

Presupposition

(预设、先设、前设、前提)

9 October 2023

A recap of last week's lecture

- Basic concepts

- Context
- Deixis
- reference

- Types of deixis

- Person deixis
- Spatial deixis
- Temporal deixis
- Discourse deixis
- Social deixis

- Deixis and grammar

Today's lecture

- Definition of presupposition
 - A kind of assumption (believe/think that sth is true, 假定, 认定)
 - Semantic vs. pragmatic presupposition
- Cancellation of presupposition
 - Projection problems with presupposition
- Presupposition triggers (触发语)
- Application of presupposition
 - Analysis of advertisements

0. What is presupposition?

- “*The queen was pregnant. Oh, my God, Who did it?*”



“女王怀孕了。上帝啊，谁干的？”

- 英王伊丽莎白二世时，一组织举办全英短篇小说赛，要求涉及宗教、皇室、神秘、性，且越短越好。结果一个十几岁小女生以这篇短文摘得桂冠。時年女王系十六岁的未婚少女，该小说是对其大不敬。但女王非但没有生氣，还接見了小作者，一時传為佳話！

In the very short piece of English writing above, there are certain presuppositions (i.e. *something that the speaker/writer believes or assumes to exist*).

Question: What does the girl believe when she is composing the story?

1. Definition

- It is a term used in the philosophy of language (语言哲学). It first appeared in Gottlob Frege's *Sense and Reference* (1982). It is quite **a controversial term**. Why?
- On the one hand, **presupposition** is studied in semantics, which is based more closely on the linguistic structure of **sentences**. For semanticists, presupposition is what is asserted in a sentence.
- On the other, **presupposition** cannot be thought of as semantic only, because it is very sensitive to **contextual factors**. For pragmaticists, presupposition is what is assumed to be the case prior to making an utterance.

Friedrich Ludwig Gottlob Frege (1848-1925) 弗雷格

- *Father of modern logic* 现代逻辑之父
- *Father of the philosophy of Language*
(语言哲学)
- *German mathematician, logician and philosopher*
- *In his original 1892 paper “Über Sinn und Bedeutung” (On sense and reference), Frege addressed the issue of (semantic) presupposition.*



1.1 Semantic presupposition

- It has a logical nature. It is what logically follows from what is asserted (断定, 肯定) in a sentence.
- For semanticists, sentences (or propositions), NOT speakers, have presuppositions (please note that they don't want to consider the role of speakers in verbal communication, **BUT Pragmaticists do.**).

1.1 Semantic presupposition

(1) *Billy shot down the bird on the table.*

(2) *Billy didn't shoot down the bird on the table.*

(3) *There was a bird on the table.*

- As you can see, both (1) and (2) presuppose (3).
When (1) is negated, we get (2), yet (3) still exists.
- Therefore, presupposition is a kind of entailment (蕴含).
That is to say, **It is what logically follows from what is asserted** (断言, 确认, 声称) **in a sentence.**
- In other words, presupposition is closely related to the truth condition of the proposition expressed by a sentence.

1.2 Pragmatic presupposition

- Robert Stalnaker (1973), an MIT philosopher
 - suggested that when people communicate, they have **mutual knowledge** or **common ground** “共同点” (*beliefs or a background set of assumptions* that both speaker and hearer consider to be true);
 - **presupposition** works by means of this common ground, which should be commonly held by all participants in a conversation). “预设” 应为交际双方共享。



Stalnaker, R. 1973. Presuppositions. *Journal of Philosophical Logic*.

1.2 pragmatic presupposition

- ◆ When people communicate, they have **mutual knowledge** or **common ground** 共同的知识点” (beliefs or a background set of assumptions 信念；假定；假想).
 - What's so funny when Wang Zijian says this?

王自健 《今晚80后脱口秀》



1.2 Pragmatic presupposition

- The video clip shows that people are concerned with how speakers make use of **presupposition** as a way of communicating (**implicit or pragmatic**) **meaning**.
- **For pragmaticists, speakers**, NOT sentences (or propositions), **have presuppositions** (a set of beliefs, assumptions, etc).

2. Cancellation of presupposition 预设的可取消性

- Presupposition is likely to be subjective, i.e., it may not be true, so it can be **cancellable or defeasible** (可取消的) by changing the words to alter the previous proposition.

(5) 美国著名幽默作家马克·吐温与共和党人交恶，曾在《纽约时报》上撰文说：有些共和党人是婊子养的。他的言论在议会引起轩然大波，共和党人纷纷抗议，要求马克吐温公开道歉。马克·吐温便在《纽约时报》上公开发表声明：“我道歉，我收回我的话，应改为“有些共和党人不是婊子养的！”

马克吐温改口后的话“有些共和党人不是婊子养的”，似乎取消了原句中的主观性预设，但其实不然，因为这个新话（否定句）中似乎仍隐含着一个预设：有些共和党人就是婊子养的。

Consider more examples:

对话发生在一位老太太和一位浙大教授之间。

- 老太太：这是你孙子吧？ (a kind of greeting)
- 教 授：哦，我是孙子的爸爸。
- The old lady **presupposes** that the professor should be the young boy's grandfather **by judging his looks** (以貌取人当然是主观臆断). Here in this case, it is essentially subjective!
- As a smart **pragmaticist**, the professor clearly **cancelled** her presupposition and in the meantime **shows his own, true identity**.

3. Projection problems with presupposition

- When simple sentences are **projected** (i.e. made bigger) into complex ones, **presupposition may not survive**, which is called “**projection problem**”. It shows that presupposition is (sometimes) subjective indeed, namely, context-dependent.

(6) a. Mary didn't manage to find a job.

>> *Mary tried to find a job. (P)*

b. Mary didn't manage to find a job; **in fact, she didn't even try.**

(7) a. Mike didn't date Mary again.

>> *Mike dated Mary before. (P)*

b. Mike didn't date Mary again, **if indeed he ever did.**

4. Presupposition triggers (触发语)

- How can we determine speakers' presupposition in the course of verbal communication?
 - In the analysis of how speaker's assumptions are typically expressed, **presupposition** has been associated with the use of a large number of **words, phrases, and structures**, known as **presupposition triggers** (i.e. words that make presuppositions work).

Definite descriptions (有定描写)

the /this/ that + NP, the 3rd person pronoun, and possessive + N (*my, your, his/her, etc.*) give definite descriptions associated with presuppositions of existence.

(8) Sue's neighbour's daughter got married last week.

>> *Sue has a neighbour.*

>> *The neighbour has a daughter.*

Factive verbs (实情动词) —sth has happened

regret, realize, know, be aware that, be sorry that, be glad that, be proud that, be pleased that, be odd, be strange, be disappointed that, etc.

(9) John **realized** that he had made a mistake.

>> *John made a mistake.*

(10) He **regretted** having started the project.

>> *He started the project.*

Implicative verbs (含蓄动词)

manage, forget, happen, avoid, etc.

(11) I forgot to bring the book.

>> *I ought to have brought the book.*

(12) We happened to meet Bob in the cinema.

>> *We didn't expect to meet Bob in the cinema.*

Change of state verbs (表示状态改变的动词)

finish, stop, begin, start, carry on, continue, cease, leave, arrive, enter, come, go, turn, transform, etc.

(13) He stopped / didn't stop smoking cigars.

>> *He had been smoking cigars (before...).*

(14) It began to snow at midnight.

>> *It did not snow before midnight.*

- How can we figure out the relevant presupposition? By **pragmatic reasoning** (with the help of our world knowledge) !

Iteratives (words expressing repetition, 表反复的词语)

repeat, back, again, too, another time, any more, etc.

(15) The spaceship came back to earth.

>> *The spaceship had been on earth.*

(16) I'm visiting China for the third time.

>> *I have visited China twice before.*

Verbs of judging (判断性动词)

accuse, charge, criticize, etc.

(17) Joe accused / didn't accuse Zoe of forgery.

>> *Joe thinks forgery is bad.*

(18) Zoe criticized Joe for backing out at the last minute.

>> *Joe backed out at the last minute.*

Temporal clauses (时间状语从句)

before, after, since, etc.

(19) After his father died, he stepped into a large fortune.

>> *His father died.*

(20) While Chomsky was revolutionizing linguistics, the rest of social sciences was/ wasn't asleep.

>> *Chomsky was revolutionizing linguistics.*

Cleft sentence (切分句/断裂句)

**It is ... that / who ...
what....**

(21) What I lost is my passport.

>> *I lost something.*

(22) It was John who danced the last dance with Mary.

>> *Someone danced the last dance with Mary.*

Non-restrictive attributive clauses

(非限制性定语从句)

(23) Jack, who visited China last year, is fond of Chinese tea.

>> *Jack has been to China.*

(24) The island of Japan, which is located to the east of China, has frequently been struck by earthquakes of varying forces.

>> *The island of Japan is located to the east of China.*

Counterfactual conditionals

(与事实相反的条件句; 虚拟条件句)

(25) If I had not burnt the cake, we would be having it for tea.

>> *I burnt the cake.*

(26) If Columbus had not discovered America, someone else would.

>> *Columbus discovered America.*

Questions (疑问句)

(27) Does Frank speak English or French?

>> *Frank speaks one of the two European languages*

There could be more **triggers**...

5. Application: How to apply the concept to analyze everyday language?

- Commercial ads very often contain **presuppositions**.

(28) ***Feel free to lie about your age*** (16 May 2005).

(One could lie about one's age in a most desirable way!)



What are the presuppositions? What are the advertiser's intentions?
All users want to look younger than their real age. And the cosmetics
are so effective that it can make users look much younger!

(29) 奔驰创意广告 -- Sorry !

A mind-bending(/blowing/twisting 烧脑) commercial ad !

提示：请注意广告中的**死神**（Grim reaper，简称 reaper），常见形象为穿黑斗篷的骷髅，手持镰刀。这源自西方的一个典故，圣经中耶稣把信徒比作麦子，等时候到了就要来收割（进入天堂），所以后来西方把收割作为死亡的代称，**镰刀也就成了死神的武器**。



Presentation's requirements (next Monday, Oct 16)

- Choose *a topic of pragmatics* we've discussed, and tell *a story (better with videos, etc.) and give your own analysis/comments.*
- Time limit: *5 minutes* plus *3 minutes'* question time

Homework: WTO

- Watch: **Arrival** 《降临》
 - A really mind-twisting movie! 烧脑影片
- Think about: **Pragmatic issues**
 - What are the intentions of aliens' arrival on the earth? How can we humans communicate with them?
- Other questions?

