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PRESUPPOSITION

A presupposition is a precondition of a sentence such that the sentences cannot be uttered meaningfully unless the presupposition is satisfied. The concept of a *Presupposition* is due to Gottlob Frege (1892), but the English term was coined by Strawson (1950). Presupposition theory is an area of active research at the *SEMANTICS/PRAGMATICS* interface. A related term is *Conventional Implicature.* Grice (1975) distinguished between presuppositions and conventional implicatures, however, it is still under debate whether such a distinction is necessary (cf. Potts 2007 and ensuing discussion).

DEFINITE DESCRIPTIONS have played a big role in the development of presupposition theory and are still generally analyzed as introducing a presupposition. Consider for example (1). No entity that satisfies the description *biggest natural number* exists. What is the status of (1)? Is it true or false?

(1)   The biggest natural number is prime.

Presupposition theory says (1) is neither true nor false: a definite description *the NP* presupposes the existence of an individual that satisfies *NP* – in other words, definite descriptions carry an *existence presupposition*. *Presupposition failure* describes the case

when a presupposition is not fulfilled like (1). Presupposition failures are analyzed as being neither true nor false, but as being truth-value gaps. Presupposition theory therefore relies on a distinction between three possible truth-values a sentence may have: true, false, and undefined. One important argument in support of a third truth-value has been the interaction between negation and presuppositions: a presupposition failure in many cases remains a presupposition failure even when the sentence is negated:

(2)   The biggest natural number is not prime.

It follows that (2), like (1), is a presupposition failure just if negation does not change the conditions under which a sentence has a truth value. Negation can be used in this way as a presupposition test: A presupposition follows from a sentence and its negation. The assertion, on the other hand, only follows from the sentence itself, and not from its negation.

Just like the existence presupposition of the sentences in (1) and (2) is triggered by the definite article *the*, many other words trigger presuppositions. Levinson's (1983) textbook lists several pages of presupposition triggers in English. A particularly interesting paradigm is that in (3) (cf. Abusch 2005): (3a) has no relevant lexically triggered presupposition. (3b) presupposes that it is actually raining outside and asserts that Bill thinks so, too. Finally, (3c) presupposes that Bill thinks that it is raining outside, and asserts that it actually is raining outside. Particularly interesting that *be right* and *know* have the same truth conditions, but differ on which part of them is presupposed. Paradigm (3) shows that part of our specific knowledge about *think*, *know*, and *be right* is whether they trigger a presupposition and which one.

(3)   a.   Bill thinks that it's raining outside.
        b.   Bill knows that it's raining outside.
        c.   Bill is right that it's raining outside.

Some presuppositions are not lexically triggered. For example, (3a) cannot be used if it is known that it really is raining outside. This presupposition, however, has been analyzed as an *implicated presupposition* (Sauerland 2007). It can be derived in a similar way to *CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES* as arising from the avoidance of a presupposition trigger and a principle of presupposition maximization (Heim 1991).

One central problem of presupposition theory is the question how to predict the presuppositions of complex sentences – the problem of *presupposition projection*. Karttunen and Peters (1979) show that, while negation does not affect presuppositions, in other complex sentences presupposition triggers can occur, but the presupposition may not project to the entire sentence: In example (4), the conditional clause blocks projection of the existence presupposition of *the biggest natural number*.

(4)   If there was a biggest natural number, the biggest natural number would be prime. Building on work by Stalnaker (1973) and Karttunen (1974), Heim (1983) has developed an influential account of presupposition projection that has given rise to dynamic semantics (see also Beaver 2001, Kadmon 2001). However, the projection problem is still subject to lively debate (see Schlenker (2007)).

--Uli Sauerland

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