
PRAGMATICS

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PRESUPPOSITION

3

We look at presupposition, another kind of inference which is very closely linked to the 'working' of the utterance.

I celebrate myself and sing myself,
And what I assume, you shall assume.
(Walt Whitman)

In the USA, an accused mugger rather foolishly chose to defend himself at the trial. The following is one of the questions he put to his victim:

Did you get a good look at my face when I took your purse?

This goes some way to explaining why he was sentenced to 10 years in prison, but it also highlights another type of inference that we make when interpreting utterances. In the previous unit we experimented with assigning 'true' or 'false' to sentences. For some sentences, like *My mother is a woman*, we could assign a TRUTH-VALUE based on what was happening in the language. For others, like *My mother is a doctor*, we could still assign a truth-value, but it had to be based on what was happening in the world.

Truth-value

EXERCISE

3.1 Decide if it is possible to assign either 'true' or 'false' to each of the following sentences. (Remember, 'true' and 'false' are not quite the same as 'yes' and 'no'.) Are there any sentences where this was not quite possible regardless of how much knowledge you had about the people, places and events involved or the meaning of English words?

- (a) *Abraham Lincoln is the current president of the USA.*
- (b) *The Eiffel Tower is in Paris.*
- (c) *A car is an automobile.*
- (d) *Have a cookie.*
- (e) *Be careful of the crumbs.*
- (f) *Where was Abraham Lincoln born?*
- (g) *How much did the car cost?*

Comment

You could answer 'false' to (a) and 'true' to (b) based on your knowledge about the world. You could automatically answer 'true' to (c) based on your knowledge of what *car* and *automobile* mean. These three sentences have a particular kind of grammatical structure. They are **DECLARATIVE SENTENCES**. Declarative sentences typically function as 'statements'.

Declarative sentences

You ran away.
 | |
 Subject Verb

Problems in assigning 'true' or 'false' occur in sentences (d) to (g). These sentences do not have a declarative structure. Sentences (d) and (e) are **IMPERATIVE SENTENCES**. In imperative sentences, which typically function as 'commands', there is no subject present although it is 'understood' as *you*.

Imperative sentences

Run away!
 |
 Verb

Interrogative sentences

Sentences (f) and (g) are **INTERROGATIVE SENTENCES**. Interrogative sentences typically function as 'questions'. Some interrogatives begin with words like *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, *how*, etc. Since the majority of these words begin with *wh-*, they are all usually called **WH-WORDS**.

Wh-words

Why did you run away? Did you run away?
 | | | | | |
 Verb Subject Verb Verb Subject Verb

You will recall from **Unit 2** that the entailments of a sentence are other sentences which are automatically true if the original sentence is true. However, as we have seen, only declarative sentences can be 'true' or 'false'. Does this mean what we cannot draw some very strong inferences from utterances based on imperative and interrogative sentences?

EXERCISE

3.2 For each of the following utterances decide whether the sentence being uttered is declarative, imperative or interrogative and whether the accompanying inference seems valid.

- (a) Where has Faye looked for the keys? 'Faye has looked for the keys.'
- (b) Did you buy this awful wine? 'This wine is awful.'
- (c) Don't sit on Annie's sofa. 'Annie has a sofa.'
- (d) Stop being lazy. 'You are being lazy.'
- (e) Lucy knows that George is a crook. 'George is a crook.'

Comment

These inferences all seem quite obvious ones to make. They look suspiciously like entailments, yet only the sentence uttered in (e) is declarative. Sentences (a) and (b) are interrogatives, and sentences (c) and (d) are imperatives. These sorts of inferences are sometimes called **PRESUPPOSITIONS**. Since not all utterances consist of full declarative sentences, presupposition can be a useful concept when analysing speaker meaning. However, it has proved very difficult for authors in the area to agree on a definition for it. This definition problem is partly a reflection of the fuzzy boundary between pragmatics and semantics. Some definitions of presupposition are very broad and speaker oriented: anything the speaker assumes to be true before making the utterance. Others are much more narrow and sentence oriented: a necessary precondition for the sentence to be true. In these units we will be treating presuppositions as inferences about what is assumed to be true in the utterance rather than directly asserted to be true:

Presuppositions

- Faye has looked for the keys **directly asserts** 'Faye has looked for the keys'
- Where has Faye looked for the keys? **presupposes** 'Faye has looked for the keys'
- Annie has a sofa **directly asserts** 'Annie has a sofa'
- Don't sit on Annie's sofa **presupposes** 'Annie has a sofa'

Presuppositions are inferences that are very closely linked to the words and grammatical structures actually used in the utterance, but they come from our knowledge about the way language users **conventionally interpret** these words and structures. Because of this, presuppositions can be quite 'sneaky' as the next exercise will demonstrate.

EXERCISE 

3.3 In Exercise 3.2 change *has* to *hasn't* in (a); *did* to *didn't* in (b); *do* to *don't* in (c); *stop* to *don't stop* in (d); and *knows* to *doesn't know* in (e). Do the inferences still hold?

Comment

Negation

You will have found that each of these inferences, or presuppositions, remains constant under NEGATION of the main sentence. (Unfortunately for our mugger at the beginning of the unit, the inference that he took the purse would still hold whether or not his victim said she got a good look at his face.) This is sometimes used as a 'test' for a presupposition, and it highlights how a presupposition can take on the appearance of 'established truth'. In the next three exercises, we will look in a bit more detail at some of the kinds of words and structures that seem to 'trigger' presuppositions.

EXERCISE 

3.4 Each of the following utterances mentions *chocolate cake*. Decide which ones contain the presupposition that at the time the utterance was made 'There was a chocolate cake'. What do those utterances have in common?

- 1(a) Mike might find the chocolate cake in the kitchen.
- 1(b) Mike might find a chocolate cake in the kitchen.
- 2(a) Is Mike giving Annie that chocolate cake?
- 2(b) Is Mike giving Annie a chocolate cake?
- 3(a) Did Mike hide a chocolate cake?
- 3(b) Did Mike hide Annie's chocolate cake?

Comment

The (a) utterance in each pair leads us to presuppose that the chocolate cake being mentioned actually existed. What we notice is that in each of those utterances the noun *cake* is part of a larger noun phrase. The words *the*, *that*, *this*, *these*, *those*, and POSSESSIVES like *Annie's*, *my*, *your*, etc. make it a DEFINITE NOUN PHRASE and trigger this very basic kind of presupposition. Notice that possessives lead to a particularly strong presupposition about the existence of the chocolate cake, and in addition lead to the presupposition that 'Annie has a chocolate cake'. This basic type of presupposition is sometimes called an EXISTENTIAL PRESUPPOSITION. Look at how existential presupposition could work if I wanted to sell you some hair lotion:

You'll want DomeBeGone, my revolutionary cure for baldness.

Possessives
Definite noun
phraseExistential
presupposition

Here, I am directly asserting that 'You will want it' but inside the definite noun phrase *my revolutionary cure for baldness* lurk several quite dubious propositions which are simply assumed to be true:

'There is a cure for baldness.'

'The cure is revolutionary.'

'I have this cure.'

You can probably see that presupposition has a great deal of importance in persuasive language, particularly in the courtroom and in advertising. Advertisers are not allowed to directly assert claims about their products or their competitors' for which they have no evidence. However, they can generally get away with making indirect assertions via presupposition. In the courtroom, where the stakes are much higher than in advertising, lawyers examining witnesses are often not allowed to make an indirect assertion via presupposition, unless it has been established by previous evidence.

 EXERCISE

3.5 For each of the following utterances, decide which ones contain the presupposition that 'Mike smashed the television'. In other words, which ones indicate that the speaker has assumed that this proposition is true but has not directly asserted it. What do those utterances have in common?

- (a) Did Mike smash the television?
- (b) When did Mike smash the television?
- (c) I was eating popcorn when Mike smashed the television.
- (d) Why did Mike smash the television?
- (e) I don't understand why Mike smashed the television.
- (f) I wonder if Mike smashed the television.
- (g) I wonder how Mike smashed the television.

Here (b), (c), (d), (e), and (g) seem to presuppose that Mike smashed the television, while (a) and (f) leave it as an 'open question'. Wh-words like *when*, *why*, *how*, etc. can trigger suppositions both when they are used to ask a question as in (b) and (d) and when they introduce a SUBORDINATE CLAUSE as in (c), (e), and (g): *when/why/how Mike smashed the television*.

Comment

Subordinate clause

 EXERCISE

3.6 In this exercise we look at some other kinds of words and constructions that can lead to presuppositions. In each case write out a presupposition contained in the utterance and decide what has triggered it.

- (a) Steve regrets buying a dog.
- (b) Meridyth pretends she's a rock star.
- (c) Ed should stop eating raw oysters.

Comment

Mine were: (a) 'Steve bought a dog'. (b) 'Meridyth is not a rock star'. (c) 'Ed eats raw oysters'. Interestingly, when hearers query presuppositions, they often explicitly query the wording that leads to them as well:

Steve could hardly regret it since he didn't buy the dog after all.

Pretend? I thought Meridyth WAS a rock star.

What do you mean 'stop'? Ed's never eaten a raw oyster in his life!

The use of *regret* in (a) triggers the presupposition that what follows is 'fact'. Other verbs that can behave like this are *know*, *realize*, *discover* and *find out* as well as constructions like *I'm aware that ...* and *It's strange that ...* On the other hand, the use of *pretend* in (b) triggers the presupposition that what follows is 'fiction'. Other verbs that can behave like this are *imagine* and *dream* and constructions like *If I were ...* as in *If I were the Prime Minister, I'd ban presuppositions*. The use of *stop* in (c) triggers the presupposition that the action was going on before. Other verbs that can behave like this are *continue* and *keep*. On the other hand, *start* and *begin* can presuppose that the action was **not** going on before.

In this unit we have been looking at utterances in isolation, as if we had just passed by an open door and overheard a stranger talking. Presuppositions seem to be inferences that can be made with very little knowledge of the context. In the next unit we will start looking at inferences that require considerably more contextual knowledge and possibly more work for the hearer as well.

SUMMARY

- We have described presuppositions as inferences about what is assumed in an utterance rather than directly asserted.
- Presuppositions are closely linked to the words and grammatical structures that are actually used in the utterance and our knowledge about the way language users conventionally interpret them.
- Presuppositions can be drawn even when there is little or no surrounding context.

FURTHER EXERCISES

3.7 In each case assume that the judge has sustained an objection to the question. What presupposition(s) might have been objected to?

- (a) How did you know that the defendant had bought a knife?
- (b) How long have you been selling cocaine?
- (c) When was your bracelet stolen?
- (d) Did you see the murdered woman before she left the office?
- (e) How fast was the car going when the driver ran the red light?
- (f) At what time did you telephone your lover?
- (g) Have you stopped being an active gang member?
- (h) Why did you leave the scene of the crime?

3.8 In each of the following advertisement extracts, what claim or claims are being made by presupposition rather than directly asserted? (The names have been changed to protect the innocent.)

- (a) The secret to Blasee's effectiveness is Calming Fluid.
- (b) Look out for the distinctive packs in your local Bippo stockists and choose the one that's just right for you.
- (c) Watch all the puffiness and wrinkles disappear!
- (d) Increased protection against water spots.
- (e) Now you can get a really crisp professional finish.
- (f) It combines three potent skin perfecting discoveries in one gentle formula.

3.9 Try your hand at being a tricky lawyer. Write some questions that attempt to sneak in the following 'facts' via presupposition. Here's a sample question for 'The defendant drove his car into a shop window': Did you brake before you drove your car into the shop window? Notice how if the defendant 'just answers the question', either Yes or No, he accepts the truth of the presupposition and admits that he drove his car into the shop window.

- (a) The defendant had a fight with his brother-in-law.
- (b) The defendant has three previous convictions.
- (c) The defendant belongs to a terrorist organization.
- (d) The defendant was speeding.

3.10 Try your hand at being a tricky advertiser. Below are completely unsubstantiated claims about various products. For each one, write a line of advertisement that slips in the claim via presupposition. For the purposes of this exercise use full sentences. Your sentences

SUPPLEMENTARY EXERCISES

can be declaratives, interrogatives or imperatives. In fact, you will find interrogatives and imperatives particularly useful in some cases.

- (a) ZONKO cures insomnia.
- (b) HappyHavens Inn has beautiful views.
- (c) KISSGOOD eliminates bad breath.
- (d) NO-ANT kills ants.
- (e) Crook & Sons Ltd employ skilled workers.
- (f) BLASTEX is not poisonous.
- (g) SHINO nourishes wood.
- (h) Dogs love YAPPY dog food.
- (i) Dentists use GRIN toothpaste.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

3.11 Since we have said that presuppositions arise from conventional interpretations, could we extend this to *and*? Here are some utterances to play with:

- (a) It was hot and very humid.
- (b) Ed ate the raw oysters and felt quite ill.
- (c) Ed got dressed and went to the office.

3.12 Would you consider it unusual for a hearer to query an entailment?

3.13 Do all of these utterances presuppose 'The boiler blew up'?

- (a) John got to safety before the boiler blew up.
- (b) John got to the safety valve before the boiler blew up.
- (c) John got to safety after the boiler blew up.
- (d) John got to the safety valve after the boiler blew up.

For an interesting discussion of how presupposition fits into semantics and pragmatics:

Simpson, 1993, Chapter 5.

For more about the case of the exploding boiler:

Yule, 1996, pp. 99-100.

For a review of the problems in defining presupposition:

Leech, 1981, Chapter 14.

FURTHER READING