M10 Presupposition

Course in Semantics · Ling 531 / 731
McKenzie · University of Kansas

1   The nature of presupposition

We can use the term *secondary proposition* to describe an unexpressed proposition that is linked truth-conditionally to an expressed one.

A **presupposition** is a secondary proposition that primary proposition's truth-value depends upon.

For instance, take Bertrand Russell's classic sentence: *The King of France is bald.* Uttered about the present, is its proposition true?

  (1)   No, because the facts of the world do not support it.

So, if it isn't true, then it is false, right? Not so fast! If it is false, then its contradiction is true. We can easily get the contradiction of most sentences with sentential negation.

  (2)   It is false that {the King of France is bald},
  (3)   Therefore it is true that {the King of France is not bald}

Well now, wait. It also is not true that the King of France is not bald. So we have a proposition that is not true, yet neither is its contradiction. We conclude that the interpretation fails to result in a truth-value at all, resulting in **nonsense**.

The reason for this failure is a presupposition, which any ordinary person can ascertain with a little world-knowledge: The proposition cannot be true *or false* because there is no King of France.

  (4)   The King of France is bald *presupposes that*
        There is a King of France

Even at a more prosaic level, natural language is replete with presuppositions.

  (5)   *Brodie stole my car.* $\overleftarrow{pr}$ I have a car
                                 Brodie exists
  (6)   *Tom took the sandwich and ate it.* $\overleftarrow{pr}$ There is a unique sandwich
                                            Tom exists

Presuppositions are typically triggered by specific types of expressions, called **presupposition triggers**. See the lecturelet on those.

2 Distinction from entailments

Students often confuse presuppositions with entailments, because both of them have to be true if the primary proposition is true.

We can think metaphorically of presuppositions as coming *before* the proposition, and entailments as coming after. And there are clear, testable distinctions:

(7) If the primary proposition is false a presupposition must still be true, while an entailment can be false or true.

(8)   a. If the entailment is false, the primary proposition is *either* true or false.

     b. If the presupposition is false, the primary proposition is *neither* true nor false.

(9) Presuppositions still hold even underneath operators that eliminate entailments, like negation or *if*-clauses.

(10) *I did not eat the red sandwich* still presupposes there is a unique red sandwich in the context

(11) *If anyone ate the red sandwich, I would be devastated*.

3 Pragmatic presupposition

We've seen the presupposition's effect on truth. But it can also have an effect on felicity.

Take for instance *My dog is sick*. Let's assume that I have a single dog. *My dog* presupposes that I have a single dog, so in that case, the presupposition holds.

But let's say you don't know I have a dog. The presupposition supports the truth of the proposition, but it's still infelicitous (inappropriate for the context). Another feature of presuppositions is that they need to be in the **common ground** of all the speech act's participants.

When confronted with a presupposition that is not in the common ground, listeners can reject it, or **accommodate** it. When accommodating a presupposition, the listener makes a small update to their world knowledge that allows the propsition