

LINGUISTIC PRESUPPOSITION AS A PRAGMATIC PROBLEM

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ABSTRACT

Presupposition has long history in philosophy of language and linguistic semantics. Recent works in linguistics have given a central place to the notion of presupposition. It is studied as an essential aspect in providing semantic as well as pragmatic representations. Resultantly, presupposition has obtained a significant place in linguist's, logician's and philosopher's spheres of interest. It has been studied as a kind of unspoken information that accompanies an utterance. Moreover, presuppositions perform a significant role in our understanding of how context and background determine proper interpretation of any utterance. They are studied as conditions which must be fulfilled for an expression to be interpreted meaningfully.

Keywords: *Presupposition, Logic, Pragmatics, Implicature, Speech Acts, Inference, Assertion*

INTRODUCTION

In everyday sense, to presuppose something is to assume something or to take it for granted in advance without saying it. Levinson (1983) points out that there are significant distinctions between the ordinary usages of the term „presupposition' and its technical usage in the field of linguistics. He provides some examples that distinguish these two usages of the term:

1. Effects presuppose causes
2. John wrote Harry a letter, presupposing he could read
3. John said “Harry is so competent,” presupposing that we know Harry had fouled things up – in fact we didn't know and so failed to realize that he was being ironic
4. Harry asked Bill to close the door, presupposing that Bill had left it open as usual; he hadn't so he threw a chair at Harry
5. Adolph addresses the butler as “Sir”, presupposing that he was the host Sir Ansel himself
6. The theory of evolution presupposes a vast time-scale
7. The article by Jackendoff presupposes Chomsky's theory of nominalizations (1983:168). In the above examples, ordinary notion of presupposition is used to narrate background assumptions which make the utterances meaningful. On the other hand, technical usage of presupposition refers to certain inferences built onto linguistic expressions.

Main body

Presupposition has its roots in philosophy. The notion of presupposition can be traced back to Aristotle. As Beaver states, Aristotle explains the similar concept in the following extract quoted from „Categories’:

For manifestly, if Socrates exists, one of the two propositions “Socrates is ill”, „Socrates is not ill’ is true, and the other false. This is likewise the case if he does not exist; for if he does not exist, to say that he is ill is false, and to say that he is not ill is true.

In other words, Aristotle treats propositions as having truth value in terms of truth and falsity which is not distinct from the theories either of Frege or Strawson. Beaver further refers to Horn’s view that it is the medieval philosopher Petrus Hispanus, who first introduced the notion of presupposition. In the final part of his work “Summulae Logicales”, Hispanus uses the terms such as “presupponit” for presupposition and “denotat” for assertion. The following extract is taken from Hispanus, a translated version, as quoted in Beaver: We now discuss reduplicative signs. Reduplicative signs are those which imply the reason according to which something is attributed to another, as “insofar as”, “according as”, “by reason of the fact that” and so on ... A reduplicative word presupposes [presupponit] a certain predicate to be in a certain subject and denotes [denotat] that to which it is immediately attached is the cause of that inheritance.

This is the first ever reference of presupposition in relation to discourse connectives. In addition, it deals with the primary distinction between presupposition and assertion. According to Lindberg, the notion of presupposition is borrowed from philosophy into linguistics and has been used to illustrate the importance of context for the generation of sentences. He states that presupposition consists of:

(a) Features from the speaker’s perception of the present situation

(b) Possible associations connecting (a) with features in his long term and short term memories. In modern times, most significant among the philosophers who influenced the theories of presupposition are Frege, Russell and Strawson. However, Richard Garner mentions that the difference between philosopher’s talk about presupposition and that of linguist is of “the matter of what it is that is said to do the presupposing”. In fact, philosophers have their own abstract views, somewhat contrasting with those of linguists, who deal with presuppositions of words, utterances and sentences.

Logical presuppositions bear on the truth conditions of sentences, whereas, pragmatic presuppositions arise out of some extra-grammatical components. In contrast to logical notion of presupposition, pragmatic accounts have sought to define presupposition in terms of felicity conditions and context or common ground. In conclusion of his article, Strawson (1950) says: Neither Aristotelian nor Russellian

rules give the exact logic of any expression in ordinary language; for ordinary language has no exact logic (Strawson 1950, in Levinson 1983:175n).

Presupposition and Third Truth Value: In truth conditional semantics, pragmatics as well as traditional logic, it is practical assumption that each sentence is either true or false. As Keith Allen points out: In traditional systems of logic, truth is bivalent, i.e., there are only two values possible: any proposition P is either true or else it is false (2001:183). However, according to Allwood et al., the negation of a sentence is true whenever the sentence is false. Consider the following example from Allwood et al.: Have you stopped beating your wife? (1977:149). The above question would have the following possible answers: 1. Yes, I have stopped beating my wife. 2. No, I have not stopped beating my wife. The answer 2 appears to be the negation of answer 1. If 1 is not true, 2 ought to be true. But a person, who never beats his wife, cannot answer either. If he answers, it commits him to having beaten his wife. Statements 1 and 2 in such case are neither true nor false. In other words, these answers have no truth-value. To have a truth-value, these sentences should fulfill a condition that the speaker must have beaten his wife at some time or the other. In addition to true and false, a sentence may have a third truth value called „Zero’. Keenan (1971:46) calls it as „nonsense value’. Allwood et al define the Third Truth Value as follows: If both a sentence p and its negation $\sim p$ can only be true, when q is true, p presupposes q (1977:150). A sentence with unfulfilled presuppositions would then have the truth value zero. In such an analysis, presupposition is treated as a condition for a sentence to have a truth value. It follows that a sentence and its negation always have the same presuppositions.

Presupposition and Inference: Pragmatics is concerned with study of meaning that involves making of inferences. Presupposition is such a kind of pragmatic inference. Inferences are rule governed steps from certain premises or propositions, to another proposition, called conclusion. There are two kinds of inference: deductive and inductive. Encyclopedia Britannica defines these two inferences as follows. A deductive inference is: A type of inference or argument that purports to be valid, where a valid argument is one whose conclusion must be true if its premises are true (2009). An inductive inference is: A type of nonvalid inference or argument in which the premises provide some reason for believing that the conclusion is true.

Out of these two, inductive inference is defeasible. It shares certain qualities with presupposition. It can be illustrated with the following example: Martha avoided quarrelling with Sam. One can draw the following inferences from the above utterance: a. Martha did not quarrel with Sam. b. Martha tried to avoid quarrelling with Sam. Now consider the negation of the same utterance: Martha did not avoid quarrelling with Sam. The above negation survives the inference (b); however, inference (a) is cancelled.

Presupposition and Assertion: Relationship between presupposition and assertion can be shown as it is new information that is asserted and it is old information that is

presupposed. In other words, what is asserted in an utterance is new to the addressee and what is presupposed is familiar or part of the common ground to addresser and addressee. In short, presupposition is a proposition that follows from a statement. Fundamental difference between presupposition and assertion is that of status. As Frege (1979) mentions, a sentence has a truth-value only if its presuppositions are satisfied. Frege is of the opinion that presupposition and assertion differ in status. Regarding the distinction between presupposition and assertion, Lambrecht has given an explicit statement: Let us refer to the „old information’ contained in, or evoked by, a sentence as the PRAGMATIC PRESUPPOSITION (or simply the PRESUPPOSITION) and let us refer to the „new information’ expressed or conveyed by the sentence as the PRAGMATIC ASSERTION (or simply the ASSERTION) (1994:52).

Any assertion does not come about if the presuppositions are not fulfilled, because only sentences with a truth-value can be the objects of an assertion. The distinction between assertion and presupposition is clarified by Heim and Kratzer with the following examples: A. John is absent again today. B. Today is not the first time that John is absent. C. John is absent today, and that has happened before. (1998:77). The above statements A, B and C indicate that the speaker believes that (i) John is absent today and (ii) John has been absent before. However, they assume different knowledge on the part of the hearer. If the hearer knows that John has been absent before but doesn’t know that John is absent today then A is appropriate but B is not. Statement A presupposes that John has been absent before and it asserts that he is absent today. On the other hand, if the hearer knows that John is absent today but does not know that John has been absent before, then B is appropriate but A is not. Statement B presupposes that John is absent today and asserts that he has been absent before. After that, if the hearer does not know that John is absent today and also does not know that he has been absent before, then C is appropriate but not the other two. Statement C does not presuppose the knowledge of John’s absence today or previous absences and instead, asserts both that he is absent today and that he has been absent before. Presupposition as Common Ground: Barbara Abbott (2000: 1419:1437) states that, Stalnaker and Karttunen initiated the view that the grammatical concept of presupposition can be assimilated to the pragmatic concept of background information, shared knowledge or the common ground. She argues that presuppositions are non-asserted propositions conveyed by an utterance, propositions which are of necessity conveyed but which are not intended by the speaker to be part of the main point. Presuppositions arise by virtue of the facts that there is a preference for an utterance to have a single main point and that the expression of any thought involves expressions of many atomic presuppositions. Stalnaker (1978) states that presupposition is what are taken by the speaker to be the „common ground’ or „mutual knowledge’ between

speaker and hearer. The recognition that the familiar or old information and parts that are new, gives birth to common ground view of presuppositions.

Presupposition and Syntax: Presupposition has been treated as pragmatic and logical concept. However, Bickerton (1979:235) suggests that presuppositions arise because of certain syntactic facts. Gazdar claims that the potential presuppositions of a sentence emphasize the role of syntactic features. He states: In terms of their components and constructions as if potential presuppositions were something given to us by the lexicon and the syntax, but I do this without prejudice to the possibility of some future general explanation as to why these lexical and syntactic sources of presupposition are such (1976:188). Here Gazdar envisages a general kind of explanation of how presuppositions are indeed given by the nature of syntax. Levinson (1983:207) states that Karttunen and Peters (1975, 1979) devised a conventional theory in the framework of the 'Montague Grammar.' The theory advocates that the clauses are built up from their components from the bottom up rather than the top down as in transformational generative grammar. Semantic content of an expression is built up together with syntax in such theory. As a result, the meaning expressions are associated with words, clauses and constructions- what we call them as presupposition triggers. Levinson states: As for presupposition, since many kinds of presupposition triggers seem to be essentially syntactic (e.g. clefts) or to have syntactic consequences (e.g. factives) there seem to be intimate relations between syntactic processes and the inference we call presuppositions (1983:373). In addition, George Lakoff is of the view that the study of 'presupposition-free syntax' would deviate from the traditional study of syntax because it would no longer involve the study of the distinction of all the grammatical morphemes. He says: It seems beyond doubt that the principles governing the distinction of morphemes will involve presuppositional information. Where these principles are given by transformational rules, there may be linkages between presuppositions and the transformational rules (1971:340). Such linkages, according to George Lakoff, between presupposition and syntactic feature are called 'global derivational constraints' (1971:340). Presupposition and Theory of Implicature: Most of the linguists and philosophers are of the view that Grice's Theory of Implicature can be used to explain presupposition. They are of the opinion, as Van Der Sandt (1988:50) points out that most presuppositional phenomena are explicable in terms of Gricean principles. The notion of presupposition can be eliminated entirely in favour of the Gricean notion of implicature. It facilitates proper explanation of the existence and behavior of presuppositions. Van Der Sandt (1988:70) refers to the view that treats most of the paradigmatic cases of presuppositions as conventional implicature. Others view presupposition as a special kind of conversational implicature that is associated with the positive sentence as well as its negative counterpart. Karttunen and Peters are of the same opinion: A large set of cases that have been called presupposition are really

instances of conventional implicature. The most obvious are those associated with particles like too, either, also, even, only and so on. This class also includes the presuppositions of certain factive verbs, such as forget, realize, take into account and fail. Presuppositions of cleft and pseudo-cleft constructions also seem to be genuine examples of conversational implicature. These are a just few examples; the list could be made much longer.

Conclusion

Thus, presupposition is one of the pivotal pragmatic concepts having relations with logic and philosophy. It has crucial relation with other disciplines with respect to language in use and function of the language. Having its roots in philosophy, presupposition has acquired status of a significant concept when it comes to the study of logical reasoning.

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