

## PRESUPPOSITIONS

My aim is to sketch a general abstract account of the notion of presupposition, and to argue that the presupposition relation which linguists talk about should be explained in terms of this general account. The notion I will discuss is a *pragmatic* notion, as opposed to a purely *semantic* one. This means that the presupposition relation cannot be explained solely in terms of the meaning or content of sentences, but must be explained partly in terms of facts about the users of sentences: their beliefs, intentions and expectations. My notion will thus contrast with the standard account of presupposition which has been given by philosophers and linguists. According to this standard account, one sentence presupposes another just in case the latter must be true in order that the former have a truth value at all. This definition was given by Strawson<sup>1</sup>, and has been developed formally by van Fraassen<sup>2</sup>. Generative semanticists such as G. Lakoff, Horn, and Karttunen<sup>3</sup> have used or assumed this kind of semantic definition.

According to the contrasting idea that I will focus on, the basic presupposition relation is not between propositions or sentences, but between a person and a proposition. A person's presuppositions are the propositions whose truth he takes for granted, often unconsciously, in a conversation, an inquiry, or a deliberation. They are the background assumptions that may be used without being spoken – sometimes without being noticed – for example as suppressed premisses in an enthymematic argument, or as implicit directions about how a request should be fulfilled or a piece of advice taken. I will argue that it is in terms of this intuitive idea of presupposition, or a refinement of it, that the linguistic phenomenon of presupposition should be explained.

The treatment of presupposition by linguists begins not with an abstract account, but with some paradigm cases of a presumed relation between sentences. For example, sentences with factive verbs like 'know' and 'regret' presuppose the truth of the proposition expressed by the nominalized sentence which is the complement of the verb. Past tense sub-

junctive conditional statements presuppose the falsity of the antecedent, and perhaps also of the consequent. A diverse collection of words like *few*, *even*, *only*, *again*, *stop*, *accuse*, *refuse*, *admit*, *confess*, *pretend*, *continue*, *resume*, *before*, and *after* each gives rise to characteristic presuppositions in sentences in which it occurs. What unites these cases is just the intuitive idea of presupposition, together with a few rough generalizations like the following: generally, if a statement *A* has a particular presupposition, then so does the denial of *A*, as well as the statement that says that it *might* be that *A*. So that if 'Ted is the only man who could have won' presupposes that Ted could have won, then so does 'Ted is not the only man who could have won', as well as 'Ted might be the only man who could have won'.

Although a great many interesting facts have been turned up by linguists exploring this phenomenon, so far as I know, little has been said by them about the general nature of the presupposition relation that the examples they have discovered are examples of. They usually assume that the account of presupposition as a semantic relation defined in terms of truth values is the correct theoretical analysis. But I believe that their substantive claims about the phenomenon rarely depend on this assumption. The examples and generalizations can be more adequately explained, and some puzzles avoided, if we define the linguistic notion of presupposition in terms of a development of the pragmatic account of presupposition as a propositional attitude. From the point of view of this alternative account, the technical semantic relation of presupposition will be just one reason among others why a statement may require a presupposition in the pragmatic sense.

I will start my defense of this claim with a sketch of the pragmatic notion. Statements and requests are made, questions asked, proclamations and commands issued, against a background of common knowledge, or at least what is represented as common knowledge. This background of knowledge or beliefs purportedly shared by the speaker and his audience constitute the presuppositions which define the context. A rough definition might go something like this: *A speaker presupposes that P at a given moment in a conversation just in case he is disposed to act, in his linguistic behavior, as if he takes the truth of P for granted, and as if he assumes that his audience recognizes that he is doing so.* I will comment on some of the qualifying phrases of this rough and tentative definition.

First on acting as if: the speaker need not really be taking the truth of

*P* for granted. He and his audience might be accepting a known falsehood, or a proposition whose truth value is in doubt, in order to further the purpose of the conversation. In such a case, the behavior may involve transparent pretense, but nevertheless, it may be essential to understanding and interpreting the conversation to recognize that the participants are acting as if they had certain common beliefs. In the same way, the speaker need not *really* be assuming that his audience recognizes in advance that he is taking something for granted. In some cases, the central purpose of making a statement may be to communicate a presupposition which is required by that statement. For example, someone asks of my daughter, 'how old is he?' I answer, '*she* is ten months old'. Or, *a* says, of the new secretary, 'Jennifer is certainly an attractive woman'. *b* replies, 'Yes, her husband thinks so too'. In these cases, the speaker represents himself as assuming that certain propositions are part of the background of common knowledge. The representation is again a transparent pretense, but it is nevertheless by means of the representation that communication is accomplished.

Second, on being disposed: I may be presupposing something, according to this definition, even if nothing I say or do indicates that I am. For example, you ask, 'Who do you think will win the next presidential election?' I answer, 'George McGovern'. Now as a matter of fact in this conversation, we both presuppose from the beginning that Richard Nixon will be one of the candidates, even though neither your question nor my answer *requires* that presupposition. We presuppose it because it is obviously true, and we each recognize that the other knows that it is obviously true. Although neither of us does in fact *act* in any way that indicates that we take it for granted that Nixon will be a candidate, we are each *disposed* to so act, should the occasion arise. This means that if I wanted to express a proposition which could most easily be expressed with a sentence whose use required that presupposition, I would use that sentence. So, for example, I might say, 'Harry doesn't even realize that Nixon is going to run again'. Or, if I wanted to argue to a conclusion that required the premiss that Nixon was a candidate, I would not feel obliged to make that premiss explicit. So for example, I might argue, 'McGovern is going to win, so Nixon will lose'. Because I *would* act, in my linguistic behavior, as if I take the truth of that proposition for granted in these ways, I *do* in fact presuppose it.

I do not want to pretend that the notion of being disposed to act, in one's linguistic behavior, as if he takes the truth of some proposition for granted is clear, nor am I confident that some other qualifying phrase is not required to get the definition right. But what I want to get out of the definition does not depend on its details. There are two things I want to use the definition to justify: first, some claims about the formal structure of the concept of presupposition; second, some general conversational rules involving the notion of presupposition.

First, whatever the details of the definition, it is clear that presupposition is a propositional attitude. More specifically, it is an attitude of accepting something to be true. Hence it is reasonable to require, as at least a rational ideal, that the set of all presuppositions made at any given moment be consistent and deductively closed. If the set of all presuppositions in force at a given moment meets these conditions, then we can characterize it in terms of a set of possible states of affairs or courses of events – possible worlds if you like. Given the presuppositions, this set of possible worlds is defined as containing just those in which all the presuppositions are true. Given the set of possible worlds, the set of presuppositions is defined as containing just those which are true in all the possible worlds in the set. Intuitively, this set of possible worlds, which I will call the presupposition set, contains just the alternative possibilities which the speaker considers to be relevant to the purposes of the participants in the conversation, or just the alternative possibilities among which the participants are expected to have some reason to distinguish with the propositions they might express.

Second, I want the definition to provide justification for some general rules of conversation. The kind of justification that I want is an argument that shows the rules to be, not just arbitrary stipulations or conventions, but maxims which derive from general principles of rational cooperative behavior. If we have such a justification for certain maxims, and can use the maxims to explain some of the linguistic facts about presuppositions that have been noted, then we will be able to show that there is no need to postulate specific syntactic or semantic rules in order to explain the facts.<sup>4</sup>

What is important for justifying such rules or maxims is just the fact that a presupposition is *like* an item of presumed common knowledge, or what is taken to be a shared belief. Whatever the details of the definition, it implies that in typical, naive, straightforward uses of language, the

presuppositions will coincide with what is taken by the speaker to be the beliefs shared by him and his audience. The only reason that the definition of presupposition cannot stop with this is that as soon as there are established and mutually recognized rules relating what is said to the presumed common beliefs, it becomes possible to exploit those rules by acting as if the shared beliefs were different than they in fact are known to be. The existence and mutual recognition of the rules is what makes it possible to communicate such a pretense, and thus to use the pretense to communicate. Since we want to say that the presuppositions are present even when such rules are being exploited in this way, we cannot simply identify presupposition with what is actually taken to be common knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

Now as linguists use the term, it is *sentences* that have presuppositions. Although according to the notion I have sketched it is persons, and not sentences, that have presuppositions in the primary sense, we may say that a sentence has a presupposition in a derivative sense just in case the use of that sentence would *for some reason* normally be inappropriate unless the speaker presupposed a particular proposition. In such a case, I will say that a sentence *requires* a presupposition. This notion of presupposition *requirement* will be the explication of the linguists' notion of presupposition.

It should be noted that if, in a normal context, a speaker uses a sentence which requires a presupposition in this sense, then by that very act, he does make the required presupposition. Whatever his actual beliefs and assumptions, he does *act as if* he takes the truth of the proposition for granted, and as if he assumes that his audience recognizes that he is doing so. Thus the act of *making* a presupposition, like the act of meaning something, is not a mental act which can be separated by an act of will from overt linguistic behavior.

If this notion of presupposition requirement is a roughly correct account of what it is for a *sentence* to have a presupposition, then the question whether a presupposition relation holds is independent of questions about what happens to the truth value of a statement when its presuppositions are false. It may be that in many, even most, cases, a statement will fail to have a truth value when one of its presuppositions is false, but if so, this will be a substantive generalization, and not something true by definition. If, however, the simplest and otherwise most plausible semantical theory requires that some statements have truth values even when

some of their presuppositions are false, we will not be prevented, by definition, from accepting this theory.

The relation between the semantic notion of presupposition and the pragmatic notion of presupposition requirement is not, of course, just accidental. Among the reasons that a pragmatic presupposition might be required by the use of a sentence, by far the most obvious and compelling reason would be that the semantical rules for the sentence failed to determine a truth value for the sentence in possible worlds in which the required presupposition is false. Since the whole point of expressing a proposition is to divide the relevant set of alternative possible situations – the presupposition set – into two parts, to distinguish those in which the proposition is true from those in which the proposition is false, it would obviously be inappropriate to use a sentence which failed to do this. Thus, that a proposition is presupposed by a sentence in the technical semantic sense provides a reason for requiring that it be presupposed in the pragmatic sense whenever the sentence is used. This explains where the semantic notion gets its name, and why linguists and philosophers have been tempted to identify presupposition in general with this semantic relation.

Why do I think it is important *not* to make this identification? Because it obscures the diversity of the sources of presupposition requirements, and the different kinds of inappropriateness which may be responsible for presupposition requirements. Because it may needlessly complicate the semantical rules determining truth values for sentences. More generally, because it obscures the explanation of the central role of presuppositions in a general account of communication.

I will give – or at least point to – three arguments in support of this way of accounting for the linguistic phenomenon of presupposition. First, I will give two examples of sources of presupposition requirements which seem to be independent of what happens to truth values when the required presupposition fails. In such cases, it is at least not necessary to say that statements lack a truth value when their presuppositions are false. Second, I will argue that if we regard the presupposition relation as the relation of pragmatic presupposition requirement, then this relation can be seen as a special case of a more general kind of constraint on language. The more general notion is the notion of a constraint imposed by the proper use of a sentence on a pragmatic presupposition set. Other specific cases of the

more general notion may be useful for the explanation of linguistic phenomena. Third, I shall argue that this approach to presupposition is likely to yield a more natural solution to what has been called the projection problem, or the compositional problem for presuppositions.

First, two examples of different explanations of presupposition requirements: (a) Normally, any proposition expressed, whether as the content of an assertion, a supposition, a conjecture, a request, or whatever, must be compatible with what is taken for granted by the speaker to be true. As I understand it, one role of the subjunctive mood in English is to indicate that this normal expectation is suspended. If this is right, then there will usually be a reason to use the subjunctive, say to make a conditional statement, or a claim that something is possible, only when the antecedent of the conditional, or the proposition said to be possible, is presupposed to be false. Since one normally has reason to use the subjunctive only when this presupposition is present, one suggests that it is present by using the subjunctive. It would therefore normally be inappropriate to use the subjunctive when the presupposition is not made. Hence, it is required in the sense defined. But there is no reason to conclude from this fact that a subjunctive conditional lacks a truth value when its antecedent is true. There is no connection between this explanation of the presupposition requirement and the truth value of the conditional when the presupposition fails.

(b) According to a recent analysis of the role of the word 'even', the insertion of this word in a sentence makes no contribution to what is asserted, but only affects what is presupposed.<sup>6</sup> If I say 'Even George Lakoff might be the Democratic nominee for President this year', I assert exactly what I would assert if I dropped the 'even'. What is added are the presuppositions that other people also might be the Democratic nominee, and that it is somehow unexpected that Lakoff might be the nominee. If this account is right, then the simplest way to give truth conditions for the original statement would be to ignore the 'even' altogether. Its role is to indicate, and thus to require, pragmatic presuppositions; it would be a gratuitous complication to add that it also may turn an otherwise true statement into one that is neither true nor false.

I should emphasize that I do not want to rest any part of my argument on intuitive judgments that statements like 'Even Gödel could prove that theorem', 'If Nixon were President we'd be in a hell of a mess', and 'All of

Lyndon Johnson's sons are bastards' in fact *have* truth values. I do not think any of us have very clear intuitions about the truth values of statements which have false presuppositions, and so I do not think that the truth value, or lack of it, of such statements can be data against which to test competing generalizations. My point is that there *need* be no essential connection between presupposition requirements and truth value gaps. Where we have an independent explanation for the presupposition requirement, then we are free to accept the consequences of what is otherwise the simplest and most plausible semantical account, even if it assigns truth values to sentences when their presuppositions are false.

Second, on general constraints on the presupposition set: If presupposition requirements are defined in terms of pragmatic presupposition sets as I have suggested, then they may be seen as one kind of constraint among others which the use of a sentence imposes on the presumed background assumptions of the context of use of that sentence. I will mention two other related types of constraints. (a) It may be that the use of a sentence requires that some proposition *not* be presupposed. The simplest example is that it is in general required that the proposition which is expressed by the use of a sentence in a context *not* be presupposed in that context. Obviously, by asserting something, a person acts as if he does *not* take it for granted. This principle helps explain the oddity of sentences like 'John's aardvark is sleeping, and John has an aardvark'. It is not that the sentence requires contradictory presuppositions, but that it requires that one and the same proposition both be presupposed and also not be presupposed. (b) Some sentences may require that a proposition of a certain kind be presupposed without requiring that any particular one of them be presupposed. This is true in general of sentences using demonstratives and personal pronouns. If I say 'he is a linguist', there must be a particular male (the referent of 'he') who is presupposed to exist, but there is no single male whose existence is required by every use of that sentence. In different uses of the sentence, the existence presupposition will be different. In terms of the notion of presupposition as a semantic relation, we cannot give an adequate account of these constraints on the use and interpretation of sentences, which are closely related to those imposed by presupposition requirements.

Third, on the projection or compositional problem. This is the problem of how the presuppositions required by a complex sentence relate to the

presuppositions required by its component clauses. If presupposition is regarded as a semantic relation, then this problem, say for sentences of the form '*A* and *B*', will be a problem of determining the truth value of a sentence of that form when one or another of the conjuncts lacks a truth value. Examples discussed by Morgan and Karttunen<sup>7</sup> show that the proper account of the matter would be complicated, and would have some surprising consequences – for example that conjunction is not in general symmetric; the inference from '*A* and *B*' to '*B* and *A*' does not always preserve truth. On the other hand, if we regard presupposition from the perspective I am suggesting, the problem looks quite different; it concerns the way that pragmatic presuppositions, or background assumptions, change in the course of a conversation. Here is one obvious principle about how pragmatic presuppositions change: after some proposition has been asserted, then the speaker may reasonably presuppose it in subsequent conversation until it is denied, challenged, retracted or forgotten. If one asserts a proposition using a conjunctive sentence, then according to this simple and obvious principle, the presuppositions will change in the middle of the assertion. The first conjunct will be added to the initial presuppositions before the second conjunct is asserted.

Now the following generalization about the presuppositions *required* by conjunctive sentences follows from, and is explained by, the simple pragmatic principle given above: a conjunctive assertion requires all the presuppositions required by the first conjunct, and also all the presuppositions required by the second conjunct *except those (if any) entailed by the first conjunct*.<sup>8</sup> Thus 'John has children and all of his children are asleep' does not require the presupposition that John has children, even though the second conjunct does require this presupposition. This is exactly the generalization proposed by Karttunen on the basis of examples. The pragmatic account of presupposition gives a natural intuitive explanation for a rule which, on the semantic account, looks *ad hoc*. More important than this, the pragmatic account separates the semantic question of the truth value of a conjunction from the pragmatic question of the presuppositions it requires. Because we have made this separation, we can reconcile the semantical symmetry of the conjunction operation with the asymmetry of conjunctive assertions with respect to the presuppositions they require. '*A* and *B*' says exactly the same thing as '*B* and *A*', but the first way of saying it may require different presuppositions

than the second. The analogous problem for disjunctive and conditional statements is not quite so straightforward, but I expect that a reasonably natural explanation for the facts can be given using plausible assumptions about the way background assumptions change in the course of a conversation.

Let me conclude by summarizing what I have tried to do. First, I gave a tentative definition of the concept of pragmatic presupposition and explained the notion of a sentence requiring a presupposition in terms of it. Then I gave reasons for thinking that this notion would yield explanations of linguistic phenomena which were more plausible than those that might be given in terms of the usual account of presupposition as a semantic relation. If we separate the problem of presupposition from the problem of truth value, I suggested, then it is likely that simpler accounts of the semantic relations among sentences can be given. By tying presupposition phenomena to a concept that should be central to a general account of rational communication, we might get explanations of the phenomena which are deeper and intuitively more natural. All of what I have said is very programmatic, but I hope I have convinced someone that the program is worth pursuing.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> P. F. Strawson, *Introduction to Logical Theory* (London, 1952), pp. 175ff.

<sup>2</sup> Bas van Fraassen, 'Singular Terms, Truth Value Gaps and Free Logic', *Journal of Philosophy* 63 (1966), 481-95, and 'Presupposition, Implication and Self-Reference', *Journal of Philosophy* 65 (1968), 136-52.

<sup>3</sup> George Lakoff, 'Generative Semantics', in Danny Steinberg and Leon Jakobovits, *Semantics: an Interdisciplinary Reader in Philosophy, Linguistics and Psychology* (Cambridge, 1971), Laurence Horn, "A Presuppositional Analysis of 'Only' and 'Even'," in *Papers from the Fifth Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistics Society* (Chicago, 1969), Lauri Karttunen, 'Plugs, Filters, and Holes: The Projection Problem for Presuppositions'. (Paper presented at the Second Annual Meeting of the Northeastern Linguistic Society, October 24, 1971, in Montreal, Quebec.)

<sup>4</sup> The influence of H. P. Grice on these remarks will be clear to anyone who knows his work. The influence comes to me (by way of the grapevine) mainly from his as yet unpublished *Logic and Conversation*.

<sup>5</sup> There are perhaps two notions of presupposition which are relevant here: the first would be the notion I am trying to define; the other would be the simpler notion of presumed common knowledge. The distinction roughly parallels a distinction that Grice has emphasized between what is *said* and what is *meant*. In the naïve, straightforward

uses of language, what is said coincides with what is meant (or at least coincides with part of what is meant), just as what is presupposed in the first sense coincides with what is presupposed in the second. And the rules which relate what is *said* to what is presupposed in the sense I am trying to define are the same rules which relate what is *meant* to what is presupposed in the simpler sense.

<sup>6</sup> Horn, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Karttunen, *op. cit.*, Jerry Morgan, 'On the Treatment of Presupposition in Transformational Grammar', in *Papers from the Fifth Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistics Society* (Chicago, 1969).

<sup>8</sup> This is an oversimplification. Any presupposition required by the second conjunct, but entailed by the first conjunct *conjoined with any other initial presupposition* is not required by the sentence as a whole. But this qualification is included in Karttunen's account, as well as explained by the pragmatic account.