

7.6. Presuppositions of Questions and Commands

Our definition of presupposition states that sentence S presupposes sentence P if “in every situation where S is accepted, P is also accepted”. Since the presupposition(s) of S are defined in terms of S’s *acceptance* conditions, S must be *acceptable* in certain situations in order to have a presupposition. But note: when we accept a sentence, we accept it as *true*. That means the kind of sentence capable of being accepted is a **declarative sentence**. So presuppositions, as currently defined, are had only by declarative sentences.

But here we extend the notion of presupposition to cover non-declarative sentences, by associating non-declarative sentence with a family of related declarative sentences. The non-declarative sentence can thereby get a presupposition ‘by association’ with those declaratives.

1. Questions. While questions (or the interrogative sentences that ask them) are not themselves declarative sentences, any question is naturally associated with a certain set of declarative sentences: the set of possible **direct answers** to that question.

Some questions have a very small set of possible direct answers. For example a “Yes/No” question like (Q1) has only two possible direct answers.

(Q1) Is today Tuesday?

- (1) (Yes,) Today is Tuesday
- (2) (No,) Today is not Tuesday

But a “Why?” question like (Q2) has an opened-ended range of direct answers.

(Q2) Why did Rex light the fire?

- (3) Rex lit the fire *in order* to attract the rescue crew’s attention.
- (4) Rex lit the fire in order to keep warm.
- (5) Rex lit the fire because he wanted to toast marshmallows.

We can't list every possible direct answer to (Q2); but we can still talk about the set of all such answers. (Likewise, while we can't list all the even numbers, we can still speak meaningfully about all them. They are, for instance, all divisible by two.) In particular, it is clear that *any direct answer to (Q2)* can be phrased in something like the following forms.

(Q2) Why did Rex light the fire?

(6) Rex started the fire because...

(7) Rex started the fire in order to...

And since these are all explanation sentences, we see that any direct answer to (Q2) will presuppose (8).

(8) Rex started the fire.

Notice, for example, that (3) through (5) all presuppose (8).

(3) Rex lit the fire *in order* to attract the rescue crew's attention

(4) Rex lit the fire in order to keep warm

(5) Rex lit the fire because he wanted to toast marshmallows

On the basis of this observation, we can extend the notion of presupposition to questions such as (Q2).

Presupposition of a Question: If P is presupposed by *every direct answer* to question Q, then P is presupposed by Q.

Since (8) is presupposed by *every direct answer* to (Q2), we can now say that (8) is presupposed by (Q2) itself.

Of course, we don't think every question will necessarily have a presupposition. But our definition of a question's presupposition at least permits some questions to have presuppositions.

2. Commands. The same strategy can be used for commands (or the imperative sentences that express them). But while a question naturally calls for a (declarative) answer in response, a command often doesn't call for any sentence at all in response, but rather some appropriate action. Still, we can build a sentence 'counterpart' to such appropriate action, by declaring that we *will*, or *will not*, comply with the command and perform that action. We call such a sentence a "compliance sentence". So, for instance, suppose someone utters (C1):

(C1) Drive below the speed limit!

There will be two compliance sentences one can make in response:

(9) I will drive below the speed limit.

(10) I will not drive below the speed limit.

But notice that both compliance sentences contain a definite description – "the speed limit" – and so both sentences presuppose (11):

(11) There is a (unique) speed limit (in this particular situation).

So we say that, by association, command (C1) presupposes (11) as well.

More generally, we define a presupposition of a commands as follows.

Presupposition of a Command: If P is presupposed by every *compliance sentence* for a command C, then P is presupposed by C.

3. Presuppositions and Rejections. While we have so far we only considered direct answers to questions and compliance sentences for commands, that much gives an incomplete account of how one can **respond** to a question or command. The account so far allows a participant in a conversation only one possible response to a question: give a *direct answer* to it. But consider question (Q3).

(Q3) Why did Suki cheat on his Logic exam?

Any direct answer to (Q3) will be of the form (12).

(Q3) Why did Suki cheat on his Logic exam?

(12) Suki cheated on his Logic exam because....

But we might not give any such response – replying instead with (13).

(13) Suki did not cheat on his Logic exam

Sentence (13) isn't a direct answer to (Q3), but rather a **rejection of the question**.

Likewise, if a speaker commands us to drive below the speed limit in a situation where there is no speed limit – say, on a German highway – then neither compliance sentence (saying we will, or will not, drive below that speed limit) is an appropriate response. Instead, we can **reject the command** by uttering (14).

(14) There is no (unique) speed limit.

While we haven't yet defined what it is to be such a rejection, the previous discussion makes clear that in each case the rejection is the denial of a presupposition. Consider again the *question* (Q3).

(Q3) Why did Suki cheat on his Logic exam?

We said that any direct answer to (Q3) – and hence (Q3) itself – presupposes (15).

(15) Suki cheated on his Logic exam

And the rejection of (Q3) is just the denial of this presupposition.

(13) Suki did not cheat on the Logic exam.

Our earlier discussion of presuppositions thus provides as well the concepts need to defined rejection.

Rejection of a Question or Command: A rejection of a question or command is the *negation of a presupposition* of that question or command.

Of course, the very fact that we sometimes want to reject a question or command highlights once more the communicative work that presuppositions do. If a non-declarative sentence *S* is uttered, it isn't accepted into the conversational background, for the simple reason that only declarative sentences can be accepted. Still, if that non-declarative sentence has a presupposition, that presupposition can be accepted into the conversational background.

The ability to reject a question or command is important for precisely this reason: if we couldn't reject the question – that is, if we couldn't negate its presupposition – then the presupposition would automatically be accepted into the conversational background.

Summary:
Presuppositions of Questions and Commands

Presupposition of a Question: If every direct answer to question Q presupposes P, then Q itself presupposes P.

Presupposition of a Command: If every compliance sentence for command C presupposes P, then C itself presupposes P.

Rejection of a Question or Command: a rejection of a question or command is the **denial of a presupposition** of the question or command.