

Presenter title

Pressuposition

Presenter name

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Presupposition

- A presupposition is an assumption whose truth is taken for granted to maintain the felicity of the utterance– taken to as part of the common ground – and is conventionally associated with a particular linguistic expression (Culpeper & Haugh, 2014:55; Haugh, 2017: 85).
- Traditionally, there are two types of approaches to account for presupposition, namely (see Huang, 2017: 85-7):
 - i. The semantic approach (Precondition of truth value; Main proponents: Frege & Strawson)
 - ii. The pragmatic approach (Precondition of proper use or presumption about relevance: Main proponent: Stalnaker)

- The semantic approach to presupposition deals with sentences as bearer of presuppositions (Huang, 2017:85).
- In this sense, a presupposition of a sentence can be triggered regardless of contextual factors or speaker's intention.
- The pragmatic approach, on the other hand, conceptualizes presuppositions as context-sensitive meanings that arise as:
 - i. part of the speaker's packaging information in an utterance;
 - ii. or an inference made by the listener about the context on the basis of what the speaker says (Saeed, 2016: 98).
- A third, complementary approach, known as semantic-pragmatic approach (or utterance approach), was put forwards scholars, such as Kattunen (1973) and Soames (1982) (see Huang, 2017,2017:86).

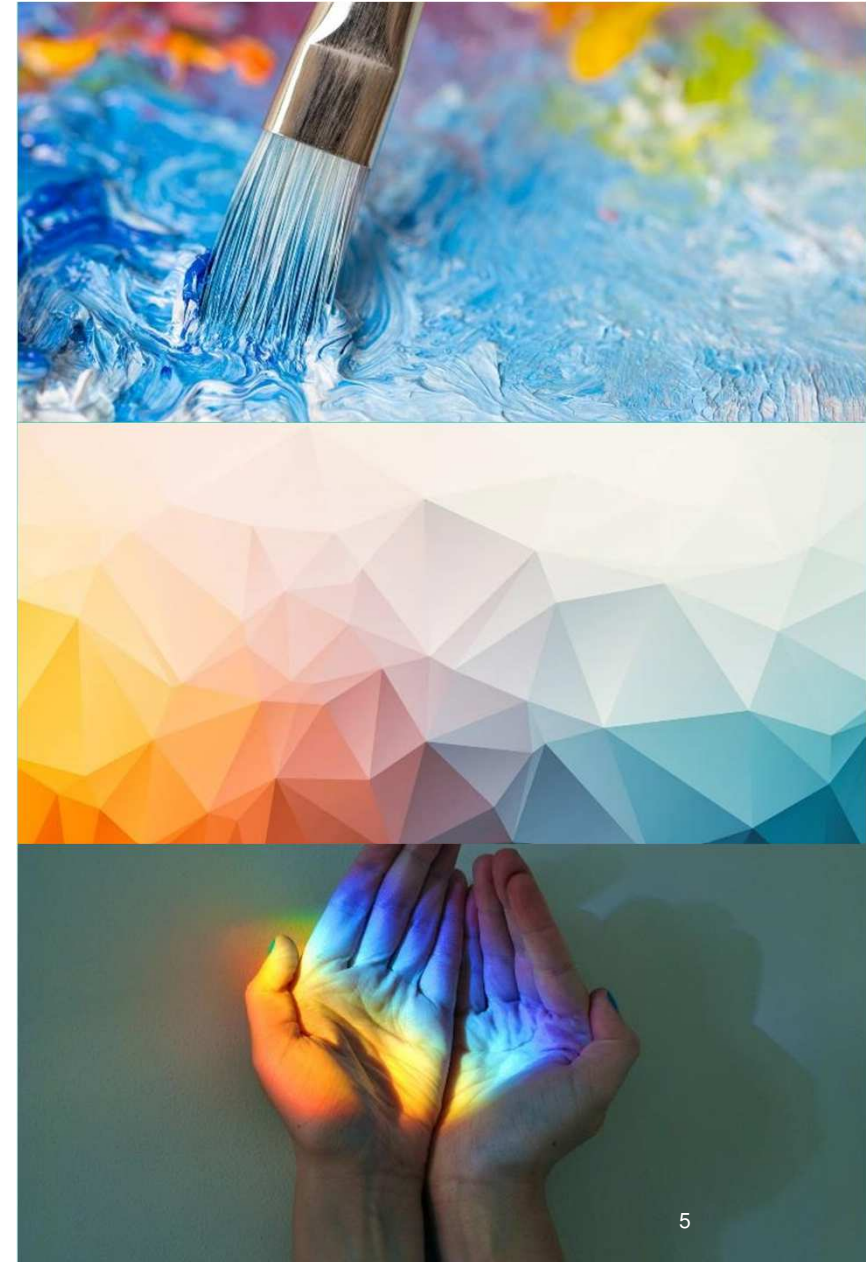
Presupposition

Culpeper & Haugh (2014:57) lists the different types of presupposition and presuppositional triggers in English.

Type	Presuppositional trigger	Example	Presupposition
Specific existential	A definite noun phrase (a definite article, demonstrative, possessive pronoun or s-genitive followed by a noun phrase, or a proper noun)	My car is red	>> There is a car which is mine
Non-specific existential	WH-questions (i.e. questions beginning who, what, when, why, where or how)	Who drove fast?	>> There is somebody who drove fast
	Cleft (or pseudo-cleft) sentences	It wasn't me that drove fast	>> There is somebody who drove fast
Factive	Factive emotive verbs (e.g. regret, be sorry, be glad)	I regret driving fast	>> I drove fast
	Factive epistemic verbs (e.g. realise, know, be obvious)	I realise that I was driving fast	>> I drove fast
Non-factive	Non-factive verbs (e.g. believe, suppose, imagine, dream, claim)	I claimed that I was driving fast	>> I may or may not have been driving fast
Counterfactual	Counterfactual conditionals	If I had been driving fast, I might have crashed	>> I was not driving fast
Other	Implicative verbs (e.g. manage, forget to, happened to)	I managed to drive fast	>> I tried to drive fast
	Change-of-state verbs (e.g. stop, begin, enter, come, go)	I stopped driving fast	>> I had been driving fast
	Iteratives (adverbs and verbs) (e.g. again, returned, repeat)	I drove fast again	>> I had been driving fast
	Temporal clauses (subordinate clauses beginning when, before, while, since, after, etc.)	When I drove fast, I skidded	>> I had been driving fast

Presupposition

- A presupposition can be distinguished from other logical inferences by means of the constancy under negation test.
- This test is based on the idea that a presupposition arises even if the sentence in which the presupposition is produced is negated.
- Consider the example below:
 - A. The fortieth pope was a German.
 - B. The fortieth pope was not a German.
 - C. There was a fortieth pope.
- Constancy under negation is motivated by the fact that the negation affects what is asserted only, *i.e.* focus of the utterance (Culpeper & Haugh, 2014:59).



Presupposition

- The other property of presuppositions is defeasibility/cancelability (Huang, 2017:90; Levinson, 1983:186).
- Defeasibility means that presuppositional triggers do not determine presuppositions, but potentially trigger an inference about what is presupposed (Culpeper & Haugh, 2014:59).
- This means that:
 1. presuppositions are not simply the properties of sentences but involve the beliefs of speakers; and
 2. presuppositions are part of the presumed common background beliefs of participants.
- Consider the following examples:
 1. None of us opened the door. (Given that the wind opened it.)
 2. I do not regret voting him out, because I did not vote.

Presupposition

- The presupposition of a clause may be projected into the complex sentence in which it is embedded.
- The **presupposition projection** can be seen as a special case of the Fregean principle of compositionality .(Huang, 2017:95).
- A complex sentence is generally expected to presuppose the conjunction of the presuppositions of all its constituent, *i.e.* its subordinate clauses.(Huang, 2017:95).
- In order to handle the projection problem, Karttunen (1973, cited in Huang, 2017: 100) classified presupposition predicates and operators into three types:
 1. **plugs**, which block off all the presuppositions of the lower clauses (*e.g.* non-factive verbs or verbs of propositional attitude),
 2. **holes**, which let all such presuppositions ascend to become presuppositions of the matrix sentence (*e.g.* factive verbs),
 3. **filters**, which prevent some but not all such presuppositions from being projected to the matrix sentence (*e.g.* the use of binary logical operators such as *and & or*).

Presupposition

- Presuppositions can be thought of as background information necessary for processing the new information asserted (or implicated) in the utterance (see Culpeper & Haugh, 2014:74).
- Yet, presuppositions can be used to communicate new information implicitly.



- Some presuppositional triggers seem geared towards presupposing new, rather than old, information, *e.g.* cleft constructions and factive verbs (*ibid.*).
- In certain cases, the speaker may act as if certain propositions are part of the common background when s/he knows that they are not.
- This, indeed, gives rise to a potentially manipulative use of presupposition (see Macagno, 2023).



Presupposition

- Thus, the issue of presupposing is not about whether it is old information or common information, or asserted or not, the issue is whether it is controversial information (Culpeper & Haugh, 2014:76).
- A presupposition has to be satisfied in its local context, otherwise, it has to be accommodated.
- Presupposition accommodation “provides an explanation for how a missing proposition required by what a speaker has said is supplied by the addressee so that what has been said by the speaker can be accepted” (Huang, 2017:108).
- Accommodation is constrained by certain conditions, namely: bridging and non-controvertiality (Huang, *ibid.*:109).

Presupposition

- In French tradition of pragmatics, presupposition is perceived differently.
- Oswald Ducrot, for instance, argues that presuppositions play roles in discourse coherence (see Moeschler, 2006: 387-8).
- For instance, a question-answer sequence has to include a common presupposition as explained in the example below:
 - (1) A: Does John write poetry?
B: No, Paul does (write poetry).
 - (2) A: Does John write poetry?
B: ?? No, Paul writes narratives.
 - (3) A: Does John write poetry?
B: No, John writes narratives.
- Within this perspective, presupposition is also argued to function as a means to ensure a level of redundancy that is necessary for thematic progression and co-referentiality (*cf.* definiteness).

Presupposition

- In an attempt to develop a more dynamic account of presupposition, some scholars provide a broader conceptualization of the concept (*e.g.* de Saussure, 2013; Polyzou, 2015).
- Conceptualizing presupposition as covering all shared knowledge necessary for discourse comprehension, Polyzou (*ibid.* 130-133) identifies three different levels of presupposed information, some of which are non-truth-functional (see Saussure, 2013: 179):
 1. lexical level presuppositions, in which presupposed concepts are evoked by the use of lexical items such as calling someone in political discourse a terrorist instead of freedom fighter.
 2. sentence level presuppositions, which are dependent on the notions of ‘figure’ and ‘ground’.
 3. discourse level presuppositions, which are not triggered by obvious linguistic triggers but understood associatively through “ideological knowledge larger units of discourse as manifested in a text, or part of a text...This includes knowledge both about the content and the genre of the text”.

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