Semantics and Pragmatics

Lecture No.11

Study Material

Presupposition: Introduction

- Presupposition has been an important topic in semantics: the 1970's saw its lively debates.

- Some important books on the subject include Kempson (1975), Wilson (1975), Boer and Lycan (1976), and Oh and Dinneen (1979).

- Important papers include Fodor (1979) and Wilson and Sperber (1979).

- In an ordinary language, of course, to presuppose something means to assume it, and the narrower technical use in semantics is related to this.

- Presupposition - refer to the assumptions implicitly made by the speakers and the listeners that are necessary for the correct interpretation of utterance (Leech).

- It allows us the freedom not to state everything in our communication.

- Speakers assume certain information which is already known by their listeners and that information is called is presupposition.

- Presupposition is treated as a relationship between two propositions.

- Similarly, in the following examples the 'a' sentence is said to presuppose the 'b' sentence:

- 1. a. Her husband is a fool.

  b. She has a husband.

- 2. a. I don't regret leaving London.

  b. I left London

- 3. a. The Prime Minister of Malaysia is in Dublin this week.

  b. Malaysia has a Prime Minister.

- 4. a. The Mayor of Manchester is a woman.

  b. There is a Mayor of Manchester.

- Below, we have a sentence that contains a proposition (p) and another proposition (q), which can be easily presupposed by listener.

- However, the speaker can produce a sentence by denying the proposition (p), obtaining as a result the same presupposition (q).

- Debora's cat is cute. (p)   Debora has a cat. (q)

Two Approaches to Presupposition

- Here, we will begin by identifying two possible types of approaches to presupposition, arising from different ways of viewing language.

- They are as follow:

- 1. Sentences - as the external objects.

- 2. Sentences - as the utterances of the individuals.

- In the first approach, sentences are viewed as external objects.

- We do not worry too much about the process of producing them, or the individuality of the speaker or writer and their audience.

- Meaning is seen as an attribute of sentences rather than something constructed by the participants.

- Semantics, in this regard, consists of relating a sentence-object to other sentence-objects and to the world.

- Let's take this example 1:

- John's brother has just got back from Milan. (p)

- John has a brother. (q)

- In order to identify this relationship, one obvious way is to cast this as a truth relation.

- Presupposition as a truth relation – three steps:

- Step 1: if p (the presupposing sentence) is true then q (the pre-supposed sentence) is true.

- Step 2: If p is false, then q is still true.

- Step 3: if q is true, p could be either true or false.

- A first composite truth table for presupposition is :

p		**q**
T	**→**	**T**

$$\textbf{F} \quad \rightarrow \quad \textbf{T}$$

$$\textbf{T or F} \quad \leftarrow \quad \textbf{T}$$
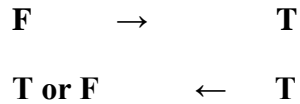
- Second approach: views sentences as the utterances of individuals engaged in a communication act.

- The aim - modeling the strategies that speakers and hearers use to communicate with one another.

- Thus, we might look at communication from the speaker's viewpoint.

- Presupposition as one of a number of inferences that the listener might make on the basis of what the speaker has just said.

- The first approach is essentially semantic and the second pragmatic.

- Let's take the same example 1; 'John's brother has just got back from Milan'

- It can roughly be said that the speaker wants to inform the listener that a particular individual has returned from Milan.

- The way she does this will depend on what she estimates about her listener's knowledge.

- If she thinks he knows John but not his brother, we can see in her use of example 1, an ordering of the assertions as :

- Assertion 1: John has a brother X.

- Assertion 2: X has come back from Milan.

- The first assertion is backgrounded by being placed in a noun phrase (John's brother) while the second is foregrounded by being given the main verb.

- Why foregrounded one assertion rather than another depends on the speaker's intentions and her guesses about the knowledge held by the participants.

Presupposition Failure

- Presupposition failure – one phenomenon that caused problems for a truth relations approach.

- It has been observed that using a name or a definite description to refer, presupposes the existence of the named or described entity.

- Thus, the 'a' sentences presupposes the 'b' sentences in the following examples.

- 1. a. Ronald is a   vegetarian.

- b. Ronald exists.

- 2. a. The King of   France is bald.

- b. There is a King of France.

- Problem - when there exists no referent for the nominal.

- If the 'b' sentences above are false, what is the status of the sentences?

- Are they false, or they are in a grey-area, neither true nor false?

- In grey-area analysis, we need to add a line to our truth table, as follows:

p		q
T	$\rightarrow$	T
F	$\rightarrow$	T
T or F	$\leftarrow$	T
? (T v F)	$\leftarrow$	F

- It shows that if q is false, the status of p is dubious, possibly neither true nor false.

- This problem for truth-based theories, known as a truth-value gap.

- An attractive simplicity of truth-based approach seems in danger of being lost.

- Russell's famous solution was to analyze definite descriptions as complex expressions.

- For instance:

- The King of France is bald is true if and only if:

- a. at least one thing is the king.

- b. at most one thing is the king.

- c. whatever is the king is bald.

- From this, it follows that the sentence 'a' is false if there is no king of France, and that there is no grey area between true and false, no truth-value gap.

- The cost, however, is a large discrepancy between the surface language and semantic representation.

Presupposition Triggers

- Presupposition triggers are types of presupposition produced by particular words or constructions.

- Some of these triggers derive from syntactic structures.

- For example, the cleft construction in 'a' and the pseudo-cleft in 'b' share the presupposition in 'c' given below:

- a. It was his behavior with frogs that disgusted me.

- b. What disgusted me was his behavior with frogs.

- c. Something disgusted me.

- Other forms of subordinate clauses may also produce presuppositions, e.g. time adverbial clauses and comparative clauses.

- Many presuppositions are produced by the presence of certain words (lexical triggers) mostly 'verbs'.

- For example, there is a class of verbs like 'regret' and 'realize' called factive verbs because they presuppose the truth of their complement clause.

- Compare the following sentences 'a' and 'b' be:

- Only the sentence with factive 'realize' presupposes the 'c'.

- There is no such presupposition with the non-factive verb 'think'.

- a. Sara realized that Iqra had dandruff.

- b. Sara thought that Iqra had dandruff.

- c. Iqra had dandruff.

- Similarly, some verbs of judgment produce presuppositions compare 'a', 'b' and 'c':

- a. John blamed me for telling her.

- b. John accused me of telling her.

- c. I told her.

- Again, one verb, 'blame', produces the presupposition in 'c', while another, 'accuse' does not.

- For a final example of lexical triggers, consider change-of-state verbs, like 'start', 'begin', 'stop'.

- These verbs have a kind of switch presupposition: the new state is both described and is presupposed not to have held prior to the change;

- Example: a. Judy started smoking cigars.

- b. Judy used not to smoke cigars.

Presupposition and Context

- One of problem for a simple truth-based account is that the presuppositional behavior seems sensitive to context.

- Levinson (1983) gives an example the type of presupposition usually triggered by time adverbial clauses.

- For example, 1a presupposing 1b below:

- 1. a. She cried before she finished her thesis.

- b. She finished her thesis.

- However, if we change the verb, as in example 2a below, the presupposition 2b is no longer produced:

- 2. a. She died before she finished her thesis.

- b. She finished her thesis.

- Why is this?

- It is argued that in example 2, the presupposition is cancelled by our general knowledge of the world: we know that dead people do not normally complete unfinished theses.

- This characteristic is known as defeasibility i.e. cancelling of presupposition.

- Another example of context sensitivity is below (Strawson, 1950):

- 3. It was Harry who Alice loved.

- 4. It was Alice who loved Harry.

- These sentences seem to describe the same essential situation of Alice loving Harry; the difference is that they belong to different conversational contexts.

- The difference that whether the participants have been discussing Harry or Alice.

- Same phenomenon is found with intonation, where stressing different parts of the sentence can produce different presuppositions (using capitals to show stress) as in:

- Alice loved HARRY.

- ALICE loved Harry.

- Thus, shows presuppositional behavior is related to context.