

In Hovdhaugen (Ed.) *Papers from the Second Scandinavian Conference of Linguistics*, University of Oslo, Dept of Linguistics, pp.1-14, 1975.

CONVENTIONAL AND NON-CONVENTIONAL PRESUPPOSITION

Jens Allwood
Department of Linguistics, University of Göteborg

Presuppositions are very important in our understanding of how background and context determine the interpretation of a sentence. However, if we study some of the things that have been claimed to be presuppositions, we find that it is a very miscellaneous collection of things.

Here are some examples:

(1) *Harry saw the man kiss her*

presupposes that *Harry* and *the man* denote uniquely existing, for the listener, identifiable, individuals and that *her* denotes a uniquely existing known female anaphoric referent.

(2) *Harry stopped growing apples*

presupposes that somebody (Harry) grew apples before. we can see that it should be somebody rather than Harry if we consider the following case. They have always grown apples at the farm. However, when Harry bought it he stopped growing apples.

(3) *Hegel didn't know that there are seven planets*

presupposes that there are seven planets.

(4) *Harry boasted to have kissed Elizabeth*

presupposes that kissing Elizabeth is evaluated positively.

(5) *Harry deprived John of the apples*

presupposes that John's not getting any apples is evaluated negatively.

(6) *Harry kissed the girl again*

presupposes that someone kissed the girl before.

(7) *Harry loves Betty too*

presupposes that something similar to Harry's loving Betty has occurred in the preceding discourse.

(8) *Bill was very big*

presupposes that we have established a universe of comparison for big.

(9) *Open the door*

presupposes that the speaker wants the door opened, that the listener is able to open the door and that the door is closed.

(10) *Unfortunately it's raining*

presupposes that it in fact is raining.

(11) *Bill ordered Harry to pick apples*

presupposes that Bill has higher social status than Harry.

(12) *Kannst Du die Tür öffnen?*

presupposes that the speaker has an informal solidarity relationship to the listener.

As we see a miscellaneous bunch of things have been called presuppositions. There have been two strategies to characterize a more precise notion of presupposition that would capture some or all of the things that have been called presupposition. We can call them the semantic strategy and the pragmatic strategy, respectively.

The semantic strategy has defined presupposition either 1) in terms of semantic components of the Katz, Fodor, Postal type (an approach I will not discuss but which leads to difficulties).¹ or 2) in terms of truthvalues and entailment.

Here a sentence or proposition is said to presuppose another sentence (proposition) iff both the sentence and its negation entail the presupposed sentence (proposition). In other words the truth of the presupposed sentence (proposition) is a precondition for the assignment of a t-value to the presupposing sentence.

The pragmatic strategy defines presupposition in terms of speaker's beliefs and/or felicity conditions.

Either 1) A sentence (proposition) presupposes another sentence (proposition) iff that sentence (proposition) expresses a condition necessary for the felicitous utterance of the presupposing sentence. (Here of course, felicity remains to be defined.)

Or 2) A speaker presupposes a sentence (Proposition) p iff the happy utterance of a certain sentence s requires the speaker to believe the presupposed sentence (proposition) p.

The second pragmatic definition shifts the locus from a sentence to the beliefs of a speaker but otherwise 2) can be viewed as singling out those felicity conditions mentioned in 1) which involve the speaker's beliefs.

If we return to the semantic characterization of presupposition this leads to problems mainly in two areas:

(i) The notion of entailment either has to be redefined or presupposition has to be viewed as an independent logical notion not definable in terms of entailment.

The reason for this can in a simplified manner be given thus: It's part of our standard classical conception of entailment that if A entails B then $\sim B$ entails $\sim A$.

Now in the case of presupposition we are told that A presupposes B but $\sim B$ entails no truth value for A. In other words either we have a new relation of entailment or if we prefer the classical notion of entailment then we have in presupposition a new primitive non-defined logical concept.

(ii) The other problem with this definition of presupposition is that it is hard to find any clear unquestionable cases of presupposition in this sense.

For instance, let us study some of the examples given above. Both (6a) *Harry kissed the girl again* and (6b) *Harry didn't kiss the girl again* presuppose that someone kissed the girl before.

However, imagine a situation where we are all very well aware of the fact that Harry is kissing the girl now and strongly suspect that he never kissed her before. It's now possible to utter (6b) expressly for the purpose of denying what is normally presupposed by the sentence. This becomes even clearer if a modifying clause is added like in (6c)

(6c) *Harry didn't kiss the girl again although he kissed her now*

Or suppose we are debating the question of what Hegel really knew and say:

(3b) *One thing is for sure, Hegel didn't know that there are seven planets*

All of us being well aware that this was one of Hegel's most preposterous claims and that it is patently false that there are only seven planets. I think similar counterexamples can be produced to show that if the semantic definition of presupposition is followed, hardly any of the cases, we want to call presupposition would be captured.

The criteria of the semantic definition are too stringent and possibly also incoherent. The semantic definition is in any case too narrow. Let us therefore consider the pragmatic definition, which if anything, has the opposite fault of letting everything in - i.e. the fault of being too wide.

¹ See Cooper (1974) P.

More specifically, the pragmatic definition does not capture the intuition that in what we could call the normal case presuppositions remain constant under negation, i.e. why normally, we believe that Harry kissed the girl before, both when we say: *Harry kissed the girl again* and: *Harry didn't kiss the girl again*.

I would like to attempt a pragmatic explanation of this phenomenon along the following lines: Let us consider cases of deception. First we should note that there is a distinction to be made between what a speaker really believes and what he acts as if he believes.

If I say: *It's snowing*, while believing it's not, I have acted as if I believed that it's snowing even though I do not.

If I say: *The pope is outside*, I have acted as though I could identify a person who could be characterized as the pope, even though I might in fact not be able to identify such a person.

So, clearly I can deceive both by not believing what I assert (lie) and by not believing what I seem to presuppose. Further, deception is hard to imagine if it is not tied to

- 1) either behavior with a certain conventional meaning or
- 2) behavior which is naturally or rationally connected with a certain purpose.

On the basis of this characterization of deception I would like to go on and distinguish between:

- (i) beliefs or attitudes which a person actually has
- (ii) beliefs or attitudes he exhibits through
 - a) a conventional connection between his beliefs or attitudes and certain behavior
 - b) possible rational extrapolations about his beliefs and attitudes from traits in his behavior
 - c) through a natural connection between his beliefs or attitudes and his behavior.

A person can always actually believe what his behavior exhibits him as believing, but does not have to. Using this analysis, I would like to distinguish between five different types of presuppositions:

- 1) The speaker's actual beliefs - the actual speaker presupposition
- 2) The listener's actual beliefs - the actual listener presupposition

(We can here distinguish any number of relations back and forth between speaker's and listener's beliefs, i.e. what the speaker takes the listener to believe, what the listener takes the speaker to believe, or what the speaker takes the listener to believe that the speaker believes ad infinitum in the usual Gricean manner.²

- 3) Exhibited conventional presupposition.
- 4) Exhibited rational presupposition.
- 5) Exhibited natural presupposition.

The three last types of presupposition can be further broken down into speaker's and listener's beliefs about exhibited presuppositions. This in turn can be extended reflexively, like above, in the Gricean way. Finally, all five types of presupposition, in as far as they involve speaker's and listener's beliefs, can be subdivided according to whether the beliefs are conscious or subconscious. However, for the analysis in this paper it will be sufficient to distinguish the five above mentioned types.

Since the two first types of presupposition should be self-explanatory, I will only exemplify the three last types below.

A conventional presupposition would be:

John hit Bill again
presupposes that *John hit Bill before*.

A rational presupposition would be that the request *Can you come?* presupposes that I want you to come, and finally, by a natural presupposition I would mean that my uttering *Give me a cup of coffee* with a New York accent, would presuppose my being from New York.

² Grice (1957)

I now want to claim that the distinction between exhibited and actual presuppositions is what is behind the conflict between semantic and pragmatic presupposition. Those who want to characterize presupposition as pragmatic are interested in the actual presuppositions of speakers and listeners while those who are interested in characterizing it as semantic are interested in exhibited presuppositions and especially in those exhibited presuppositions which I have called conventional.

There seem to be at least two interesting types of conventional presupposition.

- 1) Presuppositions tied to lexical items, which I will call lexical presuppositions.
- 2) Presuppositions tied to conventional means for marking the information structure of a sentence, i.e. such conventional linguistic means are word order, intonation or duration to mark the topic comment and focus of a sentence. I call these presuppositions thematic presuppositions.

We will now use these distinctions in order to see if we can give an explanation of the intuitions behind the semantic account of presupposition. Let us consider the sentence

(13) *John kissed Mary again.*

In order to analyze this sentence, at least, the following types of presupposition seem to be relevant (i) the actual presuppositions of speaker and listener and (ii) the lexical and thematic presuppositions which are conventionally exhibited in the utterance of the sentence. In addition, I want to claim, that we must consider so called conversational principles of the type H.P. Grice has made widely known.³

We start our explanation by considering the meaning of *again*. The meaning of *again* I think can be given in the following fashion:

Again means that some event, describable by a -abstraction over the sentence *again* modifies is at least the second event in a sequence describable in such a way.

A conversational principle, like Grice's maxim of quality⁴ then tells us that we normally should have sufficient evidence for that which we state.

Good evidence for asserting that a second instantiation of some event has taken place would be to have knowledge of at least one preceding instantiation of that same event. Thus the maxim of quality in conjunction with the meaning of *again* create what we could call the lexical presupposition of *again*, i.e. that whenever some state of affairs is asserted to obtain again, it can be taken for granted or presupposed that a similarly describable state of affairs has already obtained.

I would now like to make some remarks on how lexical presupposition as I have described it interacts with the thematic organization of the information in a sentence.

(i) The presuppositions of an assertion are usually shared by speaker and listener. To some extent, this is so, because assertions are meant to convey information effectively and rationally.

(ii) Transfer of information seems to be effective if new information can be alternated with old information in such a way that the new information is anchored in the old information. Reasons for this are our limited capacity for transferral of information and that interpersonal influence seems to be more easily achieved and effected this way.

(iii) The new information is asserted and held out to the listener for consideration on the basis of what is already known. The point of an assertion is usually the new information, (politeness and phatic communion aside) not the already known information. From the point of view of effective transferral of information, it is pointless to present the listener again with such information.

(iv) The speaker can indicate to the listener what he takes to be the new and old information of a sentence through intonation, stress, wordorder and special morphemes (japanese, *ga*, and *wa*) . A sentence need not be bipartioned in this way but can be asserted as a whole as new information.

³ Grice (1967)

⁴ Grice holds the maxim of quality to involve two more specific maxims (i) Do not say what you believe to be false (ii) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. (Grice (1967), p, 46).

The latter case I think is the normal way of interpreting an assertion of a sentence with *again* uttered without extra focal stress. A sentence modified by *again* asserts that the event described by the sentence is occurring for at least the second time.

The thematic presupposition viz. that the event has occurred before, will in this case be identical with the lexical presupposition produced by the maxim of quality. In addition if the speaker is non-deceptive, i.e. is following another of the ramifications of the maxim of quality, he will believe that there, in fact, has occurred a preceding kissing event.⁵ Further, he will normally follow the maxim of relevance and therefore believe the listener to believe this as well.

In order to have an analysis of what motivated the semantic account of presupposition we only have to add a few words about negation. Negation is an operator that normally operates on what is asserted by a sentence, i.e. the comment or focus of the unnegated sentence.

To give a partial explanation of the way negation functions, the maxim of relevance proves useful once more. The unasserted old information is usually known and shared by both speaker and listener. The relevant job for negation will, therefore, be to deny the new information asserted, leaving the old information which has already been taken for granted by both speaker and listener alone. Thus we are able to understand the fact that presuppositions remain constant under negation, as a result of a rather complex interplay between conversational principles, thematic organization lexical meaning and grammatical construction.

We see that the semantic definition of presupposition is the codification of what appears as a mere symptom, when a more thorough analysis of presupposition is given.

After this account of what I take to be the normal case of somebody's asserting *John kissed Mary again*, I want to consider three cases of what happens when we change some of the factors, I took to be true of the normal case.

(i) The speaker does not actually believe what he through choice of lexical items, grammatical construction, thematic organization and conversational principles has indicated that he believes. This is the case of lying or deception. Notice here again the possibility of presuppositional irony, as when both the speaker and listener know that what the speaker can be taken to presuppose is obviously false. Consider an example. (14) *The philosopher on the throne of Sweden has asked to be left alone by the press.*

(ii) Both the speaker and listener believe a certain proposition, but the speaker suspects the listener is not aware of some fact which is relevant for this proposition. E.g. the speaker and listener are watching John kiss Mary, but the speaker does not believe the listener also knows that John has kissed Mary before. The speaker wants to inform the listener of this, so he says: *There, John is kissing Mary again*, with extra focal stress on *again*, thereby effecting a thematic reorganization of the sentence. Part of what was before asserted is now indicated, to be part of the already shared presupposed background, i.e. here the knowledge that John is kissing Mary now.

Through the evidence at hand and the stress on *again* which asserts the repeated status of the event they are witnessing the speaker conveys to the listener that he has evidence that the event has occurred before. In this situation what would normally be taken for granted; through thematic reorganization and context is turned into the relevant new information.

(iii) Let's now imagine a situation similar to the preceding one, except that the speaker and listener disagree about whether they are witnessing the first case of John's kissing Mary or not. The speaker does not think there has been a preceding kissing-event and wants to bring this out by saying: (15) *I am sure, John didn't kiss Mary again.*⁶) Since negation is tied to focus, the repeated status of the event the speaker and listener are witnessing, is denied. The listener's attention is thus directed to facts not shared by speaker and listener. Facts that would make it impossible that the event was occurring for the second time. In this case, the speaker's evidence of a preceding kissing event, would constitute a very plausible such fact for the listener.

⁵ Following Kant, Grice calls this the maxim of relation and states it "r tersely" as "Be relevant". (Grice (1967). p. 46).

⁶ Giving both *didn't* and *again* extra focal stress.

To summarize: I hope to have thrown some light on the rather complex interrelations between actual speaker and listener presupposition, thematic organization, conversational maxims, grammatical structure and lexical meaning.

Briefly one can say that the speaker's actual presuppositions govern the thematic organization of a sentence. By various conventional means such as word order, intonation, stress and special morphemes the speaker then indicates to the listener what is to be thematically presupposed. Lexical presuppositions, on the other hand, are a joint product of lexical meaning and conversational principles and thus determined by both convention and reason.

In normal speech actual, lexical and thematic presuppositions all reinforce each other to bring about effective transferral of information from speaker to listener. However, as we have seen, they can be at variance with each other and it is my contention, that some interesting things can be learned by studying what happens when they are.

REFERENCES

- Allwood (1972): "Negation and the Strength of Presuppositions". *Logical Grammar Reports*. Avd för lingvistik, Göteborgs Universitet.
- Allwood, J. (1973); "Truth, Appropriateness and Focus" in Dahl (1974) *Topic, Comment, Contextual Boundness and Focus*. Helmut Buske.
- Cooper (1974): *Presupposition*. Mouton.
- Grice (1957): "Meaning" in Steinberg and Jakobovits, (1971) *Semantics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Grice, (1967): "Logic and Conversation" in Cole and Morgan (1975), *Syntax and Semantics III*. Academic Press.
- Lewis (1969): *Convention*. Harvard University Press.