

College of Education for Humanities
Department of English

Lecture Two (Chapter 10)

Pragmatics - Presupposition

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Presupposition

-When we communicate with others, we often rely on certain assumptions about what they already know. These assumptions are called presuppositions.

Definition

Presupposition is what the speaker/writer assumes is true or known by the listener/reader prior to making an utterance.

Examples:

- 1- if someone tells you " Your brother is waiting outside,"
there is a presupposition that you have a brother.
- 2- if you asked" why did you arrive late"
there is a presupposition that you did arrive late.
- 3- Jackson regrets playing poker,
Which presupposes that Jackson played poker

Sometimes we have two presuppositions.

e.g., when did you stop smoking cigars?

The speaker presupposes that you used to smoke and you no longer do

-The symbol (>>) is used to refer to what is presupposed in an utterance.

For instance:

'Lucy's cat is white'.

>> Lucy has a cat.

>> Lucy does exist.

Testing for Presuppositions

There is a simple test for presuppositions that involves comparing a sentence with its negative version and identifying which presuppositions remain true in both. This is called "constancy under negation."

For example, consider the following sentences:

My cat is on the mat.

My cat is not on the mat.

If we negate the first sentence, we get the second sentence. However, the presupposition that I have a cat remains true in both sentences.

Another example:

The president is coming to town.

The president is not coming to town.

In this case, the presupposition that we have a president remains true in both sentences.

Importance of Presuppositions

1. They allow us to be more efficient (well organized) in our communication.
2. They can be used to convey additional information. For example, If I say, "My cat is on the mat," I am not just saying that my cat is on the mat. I am also presupposing that I have a cat.

Presupposition Triggers

Definition

Presupposition triggers as lexical and grammatical elements that help us to identify the source of the inference.

Types of Presupposition Triggers

1. Existential presupposition:

'*My aunt's dog is skinny*' presupposes 'I have an aunt' and 'here dog is skinny'

The speaker is assumed to be committed to the existence of entities named.

2. Lexical presupposition:

a) Implicative verbs

For example, 'I *managed* to stop the car before the checkpoint' implies that I tried to stop the car before the checkpoint.

b) Non-implicative verbs

For example, 'John *forgot* to *park the car*' implies that John ought to have parked the car or intended to park the car.

c) **Factive verbs:** For instance, 'Mary *knows* that her father is dead' triggers the presupposition that her father died.

d) **Non-factive verbs**, which include triggers like *pretend*, *assume*, *believe*, *dream*, *think*, and *imagine*, imply that the speaker is not committed to the truth value of what is being presupposed.

e) **Change of state verbs:** For example, 'Mary *stopped* eating candy' triggers the presupposition that Mary had been eating candy.

f) **Iteratives:** For example, 'The tornado approached *again*'. Positive trigger the presupposition the tornado approached before.

g) **Verbs of judging:** For example, 'The Chief Executive Officer *accused* his secretary of bribery' presupposes that the Company CEO thinks that bribery is terrible.

3. Structural Presupposition:

This type refers to presuppositions related to specific sentence structures such as temporal clauses, wh-questions, comparisons, counterfactual conditionals and so on.

The interlocutors perceive the information following these constructions as already known or true.