

LIN241, Winter 2021
Week 5 summary: Presuppositions

1. Presuppositions

- (1) We can take two perspectives on presuppositions: a semantic perspective and a pragmatic perspective.
- (2) From a semantic perspective, the presuppositions of a sentence are conditions that must be satisfied for the sentence to have a truth-value. If these conditions are not satisfied, the sentence is neither true nor false.
- (3) From a pragmatic perspective, a presupposition is an attitude of the speaker, whereby she presents a proposition as being part of the common ground (part of the shared beliefs of the discourse participants).

2. Semantic presuppositions

- (4) We illustrated the concept of a semantic presupposition with singular definite descriptions (DefDs). DefDs are formed by combining the definite article **the** with an NP:
- (5) [DP the [NP prime minister of Canada]]
- (6) DefDs denote an individual that satisfy the description provided by the NP. For instance, (5) denotes Justin Trudeau, who satisfies the description “prime minister of Canada.”
- (7) In addition, the use of a DefD is usually odd when it is clear that there is no individual that satisfies this description, or when there is more than one individual that satisfies it.
- (8) a. #Suzanne is the professor of computer science at UofT.
b. #Justin is the current president of Canada.
- (9) We can account for this oddness by assuming that DefDs trigger uniqueness and existence presuppositions. If we take a semantic perspective on these presuppositions, this means that if a sentence S contains a DefD whose presuppositions are not true, then S is neither true nor false.

Since (8a) and (8b) are neither true nor false, their negation is also neither true nor false:

- (10) a. #Suzanne is not the professor of computer science at UofT.
b. #Justin is not the current president of Canada.
- (11) One way to explain this is to assume that DefDs do not have any semantic value when there isn't exactly one individual that matches the description provided by the NP:

(12) Interpretation of definite descriptions:

"The NP" has a semantic value only if there is one and only one individual that satisfies the description "NP" in the context of utterance.

If defined, the semantic value of "the NP" is the individual that satisfies the description "NP" in the context of utterance.

(13) We can now give a definition of semantic presuppositions:

(14) Semantic Presupposition:

A sentence *S* presupposes a proposition *p* iff *S* is neither true nor false unless *p* is true.

3. Pragmatic presuppositions

(15) We have treated the presuppositions triggered by DefDs as semantic presuppositions, but we can also think about them from a pragmatic perspective as speakers' presuppositions. From this point of view, when a speaker utters (16), she conveys two pieces of information (a) and (b). However, while (b) is presented as new information, the speaker presents (a) as a part of the common ground:

(16) The prime minister of Canada is Justin Trudeau.

- a. There is exactly one prime minister of Canada.
- b. This person is Justin Trudeau.

(17) Common Ground:

The common ground of a group of discourse participants is the beliefs that they share, and that they recognize that they share.

(18) This leads us to our definition of speaker presupposition (aka pragmatic presupposition):

(19) Speaker presupposition:

A speaker presupposes a proposition *p* iff he/she/they acts as if *p* were part of the common ground.

4. Semantic presuppositions and speaker presuppositions

(20) Semantic presuppositions and speaker presuppositions are different kinds of objects. However, when a proposition is semantically presupposed by a sentence, discourse participants usually assume that the speaker presupposes it as well.

5. **Presuppositions and Assertions**

- (21) Presuppositions must be distinguished from assertions. While a proposition that is presupposed is presented as part of the common ground (i.e. old information, a piece of information that was already known before the utterance), a proposition that is asserted is presented as a new piece of information, which should be added to the common ground.
- (22) In (16), while (a) is presupposed, (b) is asserted. Here is another example:
- (23) John stopped smoking.

Presupposition: John used to smoke.

Assertion: John does not currently smoke.

6. **Presupposition accommodation**

- (24) Sometimes, speakers use a sentence whose presupposition is not actually part of the common ground. In that case, the discourse participants may choose to accommodate the presupposition. That is to say, they may choose to add the proposition to the common ground and interpret the speaker's utterance as if the presupposed proposition had been common ground to start with.

For instance, if you are at a meeting and one of the participants is late, they may apologize when they arrive by saying (25). If you didn't know that the speaker had a bike (which is presupposed by the DefD “my bike”), you will most likely accommodate this presupposition.

- (25) I am sorry I am late. My bike had a flat tire.
- (26) On the other hand, the discourse participants may be unwilling or unable to accommodate a presupposition. This may lead to a communication breakdown as in the following example:
- (27) A: What are you doing tonight?
B: I'm leaving for Boston too.
A: What are you talking about? Who's leaving for Boston?

In this example, “I'm leaving for Boston too” presupposes that someone other than B left for Boston. But if A doesn't know who that person is, A cannot accommodate the presupposition.

6. **The projection test**

- (28) Unlike at-issue entailments, presuppositions survive being embedded inside non-veridical environments. Let us define the notions of “environment” and “non-veridical environment”

(29) Environment:

The environment of an expression E in a sentence S is the linguistic context that surrounds E in S. For instance, the environment of the expression (29c) in (29a) is (29b):

- (a) Before Jess left, she sent me an email.
- (b) Before __ , she sent me an email.
- (c) Jess left.

(30) Non-veridical environment:

The environment X __ Y of a clause C is non-veridical if and only if the sentence XCY does not entail C.

Example: in sentence (30a), clause (30c) is used in environment (30b), as the antecedent of a conditional clause. This environment is non-veridical. You can see that (30a) does not entail (30c).

- (a) If Jess left already, we must hurry.
- (b) If __ , we must hurry.
- (c) Jess left already.

(31) Non-veridical environments “trap” the entailments of the clauses that they embed. This is the case for instance with negation: (31a) entails (31c), but (31b) does not.

- a. Bob and Mary went to the movies.
- b. Bob and Mary didn't go to the movies.
- c. Bob went to the movies.

(32) Non-veridical environments do not “trap” the presuppositions of the clauses that they embed. These environments are **holes for presuppositions**. Here is a partial list:

(33) *Negation*:

John didn't stop smoking.

Antecedents of conditional clauses:

If John stopped smoking, he must be nervous.

Questions:

Did John stop smoking?

The modal adjective “unlikely”:

It is unlikely that John stop smoking.

The modal adverb “maybe”:

Maybe John stopped smoking.

(34) Presupposition project test:

If a sentence S presupposes a proposition p, then the sentence obtained by embedding S inside a presupposition hole also presupposes p.

(35) By contrast, at-issue entailments and conversational implicatures are trapped inside presupposition holes.

(36) Example:

“John stopped smoking” implies that John used to smoke.

“It is unlikely that John stopped smoking” also implies that John used to smoke.

Therefore, this proposition is not an at-issue entailment or a conversational implicature of the sentence “John stopped smoking”. It may be a presupposition.

8. Presuppositions and Conventional Implicatures

(37) Conventional implicatures are very similar to presuppositions.

The main difference between conventional implicatures and presuppositions is that conventional implicatures are not presented as part of the common ground:

- Conventional implicatures are speaker-oriented (presented as opinions of the speaker).
- The conventional implicatures of a sentence S are presented as new information, that is not yet in the common ground when S is uttered.
- The presuppositions of a sentence S are presented as old information, that is already in the common ground when the sentence is uttered.

There are a few things that follow from these differences:

- If a proposition p is a conventional implicature of a sentence S, you can use S to present p as new information.
- If a proposition p is a conventional implicature of a sentence S, uttering S in a context where p has just been added to the common ground may feel redundant.

Example: #Jeff is a jerk, and Jeff, that Jerk, forgot to turn off the stove.

Redundant CI: Jeff is a jerk

- If a proposition p is a presupposition of a sentence S, it should be fine to utter S in a context where p has just been added to the common ground. Everything else being equal, S should not feel redundant, since S presents p as old information.

Example: Someone broke the type-writer. Maybe it was Sam who did it.

Non-redundant presupposition: someone broke the type-writer.