

# INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE AND ITS USE

## Presuppositions I

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# INTRODUCTION

Presuppositions are meanings which must hold in order for the speech act (locution) to be meaningful.

(1) Ben's dog is sick.

a. 'Ben has a dog.'

b. 'Ben's dog is sick.'

PRESUPPOSITION

ASSERTION

Overview:

- Semantic presuppositions are *triggered* by particular expressions in the utterance.
- Pragmatic presuppositions are implicit shared assumptions and beliefs (common ground).
- Presuppositions are typically old information. If not: possibility of accommodation.
- Presuppositions, unlike assertions, remain true even if the utterance is negated.
- Presuppositions, like assertions, are kinds of entailments. They cannot be easily cancelled (cf. implicatures).

## INITIAL EXAMPLE

- (2) A Do you eat insects?  $?p$   
B<sub>1</sub> Yes.  
    ‘B eats insects.’  $p$   
B<sub>2</sub> No.  
    ‘B doesn’t eat insects.’  $\neg p$
- (3) A Do you **still** eat insects?  $?p$   
B<sub>1</sub> Yes.  
    (i) ‘B (still) eats insects.’ (STILL) PRES  $p$   
    (ii) ‘B used to eat insects.’ PAST  $p$   
B<sub>2</sub> No.  
    (i) ‘B does not eat insects (anymore).’  $\neg$ (ANYMORE) PRES  $p$   
    (ii) ‘B used to eat insects.’ PAST  $p$   
B<sub>3</sub> Wait a minute – I’ve never eaten insects!  
    ‘B has not eaten insects.’  $\neg p$

# SEMANTIC PRESUPPOSITION: ASPECTUAL VERBS

Presupposition trigger: *stop* (vs. *try*, *decide*, *want*)

- (4) a. Dave stopped eating insects. **stop**  
(i) 'Dave does not eat insects now.' ASSERTION:  $[\text{STOP } p]$   
(ii) 'Dave used to eat insects.' PRESUPPOSITION:  $[p]$
- b. Dave didn't stop eating insects.  
(i) 'Dave eats insects now.' ASSERTION:  $[\neg\text{STOP } p]$   
(ii) 'Dave used to eat insects.' PRESUPPOSITION:  $[p]$
- (5) a. Dave tried eating insects. **try**  
(i) 'Dave tried eating insects.' ASSERTION:  $[\text{TRY } p]$   
(ii) 'Dave possibly ate insects.'  $[\text{POSSIBLY } p]$
- b. Dave didn't try eating insects.  
(i) 'Dave didn't try eating insects.' ASSERTION:  $[\neg\text{TRY } p]$   
(ii) 'Dave didn't eat insects.'  $[\neg p]$

# SEMANTIC PRESUPPOSITION: PROPOSITIONAL ATTITUDE VERBS

Presupposition trigger: *know* (vs. *think*, *say*, *ask*)

(6) a. Dave knows that Trump has 5 children.

(i) 'Dave knows  $p$ '

(ii) 'Trump has 5 children.'

**know**

ASSERTION [KNOW  $p$ ]

PRESUPPOSITION [ $p$ ]

b. Dave doesn't know that Trump has 5 children.

(i) 'Dave doesn't know  $p$ '

(ii) 'Trump has 5 children.'

ASSERTION [ $\neg$ KNOW  $p$ ]

PRESUPPOSITION [ $p$ ]

(7) Dave thinks that Trump has 5 children.

'Dave thinks  $p$ '

**think**

ASSERTION [THINK  $p$ ]

Hintikka 1969

# SEMANTIC PRESUPPOSITION: REPETITIVE ADVERB

Presupposition trigger: *again* (vs. *nicely*)

(8) a. At 5pm, Dave sang again.

(i) 'At 5pm, Dave sang.'

(ii) 'Dave sang before 5pm.'

**again**

ASSERTION

PRESUPPOSITION

b. At 5pm, Dave didn't sing again.

(i) 'At 5pm, Dave didn't sing.'

(ii) 'Dave sang before 5pm.'

ASSERTION

PRESUPPOSITION

(9) At 5pm, Dave sang nicely.

'At 5pm, Dave sang and it was nice.'

**nicely**

ASSERTION

von Stechow 1996

# SEMANTIC PRESUPPOSITION: CONSTRUCTIONS

Presupposition trigger: cleft construction

- |         |                            |                |
|---------|----------------------------|----------------|
| (10) a. | It was Dave who snored.    | <b>cleft</b>   |
|         | (i) 'Dave snored.'         | ASSERTION      |
|         | (ii) 'Somebody snored.'    | PRESUPPOSITION |
| b.      | Dave snored.               |                |
|         | 'Dave snored.'             | ASSERTION      |
| (11) a. | It wasn't Dave who snored. |                |
|         | (i) 'Dave didn't snore.'   | ASSERTION      |
|         | (ii) 'Somebody snored.'    | PRESUPPOSITION |
| b.      | Dave didn't snore.         |                |
|         | 'Dave didn't snore.'       | ASSERTION      |

Hedberg 2000

# OVERVIEW OF TRIGGERS

## Classes of presupposition triggers

Beaver & Geurts 2011

- factives (*know, regret, be happy*)
- aspectual verbs and particles (*stop, continue, still*)
- some adverbs (*again, also*)
- clefts (*It was John who saved me*)
  
- quantifiers (*every student in the course*)
- definite articles (*the student in this course*)
- possessive determiners (*my cat*)
- wh-questions (*Who baked a cake?*)
- names (*Donald Trump*)



## **READING AND WATCHING TIPS**

Beaver, David and Bart Geurts. 2011. Presupposition. In Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Stanford, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/presupposition/>

YouTube video:

- The Ling Space on presuppositions: <https://youtu.be/-iQ7XrehKdw>

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