

## 7.5. Presuppositions

**1. Presuppositions: Old News vs. New News.** [Indirect communication provides one way of communicating a sentence without saying it in so many words. The second sentence, indirectly communicated, ‘rides on the coattails’ of the sentence explicitly stated.

But as we noted early on, one and the same sentence can, from one context to the next, bring with it different unspoken sentences. Recall our original example of the sentence “My car has a flat tire”: in one context it’s justifying my car being parked in a No Parking zone, while in another it requests help fixing the tire. By contrast, the meaning of a sentence explicitly uttered doesn’t vary from one context to the next (except for pronouns such as “it,” “this,” “here,” and the like). The meaning of the sentence “My car has a flat tire,” remains invariant from one context to the next

Presuppositions are a type of sentence falling halfway between these two cases. For on the one hand presuppositions will be further examples of sentences communicated without being explicitly uttered. But unlike the cases of indirect communication examined earlier, presuppositions don’t vary from one context to the next. A presupposition thus acts as a kind of unspoken second sentence hard-wired into the sentence explicitly uttered.]

Consider, for example, **cleft sentences** – sentences of the form “It was \_\_\_\_ that \_\_\_\_,” or “It is \_\_\_\_ that/who \_\_\_\_”. Sentences (1) and (2) are examples of cleft sentences.

- (1) It was Suki who broke the typewriter
- (2) It was the crystal goblet that Jack discovered in Milan

The phrasing in each sentence treats some information as **old news**, as a **settled and uncontroversial part of the common ground**. Sentence (1), for example, treats as already established that someone broke the typewriter – the only remaining question being who that someone is. So Suki being the typewriter-breaker is treated as the **new information** in (1), added to what’s already settled.

The part of a cleft sentence treated as **old news** is the **presupposition** of that cleft sentence. So (P1) is the presupposition of (1), and (P2) is the presupposition of (2).

(1) It was **Suki** who broke the typewriter

(P1) Someone broke the typewriter.

(2) It was **the crystal goblet** that Jack discovered in Milan

(P2) Jack discovered something in Milan.

*(In both sentences, what's treated as settled fact is underlined, and what's treated as **new information** is in bold.)*

It might seem that a presupposition is just an **entailment** – that (P1) is just a sentence that follows validly from (1), and likewise that (P2) follows validly from (2).

Against that suggestion we contrast Sentences (1) with (3).

(1) It was Suki who broke the typewriter.

(3) Suki broke the typewriter.

(P1) Someone broke the typewriter.

(1) and (3) report the same information, and both sentences validly entail Sentence (P1) – that “Someone broke the typewriter”. Now, if presupposition just meant “sentence that follows validly,” (P1) would be a presupposition of both (1) and (3). But the wording of Sentence (3) doesn't treat it as uncontroversial common knowledge that someone broke the typewriter. So we say that (P1) is presupposed by (1), but not by (3). And that means: **being a presupposition of a sentence isn't just following validly from that sentence.**

Within the fields of logic and pragmatics there are several competing theories of when a sentence presupposes something, and a fair amount of controversy over *why* certain sentences have just the presuppositions that they do. Short of a settled general theory of presuppositions, we settle here for a miniature catalog of sentence types and the presuppositions they carry.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Following examples from (Soames 1988: XX) and (van Fraassen 1980: XX).

A type of sentence similar to cleft sentences is the **pseudo-cleft** sentence – a sentence of the form “What X (does) is/was Y”. Sentences (4) and (5) are pseudo-clefts.

(4) What Suki broke was the typewriter.

(5) What Jacks hates is bananas.

Here again something is treated as already settled: Sentence (4) takes it as settled that Suki broke something or other; while (5) treats as settled that there’s something Jack hates. We count each as a presupposition of the corresponding pseudo-cleft sentence.

(4) What Suki broke was **the typewriter**.

(P4) There’s something Suki broke (that is: Suki broke something).

(5) What Jacks hates is **bananas**.

(P5) There’s something Jack hates.

*(Settled fact is underlined; new information is in bold.)*

**Explanation sentences** are a third type of sentence carrying a presupposition – a declarative sentence that answers a “Why?” or “How?” question (or some equivalent type of question, such as “What was the reason that...?”, or “What is the purpose/function of...?”, or “What caused...?”). While explanation sentences take a variety of grammatical forms, they are typically of sentences in one of the following forms.

The reason (why) X Y-ed is....

X Y-ed because....

X Y-ed in order to.

So the following are all explanation sentences.

(6) The reason the metal rod expanded is that it was heated by the blowtorch.

(7) The window shattered because it was hit by a rock.

(8) Neko lit the fire in order to attract the rescue crew’s attention.

In each case the sentence cites something to be explained – “The metal rod expanded,” “The window shattered,” “Neko lit the fire” – and then goes on to cite

something which explains it. Here what's assumed as settled is the matter to be explained; while the information added is what explains it. So an explanation sentence presupposes the matter being explained.

(6) The reason the metal rod expanded is that **it was heated by the blowtorch.**

(P6) The metal rod expanded

(7) The window shattered because **those kids threw rocks at it.**

(P7) The window shattered.

(8) Neko lit the fire in order **to attract the rescue crew's attention.**

(P8) Neko lit the fire.

*(Settled fact is underlined; new information is in bold.)*

Some verbs take for granted that a discussed action or event is a settled fact. These are the **factive verbs**: verbs such as “regret,” “realize,” and “know”.

(11) **Elvis regrets that** he sold his motorcycle.

(P11) Elvis sold his motorcycle

(12) **Rex realizes that** the final exam is in two days.

(P12) The final exam is in two days.

(13) **Kitty knows that** Dr. Slim is still smoking.

(P13) Dr. Slim is still smoking.

*(Settled fact is underlined; new information is in bold.)*

Sometimes a small feature of a sentence's phrasing may be all it takes for that sentence to carry a presupposition. For instance, the aspect of the sentence is a matter of whether a past activity is or isn't continuing into the present. So we'll call both of the following **aspectual sentences**.

(9) Dr. Slim **has stopped** smoking

(10) Jake **still** skips Logic classes

In both these sentences it's taken for granted that the activity under discussion occurred in the past – the only question being whether it's continuing in the present.

So the presupposition in each case is the information treated as settled: that the activity occurred earlier.

(9) Dr. Slim has stopped smoking.

(P9) Dr. Slim previously smoked.

(10) Jake still skips Logic classes.

(P10) Jake previously skipped Logic classes.

Finally, certain sorts of nominal phrases, the **definite descriptions**, have been argued to carry with them a presupposition. A definite description is a phrase of the form “the such-and-such” – for example, “the first governor of Pennsylvania” or “the oldest man in the world”. So the following sentences contain definite descriptions.

(11) **The Queen of England** is popular.

But on one account<sup>2</sup>, a definite description in a sentence brings with it a presupposition: **that there is exactly one such thing**. So Sentence (11) presupposes that there is one (and only one) queen of England.

(11) **The Queen of England** is popular.

(P11) There is exactly one queen of England.

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<sup>2</sup> This account goes back to Gottlob Frege (Frege XX:YY). Bertrand Russell develops a quite different approach to definite descriptions that does not involve presuppositions, just formal translation and logical entailment – see 6.X.

## Summary: Sentence-Types and Their Presuppositions

- **Cleft Sentences**

It was Suki who ate the sushi.

**Presupposition:** Someone ate the sushi.

- **Pseudo-Cleft Sentences**

What Neko wants is a bowl of fish soup.

**Presupposition:** Neko wants something.

- **Explanation Sentences**

The book is wet because Jake dropped it.

**Presupposition:** The book is wet.

- **Sentences with Factive Verbs**

Rex regrets telling Suki his secret.

**Presupposition:** Rex told Suki his secret.

- **Aspectual Sentences**

Neko is still stealing Jack's food.

**Presupposition:** Neko previously stole Jack's food.

- **Sentences with Definite Descriptions**

The president of the Surf Club made a speech.

**Presupposition:** There is exactly one president of the Surf Club.