

7.5. Presuppositions

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, 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’s requesting 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).

Presuppositions are a type of sentence falling halfway between these two cases. For presuppositions act as further examples of a claim communicated without being explicitly uttered. Yet unlike earlier cases of indirect communication, 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 Neko who broke into the seafood lounge.

(2) It was the crystal goblet that Barbie and 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 instance, treats as settled fact that someone broke into the seafood lounge – the only question being who that someone is. That Neko is the ‘someone’ in question is, by contrast, treated as the **new information** in (1).

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

(1) It was **Neko** who broke into the seafood lounge.

(P1) Someone broke into the seafood lounge.

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

(P2) Barbie and Jack discovered something in Milan.

*(What's treated as settled fact is underlined; what's treated as **new information** is in bold.)*

Presupposition might look like simple entailment – one sentence following validly from another. For example, it might seem that (P1) is just a sentence entailed by (1), and likewise that (P2) follows validly from (2).

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

(1) It was Neko who broke into the seafood lounge.

(3) Neko broke into the seafood lounge.

(P1) Someone broke into the seafood lounge.

(1) and (3) report the same information; and both sentences validly entail Sentence (P1) – that “Someone broke into the seafood lounge”. Now if a presupposition really were just a “sentence that follows validly” then (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 into the seafood lounge. So we say that (P1) is presupposed by (1), but not by (3). Hence **being a presupposition of a sentence isn't just following validly from that sentence**.

There are many competing theories of just when a sentence presupposes something, and so a fair amount of controversy over why certain sentences have the presuppositions that they do. Short of presenting a general theory of presuppositions, we settle here for a catalog of sentence types and the presuppositions they carry.¹

¹ Following examples from (Soames 1988: XX) and (van Fraassen 1980: XX).

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

(4) What Neko broke into was the seafood lounge.

(5) What Jacks hates is bananas.

Here again something is treated as already settled: sentence (4) treats it as settled that Neko broke into 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 Neko broke into was the seafood lounge.

(P4) There’s something Neko broke into. (Neko broke into something.)

(5) What Jacks hates is bananas.

(P5) There’s something Jack hates.

Explanation sentences are a third type of sentence carrying a presupposition. An explanation sentence is a declarative sentence which answers a “Why?” or “How?” question (or some equivalent question, of the form such as “What’s the reason that...?”, or “What’s the purpose/function of...?”, or “What caused...?”). While they take a variety of grammatical forms, explanation sentences typically fall into one of the following phrasings.

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

X Y-ed because....

X Y-ed in order to.

Hence the following are all explanation sentences.

(6) The reason Logic looks so easy is that the book is so clear.

(7) The surfboard cracked because it hit a coral reef.

(8) Barbie lit the fire in order to toast her marshmallows.

In each case the sentence cites something to be explained – “Logic looks so easy,” “The surfboard cracked,” “Barbie 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 new information added is what explains it

So the matter to be explained acts as a presupposition in an explanation sentence.

(6) The reason Logic looks so easy is that the book is so clear.

(P6) Logic looks so easy.

(7) The surfboard cracked because it hit a coral reef.

(P7) The surfboard cracked.

(8) Barbie lit the fire in order to toast her marshmallows.

(P8) Barbie lit the fire.

Sometimes a small feature of a sentence's phrasing is all it takes for that sentence to carry a presupposition. For instance, the **aspect** of the sentence is a matter of whether or not a past activity continues into the present. Call sentences expressing this feature **aspectual sentences** – as with the following.

(9) Rex **has stopped** smoking.

(10) Jake **still** skips shows up late for work.

In both these sentences it's taken for granted that the activity under discussion occurred in the past – the only question being whether it continues in the present. So the presupposition – the information treated as settled – is here that the activity occurred earlier.

(9) Rex has stopped smoking.

(P9) Rex previously smoked.

(10) Jake still shows up late for work.

(P10) Jake previously shows up late for work.

Finally, certain sorts of nominal phrases – **definite descriptions** – are claimed to carry 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 sentence contains definite descriptions.

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

But on one account², 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.

² 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.

Presupposition: If P is a presupposition of a sentence S, then (i) P is a sentence other than S, and (ii) if S is accepted, P must also be accepted.
(Though not the reverse: P can often be accepted even when S isn't accepted.)

Examples of Sentences with Presuppositions:

Cleft Sentences:

(1) *It was* Suki *who* broke the typewriter
 (P1) Someone broke the typewriter

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

Pseudocleft Sentences:

(3) *What* Suki broke *was* the typewriter
 (P3) Suki broke something

(4) *What* Trixie is saying *is* that we need to study harder
 (P4) Trixie is saying something.

Definite descriptions:

(5) *The* Queen of England is popular.
 (P5) England has exactly one queen.

Aspectuals:

(6) Dr. Slim *has stopped* smoking
 (P6) Dr. Slim previously smoked

(7) Ace *still* skips Logic classes
 (P7) Ace previously skipped Logic classes

Explanation Sentences:

(8) Neko lit the fire *in order* to attract the rescue crew's attention.
 (P8) Neko lit the fire.

(9) The window shattered *because* it was hit by a rock.
 (P9) The window shattered.

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

(P10) The metal rod expanded

Factive Verbs:

(11) Elvis regrets that he sold his motorcycle.

(P11) Elvis sold his motorcycle

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

(P12) The final exam is in two days

2. Inheritance of Presuppositions

Inheritance: A larger sentence S+ inherits the presupposition, P, of a smaller sentence S if: (i) S is a *part of* the larger sentence S+, and (ii) S+ has P as a presupposition *because* it has S as a part.

Examples of Presupposition Inheritance:

Negations:

(N1) It wasn't Suki who broke the typewriter

(N5) The Queen of England isn't popular

(N6) Dr. Slim hasn't stopped smoking.

(N11) Elvis doesn't regret selling his motorcycle

Conjunctions:

(A1) It was Suki who broke the typewriter, and Jake who stole the bicycle.

Disjunctions:

(D1) Either it was Suki who broke the typewriter, or they punished the wrong person.

Conditionals:

(C1) If Jake has an alibi, then it was Suki who broke the typewriter.

Epistemic modals:

(E1) *Maybe* it was Suki who broke the typewriter.

(E2) It was *certainly* Suki who broke the typewriter.

Note: since presuppositions are inherited by larger sentences, we can see how a presupposition P could be acceptable even when a sentence presupposing P isn't acceptable. For example, suppose (N1) – the negation of (1) – is accepted. Since (N1) presupposes (P1) just like (1) does, (P1) will be accepted in this situation as well. So here is a case where we can accept the presupposition of a sentence without accepting that sentence itself.