

**Presuppositions**  
Lecture Notes, LING 590  
March 2, 2009

## 1. A BRIEF HISTORY OF PRESUPPOSITIONS

As always, the study begins with Frege:<sup>1</sup>

If anything is asserted there is always an obvious presupposition that the simple or compound proper names used have reference. If one therefore asserts **Kepler died in misery**, there is a presupposition that the name “Kepler” designates something; but it does not follow that the sense of the sentence “Kepler died in misery” contains the thought that the name “Kepler” designates something. If this were the case the negation would have to run not **Kepler did not die in misery** but **Kepler did not die in misery, or the name “Kepler” has no reference**. That the name “Kepler” designates something is just as much a [*Voraussetzung*] for the assertion **Kepler died in misery** as for the contrary assertion.

Where *Voraussetzung* is usually translated “presupposition” (though I gather it means “condition” more generally—perhaps “precondition”?)

### 1.1. *But what does that mean?*

Option 1:  $[[\textit{Kepler died in misery}]] = [\exists x . \text{“Kepler” designates } x] \wedge [x \text{ died in misery}]^2$

then:  $[[\textit{Kepler did not die in misery}]] = \neg[[\textit{Kepler died in misery}]] =$   
 $\neg([\exists x . \text{“Kepler” designates } x] \wedge [x \text{ died in misery}])$   
 $\neg[\exists x . \text{“Kepler” designates } x] \vee \neg[x \text{ died in misery}] \dots \text{WRONG!}$

Option 2: Presupposition: something is designated by the name “Kepler”.  
 $[[\textit{Kepler died in misery}]] = \text{the } x \text{ designated by “Kepler” died in misery}$

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<sup>1</sup> And as always, it *really* begins in ancient Greece:

In terms of the actual question (and the point on questions building in presuppositions), of course it’s largely a matter of definition as to who came up with it first. For the Megarians (3d century B.C.), the sophism of choice was “Do you still beat your father? Answer yes or no.” The scholastics preferred “Do you still beat your ass?” [the donkey, not fundament]. And for us moderns, “Do you still beat your wife?” 24 centuries of social progress... –Larry Horn, *ADS mailing list*, 3/25/2004

<sup>2</sup> This is a terrible logical form. There really shouldn’t be an unbound  $x$  in the second clause. Oh well, let it go for now.

As it happens, Frege wasn't really even talking about the reference of proper names:

(1) Whoever discovered the elliptic form of planetary orbits died in misery.

Option 1: The subordinate clause somehow denotes a complete thought, e.g.  
[[ (1) ] ] = [ Someone discovered the EFoPO ]  $\wedge$  [ he died in misery ]

“If this were right, the negation would run...”

(2) Either whoever discovered the elliptic form of planetary orbits did not die in misery or there was nobody who discovered the elliptic form of the planetary orbits.

So for Frege: any referring expression (name, definite description, free relative, series of mathematical symbols) has *as a prerequisite* that it refers.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2. Enter Russell

Bertrand Russell (“On Denoting”, 1905) is having none of that.

- If *a* is identical with *b*, whatever is true of the one is true of the other, and either may be substituted for the other in any proposition without altering the truth or falsehood of that proposition. Now George IV wished to know whether Scott was the author of *Waverley*; and in fact Scott *was* the author of *Waverley*. Hence we may substitute *Scott* for *the author of “Waverley”*, and thereby prove that George IV wished to know whether Scott was Scott. Yet an interest in the law of identity can hardly be attributed to the first gentleman of Europe.

We can probably safely dismiss this via sense vs. reference, intensions, etc. etc.<sup>4</sup>

- By the law of the excluded middle, either “*A* is *B*” or “*A* is not *B*” must be true. Hence either “the present King of France is bald” or “the present King of France is not bald” must be true. Yet if we enumerated the things that are bald, and then the things that are not bald, we should not find the present King of France in either list. Hegelians, who love a synthesis, will probably conclude that he wears a wig.

This one...is harder. Russell's answer:

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<sup>3</sup> Complete with the political observation that “there is at any rate no generally accepted reference” for the expression *the will of the people*.

<sup>4</sup> And anyway, see Jennifer Saul: *Lois wishes to know whether Superman is Clark Kent*  $\neq$  *Lois wishes to know whether Superman is Superman*, even though Superman = Clark Kent.

- ...if I say “the author of *Waverley* was a man”, that is not a statement of the form “*x* was a man”, and does not have “the author of *Waverley*” for its subject. Abbreviating the statement made at the beginning of this article, we may put, in place of “the author of *Waverley* was a man”, the following: “One and only one entity wrote *Waverley*, and that one was a man”.

In other words: *the* is a generalized quantifier, and has no referent in any case. Instead...

$$(3) \quad \llbracket \text{the king of France is bald} \rrbracket = \exists x . [\text{KoF}(x) \wedge \forall y [\text{KoF}(y) \leftrightarrow x = y] \wedge \text{Bald}(x)]$$

which is exactly what Frege was trying to avoid, for now

$$(4) \quad \llbracket \text{the king of France is not bald} \rrbracket = \neg \exists x . [\text{KoF}(x) \wedge \forall y [\text{KoF}(y) \leftrightarrow x = y] \wedge \text{Bald}(x)]$$

which can hold if either there is no *x* such that *x* is the King of France, or if there’s more than one such *x*, or, finally, if there is such an *x* but *x* is not bald.<sup>5</sup>

And indeed, how else do we explain:

$$(5) \quad \text{The king of France is not bald, because there is no king of France!}$$

In Russell’s theory, (5) works because one of the three conjuncts in (3) is false, namely **KoF(x)** (which asserts that there is at least one King of France). It’s entirely analogous to

$$(5') \quad \text{The king of France is not bald, because he has hair!}$$

in which the conjunct that’s false is **Bald(x)**. But then again, it should also be analogous to

$$(5'') \quad \text{The king of France is not bald, because there are two of them!}$$

and yet that sounds much, much different.

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<sup>5</sup> And don’t miss his closing challenge: “I will only beg the reader not to make up his mind against the view—as he might be tempted to do, on account of its apparently excessive complication—until he has attempted to construct a theory of his own on the subject of denotation. This attempt, I believe, will convince him that, whatever the true theory may be, it cannot have such a simplicity as one might have expected beforehand.”

### 1.3. *Enter Strawson; exit Russell*

- (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

*Sidebar:* (6) and not...

(7) A statement A presupposes another statement B iff  $A \Vdash B$  and  $\neg A \Vdash B$ .

Why not?

1. A presupposes B.
2. Therefore, A entails B and  $\neg A$  entails B.
3. Every sentence A has a negation  $\neg A$ ;  
A is true or A is false;  
A is true or  $\neg A$  is true.
4. Therefore, B must be true.  
(and hence: there must be a king of France.)

Note that one effect of (6) is that presuppositions are qualities of *sentences*, not *utterances* (like implicatures) or *propositions* (like entailments). For instance,

- (8)
- a. Lydia has stopped eating kittens.
  - b. Lydia ate kittens and Lydia does not currently eat kittens.

both seem to express the same meaning; but only the former presupposes that Lydia once ate kittens. (Indeed, the latter entails it.)