

## الافتراض المسبق

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## Presupposition

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## Presupposition

### Introduction:

This paper consists of five sections. The first section pinpoints the concept of presupposition tackling it from a linguistic perspective. The second section discusses the three basic properties of presupposition. The third section sheds some light on presupposition in comparison with two other meaning inferences, namely, entailment and conversational implicature. The fourth section discusses presupposition triggers. The fifth section gives an account of the six types of presuppositions. The paper ends in a conclusion which summarizes the major points discussed in the paper.

### 1. The Concept of Presupposition

Presupposition has been an important topic in understanding language. Many scholars attempt to define this linguistic concept. Some scholars refer to presupposition as an assumption. In this context, George Yule (1996) describes “what a speaker assumes is true or is known by the hearer” (p. 132) as a presupposition. This agrees in content with Pär Segerdahl's and John I. Saeed's concept of presupposition. Segerdahl (1996) defines presupposition as “certain background assumptions about the context” (p. 185). Saeed (2009) argues that “to presuppose something means to assume it” (p. 102).

Other scholars refer to presupposition as something that is taken for granted. In this respect, Paul Portner (2006) argues that presupposition is “something that the speaker takes for granted” (p. 158). Also he shows that presupposition is implied in the speaker's words. Paul Dekker (2012) gives a



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clear definition of presupposition as “a proposition that is or has to be taken for granted, or ‘supposed’, before (‘pre’) a certain statement or other linguistic act can be made sense of” (p. 42).

The researcher adopts Bodil Helder's (2011) view of presupposition as a “background belief that must be mutually known or assumed by the sender and receiver for the utterance to be considered appropriate in context” (p. 161) Consider the following example from Stephen C. Levinson (1983):

*John regrets that he stopped doing linguistics before he left Cambridge.*  
(pp. 179-180)

This sentence can be thought of as a family or a set of presuppositions as it presupposes the following:

- (1) There is someone uniquely identifiable to speaker and addressee as John.
- (2) John stopped doing linguistics before he left Cambridge.
- (3) John was doing linguistics before he left Cambridge.
- (4) John left Cambridge.
- (5) John had been at Cambridge.

## **2. Basic Properties of Presupposition:**

### **2.1 Constancy under negation:**

One of the basic properties of presuppositions and perhaps the most prominent one is that they are preserved (constant) under negation. Constancy under negation means that “a presupposition generated by the use of a lexical item or a syntactic structure remains the same when the sentence containing that



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lexical item or syntactic structure is negated” (Yan Huang, 2014, p. 89). Consider the following examples where the symbol » means "presupposes":

a- *John forgot that he bought eggs.*

b- *John didn't forget that he bought eggs.* (Petra Schulz, 2003, p. 45)

» John bought eggs.

In the above examples, although sentences (a) and (b) have opposite meanings as the verb is changed from being affirmative to being negative, yet they bear the same presupposition.

## **2.2 Defeasibility (Cancellability):**

Levinson (1983) sees defeasibility as “one of the crucial properties of presuppositional behaviour” (p. 186). Defeasibility refers to the cancellation of presupposition as presuppositions are liable to vanish or disappear if they are inconsistent with background assumptions, conversational implicatures and certain discourse contexts.

### **2.2.1 Cancellation by background assumptions:**

Presuppositions are sensitive to the background assumptions about the world; that's why they are cancelled if they conflict with our knowledge of the world. For example: (the symbol » means "presupposes" and ~» stands for "does not presuppose")

a- *Mary married before she got a promotion.*

» Mary got a promotion.

b- *Mary left the company before she got a promotion.*



~» Mary got a promotion. (Sophia S.A. Marmaridou, 2000, p. 126)

In the above examples, sentence (a) presupposes that *Mary got a promotion* because the event *Mary married* precedes the event *she got a promotion*. Sentence (b), on the other hand, doesn't carry this presupposition because in our knowledge of the world no one can get a promotion after he/she leaves the company where he/she once worked.

### **2.2.2 Cancellation by inconsistent conversational implicatures:**

Presuppositions also evaporate if they are inconsistent with what is conversationally implicated. For example: (the symbol +> means "implicates" )

*If John is organizing a stag night, Mary will be angry that he is doing so.*

+> perhaps John is organizing a stag night, perhaps he isn't

~» John is organizing a stag night (Huang, 2014, p. 91)

Huang's example can presuppose that "John is organizing a stag night" if it goes like this "Mary will be angry that John is organizing a stag night", but the insertion of "if" construction carrying the conversational implicature that perhaps John is organizing a stag night or perhaps he isn't defeats such presupposition.

### **2.2.3 Cancellation by inconsistent contexts**

Presuppositions are sensitive to the context; that's why they evaporate or drop out if they are inconsistent with certain linguistic contexts. Consider the following examples:

- (1) *Mary's father knows that she passed her driving test.*
- (2) *Mary's father doesn't know that she passed her driving test.*
- (3) *I know that Mary passed her driving test.*



(4) *I don't know that Mary passed her driving test.*

(5) *Mary passed her driving test.* (Marmaridou, 2000, p. 125)

In the above examples, sentences (1), (2) and (3) presuppose (5) because the factive verb 'know' which is a presupposition trigger presupposes that the sentence complement is true. On the contrary, sentence (4) does not presuppose (5) because the speaker denies his knowledge with (5).

### **2.3 Projection Problem of Presuppositions:**

D. Terence Langendoen and Harris Savin (1971) formulate their cumulative hypothesis of the projection of presuppositions as follows: "presuppositions of a subordinate clause . . . stand as presuppositions of the complex sentence in which they occur" (p. 57). However, Huang (2014) sees this property of presupposition as a "special case of the Fregean principle of compositionality" (p. 95); this is because in some cases a complex sentence does inherit the presuppositions of the simple sentences incorporated in it and in some other cases it fails to inherit them.

In this context, Lauri Karttunen (1973, pp. 174- 180) distinguishes three groups of predicates that are responsible for presupposition projection. These three groups are:

(1) **Plugs:** This group of predicates does not let the presuppositions of the component sentences pass up to the entire complex sentence. This group contains " verbs of saying" such as *say, mention, tell, request, order, accuse, criticize, blame*, etc. Consider the following example:

*Sheila accuses Harry of beating his wife.* (Karttunen, 1973, p. 174)



This sentence doesn't presuppose that Harry has a wife although the sentence "Harry beats his wife "- in isolation- carries this presupposition, but when it becomes part of a sentence its verb is a plug, such presupposition is blocked.

**(2) Holes:** This group of predicates let the presuppositions of the component sentences become the presuppositions of the entire sentence. It contains predicates such as *know*, *regret*, *understand*, *surprise*, etc. For example:

- (1) *Fred has a wife.*
- (2) *Fred has been beating his wife.*
- (3) *Fred stopped beating his wife.*
- (4) *Fred hesitated to stop beating his wife.*
- (5) *It surprised Mary that Fred hesitated to stop beating his wife.*
- (6) *Cecilia knew that it surprised Mary that Fred hesitated to stop beating his wife.*

In the above examples, sentences (1) and (2) are presuppositions for sentence (3), incorporated in sentences (4), (5) and (6), and also presuppositions for sentences (4), (5) and (6) which contain the hole verbs "*hesitated*", "*surprised*" and "*knew*" as predicates.

**(3) Filters:** This group of predicates sometimes allows the presuppositions pass up to the entire sentence and sometimes it doesn't. It contains the logical connectives: *if .....then* and *either .....or*. Compare these two examples:

- (1) *If baldness is hereditary, then all of Jack's children are bald.*
- (2) *If Jack has children, then all of Jack's children are bald.* (Karttunen, 1973, p. 177)





In the above two examples, the consequent clause "all of Jack's children are bald" presupposes that "Jack has children". This presupposition passes up and becomes the presupposition of the whole sentence in case of sentence (1), but it doesn't in case of sentence (2).

### **3. Presupposition and other meaning inferences:**

Presuppositions, entailments and conversational implicatures are three meaning inferences. This section highlights the points of dis/similarities between presupposition and these two meaning inferences.

#### **3.1 Presupposition and Entailment:**

Both presupposition and entailment carry an implicit meaning. They are relations held between two sentences, one is uttered and explicit, the presupposing or the entailing sentence, while the other is implicit, the presupposed or the entailed sentence. Saeed (2009) gives a truth-based definition of entailment as follows: "A sentence **p** entails a sentence **q** when the truth of the first (**p**) guarantees the truth of the second (**q**), and the falsity of the second (**q**) guarantees the falsity of the first (**p**)" (p. 99).

Presupposition is similar to entailment in that both are transitive relations. In this context, Geoffrey Leech (1974) illustrates: "Presupposition, like entailment, is a logically transitive relation (i.e. if X presupposes Y and Y presupposes Z, then X presupposes Z" (p. 298). He gives the following examples:

X: *The inventor of the flying bicycle was a genius.*

Y: *Someone invented the flying bicycle.*



Z: *There is a bicycle which flies.*

In the above examples, sentence (X) presupposes (Y); sentence (Y) presupposes (Z) and sentence (X) presupposes (Z). This transitivity is also a property of entailment. For example:

*Donald is a duck* entails *Donald is a bird.*

*Donald is a bird* entails *Donald is an animal.* (Sebastian Lobner , 2013, p. 66)

Hence *Donald is a duck* entails *Donald is an animal.*

Presupposition is also similar to entailment in that both presupposition and entailment are not detachable; in the sense that one can replace some words of the presupposing or the entailing sentence with synonymous words without changing the presupposed or entailed meaning. For example:

- a. John *regrets* that he ate all the pudding.
- b. John *is sorry* that he ate all the pudding.
- c. John *repents* of having eaten all the pudding.
- d. John *is unhappy* that he ate all the pudding. (Levinson, 1983, p. 233)

In the examples above sentences (b- d) have synonymous expressions to the word (regret) used in sentence (a) and also share the same presupposition of sentence (a) that is John ate all the pudding. Entailment is also not detachable as shown in the following examples from Schulz (2003):

- a. John *bought* three books.
- b. John *purchased* three books. (p. 41)

Sentences (a) and (b) are synonymous and they share the same entailment that is John bought two books.



As for the dissimilarities between presupposition and entailment, **one dissimilarity** between these two meaning inferences is given by Paul Simpson (1993) as follows: “where the truth-value of entailments rests on whether the sentence as a whole is true or false, presuppositions operate under no such constraint” (p. 126). For example:

*John managed to stop in time.* (Levinson, 1983, p. 178)

This sentence entails that *John stopped in time* and presupposes that *John tried to stop in time*. The entailment of this sentence is true if John managed to stop in time, but if he didn't, then such entailment doesn't exist. The presupposition of this sentence, on the other hand, still exists whether John managed or didn't manage to stop in time.

The **second dissimilarity** lies in the fact that while presupposition survives under negation and when the sentence is embedded in modal operators such as *it's possible that, probably, ought to* and *should* and in the antecedent of a conditional, entailment doesn't. This can be shown in the following:

(1) Presupposition remains intact under negation while entailment doesn't. Consider the following examples:

(1) a. *John bought three books yesterday.*

b. *It is not the case that John bought three books yesterday.*

(2) John bought two books yesterday.

(3) a. *John forgot that the cat is on the mat.*

b. *John did not forget that the cat is on the mat.*

(4) The cat is on the mat. (Schulz, 2003, p. 40)



In the above examples, it is clear that sentence (1a) entails (2), but the negated sentence (1b) doesn't entail (2). On the contrary, both the asserted sentence, (3a), and its negative form, (3b), presuppose sentence (4). This shows that presupposition remains constant under negation while entailment doesn't.

(2) When a sentence with a presupposition is embedded in a modal operator, the sentence still has its presupposition, but this isn't the case with a sentence with entailment. Here is an example from Marmaridou (2000):

*The school inspector made four speeches last week.* (p. 128)

This sentence presupposes that *there is a school inspector* and entails that *the school inspector made three speeches last week*. When this sentence is embedded in a modal operator as in: *It's possible that the school inspector made four speeches last week*; this sentence still presupposes that *there is a school inspector*, but it no longer entails *the school inspector made three speeches last week*.

(3) When a sentence with a presupposition is embedded in the antecedent of a conditional, the presupposition survives, whereas the entailment doesn't.

Consider the following example from Schulz (2003):

*If John was pleased that he left, he will never come back.* (p. 48)

In this example, the sentence *John was pleased that he left* presupposes that *John left*. When this sentence is embedded in the antecedent of a conditional, the sentence still presupposes that *John left*.

The **third dissimilarity** that distinguishes presupposition from entailment is that while presupposition is defeasible, entailment isn't. For example:



(1) *She cried before she finished her thesis.*

(2) *She died before she finished her thesis.* (Levinson, 1983, p. 187)

Both these two examples entail that she was working on her thesis, but while sentence (1) presupposes that she finished her thesis, sentence (2) doesn't share this presupposition since dead people don't do things.

In sum, like presupposition, entailment is a transitive relation and it is not detachable. Unlike presupposition, entailment is a truth-conditional; it is not defeasible and it doesn't survive under negation or when embedded in modal operators and in the antecedent of a conditional.

### **3. 2 Presupposition and Conversational implicature:**

There are points of similarities and dissimilarities between presupposition and conversational implicature. Presupposition and conversational implicature are similar in that both are defeasible and non-detachable. As for defeasibility, like presupposition, conversational implicature shows sensitivity to context; that's why it disappears when it is inconsistent with the context in which it occurs. Consider the following example:

*There is a garage round the corner, but it's closed.* (Bart Geurts, 2011, p. 19)

In this example, the first part of the sentence implicates that you can get petrol at the garage around the corner. This implicature is defeated or cancelled by the second part of the sentence.



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As for non-detachability, conversational implicature is non-detachable. This means that if an utterance is replaced by another with the same literal meaning, the implicature remains. Consider the following instance:

a- *Some of the stewardesses were snoring.*

b- *At least two of the stewardesses were snoring.* (Geurts, 2011, p. 18)

In the above examples, "some" in sentence (a) is replaced by a synonymous- "at least two"- in sentence (b). However, both sentences still carry the same implicature that "not all the stewardesses were drunk".

The difference between presupposition and conversational implicature lies in that while presupposition need not be calculated, conversational implicature is calculated; it needs to be worked out depending on the whole context. Here is an illustration:

a- *Anthony regrets that Brenda is pregnant.*

b- *Candy knows that Dave is dead.* (Luciana Benotti and Patric Blackburn, 2014, p. 421)

In the above examples, sentence (1) presupposes that "Brenda is pregnant" and sentence (2) presupposes that "Dave is dead". Such presuppositions can be calculated due to the presupposition triggers used in these sentences "regrets" and "knows" without depending on prior knowledge about the context. Compare this with the following example:

Man standing by his car: *I am out of petrol.*

Passer-by: *There is a garage around the corner.* (Benotti & Blackburn, 2014, p. 419)



In this example, the answer made by the passer-by implicates that "the garage is open and has petrol to sell". To calculate this implicature, one needs to take into consideration several factors such as knowledge of the situational context.

To conclude, like presupposition, conversational implicature is defeasible and non-detachable. Unlike presupposition, conversational implicature is highly calculated.

#### **4. Presupposition Triggers:**

There are some lexical items and syntactic structures that give rise to presupposition. These lexical items and syntactic structures are considered the sources of presuppositions and are referred to as "presupposition triggers". Levinson (1983, pp. 181-184) lists a selection of presupposition triggers which can be classified into three types shown as follows:

**4.1 Existential triggers:** This type of triggers includes definite description phrases; i.e. phrases in the form "the X". For example:

John saw/ didn't see *the man with the two heads*.

»There exists a man with two heads.

Existential triggers also involve possessive constructions. For example:

*Mary's dog* is cute. (Yule, 1996, p. 26)

»There exists someone called Mary. Mary has a dog.

**4.2 Lexical triggers:** This type of triggers includes:



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(1) **Factive predicates:** This type of predicates presupposes true information; that's why it is referred to as factive. Consider the following examples:

a. Martha *regrets/ doesn't regret* drinking John's home brew.

» Martha drank John's home brew.

b. Frankenstein *was/wasn't aware* that Dracula was there.

» Dracula was there.

(2) **Implicative verbs:** Implicative verbs such as *manage, remember* and *forget* carry a presupposition that the event implied in the complement took place. Consider the following examples:

a. John *managed/ didn't manage* to open the door.

» John tried to open the door.

b. John *forgot/didn't forget* to lock the door.

» John ought to have locked, or intended to lock, the door.

(3) **Change of state verbs:** Verbs such as *stop, begin, arrive, come, enter, go, leave, start, finish, cease* and *carry on* are called change of state verbs. Here are some examples:

a. John *stopped/didn't stop* beating his wife. » John had been beating his wife.

b. Joan *began/ didn't begin* to beat her husband. » Joan hadn't been beating her husband.

(4) **Iteratives:** Iteratives such as *again, another time, anymore, come back, repeat* and *restore* involve the occurrence of some past action; therefore, it presupposes that this past action occurred or took place. Huang (2014, p.87) gives examples of sentences containing iteratives as follows:





## a. Iterative verbs:

John *returned/ didn't return* to Cambridge. » John was in Cambridge before.

## b. Iterative adverbs:

The boy *cried/ didn't cry wolf again*. » The boy cried wolf before.

## c. Iterative prefixes:

Jane *remarried/ never remarried*. » Jane married before.

**(5) Verbs of judging:** Some verbs of judgment such as *accuse, blame, criticize, praise* and *scold* involve presuppositions. For example:

a. Agatha *accused/ didn't accuse* Ian of plagiarism.

» (Agatha thinks) plagiarism is bad.

b. Ian *criticized/ didn't criticize* Agatha for running away.

» (Ian thinks) Agatha ran away.

**(6) Conventional items:** Frank Robert Palmer (1996) mentions that “presupposition is associated with specific features of certain lexical items” (p. 170). These specific features are referred to by Levinson (1983) as “the conventional meaning of expressions” (p. 206). For example:

a. *I cleaned/ didn't clean the room*. » The room was dirty.

b. *I killed/ didn't kill the bird*. » The bird is alive.

c. *John is a bachelor*. » John is unmarried. (Palmer, 1996, p. 171)

**4.3 Structural triggers:** This type of triggers includes:

**(1) Temporal clauses:** Temporal clauses presuppose the content they convey.

For example:

a. *Before* Strawson was even born, Frege *noticed/ didn't notice* presuppositions.



» Strawson was born.

b. *While* Chomsky was revolutionizing linguistics, the rest of social science was/ wasn't asleep.

» Chomsky was revolutionizing linguistics.

**(2) Cleft sentences:** Cleft sentences trigger presuppositions. For example:

a. *It- cleft:* It was/ wasn't Henry that kissed Rosie. » Someone kissed Rosie.

b. *WH- cleft:* What John lost/ didn't lose was his wallet. » John lost something.

**(3) Comparisons and contrasts:** The use of comparative constructions generates presuppositions. Consider the following examples:

a. Carol is/isn't *a better linguist than* Barbara. » Barbara is a linguist.

b. Jimmy is/isn't *as unpredictably gauche as* Billy. » Billy is unpredictably gauche.

**(4) Non-restrictive relative clauses:** Levinson (1983) mentions that only non-restrictive clauses generate presuppositions as it “is not affected by the negation of the main verb outside the relative clause” (p. 184). Here is an example:

The Proto-Harrappans, *who flourished 2800-2650 B.C.*, were/were not great temple builders. » The Proto-Harrappans flourished 2800-2650 B.C.

**(5) Counterfactual conditionals:** Conditional structures carry presuppositions. For example:

If Hannibal had only had twelve more elephants, the Romance languages would/ would not this day exist.» Hannibal didn't have twelve more elephants.

**(6) Questions:** Questions involve presuppositions. For examples:

a. Is there a professor of linguistics at MIT?



» Either there is a professor of linguistics at MIT or there isn't.

b. Is Newcastle in England or is it in Australia?

» Newcastle is in England or Newcastle is in Australia.

### **5. Presupposition Types:**

There are six types of presuppositions. The following is an account of each type of presuppositions (Examples are taken from Yule (1996, pp. 27-30)).

**5.1 Existential Presupposition:** Existential presupposition presupposes the existence of the entity named by the speaker. It is associated with possessive constructions such as "*You car*" which presupposes that "You have a car". Proper nouns also carry existential presuppositions. For example:

*Mary's dog is cute.* » There is someone whose name is Mary and that she has a dog.

**5.2 Lexical Presupposition:** Certain lexical items such as *implicative predicates, change-of- state verbs, iteratives* and *verbs of judging* carry presupposition. For example:

a. *He stopped smoking.* » He used to smoke.

b. *They started complaining.* » They weren't complaining before.

**5.3 Structural Presupposition:** The use of certain structures carries structural presuppositions such as *temporal clauses, cleft sentences, comparisons, non-restrictive clauses* and *questions* presupposes that "part of the structure is already assumed to be true" (Yule, 1996, p. 28). For example:

a. *When did he leave?* » He left.

b. *Where did you buy the bike?* » He bought the bike.



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**5.4 Factive Presupposition:** Factive presuppositions presuppose that something is truly happened. It is associated with the use of factive predicates. Here are some examples:

- a. *She didn't realize that he was ill.* »He was ill.  
b. *We regret telling him.* »We told him.

**5.5 Non-factive Presupposition:** Non-factive presuppositions presuppose that something is not truly happened. It is associated with the use of non-factive verbs such as *claim, imagine* and *believe*. For example:

- a. *I dreamed that I was rich.* »I wasn't rich.  
b. *We imagined we were in Hawaii.* »We were not in Hawaii.

**5.6 Counter-factual Presupposition:** Counter-factual presuppositions are associated with the use of *conditional structures* which presuppose information that “is not only not true, but is the opposite of what is true or contrary to facts” (Yule, 1996, p. 29). For instance:

*If you were my friend, you would have helped me.* »You are not my friend.

Counter-factual presuppositions can also be found in the embedded clause after *wish* as well as in *a clause with a modal perfect verb form*. Consider the following example from Charles W. Kreidler (2014, p.232):

*I would have enjoyed seeing the play.* »I didn't see the play.

### **Conclusion:**

This paper investigates linguistically the concept of presupposition through shedding light on some definitions of presuppositions which agree in content that presupposition is a background assumptions that are shared by both the



speaker and the hearer of an utterance/linguistic form. Also it discusses the three basic properties of presupposition: constancy under negation, defeasibility and projection. Moreover, it highlights the similarities and dissimilarities between presupposition, from one hand, and entailment and conversational implicature as two other meaning inferences, from another hand. Finally, it lists the presupposition triggers and types in order to give an overall view of the concept of presupposition.

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