Pragmatics (2)

Presupposition

foundations of semantics and pragmatics, december 20, 2012
Presupposition

• A presupposition is an implicit assumption that is needed in order to be able to interpret a sentence.

Examples:

(a) The king of France is bald. (ps) There exists a unique king of France
(b) Have you stopped beating your wife? (ps) Addressee has beaten his wife in the past
(c) John knows that this Facebook post is a hoax. (ps) This Facebook post is a hoax.
History of presupposition: Frege

- *On Sense and Reference* (1892/1948): the assumption that proper names and definite descriptions have a referent cannot be part of the semantics of a sentence, because it remains under negation:

  (a) Kepler died in misery.
  (b) Kepler did not die in misery.
  (c) Kepler did not die in misery, or the name “Kepler” has no referent.

- The negation of (a) is (b), not (c).
History of presupposition: Frege (2)

- Frege: if sentence (a) is false, the definite description in (b) and (c) fails to refer.

(a) There exists a unique king of France.
(b) The king of France is bald.
(c) The king of France is not bald.

- So neither (b) nor (c) can be assigned a truth value. This is a “deficiency of natural language”
History of presupposition: Russell

- Russell (1905): *The king of France is bald* is simply false (and similarly, *The king of France is not bald* is true).
- In Russell's theory of definite descriptions, (a) has the semantics in (b):

  1. (a) The king of France is bald.
     
     b $\text{KoF} \cap \text{bald} \neq \emptyset$ and $|\text{KoF}|=1$ (false if KoF=$\emptyset$)

  2. (a) The king of France is not bald.
     
     b $\text{KoF} \cap \text{bald} = \emptyset$ or $|\text{KoF}|\neq1$ (true if KoF=$\emptyset$)

- Since the sentence is analyse as an existential statement rather than a subject-predicate structure, we don't need presuppositions.
Strawson (1950) agrees with Russell that a sentence like *The king of France is bald* is “significant”, but only in the sense that

“the sentence *could* be used, in certain circumstances, to say something true or false, that the expression *could* be used, in certain circumstances to mention a particular person; and to know their meaning is to know what sort of circumstances these are.”

- It's not “nonsense”, but neither does it have a truth value.
- Strawson's definition of presupposition (following Frege's intuition):
  - One sentence presupposes another iff whenever the first is true or false, the second is true.
Satisfying a presupposition

• If a sentence’s presuppositions aren’t satisfied, the sentence is infelicitous.

• A presupposition can be met in two ways:
  – It is already part of the ‘common ground’ of the conversation (i.e. part of the knowledge shared by all conversation participants)
  – It is accommodated: if the information expressed by the presupposition does not contradict the common ground, it is added to it.

  example: when a stranger tells me “My wife is pregnant” both the presupposition (this person has a wife) and the actual assertion (she is pregnant) are added to the common ground.
Presupposition triggers

• A **presupposition trigger** is a lexical item, or a syntactic construction, that triggers a presupposition.

• Examples:
  – definite descriptions (*the king of France*)
  – change of state verbs (*stopped*)
  – factive verbs (*know that*)
  – possessive pronouns (*my wife*)
  – cleft sentences (*It was John who stole my chocolate*)
  – temporal constructions (*After we got lost, it took us an hour to get back onto the highway*)
Presupposition projection

• What happens when an expression $\phi$ with presupposition $\alpha$ is embedded under another expression $\psi$? (Karttunen 1973)
  – either $\alpha$ is still there – we say that $\alpha$ projects and that $\psi$ is a hole...
  – ...or $\alpha$ disappears – we say that $\alpha$ does not project and that $\psi$ is a plug.
Presupposition projection (2)

• Examples of holes:

(a) negation

The king of France is bald
The king of France isn’t bald.

(b) factive verbs

My wife is pregnant.
John knows that my wife is pregnant.

(c) questions

You have stopped beating your wife.
Have you stopped beating your wife?
Presupposition projection (3)

- Examples of plugs:

  (a) report verbs
  
  My wife is pregnant.
  
  John told everyone that my wife’s pregnant.

  (b) belief verbs
  
  My wife is pregnant.
  
  John believes that my wife is pregnant.
Presupposition projection (4)

• A **filter** is a construction that’s neither a plug nor a hole (examples from Karttunen 1973):

  (a) If Dean told the truth, Nixon is guilty too.
  (b) If Haldeman is guilty, Nixon is guilty too.

• The presupposition *someone else than Nixon is guilty* projects in (a), but not in (b), because it is explicitly stated in the antecedent of the conditional.
Presupposition, entailment and implicature

• How to decide whether an inference is a presupposition, an entailment or a conversational implicature?

• Tests:
  – Entailment/implicature versus presupposition: negation test
  – Implicature versus presupposition/entailment: cancellation test
Presupposition, entailment and implicature (2)

• Negation test: does the inference remain when the sentence is negated?
  – **Yes**: the inference is a presupposition
  – **No**: the inference is an entailment or implicature

• **Example:**
  (1) a The king of France is bald. → There is a unique king of France.
      b The king of France isn’t bald. → There is a unique king of France.

  (2) a The king of France is bald. → Someone is bald.
      b The king of France isn’t bald. → Someone is bald.
Presupposition, entailment and implicature (3)

• Cancellation test: can the inference be cancelled by explicitly contradicting it?
  – **Yes:** the inference is an implicature
  – **No:** the inference is an entailment or presupposition

• **Example:**

  (1)  a Some of my pets have trunks. → I have pets.
       b #Some of my pets have trunks but I have no pets.

  (2)  a Some of my pets have trunks. → Not all of my pets have trunks.
       b Some of my pets have trunks, in fact all of them do.
Presupposition, entailment and implicature (4)

- Summary:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Stays under negation</th>
<th>Can be cancelled</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entailment</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicature</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presupposition</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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