tied to names, the account can be smoothly extended, for example, to negative existence statements in which other denotational devices occur, and since it is not tied to ‘to exist’, to sentences such as

1. Gnoniem is not bald.

Obviously, the account is tied to negation, though, so it is silent on whether sentences such as

1. Gnoniem exists
2. Gnoniem is bald

have a truth-value. The account takes (5)-(6) to suffer from presupposition failure and this is a first step toward providing a semantics for such sentences, but what the metalinguistic view shows us is exactly that the truth of (readings of) (1) and (4) can be taken to neither depend on nor determine whether (5)-(6) have truth-values, exactly as the truth of ‘I did not quit smoking. I never smoked!’, where the negation is metalinguistic, objecting to the presupposition that I have been a smoker, neither depends on nor determines whether ‘I quit smoking’ is false or lacks truth-value. It is a positive feature of the view that it does not commit us to any fully-fledged account of (5)-(6), as it can then be supplemented by the preferred account for sentences that suffer from presuppositional failure but in which negation does not occur, as well as by a variety of accounts for proper names and existence.

**2.2. Contrary to appearance**

As Braun rightly notes, in taking

1. Gnoniem does not exist
2. ‘Gnoniem’ does not refer

to be somehow equivalent, the usual metalinguistic view ‘has the unattractive feature that negative existentials are about words and semantical relations, though they don’t appear to mention either’ (1993, 455. See also Evans 1982, 344).

A palatable aspect of our metalinguistic view is that

1. Not ‘Gnoniem exists’,

is not about any fancy semantical tool. The view does take speakers to mention words, though. But, as Saka remarks, ‘it is downright normal, outside of scholarly writing, to exclude quote marks’ (Saka 1998, 118). The fact that (1) might not appear to mention words, should not be taken to show that words are in fact not mentioned.

One might reply that, even though usual speakers mix or confuse use and mention, philosophers are better at these things, and to philosophers (1) does not look to be about language.

But, as Schnieder remarks while discussing metalinguistic negation, it would be ‘a folly to think that philosophers … are an exception’ (2006, 46). What would the rationale be, given in particular that even Geach wrote ‘Lo-sou was the name the Chinese gave to Bertrand Russell’ (2006, 267), no quotes, no italics? Examples abound. As Schnieder remarks, we all saw arguments along the following lines:

A thing can have the property of being solid

A thing cannot have being solid

Therefore, being solid is not a property.

If being philosophers made us immune to the use/mention mixing or confusion, we would all immediately realize that the second premise is metalinguistic, as it is otherwise ungrammatical, and that the conclusion does not then follow. Still, arguments like this are there and then the fact that (1) ‘doesn’t appear’ to philosophers to mention words does not show that this is the case.

**2.3. Anaphora**

In urging that in negative singular existence statements names are used, Kroon relies on the term-resilience test: if terms are genuinely being used, then they, or their anaphoric proxies, should also have a use in surrounding contexts (2000, 98). He provides examples such as

1. Murphy does not exist. She is the TV character played by Bergen. Murphy is a blond media anchor-goddess,

and holds that since the second occurrence of ‘Murphy’ is used and ‘she’ refers to Murphy, the test tells us that the first occurrence of the name is used too.

Kroon is surely right that there is something intuitive in the test, but it does not survive scrutiny. Take

1. Yui is my new colleague. Yui is a Japanese name, but she is actually from Toronto.

The first occurrence of ‘Yui’ is used, but the second is mentioned. Old cases discussed by Partee (1973, 412) are counterexamples concerning anaphora:

1. As soon as he asked ‘Where is Jane?’, she arrived

shows that anaphora can obliterate the use/mention distinction. Despite the fact that ‘she’ is used, ‘Jane’ seems mentioned and not just because it occurs in quotation marks, but also because ‘Where is Jane?’ is a direct report, as the typical indirect report is instead ‘where Jane was’ (Schlenker 2003, 68-69). Since there are plenty of counterexamples to Kroon’s test, it is unable to prove that ‘Gnoniem’ is used in true negative singular existence statements.

While examples such as (7)-(9) concern only one name, one might wonder whether cases with different names, such as

1. Unlike Obama, Gnoniem does not exist,

can show that ‘Gnoniem’ is used. For in (10) ‘Obama’ stands for Obama, not for a name and if we were to make explicit the contrast we would utter something along the lines of ‘Unlike Obama, who exists, Gnoniem does not exist’. But then according to our metalinguistic view, the true reading of (10), or the true sentence (10) is confused with, expresses that unlike Obama (who exists), ‘Gnoniem exists’ is objectionable. The fact that ‘to exist’ is used for Obama and mentioned for ‘Gnoniem’ is to be explained as another case of use/mention obliteration. But (10) seems to raise a different issue: why is the ‘unlike’ perfectly appropriate, if we have that Obama exists on the one hand and the objectionability of a sentence on the other?

To answer this question, it is useful to consider

Unlike you, I did not quit smoking, I never smoked!

On one reading, (11) can be taken to express that you quit smoking, that ‘I quit smoking’ is objectionable for presupposition failure and that I never smoked. How can we explain the ‘unlike’? An explanation is that since ‘you quit smoking’ and ‘I quit smoking’ are indeed unlike each other as only the second is objectionable, so by mixing or confusing ‘you quit smoking’ and that you quit smoking we can take also ‘I quit smoking’ and you, who quit smoking, to be similarly unlike each other. Also with ‘unlike’, use/mention obliteration seems then possible. By relying on this explanation, which concerns neither names nor ‘to exists’ in particular, we can then hold that ‘Gnoniem exists’ is indeed unlike Obama, who exists, as it is unlike ‘Obama exists’. Thus the view can provide an account for sentences such as (10), which do not prove, either, that ‘Gnoniem’ should be taken as used in negative singular existence statements.

**2.4. Quantifiers**

Everett (2007, 75-76) observes that the usual metalinguistic view struggles with truths such as

1. Some of the places it is claimed Peer Gynt visits, Solveig, and the king of the mountain trolls, do not exist.

We already saw that our view can be easily extended to ‘The king of the mountain trolls does not exist’, but

1. Some of the places it is claimed Peer Gynt visits do not exist

is more difficult. Clearly,

1. Not ‘Some places it is claimed Peer Gynt visits exist’

cannot be its true metalinguistic reading or counterpart: (14) is false, since the Theban Necropolis exists. We can take, though, something along the lines of

1. For some x for a place it is claimed Peer Gynt visits, not ‘x exists’,[[4]](#footnote-4)

where the ‘x’ stands for names that aim at standing for places claimed to have been visited by Peer Gynt, and so also names that try but do not manage to do so, as the places do not exist, so that (15) is true.

Three things to note. First, we have here an objectual quantifier ranging over names, not a substitutional (Barcan Marcus 1972) or special quantifier (Hofweber 2000). Still, one might think that taking the quantifiers to range over names generates some of the problems that plague substitutional quantifiers, in particular the many-names problem (we saw that the no-name problem is accounted for by the fact that we are not tied to proper names). Suppose Peer Gynt visits exactly 4 places, only two of which do not exist but each of which has 100 names. While

Precisely two of the places Peer Gynt visited don’t exist

is true, on our account, as it stands, it is not, since for 200 names for those places we need to reject ‘x exists’. A solution is available, though, suggested by Donnellan (1974, 27-30) and Walton (1990, 424-428. See also Friend 2014). We can take the quantifier to range not over names, but rather classes of names, grouped together in what Walton labels ‘a kind of attempted reference’. One might protest that there is no way to say that different empty names attempt at the same reference. But if this is the case, the objection dissolves, as it relies on the idea that each non-existent place has 100 names.

Second, (13) might seem not to be about language. But, as we saw, use and mention are often mixed or confused, and we can detect this with quantification too. Even in some textbooks (for example, *Everything for Early Learning*, Grade 2, 2004 American Education Publishing) we find

1. Some numbers, for example 10, have two digits,

but this is false. For otherwise ten as represented in the Roman numerical system would be a different number, since it has exactly one digit. When we take (17) to be true, we actually have in mind either a sentence which says that some numerals, such as ‘10’, have two digits, or a sentence which says that some numbers, such as 10, can be represented by some numeral with two digits.

Third, in (15) we have ‘x exists’, so we allow, in good company indeed,[[5]](#footnote-5) to have variables inside quotation marks and somebody might protest (Quine 1953, 147). But if this is a genuine issue, we can go for

1. For some names for a place it is claimed Peer Gynt visits, not: the result of putting them in ‘… exist’.

So our proposal can indeed account for quantified sentences, even if Quine is right, by employing the not that fancy notion of name.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**2.5. Modality**

Plantinga (1974, 145-147), Braun (1993, 455) and Kripke (2013, 152-153) urge that the usual metalinguistic view seems in trouble with modality, as it cannot distinguish what

1. If ‘Gnoniem’ does not refer, then ‘Gnoniem’ does not refer
2. If Gnoniem does not exist, then ‘Gnoniem’ does not refer

express, but only the proposition expressed by (19) is necessary, while that expressed by (20) is ‘a contingent proposition, since it might have been the case that [‘Gnoniem’] refers to something (e.g., Bush) though [Gnoniem] does not exist.’ (Braun 1993, 455).

Even those who raise the issue consider it surmountable, though (Braun 1993, 467f13; Kripke 2013, 152; Thomasson 2003b, 218-219f25) and it can surely be surmounted by our proposal.

The relevant sentences are

1. If not ‘Gnoniem exists’, then not ‘Gnoniem exists’
2. If Gnoniem does not exist, then not ‘Gnoniem exists’,

and what is needed is to anchor ‘Gnoniem exists’ to our language: we do not want the rejected sentence to mean that carrots are sweet. Braun himself provides a way to do this, i.e. adding ‘actually’ or ‘in English’ (1993, 467f13), but it would be implausible to take a speaker to be using the actually operator (Soames 2002, 40-50), or to be referring to English or, even worse, something similar to Church’s ‘the language which was current in Great Britain and the United States in 1949 A.D.’ (1950, 99).[[7]](#footnote-7) Luckily, following Kripke (2013, 152), we can add instead something like ‘in this use’ or ‘in this very language’, and stress that the addition typically remains unarticulated. We can moreover explain why it is unarticulated. As Church remarks (1956, 4f8), if we are speaking a language, the sentence is taken naturally to belong to it, and we only state explicitly the language when it is not the natural option. With this unarticulated addition, we get exactly what we need: in all those scenarios in which the antecedent of (22) is true, Gnoniem does not exist. In all those contexts of evaluation, ‘Gnoniem exists’ in our use or language is to be rejected, so that (22), alongside (21), expresses something necessary.

One might insist that our account faces an issue when we consider scenarios where there are no subjects able to perform the rejection.

But when we evaluate whether in a counterfactual scenario it is appropriate to object to ‘Gnoniem exists’, what we are trying to establish is whether the grounds for our actual rejection hold in the counterfactual scenarios, not whether the subjects in those scenarios would reject the sentence. Whether there are subjects in the scenario of evaluation is irrelevant.

Similarly, one might think that

1. If not ‘Gnoniem exists’, then Gnoniem does not exist

creates an issue: ‘Gnoniem exists’ might have to be rejected in some scenarios in which Gnoniem exists, for example, we can suppose, for etiquette reasons.

While these scenarios are possible, they do not really create an issue. Again, when we evaluate in a counterfactual scenario, we are trying to establish whether our actual rejection, based on presupposition failure, would be appropriate with respect to the counterfactual scenario. Whatever etiquette rules hold in such scenarios, scenarios in which Gnoniem exists are scenarios in which our rejection of ‘Gnoniem exists’ would be inappropriate. In such scenarios, the antecedent of (23) is false and (23), together with (21)-(22), is true, as it should.

Modifying Braun’s remarks about the usual metalinguistic view, one could still think that

1. Gnoniem does not exist,
2. Not ‘Gnoniem exists’

should express different propositions, as only what (2) expresses entails that ‘Gnoniem exists’ exists.

Even Braun, though, confesses to having ‘no theory of logical consequence for metalinguistic propositions that would justify these intuitions’ (1993, 467f13). Secondly, this intuition cannot work against our view. The view is not that (1) and (2) express the same proposition, so that they should entail the existence of the very same entities. According to the view, either there is indeed a reading of (1) that does not entail the existence of ‘Gnoniem exists’, as Braun thinks, or it is in fact only the sentence (1) gets confused with which entails that.

**2.6. Attitude attributions**

Kripke holds that the usual metalinguistic view is in trouble because of attitude attributions. Modified for the present proposal, the objection would be that the view cannot distinguish

1. Saul believes that Gnoniem does not exist
2. Saul believes that not ‘Gnoniem exists’,

while they have different truth-conditions: only (24) can be true even though Saul ‘may not have used the name [“Gnoniem”] or may not have used any name at all’ (2013, 154).

Also in this case, we should bear in mind what our proposal amounts to. If we take the first option in our proposal, then (1), as it occurs in (24) has two readings, and only on one does it express what is expressed by what we can represent as (2). Then only on one reading, (24) expresses what (25) does. Exactly because of what Kripke remarks, it seems moreover that the non-metalinguistic reading of (24) is generally the relevant one. On the first option, then, (24) and (25) do not have the same truth-conditions, exactly as Kripke would urge.[[8]](#footnote-8) On the second option in our proposal, (1), as it occurs in (24) gets confused with (2) and that certainly does not mean that on the proposal (24) and (25) should be taken to agree in truth-conditions.[[9]](#footnote-9)

One might object that

1. What Saul believes, i.e. that Gnoniem does not exist, is true

is true. As the proposal we are considering is tantamount to holding that (1) in its true reading or counterpart is metalinguistic, (26) seems to suggest that on the proposal (1), as it occurs in it, should be taken metalinguistically, and then Kripke’s point would be relevant: Saul can have the true belief that Gnoniem does not exist, even if he does not even know English exists, but the metalinguistic view we are considering seems in need to take his true belief to be about an English sentence.

It is not clear what (26) is really able to show, though. We often speak loosely, when we use attitude attributions in particular. For example, we can say that what you said, i.e. that nobody will show up at the party, is never going to happen, but it is not obvious that it is the very thing that you said, traditionally a sentence or a proposition, that is the thing that is not going to happen, i.e. no people showing up. Similarly, (26) can be a loose way to express that what Saul believes, i.e. that Gnoniem does not exist, is such that something else in its vicinity, i.e. (2), is true, and then we do not need to hold that Saul’s belief is about English. Secondly, even if, as it occurs in (26), (1) were to be taken metalinguistically, it would not automatically follow that Saul’s belief should be about English. In the tradition of the metalinguistic accounts for attitude attributions, one can maintain that in order for (26) to be true, it is neither necessary nor sufficient that Saul rejects the very sentence ‘Gnoniem exists’. As Quine nicely puts it, ‘[w]e may treat a mouse’s fear of a cat as his fearing ... a certain English sentence … It is a little like describing a prehistoric ocean current as clockwise’ (1956, 186). The English sentence is to be taken as samesaying (Davidson 1968, 104), or representing the sentence Saul believes is to be rejected. The notions of samesaying and representation are surely tricky to define, but the challenge has nothing to do with empty names, and then attitude attributions seem unable to prove that our account is in trouble.

**2.7. Translation**

Salmon urges that the usual metalinguistic view falls victim to Church’s famous translation argument (1950). Adapted to the present proposal, the argument is: the translation of

1. Gnoniem does not exist

into French is

1. Gnoniem n’existe pas.

But

1. Not ‘Gnoniem exists’

translates into French as

1. Non ‘Gnoniem exists’

and (27) and (28), ‘while both true, clearly mean different things in French. So too, therefore, do what they translate’ (Salmon 1998, 284).

Here, again, we need to remember that our proposal is different from the usual metalinguistic account. Our view is not that (1) and (2) are somehow equivalent, but that either (1) has a use and a mention reading and its true reading is (2), or our intuitions about (1)’s truth are in fact about (2). Thus it is not immediately a problem that the translations of (1) and (2) ‘mean different things’.

This would be too quick a reply, though. For according to our account, the truth contained in (1) or confused with (1) is (2) and, Church and Salmon would continue, (2) gets translated into French as (28), i.e. as a sentence about an English sentence. But such truth as delivered to a French speaker cannot be about English.

For this point to work, the translation of (2) into French should be (28). While Church and Salmon assume this, it has been shown to be problematic. Of course, we usually translate mentioned material, in particular when it comes to ‘fiction and, equally, of historical narrative (including the Gospel)’ (Dummett 1973, 372). But, Salmon would complain, this is irrelevant, as we are here concerned not with ‘practical canons of apt translation’, but ‘exclusively with the semantics of [(2)]’ (2001, 583-584). Still, as Burge (1978, 145) has shown, there is reason to think that translations that preserve the semantic characteristics of the sentence under translation, translate mentioned material. As we saw, in (2) there is an unarticulated ‘in this use’/’in this very language’ so by articulating it, we get

1. Not ‘Gnoniem exists’ in this use/ in this very language,

so that (2) is self-referential. As Burge stressed, in translating self-referential sentences, we can preserve self-reference or references, but not both and we then have two semantic translations in French:

1. Non ‘Gnoniem exists’ (dans le usage de (2)/ dans la langue de (2))
2. Non ‘Gnoniem existe’ (dans cet usage/ dans cette même langue).

Remember the objection: the truth contained in (1) or confused with (1), as delivered to a French speaker, cannot be about an English sentence. (31), a semantic translation of the truth contained in (1), does not provide a French speaker with a truth about English, but with a truth about her own language.

To adapt an objection he raises for Frege’s early view of identity statements, Salmon could still protest that (31) ‘misrepresents the information [that Gnomiem does not exist] as something which … is made so entirely by virtue of arbitrary linguistic convention or decision, whereas is actually made true by virtue of a certain state of affairs’ (1989b, 423).

But, first, with empty names, it is not that clear that there is a state of affairs to appeal to. Secondly, from (31), which is in her own language, the French speaker will indeed recover (27), exactly the sentence that Salmon thinks translates (1) and preserves ‘what is semantically encoded or contained’ (1998, 284) in (1). Translating sentences containing empty names is not an easy matter, but translation is not an insuperable problem for our account either.

**2.8. Different names**

The explanation of how our account can deal with translations also addresses another classic, related problem for the usual metalinguistic view. As Braun observes, for the usual view ‘negative existentials that use different names (for instance, “London does not exist” and “Londres n’existe pas”) cannot express the same proposition. This seems wrong’ (1993, 455).

The issue does not touch our account. On it, the non-metalinguistic readings of

1. London does not exist
2. Londres n’existe pas,

or what these sentences really are, instead of what they get confused with, express indeed the same proposition. The metalinguistic readings or counterparts of (32) and (33) are, respectively,

1. Not ‘London exists’ (in this use/ in this very language)
2. Non ‘Londres existe’ (dans cet usage/ dans cette même langue).

Braun does not define propositions and neither can we here. But we do not need to. Suffice it to note that propositions are usually taken to be what is common to sentences in different languages that are semantic translations of each other and, as we saw, (34) and (35) are semantic translations of each other.

**3. Some new objections**

Having seen that the usual objections are unable to show that our new metalinguistic view is incorrect, it is natural to wonder whether there are new objections due to some aspects specific to our view. I will discuss the most obvious ones and show that also these can be convincingly replied to.

**3.1 Question-begging**

Holding that negative singular existential statements in which empty names occur are true because of presupposition failure due the name being empty might be felt as having a question begging flavor.

But this feeling is based on a false impression. The account is not trying to define empty names, but rather to account for the known truth-values of some sentences where names known to be empty occur.

**3.2 The usual view coming through the back door**

One might wonder whether on the new account, the traditional one ends up coming through the back door, together with all its problems. For, one might urge, when we object to a sentence with the tool of metalinguistic negation, we object not just to a syntactic string, but to it, given what it expresses. Then, one might continue, if we hold that when I utter

1. Gnoniem does not exist,

I am rejecting

1. Gnoniem exists,

we should maintain that we are objecting to (5), given what it expresses. But what does it express? It might seem that also on the new account, since ‘Gnoniem’ is empty, it can only be taken to contribute ‘Gnoniem’ to what (5) expresses and then on the new metalinguistic account, (5) is somehow equivalent to

1. ‘Gnoniem’ refers.

But the new account is not forced to hold that ‘Gnoniem’ contributes itself to what (5) expresses and the problems for the usual view are a reason not to hold that (5) and (36) are equivalent. The new account can be combined with various views about what ‘Gnoniem’ contributes. It can for example be taken to contribute nothing. One might hold that it is correct to object to (5) exactly because ‘Gnoniem’ is presupposed to contribute an object, but, being empty, does not manage to provide any contribution. That ‘Gnoniem’ refers is, on the new account, then only a presupposition of (1).

**3.3 Tests for metalinguistic negation**

At first one might think that it is very obvious and clear when a negation is metalinguistic and then argue that it is very obvious and clear that negation is not metalinguistic as it occurs in negative singular existence statements.

But, first, we already saw that we should not trust ourselves too much when it comes to use and mention. Second, we do not seem able detector of metalinguistic negation in particular. For example, according to the Gricean account, ‘three’ is semantically on a par with ‘at least three’, while generating the conversational implicature that the relevant quantity is exactly three. But some maintain instead that the *exactly* is part of the semantic import (Breheny 2008). Imagine a scenario in which you know I had exactly four espressos and want to discuss my unhealthy habits. Were it obvious whether the negation occurring in your true utterances of ‘You did not have three espressos’ is metalinguistic, we would have sorted the issue about the semantics of ‘three’ long ago, but we did not, so it is not very obvious and clear when a negation is metalinguistic. In fact, starting from Horn (1989, 392-413), various tests to ascertain whether a negation is metalinguistic have been suggested, but problems have been detected for each and now some take the tests as sufficient but not necessary (Pitts 2011, 348-356), while others as neither necessary nor sufficient (Geurts 1998, 280; Predelli 2013, 106). This is quite good news for our account. Take for example stress. We sometimes do, but often do not stress anything when we utter a true negative existence statement in which an empty name occurs.

Still, one might reply, there is a piece of linguistic evidence which is taken to be less controversial than others: maybe not exclusively, but metalinguistic negations tend not to incorporate morphologically with the material in their scope: if we move from ‘She is not happy, she is ecstatic!’ to ‘She is unhappy, she is ecstatic!’, the metalinguistic reading is off. Let us go back to (1). If the test is reliable, according to our view, the true reading or counterpart of (1) is not what is expressed by

1. Gnomiem is non-existent
2. Gnoniem is inexistent.

One might indeed be dissatisfied with this.

But, first, it is not clear that the test is reliable as counterexamples are available (Horn 1989, 391; Pitts 2011, 350). In

1. When Reagan won 525 electoral votes, it was not an historic victory. Walter F. Mondale’s poor showing wasn’t an historic defeat. Mr. Mondale’s choice of Geraldine A. Ferraro wasn’t an historic decision, either. None of these was an historic event. Each was a historic event,

for example, the negation in the penultimate sentence is metalinguistic, objecting to ‘an historic’, but still incorporated into the quantifier ‘none’. Surely, quantifiers are special in many respects. Still, (39) shows that (1) would not be alone in failing the test.[[10]](#footnote-10) Secondly, it does not seem that it would be the end for the view if the test were reliable so that the view would be forced to take (37)-(38) to express something different from, and then not immediately following from, the true metalinguistic reading or counterpart of (1). At least prima facie, in (37)-(38) a (negative) property is designated and attributed, and this is not what happens with (1), and it can be taken as a positive feature of the view that it can be combined with various accounts for sentences such as (37)-(38).

**Conclusion**

We did not (descriptive negation!) prove that true negative singular existence statements are to be accounted for as in accordance with the new metalinguistic view. So the conclusion is modest, but it still goes beyond the semantics of (1). Since neither the usual objections to the usual metalinguistic view nor the most obvious prima facie objections specific to our new account are able to prove its inadequacy, we cannot rule our metalinguistic account out as easily as one might think. So, differently from what is widely held, we should not take negative singular existence statements to obviously create a constraint for any semantics of empty names as used.

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1. If you consider false ‘Aristotle does not exist’ and ‘Newman 1 does not exist’, where ‘Newman 1’ is introduced via ‘I hereby dub the first child to be born in the twenty-second century “Newman 1”’ (Kaplan 1968, 201), modify as: Proper names presuppose that there is, has been or will be a referent. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For details on Frege, see Salmon 1998, 283. On whether Donnellan 1974 endorsed a similar view, see Braun 1993, 466f11; Everett 2007, 71-76. Thomasson and van Inwagen suggest such a view for names they actually think are not empty. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. While *does not refer* is common, Thomasson opts for ‘the history of its uses does not meet the conditions for referring to an entity of a certain kind K’ (2003b, 217). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A plural quantifier can be used to respect *places*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ‘*If a normal English speaker*, *on reflection*, *sincerely assents to* ‘*p*’, *then he believes that p*.’ (Kripke 1979, 137).  [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Everett discusses the ‘intuitive validity’ (2007, 76) of: None of the people it is claimed Peer Gynt meets exists. Peer Gynt meets Solveig. So Solveig doesn’t exist. As we saw, it is not obvious that we can rely on our intuitions, but anyway the inference is valid when taken in its metalinguistic reading or the metalinguistic counterparts are considered: For all x for a person it is claimed Peer Gynt meets, not ‘x exists’. For a person it is claimed Peer Gynt meets (‘Solveig’). So not ‘Solveig exists’. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It is worth noting here that the account can smoothly be extended to ‘does not exist in the actual world’, ‘does not actually exist’, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For arguments in support of the thesis that all attitude attributions have these two readings, see Montague & Kalish 1959, 60; Sellars 1955, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For the thesis that we tend to confuse attitude attributions with some metalinguistic counterparts, see Church 1954; Davis 2005, 22-23; Salmon 1989a, 248-249; 2012, 438; Sorensen 2002; Yagisawa 1984. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Since quantifiers fail the test, we can have a metalinguistic reading of ‘None of the people it is claimed Peer Gynt meets exists’, which Everett (2007, 76) uses in the inference seen in f.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)