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# Presupposition as Argumentative Reasoning

Fabrizio Macagno

**Abstract** Presuppositions are pragmatically considered as the conditions of the felicity of a speech act, or discourse move; however, the decision of setting the conditions of a move, which the hearer needs to accept in order to continue the dialogue, can be thought of as a speech act of a kind. The act of presupposing depends on specific conditions and in particular on the possibility of the hearer to reconstruct and accept the propositional content. These pragmatic conditions lead to epistemic considerations: How can the speaker know that the hearer can reconstruct and accept a presupposition? A possible answer can be found in an argumentative approach grounded on the notion of presumptive reasoning. On this perspective, by presupposing the speaker advances a tentative conclusion about what the hearer may accept, hold, or know proceeding from factual, linguistic, and epistemic rules of presumption.

**Keywords** Presupposition · Implicatures · Argumentation theory · Pragmatics

When we talk, discuss, or try to persuade our interlocutor, we leave most of the information needed to communicate implicit: We simply pragmatically presuppose it. We never remind our interlocutor of the definitions of the words that we use; we never describe people, things, or places that our interlocutor may know, or we think he may know. We draw conclusions from conditional premises that we very rarely express; we take turns in speaking and prove a point without telling why we act in such a fashion, without stating the rules governing our discussion. How is it linguistically possible to leave all such information implicit? How can we perform communication moves, leaving rules, definitions, and propositions unexpressed?

The problem of the implicit grounds of dialogue is twofold. It is a linguistic matter, as presuppositions are the conditions of meaning. But it is also an epistemic problem, because we take the presupposed information for granted, as already shared by the hearer. We do not state such information because we believe that he can know it, or he can retrieve or reconstruct it. However, how can we know that a

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proposition is already known, or that it can be reconstructed? Why can we believe that our interlocutor may know or accommodate a presupposition?

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the linguistic and epistemic dimensions of presupposition from an argumentative perspective, showing the nature and the effects of the reasoning underlying the possibility of presupposing. To this purpose, presupposition will be first investigated as an implicit act aimed at setting forth the conditions of the continuation of a dialogue. Such an act is, in turn, subject to some constraints, rooted in the epistemic problem of knowing the other's mind. The argumentative approach can provide a possible explanation, presenting presupposition as the result of a process of presumptive reasoning made by the speaker.

## 1 The Meanings of Presupposition

Several linguistic and pragmatic phenomena fall under the label of presupposition (Chomsky 1972, p. 112; Green 1996, p. 72). The very term “presupposition” is ambiguous, as it may refer to the semantic conditions for the verification of a sentence (a logical relationship between two statements, see Kempson 1975, pp. 50–51), to the background assumptions underlying discourse (intended as a chain of sentences) cohesion (Sandulescu 1975), or to a much broader pragmatic concept, denoting the propositions that are taken for granted in the uttering of a linguistic expression and on whose truth, or better acceptance and knowledge by the hearer, the felicity of the statement depends (Wilson 1975, p. 26; Green 1996, p. 72). Another (operational) definition was provided by Keenan (1971, p. 45), who identified presupposition by means of the test of negation. On his view, the presupposition of a sentence is entailed by both the sentence and its negation (for the weakness of this definition, see Katz 1973).

Presuppositions have been usually considered as conditions of verification of a sentence (see Wilson 1975, pp. 43–44). For instance, if the referent of the subject of a sentence does not exist, the sentence cannot be verified (such as, for instance, in the famous example, “The king of France is bald”). However, as reference can be only determined in context, presupposition is a property not of sentences, but of the *use* of sentences, or statements (Strawson 1950, p. 1952; Karttunen 1973; Kempson 1975; Wilson 1975; Keenan 1971). For this reason, Strawson (1950, p. 325) distinguished sentences from their uses and from the utterances expressing them. Thus, from a logical perspective, presuppositions are considered as properties of the use of sentences. However, the logical criterion of truth (implying a God's eye view) needs to be relativized in order to describe a phenomenon concerning the actual use of natural language. Depending on background knowledge, a sentence can be true or false, and, therefore, either verifiable or meaningless; depending on its belonging to the pragmatic universe of discourse, or shared knowledge, a proposition can be known to be true or false (Kempson 1975, pp. 168–170).

This pragmatic concept of truth allows one to understand the relationship between the logical and the pragmatic perspectives on the use of language. As Hamblin

(1970, p. 240) pointed out, talking about what is true for a language user amounts to what *he knows* to be true. However, since we do not proceed from what is absolutely known to be true but from what we *believe*, or rather accept, to be true, the concept of verification must be replaced by the weaker criterion of acceptability (Hamblin 1970, pp. 242–243; Walton and Macagno 2005a, b). Acceptability is an assessment (and, therefore, a decision) of the agent, and not a judgment external to him or her. This pragmatic view of verification leads to analyzing meaning in terms of effects on the audience instead of in terms of truth (Grice 1975, 1989, p. 220; Levinson 1983, p. 97; Austin 1962, pp. 50–51). On this perspective, also the nature of presupposition needs to be enlarged, and presuppositional failures need to be accounted for not in terms of non-verifiability, but rather of lack of effects on the interlocutor or the audience. For example, in the case of assertions, such a failure results in the impossibility of judging a statement as acceptable or not.

The pragmatic criterion of acceptability (instead of the logical one of truth) affects the very definition of the concept of presupposition. Presupposition becomes what the speaker assumes to be true, or, rather, to be accepted by the interlocutor (Kempson 1975, p. 54). On this pragmatic perspective, presuppositions need to be defined as conditions of “meaningfulness” of speech acts. Thus, presuppositional failures result in the failure of a speech act to carry out its intended effect on the audience. This social dimension of meaningfulness and presupposition was underscored by Austin, who pointed out how the falsity of presuppositions causes the infelicity of a speech act (Austin 1962, pp. 50–51):

Next let us consider presupposition: what is to be said of the statement that “John’s children are all bald” if made when John has no children? It is usual now to say that it is not false because it is devoid of reference; reference is necessary for either truth or falsehood. (Is it then meaningless? It is not so in every sense: it is not, like a “meaningless sentence,” ungrammatical, incomplete, mumbo-jumbo, &c.) People say “the question does not arise.” Here I shall say “the utterance is void.”

In Austin’s example, the speaker is presupposing that there is a person called John, and that he has children. We notice that the speaker is not presupposing the *existence* of such entities, but simply their existence in the *listener’s domain of knowledge*. This pragmatic view extends the notion of presupposition to several phenomena of meaningfulness constraints (Austin 1962, pp. 34, 51), such as selectional restrictions, coherence relations, and felicity conditions. Such linguistic phenomena are conditions that need to be complied with for the interlocutor to understand the move. Therefore, these linguistic presuppositions are included within the pragmatic conditions for the felicity of a speech act.

The basic distinction between logical and pragmatic presupposition lies in the principles according to which language and discourse are assessed. From a logical perspective, the basic concern is the verifiability of statements (sentences that can be true or false in some context of utterance, or possible world, see Kempson 1975, p. 51). From a pragmatic point of view, the focus is on the felicity of a discourse move, or possible effect of a speech act on the interlocutor (for the notion of presupposition as felicity conditions, see Stalnaker 1970; Kempson 1975). To these two accounts we can add the linguistic criterion, in which the correctness or

coherence becomes the principle for the assessment. The three approaches are not mutually exclusive. A sentence with false presuppositions cannot constitute a coherent discourse, but the sentences of an incoherent discourse can still be verifiable. An incoherent discourse cannot be felicitous (“I am hungry! Bring the soap!”), while a coherent discourse can be infelicitous (for instance, the statement “You are really good. I hereby appoint you CEO of the company,” uttered by a clerk to an official).

The problem of the definition of presupposition hides under and is grounded on the problem of the linguistic and pragmatic phenomena that trigger presuppositions, which can be addressed by taking into account the communication level at which presuppositions are triggered (Sandulescu 1975; see also Green 1996, pp. 72–77). Considering the broadest notion of pragmatic presupposition from another perspective, the different kinds of presuppositional phenomena occur at a linguistic and pragmatic level, triggered by semantic or syntactic items or structures, or by the illocutionary force of the utterance or the use thereof within a dialogical context.

## 2 Presuppositions: Linguistic Level

At the linguistic level, we distinguish well-formed sentences such as “The king of France is bald” from sentences that are not well formed, such as “Australia is bald” or “The stone died” (Seuren 2000, p. 279; Atlas 2005; Levin 1977, p. 33). The problem of grammaticality was thoroughly analyzed by Katz and Fodor (1963) and by Chomsky (1971). From such approaches and subsequent studies, a crucial relationship emerges between the conditions required by semantic predicates (or selectional restrictions) and the fundamental semantic features of their arguments. Selectional restrictions can be described as the conditions (or preconditions, Seuren 2000, p. 277) that a predicate imposes on the elements acting as its arguments (Hobbs 1979, p. 70; Grimes 1975, p. 162). Such conditions represent the categorical presuppositions of a predicate (McCawley 1971, p. 290; Antley 1974; Chomsky 1971, p. 205), namely, the categorical conditions that the semantic structure arguments of the predicate need to satisfy. For instance, the predicate “to kill” requires an “animate being” as a second argument. Therefore, in order for the predicate to be correctly attributed to an entity acting as its grammatical subject, the latter needs to be animated (Rigotti 2005, p. 79).

There are several types of semantic presuppositions corresponding to the different types of predicates, conceiving this latter term as a logical functor that attributes a quality to an argument, or that binds one or more arguments into a relation (Seuren 2000, pp. 328–331). Quantifiers and determiners impose specific conditions on nouns (it would be ungrammatical to say “\*I ate *a* rice”), adjectives on nouns (I cannot say “\*The apple is *happy* today”), adverbs on verbs (it would be meaningless to say “\*I slept really *slowly*”).

Presuppositions can also be triggered by syntactic elements such as conjunctions (“\*America began its expansion after Germany won WW2”), prepositions (“\*I am walking in the park with Australia”), or particular syntactic constructions, such as cleft sentences (“\*It was in the USA that the Martians won the match”; Frege 1948,

pp. 224, 222: Strawson 1971; Rigotti and Cigada 2004; Gundel and Fretheim 2004; Hockett 1950; Green 1996, p. 74; Capone 2013).

At an inter-sentence level, presuppositions can be triggered by predicates of higher level, the connectors (Karttunen 1973, p. 176). In this case, the arguments are both sentences that can be used as discourse units, and presuppose specific relations between them. For instance, we consider the following famous case (Lakoff 1971, p. 133):

John is tall, but he is no good at basketball.

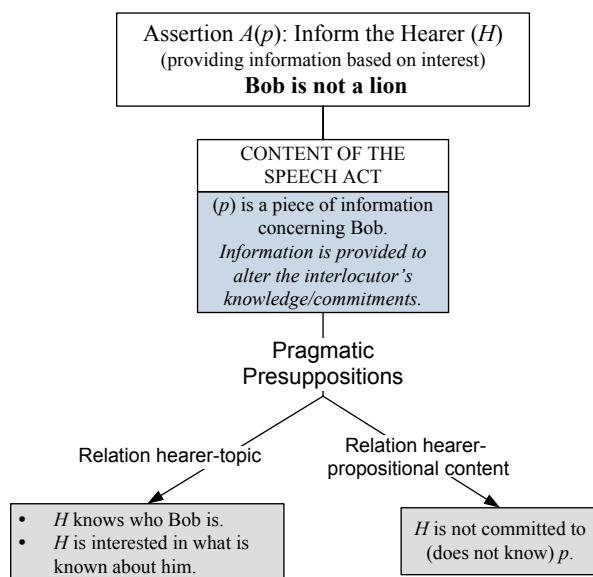
Lakoff notices that this sentence is composed of an assertion (John is tall, and he is no good at basketball) and a presupposition triggered by “but” (If someone is tall, then one would expect him to be good at basketball). The effect is a denial of expectation, which was described by Ducrot as the contradiction by the second conjunct of a presupposed conclusion (in this case, “John is good at basketball”; Ducrot 1978). Similarly, the connective “and” presupposes a common relevance or topic (Lakoff 1971, p. 128; Kempson 1975, p. 58), or a causal or temporal order of the sequences (Ballard et al. 1971). Subordinating connectives, such as “therefore,” specify more precisely the type of relationship between the sequences. For instance, the predicate “therefore” pragmatically presupposes that the first sequence is a reason supporting the second one (Vanderveken 2002, p. 47; Bach 2003, p. 163; see also Grice 1975, p. 44).

### 3 Presuppositions: Pragmatic Level

At a pragmatic level, sentence and inter-sentence presuppositions become necessary conditions for the felicity of the move, as ungrammatical sentences can hardly express a communicative intention (Austin 1962, pp. 50–51). However, in addition to these grammaticality requirements, other kinds of presupposition need to be fulfilled in order for a speech act to be felicitous. As Austin noticed, the speech act of appointing someone is not possible if the speaker has no social role entitling him to do so, or if the appointee has already been appointed, or is not a person (Austin 1962, pp. 34, 51). On this perspective, speech acts presuppose procedures (Austin 1962, p. 30; Searle and Vanderveken 1985, pp. 66–67), roles, and institutions but also the interlocutors’ interests, values, and preferences. As Ducrot pointed out (1966, p. 46), it would be “linguistically absurd” to say “I have met Pierre this morning” if my interlocutor is not interested in Pierre.

The set of pragmatic presuppositions (Stalnaker 1974; Searle and Vanderveken 1985, pp. 66–67; Bach 2003, p. 163) can be thought of as imposed by an abstract predicate connecting the dialogue unit with the interlocutors, namely, with their background knowledge (see Rigotti and Rocci 2001; Rigotti 2005; Rigotti and Rocci 2006; see also Asher and Lascarides 1998). The communicative intention, or rather the purpose of the speech act, is represented as a logical–semantic connective, which assigns a role to each speech act (Grosz and Sidnert 1986, p. 178; Walton 1989, p. 68). For example, if we assert that, “Bob is not a lion,” we presuppose a set of information that can be represented as given in (Fig. 1).

**Fig. 1** Presuppositions of a speech act in a dialogue



In this figure, we notice two categories of presuppositional requirements at the pragmatic level. The purpose of the move is established, based on an interpretation of the illocutionary force (assertions are usually performed to inform the interlocutor). The communicative intention is depicted as a connective, whose arguments are the different types of relations between the interlocutor and the subject matter (presupposition of interest of the act) and between the interlocutor and the propositional content (informativeness of the act). In this specific case, if Bob is not known by the hearer, then the assertion will be infelicitous, as it cannot provide information that is relevant and accessible to the interlocutor. Moreover, the act can fail to achieve its goal (to provide *new* and interesting information) if the proposition expressed *cannot* provide information that is presumably not shared by the hearer. In particular, this example points out a critical case, as the propositional content corresponds to a tautology (a man by definition is not a lion), which cannot be informative in normal conditions (the hearer knows the ordinary meaning of the ordinary English words). This presuppositional failure leads to the crucial issue of accommodation and the levels of accommodation, which will be treated in Sects. 5 and 6.

The pragmatic level leads to taking into account a wider context of use of a speech act. Every speech act is aimed at achieving a specific dialogical purpose, which, in turn, results in a specific dialogical effect onto the interlocutor, namely limiting the paradigm of his possible replies (Ducrot 1972a, b; Macagno and Walton 2014, Chap. 7). Every speech act is not a “disconnected remark,” (Grice 1975, p. 45) but rather an effort to reach a common dialogical purpose. For this reason, some possible conversational moves will be excluded as unsuitable. For instance, the following conversational exchange cannot be considered as reasonable (Carroll 2010, Chap. 7):

“I didn’t know it was *your* table,” said Alice; “it’s laid for a great many more than three.”  
 “Your hair wants cutting,” said the Hatter. He had been looking at Alice for some time with great curiosity, and this was his first speech.  
 “You should learn not to make personal remarks,” Alice said with some severity; “it’s very rude.”  
 The Hatter opened his eyes very wide on hearing this; but all he *said* was, “Why is a raven like a writing desk?”

Every speech act presupposes a paradigm of possible replies, setting out the possibilities of continuing the dialogue. This common dialogical purpose can be regarded as a pragmatic connective of higher level (Wüest 2001), representing the common dialogical intention (Crothers 1979; Rigotti 2005; Hobbs 1979, p. 68; Hobbs 1985). From a pragmatic perspective, these relations can be considered as high-level speech acts (Grice 1989, p. 362; Carston 2002, pp. 107–108), imposing a set of presuppositions, or felicity conditions, on the first-level speech acts (Vanderveken 2002, p. 28; Wüest 2001).

In this sense, the global purpose of the dialogue, represented by a high-level connective (Walton 1989; further developed in Walton and Krabbe 1995; Walton 1998), determines the local goal of the interlocutors’ moves by imposing specific conditions (Macagno 2008; Walton 1989, pp. 65–71). For instance, if a friend argues that the economic situation in Europe is tragic, as the Central Bank said so, it would be unreasonable to threaten him in order to win the discussion (“If you do not take back what you said I will punch you”), or negotiate with him a position (“I think it is not, let’s agree that it is not so bad”).

## 4 The Action of the *Pragmatic* Presuppositions

As mentioned above, several phenomena are labeled as presuppositions, including the controversial semantic presuppositions and the wider class of felicity conditions of speech acts and coherence relations. The common characteristic of all these phenomena is that a proposition *p* is presupposed when it is taken for granted in performing a speech act whose felicity depends on the interlocutor’s acceptance of *p*. To presuppose a proposition is “to take its truth for granted, and to assume that others involved in the context do the same” (Stalnaker 1970, p. 279). This “taking a proposition for granted” has been analyzed by Stalnaker as a propositional attitude which can be interpreted as an action of a kind (Stalnaker 2002, p. 701):

Speaker presupposition is a propositional attitude of the speaker, but I and others who have emphasized the role of speaker presupposition in the explanation of linguistic phenomena have been vague and equivocal about exactly what propositional attitude it is. To presuppose something is to take it for granted, or at least to act as if one takes it for granted, as background information—as *common ground* among the participants in the conversation.

Therefore, presuppositions are *made* by the speakers (Stalnaker 1970, p. 279), in the sense that presupposing a proposition amounts to a form of decision made by the speaker to treat some information as already known by the interlocutor. This



idea of analyzing presuppositions in terms of their effects, and relating them to the speaker's intentions is also developed by Kempson. She maintains that presupposing a proposition amounts to treating it as belonging to the common knowledge, or universe of discourse. For instance, the utterance of a sentence containing a definite noun phrase (used as a topic) implies "(a) that the speaker believes that there is an object to which the noun phrase refers, (b) that the speaker believes that the hearer believes that there is an object to which the noun phrase refers, and (c) the speaker believes that the hearer knows which object is referred to" (Kempson 1975, p. 17; see also the weaker definition set forth in Stalnaker (1974, p. 200), in which the hearer is simply assumed or believed to believe that *p* and to recognize that the speaker is making this assumption). However, this implication is "deliberately invoked" by the speaker, who "wishes to convey that the hearer knows what object he is intending to refer to" (Kempson 1975, p. 180). From these accounts, two crucial elements emerge: (1) presupposition can be considered as a form of *decision* to treat a proposition as shared; (2) presuppositions are crucially related to the speaker and hearer's beliefs and knowledge (Schwarz 1977, p. 248). However, the definition of a linguistic phenomenon in terms of beliefs or assumptions risks confounding the phenomenon with its accidental effects or possible explanations. How can a speaker *believe* or *assume* that a proposition is shared by the hearer? How would it be possible to presuppose propositions which are *known not to be shared*, without the sentence being meaningless?

A possible explanation of presupposition in nonpsychological terms can be proposed by developing the first characteristic the accounts mentioned above seem to suggest: The nature of presupposition as an act of a kind. Presupposing a proposition can be described as the performance of an implicit speech act, in which the speaker subordinates the felicity of his move to the listener's acceptance of some conditions. This idea was put forward by Ducrot, who described presupposition as the set of conditions that need to be fulfilled in order to satisfy the pretension of carrying out an effect on the listener (see Ducrot 1966). On this view, their failure, determined by the interlocutor's rejection, causes the infelicity of a communicative move (or speech act). In such an event, a move becomes simply void, that is, it cannot be considered as a move anymore.

On Ducrot's structuralistic perspective, presuppositions limit the field of the possible moves of the interlocutor within a dialogue game. For instance, if he accepts the assertion that "I have met Pierre this morning," he also implicitly agrees to a conversational situation in which the topic is *Pierre*. On the contrary, if the hearer refuses the presupposition, he terminates the dialogue game. Ducrot accounted for this pragmatic effect of presupposition defining it as an implicit speech act (Ducrot 1968, p. 87):

Comme le joueur d'échecs doit accepter le champ de possibilités que crée pour lui la manœuvre de son adversaire, le participant d'un dialogue doit reprendre à son compte certains au moins des présupposés introduits par les phrases auxquelles il répond.

Ducrot claimed that the speech acts need to be divided in an explicit act of stating (the *posé*) and an implicit act of presupposing (the *présupposé*). This latter act is aimed at setting the possible moves that can be performed by the interlocutor, that is, the possible dialogical world (Stalnaker 1970, p. 280) that determines the boundaries of the linguistic moves (Ducrot 1972b)<sup>1</sup>. On this view, the act of presupposing sets the conditions of a dialogue game (Ducrot 1972a, p. 91):

Présupposer un certain contenu, c'est placer l'acceptation de ce contenu comme la condition du dialogue ultérieur. On voit alors pourquoi le choix des présupposés nous apparaît comme un acte de parole particulier (que nous appelons acte de présupposer), acte à valeur juridique et donc illocutoire[...]: en accomplissant, on transforme du même coup les possibilités de parole de l'interlocuteur. [...] Lorsqu'on introduit des présupposés dans un énoncé, on fixe, pour ainsi dire, le prix à payer pour que la conversation puisse continuer.

By analyzing presupposition as an act it is possible to explain how and why the speaker can treat a proposition as part of the common ground even if it is not. While assertion can be counted as a proposal of adding a proposition *p* to the shared propositions (see von Stechow 2008, p. 139), presupposition can be considered as the act of treating *p* as already shared (see Horn and Ward 2004, p. xii; Atlas 2008; Lewis 1979, p. 339). Such an act does not depend on what the interlocutors *actually* share, or on what the speaker believes (Burton-Roberts 1989, p. 26). A proposition that has been assumed as not shared can be presupposed in the sense that it has been advanced as a condition or ground of the dialogue. The analysis of presupposition as an act separates the linguistic phenomena triggering it from its dialogical effects, and its effects from its epistemic conditions.

## 5 The Limits and the Conditions of the Act of Presupposing

One of the most interesting and problematic dimensions of presupposition, especially concerning their treatment in psychological terms, is that we can presuppose propositions that we *know* to be unshared. For instance, Ducrot (1966, p. 42) noticed that it is possible to imagine the enemies of Caesar or Napoleon during the Roman consulate or the French Republic talking about the magnificence, or the richness or the wisdom of the *king*. In this case, the speaker was presupposing false or unshared propositions (“Caesar (or Napoleon) is a king”). However, their

<sup>1</sup> On Ducrot's view, the communicative game resembles a chess game, in which the possibilities are set by means of presuppositions: “dans ce combat simulé—qui substitue aux possibilités réelles, dues à la force, les possibilités morales dues aux conventions—les règles permettent aux joueurs de se contraindre mutuellement à certaines actions, et de s'en interdire certaines autres” (Ducrot 1968, p. 83); “pour trouver une description sémantique satisfaisante d'un phénomène comme la présupposition, phénomène qui est repérable selon des critères syntaxiques précis, il nous a été nécessaire de la relier aux règles qui définissent conventionnellement le jeu du langage, et de décrire la présupposition par rapport aux manœuvres dont elle fournit le thème : sa réalité, comme celle d'une règle des échecs, consiste seulement à rendre possible un jeu” (Ducrot 1972b, p. 27).

assertions, far from being void, might have caused them serious troubles for their meaning. This case illustrates a crucial problem concerning presupposition, the possibility of treating as shared a proposition that is actually not granted or that does not belong to the hearer's common knowledge, called "accommodation" (see Lewis 1979; von Stechow 2008). From the analysis of the limits of such a process of reconstruction, it is possible to understand the conditions characterizing the speech act of presupposition.

## 5.1 Accommodation

Accommodation was described by Lewis as a process of adjustment of the common ground, in which the presupposed proposition comes into existence when not previously known (Lewis 1979, p. 340):

If at time  $t$  something is said that requires presupposition  $P$  to be acceptable and if  $P$  is not presupposed just before  $t$ , then—*ceteris paribus* and within certain limits –presupposition  $P$  comes into existence at  $t$ .

In this definition, some boundaries of accommodation are mentioned without being specified. Lewis noticed that the process of reconstruction, or rather the process of bringing into existence presupposed propositions, is not totally free. For instance, in the cases above, the hearers of Caesar or Napoleon could retrieve the presupposed information. However, in that specific historical time the same people could not state that "The king of Myanmar is bald" without being infelicitous. The limits of accommodation have been investigated by Soames, who noticed that the presupposed propositions can be reconstructed only when they have already been accepted by the interlocutor, or they do not conflict with the interlocutor's common ground (Soames 1982, p. 486):

Utterance Presupposition. An utterance  $U$  presupposes  $P$  (at  $t$ ) if one can reasonably infer from  $U$  that the speaker  $S$  accepts  $P$  and regards it as uncontroversial, either because

- a.  $S$  thinks that it is already part of the conversational context at  $t$ , or because
- b.  $S$  thinks that the audience is prepared to add it, without objection, to the context against which  $U$  is evaluated.

These conditions, however, are based on speaker's beliefs about the interlocutor's common knowledge. In the Caesar and Napoleon cases cited above, the speaker actually *knows* that the presupposition that "Caesar is a king" is not in the conversational context, and actually conflicts with the interlocutors' common knowledge.

## 5.2 The Conditions of Accommodation

In order to analyze the conditions of presupposition, it is useful to examine when a proposition can be presupposed, by distinguishing between two different dimen-

sions of accommodation, retrieval, and acceptance (or rather possibility and reasonableness). Stalnaker (1998, p. 8) explains the first characteristic claiming that the speaker can only *presume* that the presupposed information is *available* to his or her audience. In his view, the speaker can presuppose a proposition only because he or she can conclude that the interlocutor can retrieve such information. For instance, we consider the following case:

1. Bob was at the party too (no parties were mentioned before and the listener does not know who Bob is)

Let us consider such sentence as uttered in a context in which no parties and no guests have been previously mentioned. The presuppositions that “Hearer knows which party I am talking about” (triggered by “the”), “Hearer knows who Bob is”, and “Other people were at the party” (triggered by “too”) cannot be reconstructed without a specific dialogical context. Unless the party and Bob can be identified through the context, the presuppositions cannot be reconstructed, and the meaning cannot be even retrieved. The hearer can obtain the information that there was a party and that there were other people at the party as they are “implicit contents” of the sentence (Bach 1999). However, if he does not know that there was a party, he cannot reconstruct the information “the aforementioned party”, triggered by the determined article. In (1), the speaker presupposes two propositions that the hearer cannot accommodate because he cannot retrieve them. The *possibility* of reconstructing a presupposition was underscored by Asher and Lascarides, who claimed that the mere concept of adding a proposition to a context cannot explain why and how some presuppositions can be accommodated, and why others cannot. As they put it (Asher and Lascarides 1998, p. 255), “presuppositions must always be rhetorically bound to the context, rather than added.” Presuppositions need to be related to the propositions already known, from which they may be derived through defeasible reasoning (Hobbs 1979; Asher and Lascarides 1998, p. 277). Building on this view, the *possibility* of reconstructing the presuppositions depends on the possibility of retrieving them, based on the linguistic and pragmatic data provided by means of a pattern of reasoning. On this perspective, the reconstruction of a presupposition is essentially related with the plausible reasoning underlying its retrieval.

The second characteristic of accommodation is acceptability, which can be referred to the major premise of the reasoning or its conclusion. The possibility of reconstructing a presupposed proposition depends on the possibility of abducing it by means of defeasible reasoning, and, therefore, on the existence of the premises supporting the conclusion. Sometimes the reasoning is possible because the premise allowing the hearer to reconstruct the proposition is provided, but the reasoning itself or the conclusion cannot be accepted by the interlocutor. For instance, we consider the following cases (see Stalnaker 1998, p. 9):

2. I can't come to the meeting—I have to pick up my cat at the veterinarian.
3. My dog got an A in Math.
4. I have to pick up my Martian friend at the Voodoo club.
5. Bob is tall. Therefore he is really rich.

In (2), the hearer can reconstruct the fact that the speaker owns a cat and can accept both the reasoning (if someone has to pick up his cat, he owns a cat) and the conclusion (he can accept that usually people have pets). On the contrary, the presuppositions of (3), (4), and (5) are unacceptable for different reasons. In (3), the accommodation reasoning is based on a conditional that cannot be accepted, “If  $x$  studies, then  $x$  can be a dog.” This premise conflicts with semantic rules and therefore is simply known to be false. In (4), the reasoning can be acceptable, but the conclusion (“the speaker has a Martian friend”) is hardly acceptable, as usually people maintain that Martians do not exist. Similarly, in (5), the conditional can be reconstructed, but normally height is not considered as leading to richness, and, therefore, the conclusion cannot be accepted.

The *possibility* of presupposing needs, therefore, to be distinguished from the *acceptability* of a proposition taken for granted. Not only does the hearer need to be able to derive the missing information from the semantic, syntactic, pragmatic, and discursive conditions that the predicates impose on their arguments, but the presuppositions also need not to conflict with what is commonly known and accepted, or with the propositions that the hearer knows to be true or acceptable. Both the reasoning and the conclusion of the reasoning need to be acceptable. As seen above, the process of reconstructing a presupposition consists of a chain of reasoning from the sentence structure; such reasoning may be grounded on three different types of principles of inference: (1) undefeasible rules of reasoning (if  $x$  is an object,  $x$  has a surface; if  $x$  studies, then  $x$  is a human being); (2) defeasible but commonly accepted propositions (if there is a party, then there are guests; if  $x$  is an adult, then  $x$  may have a car); (3) conditionals known to be false (if  $x$  studies, then  $x$  can be a dog). The same applies to the conclusions: Some propositions are definitional elements, and therefore true; others are simply accepted, while others are usually considered as unacceptable.

### 5.3 The Speech Act of Presupposing

By distinguishing the two dimensions of accommodation, possibility and acceptability, it is possible to distinguish between four different cases:

- i. The presupposition can be reconstructed and accepted as a background assumption.
- ii. The presupposition cannot be reconstructed.
- iii. The presupposition can be reconstructed, but the accommodation reasoning cannot be accepted.
- iv. The presupposition can be reconstructed, but it cannot be accepted.

These possibilities allow us to outline the possible felicity conditions of the speech act of presupposing, building on Austin’s and Searle and Vanderveken’s account of speech act conditions (Austin 1962, pp. 14–15; Searle and Vanderveken 1985, pp. 13–19; Macagno and Walton 2014, p. 179):

<i>Essential condition:</i>	Speaker ( <i>S</i> ) sets the presupposed proposition ( <i>pp</i> ) as a condition of the felicity of his speech act ( <i>SA</i> ); if Hearer ( <i>H</i> ) does not accept <i>pp</i> , <i>SA</i> will be void
<i>Propositional condition:</i>	<i>pp</i> is a proposition/fact/value/role that can be reconstructed by <i>H</i>
<i>Preparatory condition:</i>	<i>S</i> can presume that <i>H</i> can reconstruct and accept <i>pp</i>
<i>Sincerity condition:</i>	<i>S</i> believes that <i>pp</i> ; <i>S</i> believes that <i>H</i> can reconstruct and know or accept <i>pp</i>

This speech act, having a direction of fit from world (of the hearer) to words (of the speaker), is aimed at setting what the hearer needs to accept for the dialogue to continue. The possibility of reconstructing the presupposition is set as a propositional condition: *H* needs to be able to draw *pp* from the linguistic and pragmatic elements provided. The acceptability of the presupposition is expressed by both the preparatory and the sincerity condition. The sincerity condition expresses the conditions set out in the tradition of pragmatic presupposition as essential, while the preparatory condition, expressed in terms of presumption, is aimed at bridging the gap between the speaker’s and hearer’s mind from an epistemic and argumentative perspective, without resorting to the psychological notion of belief (Macagno and Walton 2014, Chap. 5).

This treatment of presupposition as a speech act of a kind can explain also the particular types of presupposition such as the Napoleon and Caesar cases mentioned above. In these cases, the speaker can presume (and believe) that the hearer can reconstruct the presuppositions; but at the same time, he presumes (and believes) that he cannot accept them. Ducrot described this phenomenon as a form of connotation, in which the utterance becomes a sign aimed at communicating the conditions of its use (see Ducrot 1968, p. 44). Interpreting this concept of connotation within the theory of speech acts, it is possible to analyze this particular use of presupposition as an indirect speech act, where the act setting out the conditions of a move needs to be interpreted as a type of assertive (Hickey 1993, p. 107).

The foundations and the dimensions of the speech act of presupposition raise another important problem, the *reasonableness* of speaker’s presupposition. In our epistemological analysis, we have only considered a sentence as a fact, and not as an act. If we analyze presuppositions as acts performed by a speaker, we need to find an answer to the crucial question, why and how can a speaker presuppose a proposition? Stalnaker, in his first definition, mentioned above, explained speaker’s presuppositions in terms of belief of knowledge. However, such an approach cannot explain why in some cases presupposing is reasonable, while in others it is absurd, manipulative, or ridiculous. A possible alternative can be developed from the analysis of presuppositions from an argumentative perspective. Instead of considering the concept of belief of the other party’s knowledge as the foundation of speaker’s presuppositions, we can conceive them as the outcome of a process of reasoning. On this perspective, the speaker can presuppose what it is reasonable to be considered as known: The reasonableness of presupposing depends on the reason supporting the fact that a premise *can* be shared.

## 6 Presuming Knowledge: Accommodation and Presumptive Reasoning

The conditions of the speech act of presupposition include two essential elements: The possibility of presupposing, which is grounded on the linguistic information provided, and the hearer's background knowledge, and its acceptability. These conditions present accommodation as a reasoning process that needs to be evaluated according to the hearer's knowledge. However, this account seems to fail to explain the crucial gap between the hearer's and the speaker's knowledge. How can the speaker predict that the hearer can reconstruct and accept a proposition? A possible answer lies in the preparatory condition, setting out that the speaker can *presume* that *H* can reconstruct and accept *pp*. This concept, partially hinted at by Strawson's presumption of knowledge (Strawson 1971, pp. 58–59; Kempson 1975, pp. 166–167), shifts the traditional psychological explanation onto an epistemic level. The speaker's *beliefs* of the hearer's acceptance or knowledge are replaced by a process of reasoning grounded on plausible premises, and presumptive reasoning. On this perspective, the hearer's possibility and acceptability of reconstructing a presupposition correspond to the speaker's possibility and reasonableness of presupposing. From the speaker's perspective, the fulfillment of the conditions of the speech act of presupposing depends on presumptive reasoning. In order to presuppose a proposition *pp*, the speaker presumes that the hearer knows or accepts *pp*. The epistemic presumption of knowledge or acceptance becomes the requirement for the linguistic act of setting the conditions of a move. In order to explain this reasoning process, it is necessary to introduce presumptive reasoning and the speech act of presumption.

### 6.1 *Presuppositions as Presumptive Reasoning*

Presupposition involves essentially a gap of knowledge, as the speaker cannot know the hearer's beliefs or values, or what he holds to be true. He can only conclude defeasibly (see Simons 2013) that he holds such knowledge, beliefs, values based on a form of guess, a pattern of reasoning in conditions of lack of knowledge that is called presumptive reasoning. Presumption can be considered as an inference with three components (Ullman-Margalit 1983, p. 147): (1) the presumption-raising fact in a particular case at issue, (2) the presumption formula, a defeasible rule that sanctions the passage from the presumed fact to the conclusion, (3) the conclusion is a proposition that is presumed to be true on the basis of (1) and (2). Rescher outlined the structure of this type of defeasible inference as follows (Rescher 2006, p. 33):

- Premise 1: *P* (the proposition representing the presumption) obtains whenever the condition *C* obtains unless and until the standard default proviso *D* (to the effect that countervailing evidence is at hand) obtains (Rule).
- Premise 2: Condition *C* obtains (Fact).
- Premise 3: Proviso *D* does not obtain (Exception).
- Conclusion: *P* obtains.

Premise 1 expresses the essential element of this pattern of reasoning, namely the rational principle supporting the conclusion (Ullman-Margalit 1983, p. 147), which “may be grounded on general experience or probability of any kind; or merely on policy and convenience” (Thayer 1898, p. 314).

Presuppositions can be based on four types of presumptions. Presumptions of the first type (Level 0—pragmatic presumptions) concern the pragmatic purpose of a speech act, connecting for instance an illocutionary force (assertion) with an intention (informing). The second type (Level 1—linguistic) refers to presumptions related to the knowledge of linguistic (or rather semantic–ontological) items and structure (called semantic presumptions). For instance, dictionary or shared meanings of lexical items are presumed to be known by the speakers of a language. Other presumptions (Level 2—factual, encyclopedic) are about encyclopedic knowledge, such as facts, common connection between events, or behaviors and habits. Finally, the third kind of presumptions includes information shared by the interlocutors, such as shared values or interests (Level 3). The levels of presumptions can be represented as given in Fig. 2.

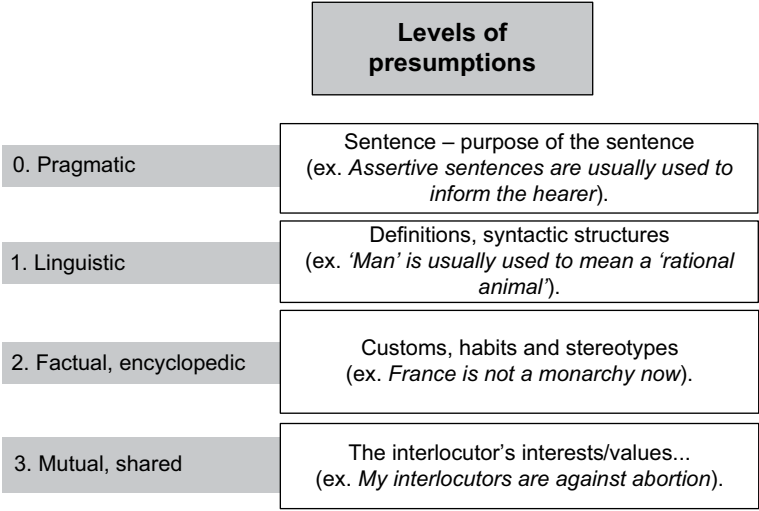


Fig. 2 Levels of presumptions



This analysis of presuppositions in terms of presumptive reasoning allows one to analyze presuppositional failures and the process of accommodation in terms of presumptive contradictions and possible resolutions of contradictory presumptive conclusions. For instance, we analyze the aforementioned sentence “Bob was at the party too” uttered in a context in which the hearer does not know who Bob is as follows:

Premise 1	<i>P (the Hearer is interested in the subject matter of a statement) obtains whenever the condition C (the Hearer is acquainted with the person the Speaker is talking about) obtains unless and until the standard default proviso D (he cannot remember him, etc.) obtains. (Rule)</i>
Premise 2	<i>Condition C (the Hearer is acquainted with Bob) CANNOT obtain (Speaker knows that Hearer does not know Bob, and people that do not know each other are presumed to continue to be strangers). (Fact)</i>
Premise 3	<i>Proviso D (the Hearer has problems of memory) does not obtain. (Exception)</i>
Conclusion	<i>P (the Hearer is interested in Bob) OBTAINS</i>

In this case, there is a conflict between a linguistic presumption (Level 1), namely, that the interlocutor knows the entity acting as a subject in the sentence, and a mutual one (Level 3), as the interlocutor cannot be presumed to be acquainted with Bob. The various levels of presumptions correspond to different levels at which presupposition can fail. We can take into consideration the other cases mentioned in Sect. 6:

3. My dog got an A in Math.
4. I have to pick up my Martian friend at the Voodoo club.
5. Bob is tall. Therefore he is really rich.

In 3, the speaker presumes at a semantic level (Level 1) that the subject (the dog) can learn Math, but at the same time he cannot presume (Level 2) that dogs can read or study. Similarly, in 4, the speaker linguistically presupposes (Level 1) that the Martians exist, but he cannot factually presume that Martians exist (Level 2). Finally, in 5, the clash is between two presumptions, one triggered by the semantic stricture of “therefore,” namely that tallness is a reason for a person’s fortune (Level 1), and a commonly known habit (Level 2) that tallness cannot be presumed to be a reason for being rich. Depending on the type of presumptive clash, the type of unreasonableness varies, resulting in impossible or unacceptable (to different extents) presuppositions. Evaluating the speaker’s reasoning allows one to understand the grounds of his unreasonableness, and to correct or challenge his act of presupposing by pointing out the premises that cannot be accepted.

## 6.2 The Dialectical Effects of Presuming Knowledge

The analysis of speaker’s presuppositions as the outcome of the speaker’s presumptive reasoning can help understand the effects of presupposition. From a dialectical

point of view, a presupposition carries the effects of a presumption. The hearer becomes committed to it, unless he challenges and rejects it (Walton 1993, 1999, p. 380; Hickey 1993, p. 108). The hearer needs to fulfill the burden of rebutting the epistemic presumption, which can be easily done by providing information about his own knowledge. Such positive evidence is often much stronger than the defaultive presumptive reasoning. However, the force of presupposing lies in a different effect of this act. As Kauffeld noticed, ordinary presumptions place on the interlocutor a specific burden, the “risk of resentment, criticism, reprobation, loss of esteem” in the event he or she does not accept a presumptive conclusion (Kauffeld 1998, p. 264). For instance, the risk of negative judgment is often associated with presumptions of knowledge or interest. In the cases above, the presuppositions were clearly conflicting with common knowledge. However, the effect of potential resentment can be understood from the example below. In this excerpt from Manzoni’s *I promessi sposi*, Father Cristoforo, in his earlier life a gentleman who became a friar after killing a man in self-defense, is invited by a powerful lord, Don Rodrigo, to judge a controversy between two guests on violence against messengers (Manzoni 2011):

“With your leave, gentlemen,” interrupted Don Rodrigo, who was afraid of the question being carried too far, “we will refer it to Father Cristoforo, and abide by his sentence.” [...] “But, from what I have heard,” said the Father, “these are matters I know nothing of.” “As usual, the modest excuses of the Fathers,” said Don Rodrigo; “but you shall not get off so easily. Come, now, *we know well enough* you did not come into the world with a cowl on your head, and *that you are no stranger to its ways*. See here; this is the question...”

Don Rodrigo presupposes the fact that Father Cristoforo knows the ways of the world pretty well and, in particular, acts of violence. Such a presupposition would be hardly acceptable by Father Cristoforo. However, the burden of rejecting is increased by the fact that it is presented as shared by everybody. Often, definitions and facts are presupposed even though not shared; however, the presumptive reasoning presents them as accepted by everybody, and the possibility of challenging them is hindered by the shame of being unaware of what everyone knows.

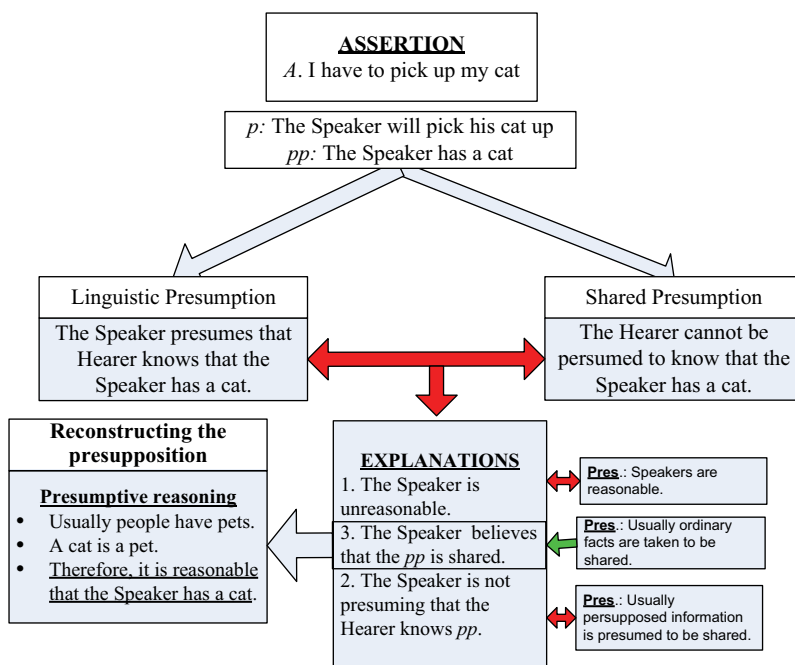
## 7 Accommodation as Reasoning from Best Explanation

A presuppositional failure can be accommodated by discarding one of the clashing presumptions and reconstructing the unshared presupposition by finding the best possible explanation (Macagno 2012). For instance, in case 2 above,

2. I can’t come to the meeting—I have to pick up my cat at the veterinarian

it is possible to find the best possible explanation on the basis of presumptions concerning ordinary habits. The process of reconstruction can be represented as in figure 3 (see Fig. 3).

In this case, the presupposition can be reasonably reconstructed, as it is possible to find a possible explanation. The clashing presumptions made by the speaker are of a linguistic nature (the topic of a sentence is presupposed to be shared) and



**Fig. 3** Reconstructing presuppositions—best explanation

mutual (the speaker never informed the hearer that he owns a cat, and the hearer cannot be presumed to know it). However, this apparent unreasonableness can be explained by taking into account the possible explanations of the speaker's contradictory presumptive lines of reasoning. The hearer can explain speaker's behavior by discarding the weakest presumption, namely that the hearer cannot be presumed to share the presupposed piece of information. He can explain this rejection of a shared presumption based on another, factual, presumption, namely that people usually have pets. For this reason, the hearer can be presumed to be able to retrieve the piece of information taken for granted based on a shared principle of presumption. By contrast, in the aforementioned cases, 3, 4, and 5, it is impossible to explain that the speaker is presuming that the presupposed information is shared, and for this reason, the assertion is potentially infelicitous.

A presuppositional failure can lead to a more complex process of explanation, in which the communicative intention is reconstructed in order to avoid a communicative failure. In performing a speech act, the speaker acts on the basis of a conflict of presumptions that cannot be solved by resorting to another presumption, as depicted in 2. Instead, the outcome of this clash is an apparent communicative failure. For instance, we consider the following cases:

6. I will park my Bentley and I will come to your place.
7. Next month I will be moving to my boyfriend's place.

These assertions, made in a context in which the hearer does not know that the speaker owns a Bentley or has a boyfriend, can be considered as a kind of indirect speech acts (Ducrot 1966, p. 42), where a conflict of presumptions is solved by rejecting a linguistic presumption that affects the whole presumptive pragmatic interpretation of the utterance (the speaker intends to inform the hearer of the explicit content of his assertion—the “*posē*”), while maintaining the shared presumption. We represent the process of reconstructing the failing presupposition as given in Fig. 4.

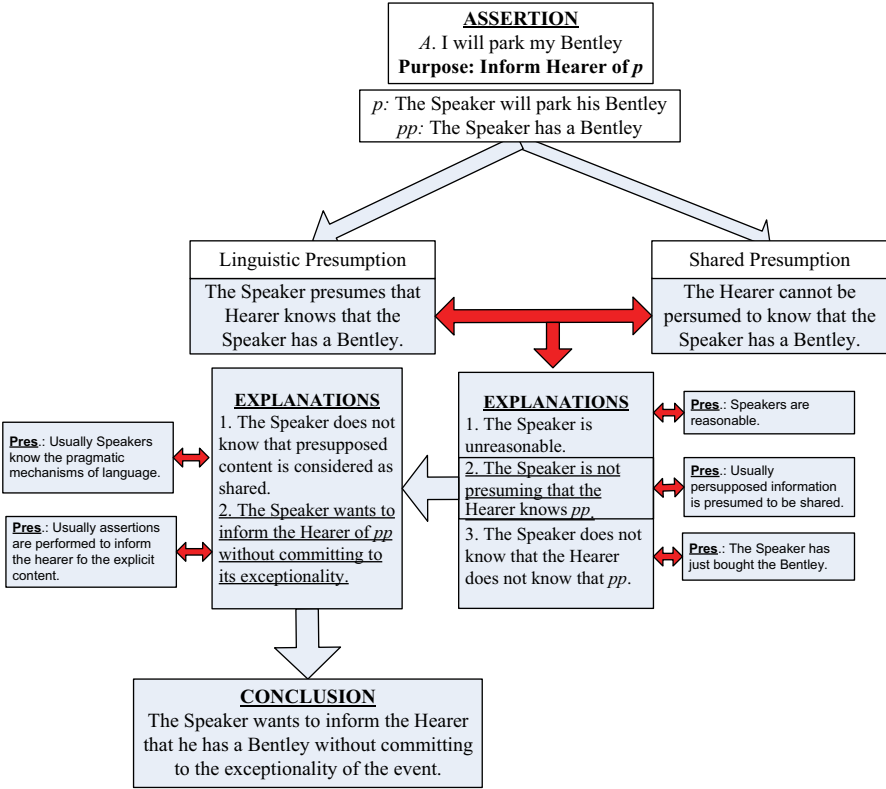


Fig. 4 Accommodation as best explanation

Here, the conflict of presumptions cannot be solved by discarding the apparently weaker one, namely the shared presumption. The speaker’s owning of a Bentley cannot be presumed to be shared by the hearer (shared level), nor are expensive cars presumed to be owned by everyone (factual level). For this reason, the only possibility is to reject the pragmatic presumption, which amounts to interpret the utterance differently from its ordinary and presumptive meaning (for the interplay between the sentence level and the interpretation of the illocutionary force of a speech act, see Capone 2005). The topic is not presumed to be shared; instead, it becomes part of the informative content of the utterance. This explanatory process leads to a

reinterpretation of the purpose of the speech act: The speaker intends to inform the hearer of a state of affairs without committing to its exceptionality.

A presuppositional failure can lead also to the re-interpretation of the explicit meaning of an utterance. A conflict of presumptions can be resolved by re-interpreting the propositional meaning of the content of the speech act, such as in the following famous case from Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (Carroll 2010, p. 55):

"So here's a question for you. How old did you say you were?"

Alice made a short calculation, and said "Seven years and six months."

"Wrong!" Humpty Dumpty exclaimed triumphantly. "You never said a word like it!"

"I thought you meant 'How old *are* you?'" Alice explained.

"If I'd meant that, I'd have said it," said Humpty Dumpty.

Humpty Dumpty could not be presumed not to know that he never asked Alice her age. For this reason, he could not presume that Alice knew that she told Humpty Dumpty her age before. Alice solves this unreasonableness by reconstructing the explicit presumptive meaning of the interrogative act by intending it as a question requesting Alice's age. Unfortunately, for Alice, Humpty Dumpty cannot be presumed to be reasonable overall, and her tentative to avoid a communicative breach failed. After all, the reasonableness of the interlocutor is just a presumption, the strongest one in communication, but still a presumption subject to default.

## 8 Conclusion

Presuppositions can be conceived as implicit speech acts, triggered at the level of the sentence, the relation between sentences, and discourse. Presuppositions are triggered by linguistic items and structures and by the pragmatic purpose of the utterance, and constitute the conditions of a possible continuation of a dialogue. Presuppositions are pragmatically considered as the conditions of the felicity of a speech act, or discourse move. However, the decision of setting the conditions of a move, which the hearer needs to accept in order to continue the dialogue, can be thought of as a speech act of a kind. The act of presupposing depends on specific conditions, and, in particular, on the possibility of the hearer to reconstruct and accept the propositional content. For this reason, the pragmatic conditions lead to problems that fall apparently into the domain of psychology: How can the speaker know that the hearer can reconstruct and accept a presupposition?

The solution that is presented in this chapter is based on presumptive reasoning. Instead of analyzing presuppositions in terms of mental states, it is possible to conceive them as the conclusion of reasoning in lack of evidence. The speaker can only reason and act *in ignorance* of the interlocutor's knowledge. He advances a tentative conclusion about what the hearer may accept, hold, or know based on factual, linguistic, and epistemic rules of presumption. Such reasoning is defeasible, and can be reasonable or unreasonable, depending on the nature of the premises it is grounded on. For this reason, the act of presupposing can be assessed and challenged by evaluating and rejecting the premises on which it is based. The idea of presumptive

reasoning as the basis of the act of presupposing can also account for the dialogical effects of presuppositions. Just like presumptions carry a burden of proof, presuppositions have the effect of committing the hearer unless he rejects them. However, presuppositions carry also another type of burden, the pretense of proceeding from what everybody knows. For this reason, sometimes the act of presupposing places on the interlocutor also a different burden, the risk of resentment or criticism.

The analysis of presupposition in terms of the patterns of the presumptive reasoning underlying them allows one to investigate the process of accommodation as a type of reasoning from best explanation, in which one of the contradictory presumptive principles needs to be discarded. The rejection of one of the terms of the contradiction leads to a process of reinterpretation, or rather of further explanation. This explanation of the speaker's intention can result in reinterpreting the whole pragmatic purpose of the utterance, leading to considering an apparently infelicitous utterance an indirect speech act.

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