Presupposition

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2 Intuitive definition

General definition The presuppositions of an utterance are the pieces of information that the speaker assumes (or acts as if she assumes) in order for her utterance to be meaningful in the current context. This broad characterization encompasses everything from general conversational norms to the particulars of how specific linguistic expressions are construed.

Pragmatic presuppositions Pragmatic presuppositions include the preconditions for linguistic interaction (for example, the mutual public knowledge that we are speaking the same language), the norms of turn-taking in dialogue, and more particularized information about conversational plans and goals.

Semantic presuppositions Semantic (conventional, lexical) presuppositions are part of the encoded meanings of specific words and constructions, called presupposition triggers.

Accommodation (for more details, see sec. 7) Speakers routinely presuppose things that have not already been established as part of the common ground. When they do this, they are implicitly asking the other discourse participants to accommodate (Lewis 1979) that information, by adding it to the common ground, or at least by adding to the common ground that the speaker is publicly committed to that information for the purposes of the current interaction. The ease with which this process happens depends on a great many factors. If the speaker is known to be knowledgeable and trustworthy, and the information is straightforward, then accommodation will be easy (as when I say to a stranger “My dog is energetic”). At the other end of the spectrum, surprising information from untrustworthy sources might bring conversation to a halt (as when a student says “My giraffe ate my homework”).

¹This handout is partly derived from a handbook article I wrote called ‘Presupposition and implicature’, for The Handbook of Contemporary Semantic Theory, 2nd ed.: http://www.stanford.edu/~cgpotts/manuscripts/potts-blackwellsemantics.pdf.
3 Presupposition triggers

(1) The dog is grumpy.
   a. Presupposes: there is a unique salient dog \(d\)
   b. Asserts: \(d\) is grumpy

(2) Ed realizes that it is Wednesday.
   a. Presupposes: it is Wednesday
   b. Asserts: Ed is aware that it is Wednesday

(3) Why did you murder Prof. Jones?
   a. Presupposes: you murdered Prof. Jones
   b. Queries: your reasons for the killing

(4) Sam quit smoking.
   a. Presupposes: Sam smoked in the past
   b. Asserts: Sam does not smoke at present

(5) Before Sam left, he sneezed.
   a. Presupposes: Sam left at time \(t\), where \(t\) is earlier than the time of evaluation
   b. Asserts: prior to \(t\), Sam sneezed

(6) JOAN likes spinach too. (focal accent on JOAN)
   a. Presupposes: some salient entity other than Joan likes spinach
   b. Asserts: Joan likes spinach

(7) “Confirm your eBay transaction” (spam email)
   a. Presupposes: you have an eBay transaction \(e\)
   b. Requests: that you confirm \(e\)

Harder cases to explicate:

(8) “Are you really looking for a job?” (spam email)

(9) There is no God and Dawkins is his prophet. ([http://richarddawkins.net/articles/1580](http://richarddawkins.net/articles/1580))

(10) You deserve respect and will eventually get it. (real fortune cookie!)

(11) Who wants to go swimming? We do, too (N. Y. Times headline)
4 Presuppositions in discourse

4.1 Backgrounding

In the prototypical case, presuppositions are already agreed upon as true before they are invoked. Accommodation creates many exceptions to this, but it's important that presuppositions always can be backgrounded without too much of a sense of redundancy:

[(12) a. I have a dog, and my dog has brown hair.
   b. It is Wednesday, and Ed realizes \{that/that it is Wednesday\}.
   c. Ed used to smoke, but he stopped smoking.]

Compare with the redundancy of the non-presupposed (but perhaps still peripheral) content expressed by the italicized material in the following:

[(13) Otto Jespersen likes burgers, and Noam Chomsky likes cheese sandwiches. Otto, \#who likes burgers, usually slathers them in catsup.]

4.2 Hearer objections

Presuppositions are meanings that the speaker takes for granted and thus (acts as if she) assumes to be uncontroversial. Speakers might even go so far as to express certain pieces of information via presupposition triggers in order to signal what is and isn't up for debate. Thus, objecting to presuppositions can be difficult.

Standard denials are generally taken to accept presuppositions and target only the at-issue content. In (14), for example, the denials (14a–c) all seem to join (14) in presupposing that Sam smoked in the past.

[(14) Sam quit smoking.
   a. No/Wrong/Impossible.
   b. No, he didn't.
   c. I doubt it.]

When speakers do want to object to presupposed content, they typically have to resort to more specialized forms that first disrupt the flow of the conversation in order to re-invoke the presupposed content as an item for discussion. Shannon (1976) studies such devices, using 'Hey, wait a minute' and its variants as prototypical examples (see also von Fintel 2004):

[(15) Sam quit smoking.
   a. Hey, wait a minute: I didn’t know that Sam smoked!
   b. Just a second: Sam never smoked!]
5 Presuppositions in semantic composition

5.1 Partial functions

A total function for domain $D$ supplies a value for every element of $D$. We have so far studied only total functions as part of our theory of semantic composition. A (strictly) partial function for domain $D$ supplies values only for a proper subset of $D$. For the rest, it is undefined.

\[(16) \quad U = \{ \text{characteristic sets} \} \]

Here are examples of partial functions: (17)–(19) with domain $U$, and (20) with its domain as the set of functions from $U$ into truth values.

\[(17) \quad \begin{bmatrix} \text{characteristic set} \end{bmatrix} \rightarrow \begin{bmatrix} \text{truth value} \end{bmatrix} \]

\[(18) \quad \begin{bmatrix} \text{characteristic set} \end{bmatrix} \rightarrow \begin{bmatrix} \text{truth value} \end{bmatrix} \]

\[(19) \quad \begin{bmatrix} \text{characteristic set} \end{bmatrix} \rightarrow \begin{bmatrix} \text{truth value} \end{bmatrix} \]

\[(20) \quad \begin{bmatrix} \text{domain} \end{bmatrix} \rightarrow \begin{bmatrix} \text{truth value} \end{bmatrix} \]

Caution! With partial functions, we lose the correspondence between characteristic sets and functions. Given a set, we need to know which elements of the domain our function is defined for. Given a truth-valued function, we need the information about definedness when we move to a set.
5.2 The definite article as a partial function

In the second week of class, we did some experimental work that supported the following modification to Partee’s (1995) proposal about how to handle the definite article:

\[(21) \quad \llbracket \text{the} \rrbracket \text{ is a function from functions from entities to truth values into entities} \]

\[\text{a. } \llbracket \text{the} \rrbracket (f) \text{ is defined if and only if there is a unique salient entity } x \text{ such that } f(x) = T \]

\[\text{b. } \text{Where defined, } \llbracket \text{the} \rrbracket (f) = \text{an entity } x \text{ such that } f(x) = T \]

Note 1: I stated the assertion part, (21b), using the indefinite article. This is pragmatically odd, since we know from (21a) that there is exactly one entity that has the property \( f \). However, I like the slight infelicity because it highlights the fact that, assuming the presupposition (21a) is met, we don’t need to worry about uniqueness in (21b).

Note 2: As I said earlier, I think it isn’t solely up to linguists to figure out what notion of salience is involved here. Sorting it out would likely be an interdisciplinary project involving linguists, vision researchers, perception researchers, attention researchers, and others.

Assuming our little universe (16), we can fully depict the partial function described in (21):

\[(22)\]
5.3 Presuppositional quantifiers

(23) \textit{[both]} is a quantificational determiner

a. \textit{[both]}(f) is defined if and only if \(|\{x \mid f(x) = T\}| = 2\)

b. Where defined, \textit{[both]}(f) = \lambda g \{x \mid f(x) = T\} \subseteq \{x \mid g(x) = T\}

(24) \textit{[neither]} is a quantificational determiner

a. \textit{[neither]}(f) is defined if and only if

b. Where defined, \textit{[neither]}(f) =

(25) Refashion \textit{[the]} as a quantificational determiner:

a. \textit{[the]}(f) is defined if and only if

b. Where defined, \textit{[the]}(f) =
6 Presupposition projection

6.1 Negation

Hypothesis N  If \( p \) is a presupposition of sentence \( S \), then \( p \) is a presupposition of the negated version of \( S \) as well.

(26) a. Sam stopped smoking. \((p = \text{Sam smoked in the past})\)
    b. Sam didn’t stop smoking.

(27) a. Ed realizes that it is Wednesday. \((p = \text{it is Wednesday})\)
    b. Ed doesn’t realize that it is Wednesday.

(28) a. My dog is outside. \((p = \text{the speaker has a dog})\)
    b. It is not the case that my dog is outside

Theoretical observation  Hypothesis N follows from our decision to model presuppositions as partial functions and our theory of semantic composition:

(D)  Given a syntactic structure \( \text{DP} \), \([\text{DP}] = [\text{the}][\text{NP}]\)

(S7)  Given a syntactic structure \( \text{VP} \), \([\text{VP}] = [\text{V}][\text{DP}]\)

(29)  \([\text{parent}] = \begin{bmatrix} \rightarrow F \\ \rightarrow F \\ \rightarrow T \end{bmatrix}\)

(30)  \([\text{child}] = \begin{bmatrix} \rightarrow T \\ \rightarrow T \\ \rightarrow F \end{bmatrix}\)
(31) S
   /\  
  PN  VP
     /\   
    Bart  not  VP
       /\     
      V  DP   
        /\     
       tease  the NP
          /\     
         N  parent

(32) S
   /\  
  PN  VP
     /\   
    Bart  not  VP
       /\     
      V  DP   
        /\     
       tease  the NP
          /\     
         N  child

(33) S
   /\  
  QP  VP
     /\   
    D  NP  not  VP
       /\     
      Both  N  V
        /\     
       children  skateboard
6.2 Interrogatives

**Hypothesis Q**  If $p$ is a presupposition of sentence $S$, then $p$ is a presupposition of the interrogative version of $S$ as well.

(34)  a. Sam stopped smoking.  
     b. Did Sam stop smoking?

(35)  a. Ed realizes that it is Wednesday.  
     b. Does Ed realize that it is Wednesday?

(36)  a. My dog is outside.  
     b. Is my dog is outside?

6.3 Conditional antecedents

**Hypothesis C**  If $p$ is a presupposition of sentence $S$, then $p$ is a presupposition of any sentence of the form if $S$, then $S'$.

(37)  If Sam stopped smoking, then his marathon time should improve.

6.4 Testing potential triggers

(38)  It was Joan who stole the cookies.  
     a. someone stole the cookies ___ presupposed  ___ asserted 
     b. Joan stole the cookies ___ presupposed  ___ asserted 

(39)  Sue believes that it is Tuesday.  
     a. Sue believes that it is Tuesday. ___ presupposed  ___ asserted 
     b. it is Tuesday ___ presupposed  ___ asserted 

(40)  Bart managed to pass the test.  
     a. Bart passed the test ___ presupposed  ___ asserted 
     b. (roughly) Bart's passing the test defied expectations ___ presupposed  ___ asserted
6.5 Why not turn them around?

The hypotheses above are all of the form ‘If $p$ is a presupposition, . . .’. That is, we need to assume presupposition status and see what follows. Strictly speaking, this means that the tests are useful only for disconfirming that $p$ is a presupposition (via the contrapositions, i.e., the equivalent forms like ‘If $p$ is not a presupposition of the negated version of $S$, then $p$ is not a presupposition of $S$’).

The following is a more powerful version of hypothesis N:

**Hypothesis N’** If $p$ is expressed in the scope of negation in sentence $S$ but $p$ remains a commitment of $S$, then $p$ is a presupposition of $S$.

We implicitly use such versions of the tests. However, we shouldn’t follow them blindly, else we will classify certain meanings as presupposed even where that seems wrong. For example:

(41) a. Sam didn’t see Joan, who works in accounting, when he came in today.
    b. I don’t want any friggin’ broccoli in my dinner!

(42) If Louise is tall and therefore intelligent, we should put her on our team!

Similar data for: honorifics (Japanese, Korean, and even titles like Dr, Mrs, and President), formal/familiar pronouns (German, French, Spanish), evidentials, and basically all of the stuff that Grice places under the heading of ‘conventional implicature’.

**Lesson** It’s okay to ‘turn the tests around’, as long as it is part of a larger argument in which one looks at a wide spectrum of data.
7 Accommodation

If a speaker utters a sentence $S$ whose content presupposes a proposition $p$ that is not entailed by the input information state, then hearers will adjust the input information state so that it entails $p$, in order to update the content of $S$ successfully. (The more cautious hearer might update only with the proposition that the speaker is publicly committed to $p$ and then in turn update with the proposition the speaker is publicly committed to $[S]$.)

The following observations from Thomason (1990) help to identify the complex role that presupposition accommodation plays in communication:

In pragmatics, the plausibility of informal rules is diluted by the fact that they are routinely flouted. Because of this, well-motivated generalizations not only will have exceptions, but many of these exceptions will be so flagrant as to seem to undermine their ability to serve as linguistic generalizations. (p. 331; see also p. 332, bottom)

Worse still, in pragmatics we can take instances in which a rule is flouted to provide evidence of a sort for the rule. We can argue like this: “There must, in our society, be a rule against hanging up a telephone without closing the conversation, or people would not violate this rule to achieve an effect of snubbing.” (p. 333)

But this isn’t equivalent to having no principles at all. Accommodation is fundamentally acting to remove obstacles to the achievement of desires or goals that we attribute to others. (p. 332).

And the act of removing the obstacles might be important:

The case in which a shopkeeper regularly marks off his goods for various ad hoc reasons is different from the case in which the goods have no price at all, even though the cash register receipts may be the same for the two cases. In the one case there is a rule established by a marked price, in the other there is not. (p. 332).

Pragmatics need not become “a methodological disaster area” (p. 334).

Our best hopes for fostering good interactions between evidence and theory in pragmatics, it seems to me, lie in concentrating on underlying reasoning mechanisms, and on adopting an interdisciplinary approach that spreads the sources of evidence wider than is common in linguistics. (p. 334)

We should focus on accommodation, in the broadest possible terms:

Concentrating on accommodation means shifting to reconstructed reasoning that underlies utterances. And it suggests that certain reasoning processes, such as intention recognition and cooperation, are central. Successful accommodation requires that we first recognize someone's intention to achieve a goal, and then establish goals of our own that will assist in achieving this goal. (p. 334)
References


