

2.5. Presuppositions

1. Presuppositions

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.