

Anglistisches Seminar  
 Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg  
 PS I: Pragmatics – The many faces of language use  
 Dozent: Iwo Iwanov

Referentinnen: Haykuhi Jaghinyan, Ludmila Natcheva

## Presupposition

- origins within the tradition of **Philosophy of language**
- **Gottlob Frege** (re)introduced the philosophical study of presupposition
  - Gottlob Frege:
  - 8 November 1848-26 July 1925 German mathematician who became a logician and philosopher
  - One of the founders of modern logic
  - As a philosopher he is generally considered to be the **father of analytic philosophy**, for his writings on the philosophy of language
- Presupposition has attracted an ever growing amount of attention of

Philosophers	Linguists
Debate about <b>reference</b> (an act in which a speaker or a writer uses linguistic forms to enable a listener / reader to identify something) and <b>referring expressions</b> (linguistic forms like proper nouns, NPs, pronouns)	Are concerned with a much wider range of phenomena about the interaction and division of labour between <b>semantics</b> and <b>pragmatics</b>

**What is presupposition?** - An inference or proposition whose truth is taken for granted in the utterance of the sentence

Main function is to act as a **precondition of some sort** for the appropriate use of that sentence; this background assumption will remain in force when the sentence that contains it is **negated** (constancy under negation)

It is generated by the use of particular lexical items and/or linguistic constructions:

**Presupposition triggers:** lexical items and linguistic constructions that engender presupposition

**Potential presuppositions:** The use of large number of words, phrases and structures to express a speakers' assumption; can only become actual presupposition in context with speakers (examples: existential presupposition, factive presupposition)<sup>1</sup>

### Examples:

#### A) Lexical triggers:

1. **Definite descriptions:** John saw/didn't see the man with two heads.

>> There exists a man with two heads

⊗ Existential presupposition (is presented in possessive constructions or to any definite noun phrase: the girl next door, the King of Sweden...)

#### 2. Factive verbs:

a) Epistemic or cognitive factives: John *knows*/doesn't know that Baird invented television.

>> Baird invented television

1 This will become more relevant in our next session. There are different theories on when a presupposition becomes actual and when not.

b) Emotive factives: Martha regrets/ doesn't regret drinking John's home brew.

>> Martha drank John's homebrew (factive verbs: know, be sorry that, be proud that, be indifferent that, be aware)

⊗ Factive presuppositions (may arise from the use of factive NPs such as *the fact/knowledge that*)

**3. Aspectual/change of state verbs:** Mary has/ hasn't stopped beating her boyfriend.

>> Mary has been beating her boyfriend

**4. Iteratives:** a) Iterative verbs: John returned/didn't return to Cambridge.

>> John was in Cambridge before

b) Iterative adverbs: The boy cried/ didn't cry wolf again.

>> The boy cried wolf before

**5. Implicative verbs:** John managed/didn't manage to open the door.

>> John tried to open the door<sup>2</sup>

## B: Constructional/structural triggers

**1. Temporal clauses:** Before Strawson was even born, Frege noticed/didn't notice presuppositions

>> Strawson was born (temporal adverbs: after, whenever, while, during, as...)

Other structural trigger: **Cleft sentences** and **Counterfactual conditionals**

## Properties of presupposition

**1. Constancy under negation:** An utterance of a sentence S presupposes a proposition p if and only if:

A) If S is true, then p is true

B) If S is false, then p is still true

Example: a) Mary's dog is cute >> Mary has a dog

b) Mary's dog is not cute >> Mary has a dog

### Exceptions:

1) When constancy under negation is not necessary - sentences that can't be negated<sup>3</sup>

Long live the king of France!

>> There is a king of France

2) When constancy under negation is not sufficient

Do/Don't bring the digital camera here? >> The digital camera is not here

The inference is analyzed as a **felicity on the speech act of requesting**

**2. Defeasibility** – seen as the second most important property of presuppositions

-Presuppositions are cancellable when they are inconsistent with:

1) Background information (Our real world knowledge allows us to nullify the presupposition)

- Vera finished writing the letter to Jerry.

>> Vera wrote a letter to Jerry.

- Vera felt asleep before finishing the letter to Jerry.

~>> Vera wrote a letter to Jerry.

2) Conversational implicatures

- If John is organizing a stag night, Mary will be angry that he is doing so.

+> perhaps John is organizing a stag night, perhaps he isn't

~>> John is organizing a stag night.

2 Thinks about this again. Which type of *implicature* was this again?

3 Clarify this somewhat. In fact, every sentence can be negated. *The king of France is old. Neg.: The King of France does not exist.* The second sentence **entails** that there is not a King of France. Therefore the presupposition evaporates. Entailments beat presuppositions.

3) Certain discourse context.

- Sarah forgot to get the newspaper. Therefore she didn't read the newspaper today.

~>> Sarah read the newspaper.

4) Reduction argument (Levinson 1983: 189).

- A, noticing an open door: Was it you that opened the door to the porch? I closed it at lunch.

B: It wasn't me, because I wasn't home and it wasn't Joan who opened it, because she was with me.

~>> someone opened the door to the porch

5) No evidence of truth – when the evidence of the truth of the presupposition has been rejected or weighed

- A: We've got to find out if Serge is a KGB infiltrator.

B: Who if anyone would know?

C: The only person who would know is Alexis. I've talked to him and he isn't aware that Serge is on the KGB payroll. So I think Serge can be trusted.

~>> Serge is on the KGB payroll.

**The Projection Problem** –The meaning of a compound expression is a combination of the meanings of its parts (**Fregean principle of compositionality – very important**). Therefore the presupposition of a component sentence may fail to be projected on to the whole complex sentence or may be preserved when that constituent sentence becomes part of a more complex sentence.

**Survival of Presuppositions:**

- When under negation:

-It was/wasn't the dog that ran away from the street.

>> Something/Somebody ran away from the street.

- When presuppositional triggers are embedded in modal operator such as *it's possible that, ought to, may be, and should*:

- There is a chance that the dog ran away from the street.

>> There is a dog.<sup>4</sup>

**Additional**

**The Projection Problem** – has two sides: first presuppositions survive in linguistic contexts where entailments cannot and second, presuppositions disappear in other contexts where one might expect them to survive, and where entailments would. Therefore the presupposition of a component sentence may fail to be projected on to the whole complex sentence or may be preserved when that constituent sentence becomes part of a more complex sentence.

**1. Survival of Presuppositions:**

- 1) When under negation the presuppositions survive, but entailments don't:

a) The policeman arrested three men

b) There is a policeman.

c) The policeman arrested two men.

✦ When we negate a) to "*The policeman didn't arrest three men.*" The entailment c) doesn't survive, but the presupposition b) does.

- 2) When presuppositional triggers are embedded in modal operator such as *it's possible that, ought to, may be, and should*:

d) It's possible that the policeman arrested three men.

e) The policeman ought to have arrested three men

f) The policeman could have arrested three men.

✦ Again neither d), e) nor f) entail c), but they presuppose b)

<sup>4</sup> Next session: How do different theories try to solve the projection problem?

2. **Presuppositions of lower clauses sometimes fail to be inherited by the whole complex sentence.**
3. When presuppositions of a sentence are overtly denied in a co-ordinate sentence
  - John didn't manage to pass his exams, in fact he didn't even try.
  - In contrast to: John didn't manage to pass his exams because he didn't even try.
4. Suspensions (Horn) – by using the *if*-clause speaker's commitment can be easily suspended to presuppositions.
  - John didn't cheat again, if indeed he ever did.
5. Plugs (Karttunen) - When using verbs of propositional attitude (*want, believe, imagine, dream, etc.*) and all the verbs of saying (*say, tell, mumble, etc.*)
  - Harry believes he's the King of France. – Which doesn't presuppose that "There is a present King of France."
6. Behaviour of Presuppositions when using connectives (*and, or, if...then*) and relative expressions that include *but, alternatively, suppose that, etc.*
  - If John quit his job, he will regret doing it.
  - ~>> John will quit his job.