Presuppositions as conversational phenomena☆

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Abstract

In this paper, I distinguish between linguistic and non-linguistic presuppositions. I also propose that we should be interested in conversational presuppositions, which could also be called *speaker-meant presuppositions* or *speaker's presuppositions*. I also distinguish between *potential* and *actual* presuppositions. I propose that, in some cases, presuppositions can be conversationally implicated and cancellation is possible. I specify what the hard cases are and I try to explain them through ontological considerations. I try to reduce the hard cases through (a) the notion that all actual presuppositions are speaker-meant; (b) the distinction between ontological and linguistic presuppositions; and (c) the uncontroversial notion that even ontological presuppositions are susceptible to semantic under-determination that has to be tackled though pragmatic intrusion. Pragmatic intrusion for presuppositional cases, however, cannot really amount to completing or expanding or in any case computing an explicature in an ordinary sense, as explicatures have to do with truth-conditions and aim to create propositionally complete forms that are truth-evaluable, unlike propositional fragments or schemata that are usually expressed in sentences (Carston, 2002; Wilson and Sperber, 2002, 2012). They are processes similar to explicatures, but since presuppositions are only pre-conditions for an utterance's being true or false (Strawson, 1950; Macagno; 2016; Green, 1989; Marmaridou, 2000), we cannot say that these processes are completely like those of explicatures. Nevertheless, they are pragmatically-motivated, even if hard to cancel. (See Capone, 2009 on lack of cancellability or Jaszczolt, 2016 on entrenched meanings.) This more or less brings my approach in line with contextualism (even if I accept semantic invariantism, along the lines of Kratzer, 2012 or Cappelen and Lepore, 2005 (Invariantism is also shared by Carston (2002), in a form that is compatible with her contextualism.)).
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1. Introduction

One of the notorious and thorny problems in the theory of presupposition is the relationship between presupposition and entailment, including the question of whether or not presuppositions are semantically entailed or not. Such a problem, according to Cummings (2009), may be the reason why studies on presupposition from the perspective of clinical

pragmatics are so scarce. Cummings may not be too wrong about this, as at one point in this paper I too ask questions about the distinction between ontological and semantical issues, a distinction which promises to bear on decisions about semantic entailment. This paper, in fact, investigates the relationship between presupposition and entailment and proposes some distinctions that are related to speaker's meaning. (Some scholars like Haugh, 2013 define semantic entailment in the following way: p entails q, if and only if the truth of p guarantees the truth of q (Haugh, 2013; Huang, 2014).)[1] In particular, this paper promises to delve into what Huang (2014) calls the 'triggering problem, namely the problem of explaining the origin or source of presupposition. Where do presuppositions come from? Or put slightly differently, why do presuppositions take place in the first place?'' (Huang, 2014, 99). Here I investigate the idea that top-down inferential phenomena can shape presuppositions in discourse, in the same way as they can serve to shape explicatures (see Recanati, 2010 and Capone, 2010 on top-down pragmatic effects on utterance interpretation and content; also see Jaszczolt, 2016 and her idea that we need a gestaltist compositionality that can allow an implicature to work as primary meaning and the explicit meaning can take the status of secondary meaning[2]). In particular, I will follow some important suggestions by Macagno (2016), who opened up the way to an investigation of presupposition in terms of ''argumentative reasoning''. Although this idea could be seen as a prosecution of Karttunen (1974), according to whom pragmatic principles determine which presuppositions can be projected and which should be cancelled, or of Gazdar (1979), according to whom only presuppositions that are consistent with (a) entailments, (b) propositions in the previous context, (c) the implicatures associated with an utterance, will survive (this is a global cancellation process), in fact, it deals with the triggering problem in a radically different way. (See Beaver, 1997 for a detailed list of triggering constructions.)

The received view of presupposition is as follows, as pointed out by Atlas (2005, 129):

> A presupposed proposition is a semantic entailment from the affirmative statement and the content of the conversationally implicated, specific interpretation of the negative statement in a context, an interpretation that is beyond the literal meaning of the semantically nonspecific negative sentence. (Atlas, 2005, 129)

This view is unsatisfactory because, as admitted by Atlas (2005), presupposition is considered a 'heterogeneous' relation. Following Modified Occam's Razor and Jaszczolt's reformulation of it in Jaszczolt (1999), we should prefer a theory that is capable of eliminating the asymmetry between positive and negative sentences, provided that there are no insurmountable obstacles. This would be an advantage, given that many scholars – including Frege, Keenan (1971) and Levinson (1983) (but see also Marmaridou, 2000, Atlas, 2004, Van der Sandt, 2012 among many others) – take constancy under negation to be a defining property of presupposition. But how can it be a defining property if there is an asymmetry between the status of the inference as entailment in positive sentences and that of the inference as conversational implicature in negative ones? The definitional problem is tainted by what Atlas (2005) calls the 'heterogeneous' status of presupposition as an inference. 'Constancy' is merely an appearance, since the inference in the positive sentence is of a very different nature from the inference in the negative counterpart, at least if we confine ourselves to the received views. What is it that is constant? The entailment or the conversational implicature? Clearly the received view leads us to believing that there is one thing which is constant, but then it denies that the inferences are of the same (pragmatic) nature. This is too bad.

The strategy of this paper is to show that presuppositions can be conversational phenomena – in other words, inferences that are calculable by deploying human rationality (and its resources).[3] Pragmatics, in this paper, is seen as the ability by language users to reason explicitly or tacitly on why a certain lexeme was used at a certain point in the conversational exchange, why a certain choice was made rather than another, why the speaker used language in this way rather than in a different way. Reasoning involves making use of tacit arguments that take as inputs utterances and contexts and give as output pragmatic inferences. We need a theory that considers both language and its users (Mey, 2001). It is not enough to look at semantics, we need to take into account the pragmatic effects that accrue in context, which Mey (2001) calls 'pragmemes', a term applied by Seymour (2013) to pragmatic increments in context.[4] Conversational presuppositions, if they could be reduced to pragmatics, would have to have the following features, following Huang (2017, 156): they would have to be expressed implicitly by a speaker in virtue of his/her utterance; they would provide augmented meaning; they would have to be beyond and above what is said; they would arise in virtue of a relationship between a proposition and a speaker on the basis of reasoning or what Huang calls Grice's logic of

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[1] We should probably add to this the Strawsonian desideratum (Strawson, 1952) that if p entails q, then a (serious) assertion of 'p but not q' should be perceived as contradictory. Still, formulated this way, the definition is not perfect, as entailment should not be seen as a relationship between propositions but a relationship occurring between sentences in virtue of their words and syntax (Davis, 2005).

[2] It is not clear what would the status of conversationally implicated presuppositions be in Jaszczolt's compositional picture. I assume they would not be primary meanings anyway, as they are certainly prior to the primary purpose of the speech act, as Geurts (2017) says.

[3] Lepore and Stone (2015) discuss at length the notion of rationality and its role in the Gricean programme.

[4] Needless to say, what I have to say in this paper is closer to a theory of performance (or pragmemes in Mey's sense) than to a theory of competence.