



EGG 2018: Intro to pragmatics (week 2)

Session 3: Presuppositions

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Yesterday's class

- ▶ Communication is essentially based on common belief and common communicative interest between the individuals involved in communicative activities. (→ Grice, Stalnaker)
- ▶ **Minimal discourse model:**
 - ▶ list of interlocutors
 - ▶ their common ground
 - ▶ rules of how the common ground changes depending on different utterances

Today: introduce the idea of presuppositions and how to capture them in the minimal discourse model

⇒ this session is based on Beaver & Geurts 2011 and Stalnaker 2014: Ch 3



Roadmap

Intro

Two views of presuppositions

Properties of semantic presuppositions

A pragmatic, presupposition-related process: accommodation

Further topics



What are presuppositions?



What are presuppositions?

Two ways in which the term “**presupposition**” is used in the linguistic and philosophical literature:

- ▶ **View 1:** content that has to be true for a sentence to be true or false
 - ⇒ “semantic presuppositions”
 - ⇒ no reference to discourse

- ▶ **View 2:** content that the speaker of an utterance takes for granted
 - ⇒ “speaker presuppositions”
 - ⇒ grounded in the mechanics of discourse



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 - ⇒ grounded in the mechanics of discourse

Important: these two notions are not independent!



Semantic presupposition – I

The notion of semantic presupposition concerns the impact of certain content on the evaluation of a sentence wrt. truth or falsity:

- (1) A content is a **semantic presupposition** of a sentence if that content has to be true for the sentence to be true or false (= to have a truth value in the world of evaluation).

Famous example:

- (2) [Uttered in 2018:] The King of France is bald.

Is this sentence true or false?



Semantic presupposition – II

The evaluation of the content of (3-a) depends on the truth of (3-b):

- (3)
- a. The King of France is bald.
 - b. There is a unique King of France.

Where does the semantic presupposition come from?



Semantic presupposition – II

The evaluation of the content of (3-a) depends on the truth of (3-b):

- (3) a. The King of France is bald.
b. There is a unique King of France.

Where does the semantic presupposition come from?

Assumption:

semantic presuppositions are “triggered” by certain lexical items

- ⇒ trigger in (3-a): *the King of France*
- ⇒ definite descriptions (via the definite article) are a class of **presupposition triggers**



More presupposition triggers

(4) Peter is bald.



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- (7) Alex knows that Mary likes rakija.



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 >> Mary likes rakija. (factive verbs)



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- (7) Alex knows that Mary likes rakija.
 >> Mary likes rakija. (factive verbs)
- (8) It was Mary, who drank the rakija.



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- (7) Alex knows that Mary likes rakija.
 >> Mary likes rakija. (factive verbs)
- (8) It was Mary, who drank the rakija.
 >> Someone drank the rakija. (clefting)



Pragmatic presuppositions

The notion of pragmatic presupposition (or: “speaker presupposition”) concerns the discourse status of that content:

- (9) A content is a **pragmatic presupposition** connected to an utterance if the speaker of that utterance assumes that the truth of that content is established.

For instance: if A goes up to B and says “Hi, how are you?” the speaker presupposes that B can speak English

Specification of “being established”:



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Specification of “being established”:

- (10) A content is a **pragmatic presupposition** connected to an utterance if the speaker of that utterance assumes that the content is **part of the common ground**.



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⇒ contents that are semantic presuppositions of sentences that are uttered by a speaker are also speaker presuppositions

⇒ neither semantic nor pragmatic presuppositions are “truth-conditional content”



Semantics vs. pragmatics again

A familiar problem:

Contents that are semantic presuppositions are closely connected to:

- the lexical items that trigger them
- the sentences in which the triggers occur

⇒ intuitively part of the overall meaning conveyed by these sentences

⇒ not a problem for purely pragmatic presuppositions

How can we decide whether some content is part of the truth-conditional meaning or a (semantic) presupposition?



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Properties of semantic presuppositions

A pragmatic, presupposition-related process: accommodation

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Classical presupposition test: family of sentences – I

The classical presupposition test uses one of the central properties of presupposed content:

- (11) Presupposed content is not affected by entailment-cancelling logical operators.
- ▶ Operators: negation, question operator, *if-then*, epistemic modals. . .
 - ▶ only operate on truth-conditional content



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- ▶ Operators: negation, question operator, *if-then*, epistemic modals. . .
 - ▶ only operate on truth-conditional content
- (12) Alex likes rakija.
- a. Alex doesn't like rakija.
 - b. Does Alex like rakija?
 - c. If Alex likes rakija, she also likes beer.
 - d. Perhaps Alex likes rakija.

⇒ the modified sentences cannot be used to claim that Alex likes rakija



Classical presupposition test: family of sentences – II

Since presuppositions are not affected:

adding a logical operator to a sentence with a semantic presupposition will not affect the presupposition

- (13) Alex stopped drinking rakija at 3am.
 >> Alex drank rakija before 3am.
- (14) a. Alex didn't stop drinking rakija at 3am.
 b. Did Alex stop drinking rakija at 3am?
 c. If Alex stopped drinking rakija at 3am, she was sober at 9am.
 d. Perhaps Alex stopped drinking rakija at 3am.

⇒ “family of sentences” often reduced to just negation

⇒ we say: presupposed content **projects** from under logical operators



Classical presupposition test: family of sentences – III

The family of sentences can also be used to distinguish presupposed content from content that is logically/semantically entailed:

- (15) A content p entails a content q iff in all situations/worlds in which p is true, q is true, as well.



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- (16) Alex stopped drinking rakija at 3am.
entails: Alex did not drink rakija after 3am.
- (17) a. Alex didn't stop drinking rakija at 3am.
b. Did Alex stop drinking rakija at 3am?
c. If Alex stopped drinking rakija at 3am, she was sober...
d. Perhaps Alex stopped drinking rakija at 3am.



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c. If Alex stopped drinking rakija at 3am, she was sober...
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⇒ entailment-cancelling operators unsurprisingly affect entailments



“Cancellation” – I

So far:

- ▶ presuppositions are not affected by entailment-cancelling operators
- ▶ this includes operators that form multi-clausal structures
- ⇒ we might expect them to never be affected by anything

But: sometimes triggered presupposed content seems to disappear

Circumstance 1: denial of the truth of the presupposed content

- (18) The King of France is not bald. (There *is* no King of France!)
 ⚡ There is a unique King of France.

- ⇒ **Horn 1985:** two types of negation (controversial!)
 ⇒ presuppositions are only affected by one type



“Cancellation” – II

Circumstance 2: presupposed content triggered in a subclause may fail to be a presupposition of the full sentence

- (19) Either this house has no bathroom, or the bathroom is in a funny place. (after Partee, see Roberts 1989)
 ➤ There is a unique bathroom.
- (20) If Alex has a partner, she will bring her partner to the party.
 ➤ Alex has a unique partner.

What could be the reason for why these sentences lack their expected presuppositions?

(“cancellation” seems inadequate to describe what’s going on!)



“Cancellation” – III

To account for the behavior of presupposed content that is triggered in sub-clauses is arguably **the hardest problem of presupposition theory!**

⇒ **“projection problem”**

(e.g., Karttunen 1973, 1974; Heim 1982, 1983, 1992; Beaver 1992; Chierchia 1995)



“Cancellation” – III

To account for the behavior of presupposed content that is triggered in sub-clauses is arguably **the hardest problem of presupposition theory!**

⇒ “**projection problem**”

(e.g., Karttunen 1973, 1974; Heim 1982, 1983, 1992; Beaver 1992; Chierchia 1995)

- (21) a. Either there is no bathroom, or the bathroom is in a funny place.
b. Either I'm very drunk, or the bathroom is in a funny place.
- (22) a. If Alex has a partner, she will bring her partner to the party.
b. If Alex got my text in time, she will bring her partner to the party.

⇒ the projection or non-projection cannot just be a function of the operators that are present in the sentence



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Accommodation – I

- ▶ If presupposed content is not part of the common ground, the addressee potentially lacks the necessary content to evaluate the speaker's utterance.
- ▶ **Expectation:** if the presupposed content is not part of the common ground, the utterance is infelicitous or pragmatically faulty

However:

(24) **[Context:** A and B just met. They get interrupted by someone calling A's cell phone.]

A: I'm sorry, it's my partner.

≫ A has a partner

⇒ this expectation is not always borne out

⇒ sometimes presupposing content that's new for the addressee is okay

⇒ the missing content is **accommodated**

(Lewis 1979)



Accommodation – II

- (25) **Presupposition accommodation** is the process by which **the common ground is adjusted quietly and without fuss** to accept the utterance of a sentence that imposes certain requirements on the common ground in which it is processed. (slight modification of von Stechow 2008: 137)

When can accommodation apply? Are there restrictions on its applicability?

⇒ if there were no restrictions, presuppositions would not have any effect



Accommodation – III

(26) [Context: A and B just met. They get interrupted by someone calling A's cell phone.]

A: I'm sorry, it's my partner.

≫ A has a partner

⇒ It is easily accommodated that A has a partner.



Accommodation – IV

Accommodation happens in **two kinds of circumstances**:

(von Fintel 2008:145)

- ▶ the addressee is genuinely agnostic and trusts the speaker to not say something (they believe to be) false
- ▶ the addressee does not want to challenge the speaker because the matter is irrelevant or they do not want to interrupt the conversation

But: if the presupposed content is too outlandish / unusual / provoking, addressees will refuse to accommodate and **open a side-thread of the conversation**

⇒ ask after the content

⇒ directly deny the content



Further topics for independent reading

- ▶ **Projection problem** (see references above)
- ▶ **Truth-value-lessness vs. falsity** (see Abrusán & Szendrői 2013)
 - (28) I had breakfast with the King of France yesterday.
 - (29) [A points to an empty chair.]
A: The King of France is sitting there.
- ▶ Differences between **types of presupposition triggers** (Karttunen 2016)
⇒ Is semantic presupposition a uniform phenomenon?



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