



Presuppositional effects and ostensive-inferential communication

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we argue that presuppositions fall within the scope of ostensive-inferential communication, and present the benefits of this proposal. On the one hand, by treating presuppositions as part of what is *ostensively* communicated by the speaker, we can provide a unified account of so-called ‘informative’ presuppositions, and presuppositions that are part of the ‘common ground’. On the other hand, by treating presuppositions as the output of an *inferential* process of pragmatic interpretation, we can explain their context-sensitivity as well as the way in which their propositional content is constructed through a process of ‘mutual parallel adjustment’ with the explicit content of the utterance and its implicatures.

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1. Introduction

Traditionally, linguists and philosophers of language characterize presuppositions as background information, that is, information that is taken for granted by the interlocutors. An utterance of (1a), for example, is typically described as giving rise to the presupposition (1b):

- (1) a. Rob stopped smoking
b. Rob used to smoke

That is, an utterance of (1a) introduces two pieces of information: *that Rob does no longer smoke* – the asserted content – and *that Rob used to smoke* – the presupposed content. The latter piece of information is presented as part of the set of background assumptions against which the conversation takes place and develops.

The question of the role of presupposition in communication has a long philosophical history. Frege (1982) offers a first discussion of the phenomenon of presupposition by analyzing the case of proper nouns. The observation is that a proper noun appears to presuppose the existence of its referent when used in a sentence. Frege argues that this implication of existence results from the use of the sentence and it is not part of its “sense”. This view is later developed by Strawson (1950), who clearly distinguishes between *expressions* and *uses of expressions*, and extended to other referring

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expressions such as definites and quantificational noun phrases. Crucially, according to the Frege/Strawson view, presuppositions are conditions for the proper use of certain linguistic expressions (see [Simons \(2013\)](#) for a discussion). The idea of presupposition as ‘conditions of use’ paved the way for the broader concept of presupposition introduced by speech act theorists like [Austin \(1962\)](#) and [Searle \(1969\)](#). This concept encompasses the necessary conditions for the felicity or appropriateness of a speech act and, as a result, presuppositions cease (at least in some cases) to be associated with specific linguistic forms.

It is thanks to the work of [Stalnaker \(1973\)](#), though, that the phenomenon of presupposition receives a central place in the linguistic and philosophical debate. The influential Stalnakerian account conceives of presuppositions as conditions for the appropriateness of an utterance: a sentence ‘p’ presupposes the proposition *q* if the use of ‘p’ would be inappropriate when *q* does not belong to the ‘common ground’, i.e., the set of assumptions mutually held by the discourse participants for the purpose of the conversation ([Stalnaker, 1973, 1974](#)). If *q* is entailed by the context before the utterance time, then the presupposition *q* is said to be *satisfied*. Conversely, if *q* does not belong to the common ground, then this leads to *presupposition failure* ([Stalnaker, 2002](#)). When a failure occurs, the addressee is required to *accommodate* the presupposition in order to make sense of the utterance ([Lewis, 1979; Heim, 1982](#)). According to this standard view, accommodation is the process whereby the content of a presupposition that is not satisfied is introduced into the discourse in order to make it possible for the context to be updated with the assertive component of the utterance.

Presupposition satisfaction and presupposition accommodation are conceived of as two distinct phenomena that account for different uses of presuppositions, respectively referred to as ‘proper or non-informative uses’ and ‘informative uses’ ([Karttunen, 1974; Stalnaker, 1974](#)). While the former concern shared pieces of information, the latter involve assumptions that are not yet part of the common ground. For instance, an utterance of (1a) can be used to presuppose (1b) when the fact *that Rob used to smoke* is common ground between the speaker and the addressee (non-informative use), as well as when this represents a new piece of information for the addressee (informative use).

While the distinction between non-informative and informative uses of presupposition is well established in the linguistics literature, its psychological significance has already been questioned. For instance, as [Sbisà \(1999\)](#) points out, this distinction “does not reflect the reality of social communication processes” as presuppositional uses typically fall on a continuum of cases. This is because the speaker may be mistaken or even uncertain with respect as to whether or not a certain piece of information is shared with the addressee. Furthermore, the addressee may forget a piece of information that has been previously shared. Finally, an audience can be split between those who share a certain piece of information with the speaker and those who do not. All these considerations blur the contours of the distinction between proper and informative uses of presuppositions and call for a “good account of presupposition [that] should be extensible without modification to informative presupposition, as well as to the intermediate cases” ([Sbisà, 1999](#)).

The distinction between proper/non-informative and informative uses of presuppositions, though, plays a crucial role even in the context of those accounts of presuppositions that focus on their communicative effects. For instance, [Simons \(2005\)](#) emphasizes that informative uses of presuppositions can be exploited in order to carry the main point of the utterance. For instance, in the example in (2), the main point of B is to inform A of the presupposition that the new guy has a wife.

- (2) A: The new guy is very attractive.
B: Yes, and his wife is lovely too.

Crucially, the ‘exploitative nature’ of this kind of uses is typically seen as tightly intertwined with their informative status. For instance, [Garcia-Carpintero \(2013\)](#) suggests that ‘informative presupposition’ can convey the main point of the utterance because they violate the felicity conditions of the speech act of presupposing. According to Garcia-Carpintero, presupposing involves a common ground requirement, which is not satisfied in the case of informative uses. These uses would thus correspond to the performance of a different kind of speech act, namely, an indirect assertion. Importantly, it is the recognition of the common-ground violation, and therefore of the informativity of the presupposition, that is said to allow the addressee to infer that the speaker intended to perform an indirect assertion.

To sum up: on the one hand, the distinction between non-informative and informative uses of presuppositions appears to lack any psychological significance; on the other hand, this distinction is called upon to explain how presuppositions can be communicatively exploited. This apparent contradiction calls for an account of presuppositions that is able to explain their distinct communicative functions while being grounded in a psychologically plausible framework. The aim of this paper is to develop such an account.

Our starting point is represented by existing relevance-based account of presuppositions ([Simons, 2005; Saussure, 2013](#)). Crucially though, we depart from two of their standard assumptions: first, we challenge the idea that presuppositions are not part of what is intentionally communicated by the speaker (section 3); second, we recognize a role for pragmatic inference in the recovery of the propositional content of the presupposition (Section 4). These moves will set the ground for a unitary treatment of a variety of presuppositional uses. Furthermore, they will allow us to explain their communicative effects as a function of the role presuppositions can play in the inferential process of constructing the speaker intended meaning.

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