



Einführung in Pragmatik und Diskurs

Presuppositions

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The Meaning of “Presuppose”

- [Roget’s II: The New Thesaurus, Third Edition. 1995: To take for granted without proof: assume, posit, postulate, premise, presume, suppose.
- **wordreference.com**
(Adapted From: WordNet 2.0 Copyright 2003 by Princeton University.):
 1. require as a necessary antecedent or precondition; “This step presupposes two prior ones”
 2. take for granted or as a given; suppose beforehand; “I presuppose that you have done your work”

Presupposition

- (1) *Der König von Frankreich* ist weise.
Presupposes: Es gibt einen könig von Frankreich
- (2) *Der König von Frankreich* ist nicht weise.
Presupposes: Es gibt einen könig von Frankreich
- (3) Martha *bedauert*, Peters Gebräu getrunken zu haben
- (4) Martha *bedauert* nicht, Peters Gebräu getrunken zu haben
Presupposes: Martha hat Peters Gebräu getrunken
- (5) Zuckerstangen gibt es *nicht mehr*
Presupposes: Früher gab es Zuckerstangen
- (6) Was hat Peter gegessen?
Presupposes: Peter hat etwas gegessen

Presupposition

Presupposition (*G. Präsupposition*) is a technical term for certain patterns of inference or assumptions, which can be isolated by using specific test, are built into (the form of) linguistic expressions.

'textbf[Beaver 1994]: “A large class of lexical items and grammatical constructions produce **distinctive patterns of inference.**” It is difficult to find any common strand to current analyses of presupposition, save that they all concern (various parts of) this class”.

- long tradition in philosophical literature
- raised many problems for linguistic theory (esp. formal semantics) in the 1970s
- much clarified in dynamic semantics approaches since 1980s

Outline

- Historical Overview
 - Frege 1892
 - Russell 1905
 - Strawson 1950
- Properties of presuppositions:
 - Survival/heritability
 - Defeasibility
 - Detachability: presupposition triggers
- Presupposition projection problem
- Semantic theories of presupposition
- Pragmatic theories of presupposition
- Conclusions

Reading: Levinson 1983, Ch 4; Davis, Ch 6; Geurts 1999, Ch 1, 2, 3

Historical Background

The investigation of presuppositions as a phenomenon originates with debates in philosophy about the nature of reference and referring expressions, and their logical interpretation.

The main influential proposals

- Frege 1892
- Russell 1905
- Strawson 1950
- (Stalnaker 1973, 1974)

Frege's Theory of Presupposition

Reference of proper names:

- (7) *Kepler died in misery*
Kepler starb im Elend.

Presupposition (*Voraussetzung*): "Kepler" designates something.

Frege argues: the presupposition is not part of the meaning of the Proper Name.

If it were, the meaning of (7) would be (8):

- (8) *Kepler died in misery and "Kepler" designates something.*

Hence, the meaning of (9) would be (10), because $\neg(p \wedge q) \equiv (\neg p \vee \neg q)$:

- (9) *Kepler did not die in misery.*
Kepler starb nicht im Elend.

- (10) *Kepler did not die in misery or "Kepler" does not designate anything.*

According to Frege, this is obviously wrong.

Frege's Theory of Presupposition

Reference of temporal clauses:

- (11) *After the separation of Schleswig-Holstein from Denmark, Prussia and Austria quarreled.*

Nach Losreißung Schleswig-Holsteins von Dänemark entzweiten sich Preußen und Östereich.

Presupposition: There is a past event such that S-H separated from Denmark.

Frege's Theory of Presupposition

Frege's view:

- Referring phrases and temporal clauses carry presuppositions to the effect that they refer (i.e., there is a uniquely identifiable object described by them).
- A sentence and its negative counterpart share the same set of presuppositions. (i.e., Presuppositions are not part of the conventional meaning of a sentence.)
- **A sentence/assertion has a truth value only if its presuppositions are true.**
- **Hence if a referring phrase fails to refer, its containing sentence fails to have a truth-value.**

Some problems with Frege's theory

Problem 1: According to Frege, if a referring phrase fails to refer its containing sentence fails to have a truth-value.

But: Presupposition failure need not make a sentence meaningless.

For example: “Jan’s children” presupposes: “Jan has children” However, even if this presupposition is not verified (i.e. if Jan does not have children), (12-14) can all have a determinate truth value (i.e. be either false or true).

- (12) Jan has children and **Jan’s children** are tall.
Jan hat Kinder und Jans Kinder sind hoch.
- (13) If Jan has children, **Jan’s children** are tall.
Wenn Jan Kinder hat, sind Jans Kinder hoch.
- (14) Either Jan does not have children, or **Jan’s children** are tall.
Entweder hat Jan keine Kinder oder sind Jans Kinder hoch.



Some problems with Frege's theory

Problem 2: Presuppositions arise also from other than **referring expressions**.

- (15) a. If a man gets angry, **his child** starts crying.
Wenn ein Man wutig wird, fangt **sein Kind** an zu weinen.
- b. Every man kissed **the girl who loved him**.
Jeder Man hat das Mädchen gekusst, die ihm liebte.

The presuppositional expressions “**the girl who loved him**” and “**his child**” are *not referring* as they contain pronouns that are interpreted as bound variables.

There is no unique object on which the presuppositional expression depends and consequently no way to analyse these NPs as referring expressions.

Russell's Theory of Descriptions

Russell came to quite different conclusions than Frege.

- According to Russell, definite descriptions like **the N** have a complex logical representation:

$$(16) \quad \exists x(Px \wedge \neg \exists y((y \neq x) \wedge Py))$$

Es gibt eine Entität x , so daß es gilt:

- a. x hat die Eigenschaft P (P ist die Interpretation von N)
- b. es gibt keine andere Entität y , die sich von x unterscheidet und Eigenschaft P hat.

Russell's Theory of Descriptions

According to Russell, (17) is meaningful, and simply false, if France has no King (at the time of utterance):

(17) *The King of France is wise.*

Der König von Frankreich ist weise.

$\exists x(KFx \wedge \neg \exists y((y \neq x) \wedge KFy) \wedge Wx)$

Es gibt eine Entität x , so daß gilt:

- a. x hat die Eigenschaft KF
- b. es gibt keine andere Entität y , die sich von x unterscheidet und Eigenschaft KF hat.
- c. x hat die Eigenschaft W

i.e., there is a King of France who is wise and there's no one else who's King of France.

Russell's Theory of Descriptions

Russell predicts that

(18) *The King of France is not wise.*

Der König von Frankreich ist nicht weise.

(19) $\neg\exists x(KFx \wedge \neg\exists y((y \neq x) \wedge KFy) \wedge Wx)$

Has two possible interpretations, due to **scope ambiguity of negation**:

(20) $\exists x((KFx \wedge \neg\exists y((y \neq x) \wedge KFy)) \wedge \neg Wx)$

false when France has no (unique) King of France

(21) $\exists x(\neg(KFx \wedge \neg\exists y((y \neq x) \wedge KFy)) \wedge Wx)$

trivially true when France has no (unique) King of France

Therefore . . .

Russell's Theory of Descriptions

. . . Russell's approach predicts correctly that

(22) *The King of France is not wise because there is no such person*

Der König von Frankreich ist nicht weise, weil es keine solche Person gibt.

can be true. (This is the phenomenon of *presupposition cancellation*.)

In Frege's account this sentence would have no truth-value (because a presupposition of an embedded expression is not satisfied). (Frege's account would have to be saved by postulating lexical ambiguity for linguistic negation, one reading preserving presuppositions and one not.)

Strawson's Theory

- Introduces a distinction between **sentences** and **statements**, i.e., **use of sentences** in context: $\langle \text{Sentence, Context} \rangle$ pairs
- It is statements that are true or false (not sentences).

(17) *The King of France is not wise.*

Der König von Frankreich ist nicht weise.

- i. True in 1670.
- ii. False in 1770.
- iii. Neither true nor false in 1970.

Strawson's Theory

- Presuppositions are pragmatic inferences arising from conventions about **use** of referring expressions: **a statement A presupposes a statement B iff statement B is a precondition for the truth or falsity of statement A.**

= presupposition is a relation between statements (not sentences).
- Shares Frege's view that a negative statement has the same presuppositions as the corresponding positive statement
- Rejects Russell's logical form for Definite Descriptions and therefore (like Frege) fails to explain presupposition cancellation.

Summary Up To This point

- contrast between assertion and presupposition (of an expression)
- presupposition as a different type of inference than logical implication or entailment
- presupposition as relation between sentences vs. statements (or even between speakers and statements)
- ambiguity of negation: structural (Russell) vs. lexical (Frege, Strawson)

Defining Properties of Presuppositions

1. Presuppositions differ from semantic entailments because:

- presuppositions **survive** in contexts where entailments disappear (e.g. negation, modals, attitude verbs)
- presuppositions are **defeasible** e.g. they can disappear in contexts where entailments survive

⇒ **Presupposition projection problem**

Defining Properties of Presuppositions

2. Presuppositions differ from conversational implicatures, in that they are tied to aspects of **surface structure**, in particular:

- Unlike conversational implicatures, presuppositions are associated with linguistic items or constructions (**presupposition-triggers**), i.e. **detachable**, rather than arising from the cooperative principle.
(Cf. also **Grice: conventional implicatures**)
- Unlike conversational implicatures, presuppositions have a complex “inheritance” behavior which is **partially sensitive to surface structure**, rather than purely to context or world knowledge. ⇒ **Presupposition projection problem**

Presupposition Triggers

Levison, Sec. 4.2,
pp. 197-203 in the German version,
181-184 in the English version
⇒ Homework for next exercise session.



Presupposition Triggers

Presupposition are tied to particular words, or aspects of surface structure in general. Karttunen counted 31 kinds of presuppositional triggers, e.g.:

- **Definite descriptions**

(23) *John saw **the man** with two heads*

Peter sah *den Mann mit den zwei Köpfen* [nicht]

» Es gibt einen Mann mit zwei Köpfen

- **Factive verbs**, e.g. bedauern, wissen, ignorieren, leidtun, dass, stolz darauf sein, dass, froh darüber sein, dass, traurig darüber sein, dass

(24) *Sue **regrets** that she drank wine.*

Martha *bedauert* [nicht], Wein getrunken zu haben.

» Martha hat Wein getrunken

- **Implicative verbs**, e.g. schaffen, vergessen, zufällig tun, vermeiden
(25) *Maria managed to smile.*
Maria schaffte es [nicht], zu lachen.
» Maria smiled.
- **Change of state verbs** e.g., aufhören, beginnen, anfangen, innehalten, aufgeben, wegnehmen, verlassen, betreten, kommen, gehen
(26) *Jon stopped drinking*
Jon hörte [nicht] auf zu trinken.
» Jon was drinking
- **Iteratives** e.g., wieder, noch x-mal, wiederkommen, wiederherstellen, zum x-ten Mal
(27) *Jon kissed Sue again.*
Jon küsste Sue wieder.

» Jon kissed Sue before.

- **Judgement verbs** bezichtigen, vorhalten

(28) Amalie *bezichtigte* Jakob [nicht] eines Plagiats

» (Amalie denkt,) ein Plagiat ist schlimm

- **Temporal clauses** e.g., *bevor, nachdem, solange, wann immer, als*

(29) *Bevor* Strawson geboren wurde, hatte die Frege sich [nicht] mit Präsuppositionen beschäftigt.

» Strawson wurde geboren.

- **Counterfactual conditionals**

(30) *Hätte Hannibal nur zwölf Elefanten mehr gehabt*, würden die romanischen Sprachen heute [nicht] existieren

» Hannibal hatte nicht zwölf Elefanten mehr

- **Comparisons and contrasts** e.g., auch, ebenfalls, nur, sogar

(31) *Auch* JAN *küsste* Sue.

JAN *kissed* Sue, *too*.

» Someone else than Jan kissed Sue.

(32) *Jan küsste auch* SUE.

Jon kissed SUE, *too*.

» Jon kissed someone else than Sue.

- **Cleft sentences**

(33) Es war [nicht] Hermann, der Rosi küsste.

It was/wasn't Harry who kissed Rosie. » Someone kissed Rosie.

Presupposition Projection Problem

What are the presuppositions of (complex) sentences or entire discourses in terms of the presuppositions of their parts, i.e., **compositionality**: how are the presuppositions of a discourse calculated given the presuppositions of its parts.

There are three ways in which the presuppositions of the parts can *project* to participate in the presuppositions of the whole:

- Context lets a presupposition “survive” i.e. project.
- Context “overtly cancels or suspends” a presupposition.
- Context “filters”: cancels some presuppositions, but lets others survive.



Presupposition Survival

Negation: Presuppositions survive under negation, entailments don't.

- (34) Jan schaffte es, rechtzeitig auf zu hören.
- (35) Jan managed to stop in time.
 \gg Jan tried to stop in time.
 \models Jon stopped in time.
- (36) Jan schaffte es **nicht**, rechtzeitig auf zu hören.
- (37) Jan did **not** manage to stop in time.
 \gg Jon tried to stop in time.
 $\not\models$ Jon stopped in time.



Presupposition Survival

Modals: Presuppositions survive under modal operators, entailments don't.

- (38) Der Sheriff hat drei Männer arrestiert.
 \gg There is a sheriff.
 \models The sheriff arrested two men.
- (39) Der Sheriff könnte drei Männer arrestiert haben.
 \gg There is a sheriff.
 $\not\models$ The sheriff arrested two men.
- (40) Der Sheriff hat **vielleicht** drei Männer arrestiert.
 \gg There is a sheriff.
 $\not\models$ The sheriff arrested two men.



Presupposition Survival

- (41) Die zwei Diebe sind gesternabend **wieder** gefahtet worden.
The two thieves were caught **again** last night.
 >> The two thieves were caught before.
 ⊨ A thief was caught last night.

Conditionals:

- (42) **Wenn** die zwei Diebe gesternabend wieder gefahtet sind, bekommt Jan eine Promotion.
If the two thieves were caught again last night, John will get promoted.
 >> The two thieves were caught before.
 ⊭ A thief was caught last night.

Disjunctions:

(43) **Entweder** sind die zwei Diebe gesternabend wieder gehaftet, **oder** Jan verliert sein Job.

Either the two thieves were caught again last night **or** John will lose his job.

» The two thieves were caught before

≠ A thief was caught last night.



Presupposition Defeasibility/Cancellation

A presupposition can be canceled by the linguistic or non-linguistic context within the context of the same sentence or beyond the sentence, in the larger discourse context.

1. When the linguistic context makes the presupposition inconsistent.
2. When is it common knowledge that the presupposition is false
3. When what is said, taken together with background assumptions makes the presupposition inconsistent.
4. When evidence for truth of the presupposition is being weighed and rejected



Contextual Defeasibility

(1) When linguistic context makes presupposition inconsistent.

(44) Ich weiß nicht, dass Bill gekommen ist.

I don't know that Bill came.

does not presuppose S knows that Bill came.

although

(45) Jan weißt nicht, dass Bill gekommen ist.

Jon does not know that Bill came.

» S knows that Bill came.

- (46) Peter hat es nicht geschafft, sein Examen zu bestehen.
 >> Peter hat versucht, sein Examen zu bestehen
- (47) Peter hat es nicht geschafft, sein Examen zu bestehen, ja, **er hat es nicht einmal versucht.**
- (48) Peter hat es nicht geschafft, sein Examen zu bestehen, **falls er es überhaupt versucht hat.**
- (49) **Entweder hat Peter nie versucht, sein Examen zu bestehen,** oder er hat es versucht und nie geschafft.
- (50) Peter hat es nicht *geschafft*, sein Examen zu bestehen - er ist durchgerutscht, ohne es überhaupt versucht zu haben.



Contextual Defeasibility

(2) When is it common knowledge that the presupposition is false.

(51) A: Peter hat es nicht geschafft, in einen Medizindiplomstudiengang aufgenommen zu werden.

Peter has failed to get into a medicine degree.

B: Zumindest muss Peter jetzt nicht bedauern, ein Medizindiplom gemacht zu haben.

At least Peter won't have to regret that he did medicine.

B's utterance does not presuppose that Peter studied for a degree in medicine.



Contextual Defeasibility

(3) When what is said, taken together with background assumptions (i.e. relevant world knowledge), is inconsistent with what is presupposed.

(52) Sarah starb, bevor sie ihre Diplomarbeit beendete.

Sarah died before she finished her thesis.

Does not presuppose Sarah finished her thesis.

although

(53) Sarah machte Urlaub, bevor sie ihre Diplomarbeit beendete.

Sarah cried before she finished her thesis.

»» Sarah finished her thesis.



Contextual Defeasibility

(4) When evidence for truth of presupposition is being weighed and rejected.

(54) A: Wier müssen herausfinden, ob Sascha ein KGB-Spion ist Wer sollte das wissen?

B: Die einzige Person, die das mit Sicherheit weiß, ist Alexis. Ich habe mit ihm gesprochen, und **er hat keine Kenntnis davon, dass Sascha vom KGB angeheuert worden ist**. Ich denke also, dass wir Sascha vertrauen können.

Does not presuppose Serge is on the KGB payroll, although:

(55) Alexis hat keine Kenntnis davon, dass Sascha vom KGB angeheuert worden ist

» Sascha ist vom KGB angeheuert worden



Presupposition Filtering

In certain types of syntactic constructions (e.g. *if ...then, either ... or*) some presuppositions get canceled, but not all.

(56) If it is sunny, Jon's wife likes gardening.

 >> Jon has a wife.

(57) If Jon has a wife, she (Jon's wife) likes gardening.

(58) If Jon is married, his wife likes gardening.

(57-58) do not presuppose that Jon has a wife.

(59) Either Jon learnt to manage his time or his wife is helping him with work.

 >> Jon has a wife.

(60) Either Jon got a divorce or his wife is helping him with work.

 does not presuppose that Jon has a wife.



Presupposition Filtering

Filtering Restrictions

1. In a sentence of the form *if p then q*, the presuppositions of the parts will be inherited by the whole unless:
 - (i) q presupposes r and (ii) $p \models r$.
2. In a sentence of the form *p or q*, the presuppositions of the parts will be inherited by the whole unless
 - (i) q presupposes r and (ii) $\neg p \models r$.

Summary Thus Far

- Presuppositions differ from entailments and conversational implicatures
- They are triggered by certain lexical items or by certain types of constructions
- They have complex projection behavior which is partly sensitive to linguistic structure