Pragmatics :: Notes on Presupposition

Initial Characterization

The theory of presupposition is concerned with a component of meaning that appears to be distinguishable from ordinary truth-conditional entailments. Two characteristic properties:

 (i) When a sentence with a presuppositional component is asserted, the presupposition is not thereby put forward as potentially new and worthy of discussion; instead, normally the presuppositional component is taken to be something that the speaker is taking for granted, assuming that it is already agreed upon.

 (ii) When a sentence with a presuppositional component is embedded in a larger structure, more often than not the larger structure inherits that presuppositional component.

<center>* * *</center>

To presuppose something is to take it for granted in a way that contrasts with asserting it. For example, if one assertively utters

(1)   It was Sam who broke the typewriter.

one presupposes that the typewriter was broken and asserts that Sam was the one who did it. Similarly, if one assertively utters

(2)   John is going to drop out of school again.

one presupposes that he has dropped out of school before and asserts that he will drop out in the future. In each case, the speaker commits himself both to that which he presupposes and to that which he asserts. However, there are important differences between the two.

One such difference is that commitments that are presupposed are highly heritable, whereas those that are only asserted are not. If assertive utterances of a sentence S are used to assert A and presuppose P, then assertive utterances of more complicated sentences containing S often presuppose P without carrying any commitment to A. (Soames 1989)

Initial Examples

1. Existence presupposition of definites and other noun phrases

(3)   a.   The mathematician who proved Goldbach's conjecture[1] was a woman.

        b.   The mathematician who proved Goldbach's conjecture wasn't a woman.

        c.   Maybe the mathematician who proved Goldbach's conjecture was a woman.

        d.   It is unlikely that the mathematician who proved Goldbach's conjecture was a woman.

        e.   If the mathematician who proved Goldbach's conjecture was a woman, then she will get the Fields Medal this year.

(4)   a.   John invited every foreign graduate student to his party.

        b.   John did not invite every foreign graduate student to his party.

        c.   Maybe John invited every foreign graduate student to his party.

        d.   It is unlikely that John invited every foreign graduate student to his party.

        e.   If John invited every foreign graduate student to his party, we will need more beer.

2. Clefts

(5)   a.   It was Sam who broke the typewriter.

        b.   It wasn't Sam who broke the typewriter.

        c.   Maybe it was Sam who broke the typewriter.

        d.   It is unlikely that it was Sam who broke the typewriter.

        e.   If it was Sam who broke the typewriter, then he will have to fix it.

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[1] Currently unproven, in fact. See http://directory.google.com/Top/Science/Math/Number_Theory/Open_Problems/Goldbach_Conjecture/?tc=1, http://mathworld.wolfram.com/GoldbachConjecture.html, and http://primes.utm.edu/glossary/page.php?sort=GoldbachConjecture.

3. Factive verbs

(6) a. Bill is aware that Mary kissed John.
    b. Bill is not aware that Mary kissed John.
    c. Maybe Bill is aware that Mary kissed John.
    d. It is unlikely that Bill is aware that Mary kissed John.
    e. If Bill is aware that Mary kissed John, then he will not talk to John tonight.

4. Additive particles (*too, again*)

(7) a. John is going to drop out of school again.
    b. John isn't going to drop out of school again.
    c. Maybe John is going to drop out of school again.
    d. It is unlikely that John is going to drop out of school again.
    e. If John is going to drop out of school again, his mother will be upset.

5. Change-of-phase predicates

(8) a. John has quit smoking.
    b. John hasn't quit smoking.
    c. Maybe John has quit smoking.
    d. It is unlikely that John has quit smoking.
    e. If John has quit smoking, then we won't need ashtrays at the party.

Research Questions

1. Questions of Description

   a) Give a catalog of presupposition triggers.

   b) Describe the facts of presupposition inheritance.

2. Questions of Explanation

   a) What is the nature of the presuppositional component of meaning?

b) Why and how do presupposition triggers trigger the presuppositions they trigger?

c) Why and how do presuppositions get inherited by complex utterances?

Presuppositions as Requirements on the Common Ground

Stalnaker's picture (cf. Heim 1983, 1990; Karttunen 1974; Stalnaker 1973, 1974, 1979; Thomason 1990)

(9)   A speaker S presupposes that p iff S believes that it is common ground that p.

(10)   It is common ground in a group X that p iff for all members x of the group, x accepts that p, x believes that all members accept that p, x believes that all members believe that all members accept that p, etc.

(11)   A sentence φ presupposes that p iff the use of φ would *for some reason* normally be inappropriate unless the speaker presupposed p. Stalnaker says "sentence φ requires the presupposition that p".

A slightly different picture:

(12)   A sentence φ presupposes that p iff the use of φ would for some reason normally be inappropriate unless it is common ground that p.

More generally:

(13)   A sentence φ imposes a presuppositional requirement P iff the use of φ would for some reason normally be inappropriate unless the common ground has property P.

special case: P = 'entails that p'
other special case: P = 'for some salient male x, entails that x was at the party'.

Two Tests (for what?)

The *Hey, wait a minute!* Test (inspired by Shanon 1976)

(14)   A: It was Sam who broke the typewriter.
        B: Hey, wait a minute! I had no idea that the typewriter was broken.
        B': #Hey, wait a minute! I had no idea that Sam did that.

(15)   A: John is going to drop out of school again.
        B: Hey, wait a minute! I had no idea that he dropped out of school before.
        B': #Hey, wait a minute! I had no idea that he was going to do that.

Percus (1998 lecture notes)

(16)   A: So, Bill believes that Mary kissed John.
        B: Yes, and what's more, Bill is correct in thinking that Mary kissed John.
        B': #Yes, and what's more, Bill is aware that Mary kissed John.

(17)   A: I wonder whether there were any thieves among the visitors and whether it was any of them who shot Mary.
        B: There was a single thief and he shot Mary.
        B': #The thief shot Mary.

(18)   A: John is going to drop out of school.
        B: Yes, and what is more, he's done that before.
        B': #Yes, and what's more, he is doing that again.

Accommodation

(19)   I am sorry that I am late. I had to take my daughter to the doctor.

A thorough discussion of accommodation in Stalnaker's system: von Fintel (2000); Gauker (1998); Simons (2003); Stalnaker (1998, 2002).

Conjunction:

(20)   Thanksgiving will be great. The turkey is organic and Harry's wife is a great cook.

   presupposes that Harry has a wife.

(21)   Harry is married and Harry's wife is a great cook.

   does not presuppose that Harry has a wife.

(22)   If the turkey is organic and Harry's wife is a great cook, Thanksgiving will be great, otherwise . . . .

(23)   If Harry is married and Harry's wife is a great cook, Thanksgiving will be great, otherwise . . . .

(24)   Stalnaker's explanation:

   Once a proposition has been asserted in a conversation, then (unless or until it is challenged) the speaker can reasonably take it for granted for the rest of the conversation, In particular, when a speaker says something of the form A and B, he may take it for granted that A (or at least that his audience recognizes that he accepts that A) after he has said it. The proposition that A will be added to the background of common assumptions before the speaker asserts that B. Now suppose that B expresses a proposition that would, for some reason, be inappropriate to assert except in a context where A, or something entailed by A, is presupposed. Even if A is *not* presupposed initially, one may still assert A *and* B since by the time one gets to saying that B, the context has shifted, and it is by then presupposed that A.

Conditionals:

(25)   If this dish wasn't catered, then Harry's wife is a great cook.

(26)   If Harry is married, then Harry's wife is a great cook.

(27)   Stalnaker: "Here we need first the assumption that what is explicitly *supposed* becomes (temporarily) a part of the background of common assumptions in subsequent conversation, and second that an *if* clause is an explicit supposition."

What's Left to Do After Stalnaker 1974

1. Find and explain the various sources of presuppositional requirements on the common ground.

2. Establish how independent the truth-conditional content is from the presuppositional pragmatics. Can the truth-conditional content of complex constructions work in ignorance of presuppositional ingredients especially if the latter are conventional/semantic?

3. Extend projection analysis to other constructions: negation, disjunction, quantification, attitudes.

Six Sources of Presupposition

1. *Expressive presupposition.*

2. *Partiality.*

3. *Three-Valued Truth-Conditions.*

4. *Two-Dimensional Semantics.*

5. *Conventional Presuppositions.* van Rooy, Cresswell.

6. *Conversational Implicature.*

Expressive Presupposition

(28)   I have always paid the rent.

(29)   She paid the rent.

(30)   I shared the room with a police officer and she paid the rent.

(31)   John was at the party, and Bill was at the party too.

(32)   [Beginning of a novel] He was going to drop out of school again. This
        time, she would not put up with it and kick him out of the house. She
        has been a good mother, she thought. But what's enough is enough.

                        Semantic Presupposition

(33)   The King of France is bald.

(34) $[\![\text{king-of-france}]\!]^{w} \in \text{dom}([\![\text{the}]\!]^{w})$
                        only if $\exists!x$ such that $[\![\text{king-of-france}]\!]^{w}(x) = 1$.

(35)   If so, $[\![\text{the king-of-france}]\!]^{w} =$
                        the unique x such that $[\![\text{king-of-france}]\!]^{w}(x) = 1$.

(36) $w \in \text{dom}([\![\text{the king-of-france is bald}]\!]_{\mathcal{C}})$
                        only if $\exists!x$ such that $[\![\text{king-of-france}]\!]^{w}(x) = 1$.

(37) $[\![\text{the king-of-france is bald}]\!]_{\mathcal{C}} = \lambda w: \exists!x$ such that x is King of France in
        w. the unique x such that x is King of France in w is bald in w.

(38)   *Stalnaker's Bridge*

        "Since the whole point of expressing a proposition is to divide the rele-
        vant set of alternative possible situations – [the context 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 pre-
        supposed 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." (Stalnaker 1973, 452).

        "[T]he point of an assertion is to reduce the context set in a certain de-
        terminate way. But if the proposition [expressed by the assertion] is not
        true or false at some possible world, then it would be unclear whether
        that possible world is to be included in the reduced set or not. So the
        intentions of the speaker will be unclear." (Stalnaker 1979).

(39)   In some cases, one may just have to write presupposition constraints
        into the meanings of particular words or constructions. This would
        make certain presupposition requirements a matter of meaning, but it
        would not thereby make them a matter of content. There may be facts
        about the meaning of a word which play no role at all in determining
        the truth-conditions of propositions expressed using the word. (Stal-
        naker 1974)

(40)   According to a recent analysis of the role of the word 'even', the in-
        sertion of this word in a sentence makes no contribution to what is
        asserted, but only affects what is presupposed. [The reference is to
        Larry Horn's seminal CLS paper on *only* and *even* (Horn 1969).] If I
        say 'Even George Lakoff might be the Democratic nominee for Pres-
        ident 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 sim-
        plest 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 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 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 presup-
        position 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. (Stalnaker 1973)

(41)   Problem: How does one actually write presuppositional requirements
        into the semantics of an expression without affecting the truth-conditional
        meaning of the expression? Stalnaker remained silent on this.

Two solutions:

1. Two-dimensional semantics: Karttunen & Peters (1979), see also Bergmann
   (1981); Herzberger (1973); Martin (1977).

2. Pragmatic presupposition as a semantic presupposition: Cresswell (2002);
   van Rooy (2001).

Presuppositions as Conversational Implicature

Two relevant recent papers: Abusch (2002); Simons (2001).

Context Change Potentials

According to Stalnaker's conception, a sentence is uttered as a proposal to be
added to the common ground, or as a proposal to eliminate from the context
set those worlds in which the proposition is false. Furthermore, the sentence
may require the common ground to satisfy certain conditions.

Take a sentence ϕ which expresses/denotes the proposition $[\![\phi]\!]_\mathcal{C}$. We associate
with the sentence a context change potential (ccp), which is a function from
context sets to context sets. We write the ccp of ϕ as $+\phi$.

[The term *context change potential* is due to Heim. $+\phi$ is her notation as well.
In her terminology, Heim might have been influenced by the term *illocutionary
act potential* employed by Alston (1963) in work discussed in Heim's MA Thesis
(Heim 1977).]

One thing we know about $+\phi$ is that for any input context set c it should return
an output context set c' which does not (anymore) contain any worlds in which
ϕ is false.

(42) $c + \phi \subseteq \left\{ w \in \mathrm{dom}\left([\![\phi]\!]_\mathcal{C}\right) : [\![\phi]\!]_\mathcal{C}(w) = 1 \right\}$

Furthermore, we can impose Stalnaker's Bridge:

(43) $c + \phi$ is defined only if $\forall w \in c$: $w \in \text{dom}(\llbracket \phi \rrbracket_{\cancel{c}})$

and non-triviality of assertion:

(44) $c + \phi$ is defined only if $c \cap \{ w \in \text{dom}(\llbracket \phi \rrbracket_{\cancel{c}}): \llbracket \phi \rrbracket_{\cancel{c}}(w) = 1 \} \neq c$ and $\neq \emptyset$.

Stalnaker-ccps will also include pragmatically derived definedness conditions such as the factivity of know (which he argued do not have to be, and thus should not be, stipulated in the semantics).

So far, ccps are just a convenient notation. ccps are not the direct output of the compositional interpretation of sentences. But the notation may be useful later when we want to have succinct descriptions of how complex sentences are used to update a context.

Heim's Project

Heim (1982, 1983) goes much further. Her ccps are derived compositionally. Furthermore, no other level of propositional meaning is assumed.

(45)   [A] compositional assignment of CCPs to the sentences of a language can fully replace a compositional assignment of truthconditions of the sort normally envisaged by semanticists, without any loss of empirical coverage. (1983)

Of course, this will only work if in general, "the truthconditional aspect of the meaning of any expression is predictable on the basis of its CCP."

Presupposition Projection

Terminology

Why the term *projection*? Beaver (1997) seems to think that it is a misnomer:

(46)   The projection problem for presuppositions is the task of stating and
         explaining the presuppositions of complex sentences in terms of the
         presuppositions of their parts. The larger problem, which strictly con-
         tains the presupposition projection problem, could naturally be called
         "the projection problem for meanings", i.e. the problem of finding the
         meanings of complex sentences in terms of the meanings of their parts.
         Of course, this larger problem is conventionally referred to under the
         general heading of *compositionality*. [p. 946]

In fact, the term *projection* was the one used to refer to composition of meaning
early on in the history of generative grammar. Katz & Fodor (1963 paper in
Language) and Katz & Postal (1964 book) assumed that

(47)   the semantic component of a linguistic description will be taken to be
         a projective device [...]. Such a projective device consists of two parts:
         first, a dictionary that provides a meaning for each of the lexical items
         of the language, and second, a finite set of projection rules. The pro-
         jection rules of the semantic component assign a semantic interpreta-
         tion to each string of formatives generated by the syntactic component.
         [...] The projection rules then combine [lexical] meanings in a manner
         dictated by the syntactic description of the string to arrive at a charac-
         terization of the meaning of the whole string [...]. [Katz & Postal, p.
         12].

The term "projection problem for presuppositions" is then no surprise. Just its
survival into current terminology might require comment.

Conjunction Again

(48) $c + (\phi \ and \ \psi) = (c + \phi) + \psi$

(49)   Question: Suppose that ψ has a presupposition that is induced by partiality in its semantics. Then what proposition does φ *and* ψ express?

(50)   The need for a compositional semantics for complex constructions containing partial propositions.

(51)   Question: Should this compositional calculation mirror the asymmetry of the way the context gets changed?

(52)   If so, what is the resulting picture? What explains what? What depends on what?

(53)   Prediction of Heim & Kratzer system: accumulation of partiality.

(54)   Alternative: three-valued semantics. [Truth-table on blackboard!]

Two Strategies

- "Semantic" strategy:

    (i) Compute the semantic value of the complex construction.

    (ii) This will involve semantic presuppositions of the preferred kind (Fregean, 3-valued, 2–dimensional).

    (iii) Via bridging principles à la Stalnaker predict the empirically observed pragmatic presuppositions of the whole complex construction.

- "Pragmatic" strategy.

    (i) Compute semantic presupposition only for the simple sentence.

    (ii) Analyze the pragmatic use of the complex construction as involving assertion of the simple sentence inside it in an "auxiliary" context.

    (iii) The dynamic relation between the input context and the auxiliary context in which the simple sentence is asserted determines the pragmatic presuppositions of the whole complex construction.

Negation

(55)   The King of France isn't bald.

(56)   John isn't going to drop out of school again.

(57)   It wasn't Sam who broke the typewriter.

(58)   Fregean negation
$$[\![\text{not}]\!]^w = \lambda t.\ (t=0)$$

(59)   3-valued negation
$$[\![\text{not}]\!]^w = \lambda t. \begin{cases} 1 \text{ if } t=0 \\ 0 \text{ if } t=1 \\ * \text{ if } t=* \end{cases}$$

(60) $c + \textit{not}\ \phi = c - (c + \phi)$

(61)   There is no King of France. Therefore, the King of France is not hiding in this room.

(62)   I don't know whether there is a King of France. But at least, the King of France is not in this room.

(63)   3-valued P-cancelling negation
$$[\![\text{not}_1]\!]^w = \lambda t. \begin{cases} 1 \text{ if } t=0 \\ 0 \text{ otherwise} \end{cases}$$

(64)   Fregean P-cancelling negation
$$[\![\text{not}_1]\!]^w = \lambda p_{<s,t>}.\ (\lambda w.\ w \in (W - \{w \in \text{dom}(p)\colon p(w)=1\})\ ).$$

(65)   Since there is scant evidence for an ambiguity of negation (but see for much more detail Horn's bible on negation), one might prefer a different approach. This approach, called by Beaver the "Floating A" proposal, posits an operator that cancels presuppositions essentially turning them into simple entailments. This operator would apply optionally to the simple sentence embedded under negation to result in a proposition that is true if both the simple sentence and its presupposition are true, false otherwise. NB: This proposition will be simply false if the sentence under the A operator carries a false presupposition.

The "Floating A" approach may also have a further advantage: we need somehow ensure that p-canceling readings of negation are dispreferred and only triggered under duress. Saying that positing a shadowy A-operator is dispreferred seems to make more sense than saying that for some reason the preferred reading of negation is the non-p-canceling kind.

(66)   Local Accommodation (Heim)
        c − (c' + φ), where c' is the result of adding to c a salient proposition that entails the presuppositions of φ.

Disjunction

(67)   Either the King of France is out of town or the Queen of France is unhappy.

(68)   Either there is no King of France or the King of France is out of town.

(69)   Either the King of France is out of town or there is no King of France.

(70)   Either John just started smoking or John just stopped smoking.

(71)   c+φ *or* ψ = (c+φ) ∪ (c+ψ)

(72)   c+φ *or* ψ = (c+φ) ∪ ((c-(c+φ))+ψ)

(73)   c+φ *or* ψ = ((c-(c+ψ))+φ) ∪ (c+ψ)

(74)   c+φ *or* ψ = ((c-(c+ψ))+φ) ∪ ((c-(c+φ))+ψ)

The big issues: compositionality, semantics vs. pragmatics

Picture F: partial/3-valued semantics + pragmatics of assertion

(75)   Step 1: $\phi \rightsquigarrow [\![\phi]\!]^w$, a partial/3-valued proposition p

        Step 2: $p \rightsquigarrow \searrow p$.

(76)　Suppose p is a 3-valued proposition.

Then $\searrow p = \lambda c: \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \forall w \in c: p(w) \neq * \\ \neg\forall w \in c: p(w) = 1 \\ \neg\forall w \in c: p(w) = 0 \end{array} \right\}. \{w \in c: p(w) = 1\}.$

(77)　Note: even when ϕ is complex, all the complexity happens in the recursive semantics.

Picture S: some kind of semantics + structured pragmatics

(78)　Step 1: $\phi \rightsquigarrow [\![\phi]\!]^w$

　　　Step 2: $c + \phi$ *and* $\psi = (c + \phi) + \psi$ [needs to be made more precise]

(79)　The two steps are independent of each other. Compositional interpretation happens twice.

Picture H: compositional calculation of context change potentials

(80)　$+\phi$ *and* $\psi = \lambda c. (c + \phi) + \psi$, more precisely:

$= \lambda c: \left\{ \begin{array}{l} c \in \mathrm{dom}(+\phi) \\ \text{and if so, } c + \phi \in \mathrm{dom}(+\psi) \end{array} \right\}. (c + \phi) + \psi$

(81)　$+not \ \phi = \lambda c. \ c - (c + \phi)$

(82)　Because of accommodation, we know that there is more to the pragmatics of assertion than just applying $\lambda c. \ (c + \phi) + \psi$ to the incoming context.

　　　I had to take my daughter to the doctor and the roads were wet.

(83)　*Important*: Because of local accommodation (e.g. in the case of *The King of France is not bald — There is no King of France.*), we see that the proposal is to be read procedurally and not really as applying a ccp computed compositionally to the incoming context.

　　　Exercise: Convince yourself that one couldn't do some adjustment to the incoming context to get the same effect as one gets through local

accommodation. Give a proof of some sort of some theorem in that direction?

(84)   What is $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{the proposition expressed} \\ \text{what is said} \end{array} \right\}$ by a possibly complex sentence φ?

(85)   For any ccp κ, the proposition corresponding to κ is
$\downarrow \kappa = \lambda w: \{w\} \in \text{dom}(\kappa). \ \kappa(\{w\}) = \{w\}.$

[I found this simple idea in 1991 seminar notes of Angelika Kratzer, in a survey article on dynamic semantics by Muskens et.al. (1997) and in Gennaro Chierchia's book on dynamic semantics (1995).]

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