Presuppositions

LING-053 Semantics 1
UCSC
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February 4, 2004
What are presuppositions?

• Suppose John was never a smoker. Suppose somebody were to ask the following question:

(1) Did John quit smoking?

• Suppose you were to answer “Yes”:

(2) Yes, John quit smoking.

• Now, suppose you were to answer “No”:

(3) No, John didn’t quit smoking.

• Conclusion: Neither answer seems true in that either answer seems to convey something false:

(4) John used to smoke.
(5) John quit smoking.

(6) John used to smoke.

• The truth of (5) implies the truth of (6): (5) **PRESUPPOSES** (6).

• Let’s consider another example:

(7) John is sick again.

• An utterance of (7) is only felicitous in a context where it is taken for granted that:

(8) John was sick at some point in the past.
Informal definition of a PRESUPPOSITION:

A sentence S presupposes a proposition $p$ if S implies $p$ and further implies that $p$ is somehow already taken for granted in the conversation.

Therefore, there are two requirements that must be jointly satisfied if $p$ must be said to be presupposed by S:

1. $p$ is a presupposition of S if S implies $p$.

2. $p$ is a presupposition of S if $p$ is already taken for granted by the participants in the conversation (it is something the participants in the conversation already assume).
Empirical tests

1. **Negation**: 

   (9)  
   a. John quit smoking.  
   b. John used to smoke.  

   (10)  
   a. John didn’t quit smoking.  
   b. John used to smoke.  

**Conclusion:** *If S presupposes p then both S and ¬S imply p.*

The truth of p is a precondition for evaluating whether S is true or false.
2. Questions:

(11)  a. Did John quit smoking?
     b. John used to smoke.

Conclusion: If S presupposes p then both S and its interrogative counterpart [S?] imply p.

3. Conditionals:

(12)  a. If John quit smoking, then he can run the marathon.
     b. John used to smoke.

Conclusion: If S presupposes p then both S and its hypothetical counterpart [if S] imply p
Conclusion

If S presupposes $p$, then S presupposes $p$ not only when S is asserted but also when it is denied, questioned, or presented as an hypothesis.
• Not all information that is backgrounded is a presupposition.

• Take the case of a nonrestrictive relative clause (appositive):

  (13) John, who bought a new CD player, is Mary’s new roommate.

• The relative clause in italics is backgrounded information but it is not presupposed. Compare (13) to (14) (a pseudo-cleft):

  (14) What John bought is a new CD player.

• (13) passes the S family test.
To sum up:

1. Failing the S family test (negation, question, conditional) tells you that some proposition $p$ is not a presupposition of $S$.

2. However, passing the S family test does not always tell you that $p$ is a presupposition of $S$. You must check whether $S$ can be uttered out-of-the-blue or whether it needs $p$ to be felicitous.
The difference between presuppositions and entailments

- **Entailments of S do NOT survive when S is negated, questioned, hypothesized.**

(15) John arrived yesterday morning.  
⇒ John arrived.  

(16) John didn’t arrive yesterday morning.  
≮ John arrived.  

(17) Did John arrive yesterday morning?  
≮ John arrived.  

(18) If John arrived yesterday morning, we’ll invite him for dinner.  
≮ John arrived.
S can both entail and presuppose \( p \).

(19) Mary realizes that John didn’t pass the exam.

(19) entails that John didn’t pass the exam.

(19) presupposes that John didn’t pass the exam.

(If Mary realizes that John didn’t pass the exam, it must be the case that John didn’t pass the exam.)

(20) Mary doesn’t realize that John didn’t pass the exam.

(21) Does Mary realize that John didn’t pass the exam?
The difference between presuppositions and implicatures

- **Implicatures of** $S$ **do NOT survive when** $S$ **is negated, questioned, hypothesized**

(22)  
  a. John has two children.  
  b. John has only two children.

(23)  
  a. Does John have two children?  
  b. NO: John has only two children.

- **Both entailments and implicatures of a sentence** $S$ **vanish when** $S$ **is not asserted.**
Consider a more puzzling case: *discover*

(24) Mary discovered that John is married to Sue.

(25) John is married to Sue.

(26) If Mary discovers that John is married to Sue, she will be surprised.

(27) I discovered that John is married to Sue.

(28) If I discover that John is married to Sue, I will be surprised.

• Presupposition triggered conventionally or by conversational maxim?
A classification:

1. A **entails** B (if A is true, B is true)

2. A **presupposes** B (B is backgrounded and taken from granted)

3. A conversationally (or conventionally) **implies** B (B follows from the interaction of the truth conditions of A together with the maxims of conversation)