

Presuppositions (Ch. 6, pp. 349-365)

(1) John left work early again

We “take for granted” that John has left work early before.

Linguistic presupposition occurs when the utterance of a sentence tells the hearer that the speaker is taking something for granted. In the case of (1), it is the presence of *again* that signals what is being taken for granted.

(1)^P = the proposition that John has left early from work at some time before the reference time of (1). [the superscript ‘P’ indicates “the presupposition of(1)”]

(3) At the reference time, John left work early

[An *entailment* (or, an *equivalent*?) of (1)]

Although we want to distinguish entailments from presuppositions, note that presuppositions are technically a species of entailment: if (1) is true then (1)^P must also be true. But they are entailments that “are taken for granted”.

We would like some tests for determining when something is “taken for granted”.

The main tests are cases of embeddings where presuppositions “survive” but entailments do not.

For example:

(4) John didn’t leave work early again.

(4) entails (1)^P but does not entail (3).

The negation, (4), denies (1) and hence takes out the support for the regular entailments.

But it does not take out the support for the presupposition, (1)^P

One way of putting this is in terms of the (abstract) trees for (1) vs. (4):

The (1) tree is a subpart of the (4) tree

The presupposition of (1) is “inherited” by the larger (4) tree

It is “projected” to the higher tree

What constructions do this?

- (5) Has John left early from work again?**
- (6) John ought to leave work early again.**
- (7) Perhaps John has left work early again.**
- (8) If John left work early again, then he'll be fired.**

Contrast With

- (9) Lee kissed Jenny (which entails: Lee touched Jenny)**
- (10) Lee didn't kiss Jenny (does *not* entail Lee touched Jenny)**
- (11) Lee ought to kiss Jenny (does *not* entail Lee touched Jenny)**
- (12) Perhaps Lee kissed Jenny (does *not* entail Lee touched Jenny)**
- (13) If Lee kissed Jenny, then he'll be in trouble (does *not* entail Lee touched Jenny)**

Some entailments pass the test for “being backgrounded” but are not presuppositions nonetheless: E.g., non-restrictive relative clauses

(14) Jill, who lost something on the flight from Ithaca to NY, likes to travel by train

this entails (15) Jill lost something on the flight from Ithaca to NY

and so do all of

(16) Jill, who lost something on the flight from Ithaca to NY, does not like to travel by train

(17) Does Jill, who lost something on the flight from Ithaca to NY, does not like to travel by train

(18) If Jill, who lost something on the flight from Ithaca to NY, likes to travel by train, then she probably flies infrequently

Contrast with:

(19) What Jill lost on the flight from Ithaca to NY was her new flute.

The hallmark of a presupposition is:

It is taken for granted in the sense that its assumed truth is a precondition for felicitous utterance of the sentence and it places a kind of constraint on the discourse contexts that admit the sentence for interpretation.

The tests for presuppositional status of implications work because a proposition cannot be presented as already assumed and simultaneously presented as denied or hypothesized or queried.

Failing the tests is good evidence that an implied proposition is not presupposed but is instead asserted.

Certain constructions (especially lexical items) generate presuppositions:

“Factive Verbs”

(20) Jim was surprised that Mary failed the course

(21) Jim discovered that Mary failed the course

(22) Jim realizes that Mary failed the course

(23) Jim knows that Mary failed the course

(24) Jim regrets that Mary failed the course

Certain idiosyncratic particles

(25) Mary just barely/easily passed the course

(26) Mary intentionally kissed Sam

(27) Mary kissed Bill too

How do presuppositions enter into semantics? Two theories.

- i. *The two component model:* Presuppositions have a special status. Sentences have two kinds of content, their ordinary semantic content and their presuppositional (pragmatic) content. [Gazdar; Karttunen & Peters; Soames]**
- ii. *Pragmatic presupposition:* Presuppositions are admittance conditions for sentences into a context. [Stalnaker; Heim; van der Sandt]**

To explain the difference between these two types of theories we need to understand “the projection problem” (for presuppositions):

WHAT CONSTRUCTIONS INHERIT THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF THEIR PARTS AND WHICH DO NOT?

(28) It stopped raining

(28)^P It was raining at some time shortly before the reference time

(29) It started raining

(29)^P It was not raining at some time shortly before the reference time

(i) It stopped raining and then it started raining

(ii) It started raining and then it stopped raining

(iii) If it was raining, then it stopped raining by noon

(iv) If John came to the party, then it stopped raining by noon

(v) Either it stopped raining or Mary had an umbrella

(vi) Either it stopped raining or it never was raining in the first place

It seems that only (i), (iv), and (v) presuppose (28)^P

How do we handle the conflicting presuppositions of (i) and (ii)?

(30) John arrived on time too

(30)^P Someone else arrived on time

(31) Mary is happy, and John arrived on time too

(31)^P = (30)^P

(32) Mary arrived on time, and John arrived on time too

(32)^P <no presuppositions>

The general (type of) rule [from Karttunen & Peters]:

$(\phi \& \psi)^P = \phi^P$ plus as much of ψ^P that can't be deduced already from the semantic meaning of ϕ

Problems with this (type of) rule?

If I realize that I haven't told the truth, I will confess it in public

[Gazdar, Soames]: We need to distinguish between *potential presuppositions* and *actual presuppositions* of a sentence.

A sentence inherits *all* of its potential presuppositions of its parts, but some of these might be canceled by other information present in the conversation.

A potential presupposition only becomes *actual* if nothing else undoes it.

PROBLEM: not all presuppositions are cancelable:

(33) ??John came to the party too, although nobody else did.

This should be ok, since the second clause would cancel the presupposition of the first clause and thereby making the whole sentence equivalent to

(34) John came to the party, although nobody else did.