

# Projecting Presuppositions

Lecture Notes, LING 590

3/18/2009 – 3/23/2009

## 1. PRESUPPOSITION DEATH AND SURVIVAL

Last time, we said—

- (1) In a sentence of the form *if m then p* or *m and p*, where *p* presupposes *q*:  
the whole sentence presupposes *q*, **unless** *m* entails *q*.
- (2) In a sentence of the form *m or p*, where *p* presupposes *q*:  
the whole sentence presupposes *q*, **unless**  $\neg m$  entails *q*.

But that's not quite right, based on, e.g.,

*m*: The Vice-Chancellor invites Noam Chomsky to dinner.  
*q*: The Vice-Chancellor invites an extreme left-winger to his table.

*m*: Sue is/has been a Mormon.  
*q*: Sue wore temple garments in the past.

where in both cases,  $m \nvdash q$ . On the other hand, they *resemble* entailment...

In fact, both of them are entailments if you add in another assumption:

*m*: The Vice-Chancellor invites Noam Chomsky to dinner.  
*n*: Chomsky is an extreme left-winger.  
*q*: The Vice-Chancellor invites an extreme left-winger to his table.

*m*: Sue is/has been a Mormon.  
*n*: Mormons wear temple garments  
*q*: Sue wore temple garments in the past.

In both cases,  $(m + n) \vdash q$ . So we might have instead

- (3) In a sentence of the form *if m then p* or *m and p*, where *p* presupposes *q*:  
the whole sentence presupposes *q*,  
**unless** *m* plus information from the context entails *q*.

and similarly for *or*.

## 2. ON THE “COMMON GROUND”

By “the context”, we’re really talking about, following Stalnaker (1978), **common ground**.

- (4) The **common ground** in a context is the set of propositions whose truth is accepted (“taken for granted”?) by the participants in the conversation. –That is, the set of propositions *presupposed*.

An aside from Stalnaker (1978):

The propositions presupposed need not really be common or mutual knowledge; the speaker may not even believe them. He may presuppose any proposition that he finds it convenient to assume for the purposes of the conversation, provided he is prepared to assume that his audience will assume it along with him.

- (5) Relatedly: the **context set** is the set of worlds in which all propositions in the common ground are true. (Stalnaker again: “the set of possible worlds recognized by the speaker to be the ‘live options’ relevant to the conversation.”)

How do we know whether a truth is accepted by the participants in the conversation? We don’t; we can only guess. e.g.,

- When speaking to a fellow semanticist on the job market, I might say, “I wonder whether the position at Michigan is still open”, presupposing *A position exists at Michigan* and *This position was open at some point in the past*, with the belief that we both think these things to be true.
- When speaking to my aunt, I might say instead, “There was a position at Michigan that was open at some point in the past, and I wonder whether it still is”—thus filtering the presuppositions, because I don’t believe that we both think these things to be true.

And we can be wrong:

- I might say “Jesse has stopped drinking” because I believe we all know that Jesse used to drink; you might correct that belief by saying, “I didn’t know he did drink”.

### 3. ASSERTION AND PRESUPPOSITION IN CONTEXT

#### 3.1. *Assertion*

Again, following Stalnaker:

To make an assertion is to reduce the context set...[such that] all of the possible situations incompatible with what is said are eliminated. To put it a slightly different way, the essential effect of an assertion is to change the presuppositions of the participants in the conversation by adding the content of what is asserted to what is presupposed.

Note that...

- This is a description of the effect of asserting, not a definition of assertion.
- It's not a sufficient condition: things can get added to the common ground without assertion.
- It's not a necessary condition: things can get asserted even though the speaker knows they won't be added to the common ground.

So for example:

Old context:  $c$

I assert  $p$

New context:  $c + p$

#### 3.2. *...and Presupposition...*

Previously, we said

- (6) A statement A presupposes another statement B iff:
- a. if A is true, then B is true
  - b. if A is false, then B is true

which is to say, using our sense of “felicitous”:

- (7) A statement A presupposes another statement B iff B must be true for A to be uttered felicitously.

Now, substituting facts about context for “B must be true”:

- (8) A statement A presupposes another statement B iff A can be uttered felicitously only in contexts that entail B. (cf Kadmon, p. 119)

### 3.3. ...in context

Quick terminological note: the following are equivalent...

- context  $c$  **admits** sentence  $S$
- context  $c$  **satisfies** the presuppositions of  $S$
- context  $c$  **entails** the presuppositions of  $S$

Then we can say that a presupposition must be satisfied by the context.

So for example:

Old context:  $c$

I assert  $p$

[check to make sure that  $c$  entails the presuppositions of  $p$ ]

New context:  $c + p$

But we can do better! Rather than having this, plus the filtering rules above, we can say:

(9) A presupposition must be satisfied by the *local* context.

Oh good. If we knew what a local context was, we'd be all set.

### 3.4. ...in local context

#### 3.4.1. Conjunction

Old context:  $c$

I assert  $p \wedge q$

[check to make sure that the local context entails the presuppositions of  $p$ ]  
[i.e., check to make sure that  $c$  entails the presuppositions of  $p$ ]

[check to make sure that the local context entails the presuppositions of  $q$ ]  
[i.e., check to make sure that  $(c + p)$  entails the presuppositions of  $q$ ]

New context:  $(c + p) + q \equiv c + p + q \equiv c + (p \wedge q)$

How can  $(c + p)$  entail the presuppositions of  $q$ ? Either...

- $c$  itself entails the presuppositions of  $q$

*The queen of England is bald and the king of France is bald.*

...we must already agree that there is a king of France.

- $p$  itself entails the presuppositions of  $q$

*There is a king of France and the king of France is bald.*

...nothing in particular needed in the context.

- $c$  along with  $p$  entails the presuppositions of  $q$

*Susan is a Mormon and she's stopped wearing temple garments!*  
...context contains "Mormons wear temple garments".

### 3.4.2. Conditionals

Old context:  $c$

I assert "If  $p$ , then  $q$ "

[check to make sure that  $c$  entails the presuppositions of  $p$ ]

[check to make sure that the local context entails the presuppositions of  $q$ ]

[i.e., check to make sure that  $(c + p)$  entails the presuppositions of  $q$ ]

New context:  $(c + p) + q \equiv c + p + q \equiv c + (p \wedge q) \dots?$  (Not really, no.)

So (9) doesn't actually tell us to change the context; it just tells us how to check to see if the context satisfies the presuppositions. (Have we really added  $p$  to the context before checking  $q$ ? What if we don't add  $q$  because, say, it contradicts the context—have we added  $p$  anyway?)

The model therefore looks more like:

#### Assertion

Old context:  $c$

I assert "If  $p$ , then  $q$ "

New context:  $c + (p \rightarrow q)$

#### Presupposition

does  $c$  satisfy  $p$ ? If so...

does  $c + p$  satisfy  $q$ ? If so...

## 4. PROBLEMS WITH THE CONTEXT APPROACH

- Though "local context" seemed to be a more natural way of capturing the filtering rules of (1), the filtering rules still need to be stated. They work independently of the actual meaning (which is why checking the context for the assertability of *If  $p$ , then  $q$*  is different from actually adding it to the context).
- Having  $c + p$  be the local context for  $q$  in conjunction and implication seemed OK. But what about disjunction?

- (10) a. Either the king of France is bald, or there is no king of France.  
b. Either there is no king of France, or the king of France is bald.  
*neither presuppose that there is a king of France*

- (11) In a sentence of the form  $p$  or  $q$ :  
the whole sentence presupposes  $ps(q)$ , **unless**  $c + \neg p$  entails  $ps(q)$   
...and also, the whole sentence presupposes  $ps(p)$ , **unless**  $c + \neg q$  entails  $ps(p)$

So the local context for  $q$  is  $c + \neg p$ , and the local context for  $p$  is  $c + \neg q$ . Er. At this point, how explanatory is the theory?

#### 4.1. Counterexamples

##### 4.1.1. "it is possible that"

- (12) It is possible that Sam has children, and it is possible that her children are away.

Prediction:

$ps(q)$  = "Sam has children" (because *possible* is a hole)

local context:  $c + p$

$p$  does not entail "Sam has children";

it's unlikely that any  $c + p$  could possibly entail it;

therefore  $c$  must entail  $ps(q)$  on its own...

ergo, (12) can only be uttered in a context that entails  $ps(q)$

Fact: no presupposition that Sam has children.

*Commentary*: it looks like (12) might just be equivalent to

- (12') It's possible that [Sam has children and her children are away].

But note that (12) suggests (implicates?) three possibilities—Sam has no children, Sam has children who are here, Sam has children who are away—whereas (12') suggests only two possibilities—i.e., "Sam has children who are here" doesn't seem to be suggested.

Dimka's right that possible worlds enter into it somehow; but note too that we can't use a rule that gets us "The local context for the second conjunct is  $c +$  'Sam has children'", because that would predict no presupposition for:

- (12'') It's possible that Sam has children; and her children are away.

which is wrong (in fact, the sentence is quite odd).

#### 4.1.2. *Factive verbs*

(13) If Nixon knows the war is over, the war is over.

Prediction:

ps(*p*) = “the war is over” (because *know* is factive)

local context: *c*

*c* must entail “the war is over”

Fact: the sentence does not presuppose that the war is over.

(14) If I realize later that I lied, I will apologize.

Prediction:

*c* entails ps(“I [will] realize later that I lied”),

i.e. *c* entails “I lied”

i.e. the sentence presupposes that I lied.

Fact: Nope.

Possible explanation: there’s something future-oriented about “realize”. But note that even a future-tense sentence with {realize/discover/find out} still presupposes that the embedded sentence happens at some point...

(14') Some time next week, Mary will realize that she forgot her passport.

...i.e. that Mary forgetting her passport *does* happen, even if it happens after the speech time. But in (14), there’s no presupposition that I ever lied or will lie. Also, imagine ending a lecture with:

(14'') If I discover later that I made a mistake in today’s lecture, I’ll send out a correction.

It’s not going to be the case that my making a mistake in today’s lecture will happen after the speech time. The event of making a mistake, if it occurred, has to have already occurred—but the sentence doesn’t presuppose that it occurred at all, and is perfectly compatible with my having not made any mistakes.

New explanation: there’s some interaction between *if*-clauses and factive verbs, such that the antecedent of an *if* statement is a hole for presuppositions except the ones of factive verbs. (It remains to be worked out what that is.)

### 4.1.3. *A mysterious counterexample*

(15) If John hasn't just stopped smoking, he has just started smoking.

Prediction:

*c* entails ps("John hasn't just stopped smoking"),

i.e. *c* entails "John used to smoke (fairly recently)"

i.e. the sentence presupposes that John used to smoke (fairly recently)

Fact: Also nope.

### 4.1.4. *A few non-counterexamples from Levinson*

First, Levinson worries about the "holy underwear" and "invites a feminist" sentences; we've taken care of that by adding in the common ground.

Second, Levinson presents...

(182) John didn't in fact regret losing the game, because in fact he won.

Saith Levinson: "the negation in...(182) must be a different kind of negation, namely one which does not let conventional implicata survive. But this view runs into all the objections we raised above against the view that negation is ambiguous..."

From the Digression Board, a few (perhaps) similar sentences:

- (a) #The King of France is not bald.
- (b) The King of France is not bald—there is no King of France!
- (c) If the King of France is bald, then there is a King of France.

We'll come back to this....

## 4.2. *The bottom line*

The filtering approach (even via context change) doesn't filter out nearly enough.