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## Presupposition: A Tool For Communication

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### **Abstract:**

*Presupposition is used in pragmatics and semantics, particularly in discourse analysis. Presupposition is nothing but assumptions about the context of an utterance or a sentence. But the assumptions may be sometimes mistaken. It is something which a speaker assumes to be the case before making an utterance. It has an important role in communication because communication would have been impossible if everything had to be defined or explained every time we spoke. That is why pragmatics concentrates on the study of presupposition. Depending on its association with words, phrases, structures, verbs and lexical items (like stop, start, again etc.), presupposition has been divided into various sections. A great philosopher, Frege has remarked a hundred years ago that presupposition is only partially understood and so it has been an important ground for the study of how semantics and pragmatics interact. Whatever it may be, but presupposition has been an interesting topic for new researchers, upcoming authors and for the students of English too.*

**Key words:** assume, communication, presupposition, utterance, assumptions, receiver

### **1. Introduction**

Presupposition is treated as a relationship between two propositions. The term 'presupposition' is used in semantics and pragmatics and taken from logic to refer to the necessary preconditions or assumptions made in speaking or writing an utterance. Presuppositions form an important aspect of pragmatics, particularly in discourse analysis. A great scholar Stalnaker defines presupposition as, 'Presuppositions are what is taken by the conversation'.

The above definition makes it clear that presuppositions are assumptions made about the context of a sentence. In other words, a presupposition is something, which the speaker assumes to be the case before making an utterance.

Whatever, the speaker or writer assumes that the receiver of the message already knows is called a presupposition?

For example,

A) John works in Furgusson College.

Presupposition: 1) There is a college, named Furgusson College.

B) Your brother is waiting in the library of the college.

Presuppositions:

1) You have a brother.

2) There is a library in the college.

3) There is a college.

All of these presuppositions are of the speaker and can be false.

### **2. Role And Importance Of Presupposition**

Presupposition plays an important role in communication. Communication would have been impossible if everything had to be defined or explained every time we spoke. Whatever a speaker or writer assume that the receiver of the message already knows is called presupposition. According to the philosopher Frege, 'If anything is asserted there is always an obvious presupposition'. Thus, on the basis of assumptions that their listeners knows, of course, these assumptions may be sometime mistaken.

For example,

Speaker A: What about inviting Simon tonight?

Speaker B: It's a good idea. Then, he can give Monica a lift.

The presuppositions in the above dialogues are:

1) A and B know who Simon and Monica are.

2) Simon has a vehicle.

3) Monica does not have vehicle at the moment.

Thus, presupposition has an important role to play in communication. And, therefore pragmatics concentrates on the study of presupposition.

### 3. Constancy Under Negation

It is worth nothing that even the opposite of an utterance made by negating it does not change the relationship of presupposition. This property of presupposition is generally known as constancy under negation.

For Example, 'Julie's cat is cute' presupposes that Julie has a cat. In the same way, 'Julie's cat is not cute' also presupposes that 'Julie has a cat.'

Thus, the presupposition of a statement remains constant even when that statement is negated.

### 4. Constancy Under Interrogation

Presuppositions do not change in interrogative sentences also. For example, in the statement, 'My uncle is coming home from Pune' has the proposition, 'I have an uncle'. In the same way, the question forms of the sentence i.e. 'Is my uncle coming home from Pune?' and 'Isn't my uncle coming home from Pune?' have the same presupposition i.e. 'I have an uncle.'

### 5. Types Of Presuppositions

George Yule has discussed different types of presuppositions, which could be briefly presented as follows:

#### 5.1. Potential Presupposition

In the analysis of how assumptions of the speaker are expressed, presupposition is associated with the use of words, phrases and structures. These linguistic forms are the indicators of potential presuppositions. These can only become actual presupposition in context with speakers.

#### 5.2. Existential Presupposition

In this type of presupposition, the possessive construction in English is associated with a presupposition of existence. The 'existential presupposition' is not only assumed to be present in possessive constructions such as 'Your car' which presupposes 'You have a car', but more generally in any definite noun phrase. By using any of the expression in the sentence below, the speaker is assumed to be, committed to the existence of the entities named. 'The king of Japan, the car, the girl next door, the counting crows, etc.'

#### 5.3. Factive Presuppositions

When the presupposed information following a verb like, 'know', it can be treated as a fact, and is described as a 'factive presupposition'. A number of other verbs such as 'realize' in sentence (a) and 'regret' in (b), as well as phrases involving 'be' with 'aware' in (c), 'odd' in (d) and 'glad' in (e) have factive presuppositions.

a) She didn't realize he was ill.

Presupposition: He was ill.

b) We regret telling him.

Presupposition: We told him.

c) I was not aware that she was married.

Presupposition: She was married.

d) It isn't odd that he left early.

Presupposition: He left early.

e) I'm glad that it's over.

Presupposition: It is over.

#### 5.4. Lexical Presupposition

There are also a number of other forms, which may best be treated as the source of 'lexical presupposition'. Generally in 'lexical presupposition', the use of one form with its asserted meaning is conventionally interpreted with the presupposition that another (non-asserted) meaning is understood. Each time we say that, 'Someone managed to do something', the asserted meaning is that person succeeded in some way. When we say that 'someone didn't manage', the asserted meaning is that the person did not succeed. In both cases, however, there is a presupposition (non-asserted) that the person 'tried' to do that something. So, 'managed' is conventionally interpreted as asserting, 'succeeded' and presupposing 'tried'. Other examples, involving the lexical items, 'stop', 'start' and 'again' are presented with their presuppositions in the sentences below:

a) He stopped smoking.

Presupposition: He used to smoke.

b) They started complaining.

Presupposition: They were not complaining before.

c) You're late again.

Presupposition: You were late before.

In the case of lexical presupposition, the speaker's use of a particular expression is taken to presupposed another (unstated) concept, where as in the case of a factive presupposition, the use of a particular expression is taken to presupposed the truth of the information that is started after it.

#### 5.5. Structural Presupposition

In addition to presuppositions, which are associated with the use of certain words and phrases, there is also 'Structural presupposition'. In this case, certain sentence structures have been analyzed as presupposing that part of it is already assumed to

be true. For example, the *wh*-question construction in English is interpreted with the presupposition that the information after the *wh*-form is already known.

For example, in the question 'When did he leave?' the presupposition is 'he left' which is already known. Similarly in, 'Where did you buy the car?' 'You bought the car' is the presupposition is the type.

#### 5.6. *Non-Factive Presupposition*

The non-factive presuppositions are associated with a number of verbs in English. These are presuppositions which are assumed not to be true. Verbs like 'dreams', 'imagine', 'pretend' etc. as shown in the sentences below, are used with the presupposition below, are used with the presupposition that what follows is not true.

a) I dreamed that I was rich.

Presupposition: I was not rich.

b) We imagined we were in Hawaii.

Presupposition: We were not in Hawaii.

c) He pretends to be mad.

Presupposition: He is not mad.

#### 5.7. *Counter-Factual Presupposition*

The counter-factual presuppositions imply that what is presupposed is not only 'not true' but also the opposite of what is true or 'contrary to facts'. A conditional structure of the types shown in the sentence below, is generally called a counter-factual conditional, which presupposes that the information in the 'if clause' is not at the time of utterance.

"If you were my friend, you would have helped me."

Presupposition: You were not my friend.

### 6. Conclusion

The above explanation shows that we have two major problems, neither of them easily solved. The first is whether we can draw distinction between what is asserted and what is presupposed. The second is what phenomena should be brought under the heading of presupposition. This is far more difficult since the phenomena are desperate, but not unrelated. It would be sensible to exclude what are obviously contextual felicity conditions, partly at least because they are not, or not easily, describable in prepositional terms. For the rest it is, perhaps, reasonable to restrict the notion of presupposition either to what is assumed to be true or to assumption about 'existence' in the wide sense of the term. We conclude that presupposition remains. Ninety years after Frege's remarks on the subject, still only partially understood, and an important ground for the study of how semantics and pragmatics interact.

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