

Pragmatic Presupposition

Read: Stalnaker 1974

Presupposition vs. Assertion

- The Queen of England is bald.
 - I presuppose that England has a unique queen, and assert that she is bald.
- Sam regrets that he voted for Nixon.
 - I presuppose that Sam voted for Nixon, and assert that he feels bad about it.
- Ted Kennedy is the only person who could have defeated Nixon in 1972.
 - I presuppose that Ted Kennedy could have defeated Nixon in 1972, and I assert that no one else could have done so.

- Criterion to identify presupposition:
 - Q is presupposed by an assertion of P just in case under normal conditions one can reasonably infer that a speaker believes that Q from either his assertion or his denial that P.
- Two different accounts of how presupposition should be explained.
 - Semantic
 - A proposition that P presupposes that Q is and only if Q must be true in order that P have a truth-value at all.
 - Pragmatic
 - Presuppositions are something like the background beliefs of the speaker—propositions whose truth he takes for granted, or seems to take for granted, in making his statement.

Communication

- Communication normally takes place against a background of beliefs or assumptions which are shared by the speaker and his audience, and which are recognized by them to be so shared.
- The more common ground we can take for granted, the more efficient our communication will be.
- I will not say things that are already taken for granted, since that would be redundant. Nor will I assert things incompatible with the common background, since that would be self-defeating.
- When we make an assertion we add an *increment of information* to the common ground.

Characterization

- A proposition P is a pragmatic presupposition of a speaker in a given context just in case the speaker assumes or believes that P, assumes or believes that his addressee assumes or believes that P, and assumes or believes that his addressee recognizes that he is making these assumptions, or has these beliefs.
- One might define a sentence or utterance having a presupposition derivatively:
 - A sentence x presupposes that Q just in case the use of x to make a statement is appropriate (or normal, or conversationally acceptable) only in contexts where Q is presupposed by the speaker.

Qualifications

- In small talk, we may act as if the background of common knowledge is smaller than it really is:
 - “Cold today, isn’t it?” “Sure is, windy too.”
- In other cases, a speaker may act as if certain propositions are part of the common background when he knows that they are not.
 - He may want to communicate a proposition indirectly, and do this by presupposing it in such a way that the audience will be able to infer that it is presupposed.
 - It might be indiscreet, or insulting, or tedious, or unnecessarily blunt, or rhetorically less effective to openly assert a proposition that one wants to communicate.
 - Presupposing is thus not a mental attitude like believing, but is rather a linguistic disposition—a disposition to behave in one’s use of language as if one had certain beliefs, or were making certain assumptions.

Advantages to a pragmatic approach

1. It is possible for the constraints on presupposition to vary from context to context, without requiring variation in the semantic interpretation of what is said.
 - “My cousin isn’t a boy anymore.”
2. One can separate the question of entailment relations from the question of presupposition.
 - “Sam realizes that P” entails that P.
 - “Sam does not realize that P” does not entail that P.

3. The constraints imposed by a statement on what is presupposed seem to be a matter of degree.
 - “Sam was surprised that Nixon lost the election.”
 - “If Eagleton hadn’t been dropped from the Democratic ticket, Nixon would have won the election.”
4. It may be possible to explain some of the facts in terms of general assumptions about rational strategy in situations where people exchange information or conduct argument.
 - E.g., if a speaker says “x knows that P” or “x does not know that P” in a context where P is in doubt or dispute, his main point would be unclear: is to make a claim about the truth of P or to say something about x’s epistemic state? One could communicate more efficiently by saying something else.

Linguistic advantages

- Karttunen's distinction between full factives and semi-factives
 - “If I **regret/realize/discover** later that I have not told the truth, I will confess it to everyone.”
 - Did you **regret/realize/discover** that you had not told the truth?
 - If a speaker explicitly supposes something, he thereby indicates that is not *presupposing* it, or taking it for granted.
 - In general, by asking a question, one indicates that one is not presupposing a particular answer to it. The presupposition reappears with a third-person subject.
 - We can allow presupposition differences in cases like this without postulating separate semantic accounts of propositions expressed from different points of view.

- Karttunen's account of the presuppositions of compound sentences.
 - If it is a generalization about semantic presuppositions, then *and* is not truth functional, since the truth value of a conjunctive statement will in some cases depend on entailment relations between the conjuncts; *and* is not symmetric; and the simple conjunction is governed by mysteriously complicated rules.
 - On the pragmatic account, if B presupposes that A, even if A is not presupposed initially, one may still assert *A and B* since by the time one gets to saying that B, the context has shifted, and it is by then presupposed that A.

Semantics vs. Pragmatics

- It can be a contrast between claims about the particular conventional meaning of some word or phrase on the one hand, and claims about the general structure of strategy of conversation on the other hand.
 - Grice's conventional vs. conversational implicatures.
- It can be a contrast between claims about the truth-conditions or *content* of what is said—the proposition expressed—on the one hand, and claims about the *context* in which a statement is made—the attitudes and interests of speaker and audience—on the other.
 - This is the contrast that Stalnaker is invoking here.

- In some cases, one may have to write presupposition constraints into the dictionary entry for a particular word. This would make certain presupposition requirements a matter of meaning, but it would not thereby make them a matter of *content*. There may be facts about the meaning of a word which play no role at all in determining the truth-conditions of propositions expressed using the word.
- The semantic rules which determine the content of a sentence may do so only relative to the context in which it is uttered. This is obviously the case with sentences using personal pronouns, demonstratives, quantifiers, definite descriptions, or proper names. I suspect it happens in less obvious cases as well. But this interaction does not prevent us from studying the features which define a linguistic context (such as a set of pragmatic presuppositions) in abstraction from the propositions expressed in such contexts,
- Distinctions such as that between semantic and pragmatic features may be used as a way to set problems aside, ... a pragmatic wastebasket. I am recommending instead the development of a pragmatic theory in which detailed explanations of phenomena relating to linguistic contexts can be given...