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Pragmatics and The Logic of Presupposition

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Abstract

This article delves into the pragmatic understanding of presupposition and reconceptualises it as a propositional attitude grounded in the conversational interplay of shared knowledge, setting it apart from the semantic interpretations offered by P.F. Strawson, and Bas C. van Fraassen. Strawson's logico-semantic approach highlights the intriguing notion of truth-value gaps that emerge when referential conditions are not satisfied. In contrast, Max Black weaves in the pragmatic dimensions of performance and context, while van Fraassen articulates presupposition as a semantic relation through the lens of super valuations. Stalnaker's pragmatic framework, which focuses on the assumptions held by speakers and the process of accommodation, provides a nuanced and insightful understanding of presupposition phenomena. The framework includes the complexities of the projection problem and various triggers such as factive verbs and anaphoric particles. By anchoring assumptions in rational collaborative actions, the pragmatic perspective adeptly encapsulates the subtleties of context and the intricacies of dialogue more proficiently than semantic approaches, reinforced by its alignment with Gricean principles and empirical research on discourse. This examination contends that the practical perspective offers a more effective structure for comprehending presupposition in natural language.

Keywords: Pragmatic Account, Semantic Account, Common Ground

Introduction:

Presupposition is an important idea in linguistics and the philosophy of language that looks at what has to be true for a statement to be meaningfully judged as true or incorrect. Presupposition, according to traditional semantic explanations offered by P.F. Strawson (1950, 1952) and Bas C. van Fraassen (1968), is a logical or semantic connection in which a sentence S presupposes a proposition P if P must be true for S to have truth value. Classical logic's bivalence was challenged by Strawson's groundbreaking work on definite descriptions, which included the concept of truth-value gaps when referential presuppositions fail (Strawson, 1950, p. 330). Van Fraassen also formalised presupposition into a semantic framework by employing supervaluations to bring classical logic and truth-value gaps together (van Fraassen, 1968, p. 143). Max Black (1952) agreed with Strawson's idea of a 'truth-value gap', but he changed the emphasis to the practical aspects of language usage. He said that the speaker's performance, mental state, and situational context all play a role in developing presuppositions (Black, 1952, p. 542).

Robert Stalnaker's pragmatic approach, on the other hand, sees presupposition as a propositional attitude, where speakers believe particular propositions are part of the conversational common ground to make communication easier (Stalnaker, 1972, 1973, 2002). Stalnaker's framework is based on Paul Grice's cooperative principles and focusses on how common ground changes over time through processes like accommodation. This gives a flexible explanation for things like the projection problem and different presupposition triggers (like factive verbs and anaphoric particles). This article combines Stalnaker's pragmatic view with the semantic and quasi-pragmatic views of Strawson, van Fraassen, and Black. It says that the pragmatic account's emphasis on how conversations function and what speakers want to say gives us a better and more supported way to explain presupposition in natural language, including both the theoretical and practical aspects of language use.

This article will go over some of the benefits of pragmatic explanations of presupposition as opposed to semantic analyses.

Strawson's Logic of Presupposition:

One of the first twentieth-century philosophers to explore the logic of presupposition was P. F. Strawson. After Strawson used the logic of presupposition in his criticism of Russell's theory of definite description, philosophers started to pay attention to the topic. Strawson's theory, especially his examination of definite descriptions (such 'The present king of France is bald'), says that a phrase needs specific requirements (like the existence of a reference) to be able to be judged as true or false (Strawson, 1950, p. 330). The issue of whether something is true or false 'does not arise' if certain requirements are not met.

P.F. Strawson's Introduction to Logical Theory (1952) talks about a theory of presupposition that looks at the logico-semantic requirements that must be met for a statement to have a clear truth value. He questions the idea that the four Aristotelian categorical forms of propositions (such 'All S are P', 'Some S are P', etc) must be understood in terms of existence, either positively or negatively (Strawson, 1952, p. 173). Strawson, on the other hand, says that the subject class must have members in order for these claims to be true and for them to have any truth-value at all.

Think about the sentence 'All of John's kids are asleep'. According to Strawson, the speaker must think that John has kids in order to say this (Strawson, 1952, p. 173). The issue of whether the statement is true or untrue becomes misleading if John doesn't have any children, since neither response is correct. This shows Strawson's main point: the subject class (John's children) must exist for the statement to be able to be judged as true or untrue (Strawson, 1952, p. 174). Strawson says that in certain instances, the statement doesn't have a truth value at all, which creates a truth-value gap. This is different from typical logical analyses that would say the statement is untrue when the subject class is empty (e.g., Russell, 1905).

Strawson says that those who don't agree with this approach are confused about the difference between sentences and assertions, which is made worse by the 'true, false, or meaningless' trichotomy (Strawson, 1952, p. 174). He makes it clear that the line 'All of John's children are asleep' is not useless; it is quite important. However, using it means that the speaker has to assume that John's children exist (Strawson, 1952, p. 175). If these assumptions are wrong, the statement doesn't become untrue; instead, the issue of whether it is true or false doesn't come up. This failure is different from a simple self-contradiction, which

happens when a statement includes its own negation. Strawson uses the term 'presupposition' to characterise a relationship in which the truth of statement S' (like 'John has children') is a prerequisite for the truth or falsehood of statement S (like 'All John's children are asleep') (Strawson, 1952, p. 175). Putting S along with the denial of S' makes a 'logical absurdity', but this absurdity is not a self-contradiction since S' is not a required condition for S's truth alone; it is a necessary condition for S's truth-evaluability.

Strawson's method is logico-semantic since it looks at the logical structure of propositions and the semantic requirements (such reference and existence) that determine whether they are true or false. His study is on the formal aspects of language, especially how presuppositions affect whether a statement can be given a truth value in a logical framework. This is different from pragmatic methods, which focus on the situational and performative elements of how language is used.

Black's Pragmatic Account of Presupposition:

Max Black's 1952 article 'Definition, Presupposition, and Assertion' talks about presupposition in a way that is similar to Strawson's. Both agree that presuppositions are conditions that must be met for a statement to be able to be evaluated for truth. However, Black's article focusses more on the practical aspects of language use. According to Black, presuppositions are the ideas that are stated in the 'preamble' of a sentence's meaning-explanation, together with their logical consequences (Black, 1952, p. 542). If a presupposition is shown to be false, it is difficult to say whether a case falls inside the sentence's scope or to say whether the phrase is true or false (Black, 1952, p. 542). Black, like Strawson, agrees that there are gaps in truth-value, but he explains this by looking at how communication works in real life instead of only at logical or semantic structure. Black uses the phrase 'honestly asserts' to show this by looking at the line 'Tom asserted it had begun to rain' (Black, 1952, pp. 548–549). He lists three practical parts that are important for the statement to be used correctly:

1. Performance: The speaker's use of an authoritative tone while saying the words, which can be seen and is linked to language behaviour.
2. Mental State: The speaker's thoughts, emotions, and beliefs (for example, Tom's belief that it is raining) that affect how true the statement is.
3. Context: Outside things, like Tom's answer to a question or the real weather, can affect how suitable the statement is.

Black says that for 'honestly asserts' to work, there has to be a meaningful context (like being able to tell whether it's raining) and Tom has to want to tell the truth. If these assumptions are wrong—for example, if Tom is joking or the situation doesn't matter—the statement can't be judged as true or untrue. This isn't because of a logical mistake; it's because the criteria for making a meaningful statement aren't satisfied (Black, 1952, p. 549). Strawson, on the other hand, focusses on the logical requirements that must be met for something to be true, such the presence of a referent. Black's practical approach shows how assumptions shape how language is used in everyday communication. Strawson's analysis of 'All John's children are asleep' focusses on the fact that John has children, whereas Black's study of 'Tom said it had begun to rain' focusses on the speaker's performance and purpose in a certain situation. Black's theory is similar to other pragmatic theories, including those of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), which say that language is a performative act that is affected by social and environmental conditions.

Van Fraassen's Semantic Analysis of Presupposition:

Bas C. van Fraassen's 1968 article 'Presupposition, Implication, and Self-Reference' gives us a strict semantic framework for comprehending presupposition. It builds on but differs from prior work by philosophers like P.F. Strawson and Max Black. Van Fraassen's main goal is to explain presupposition as a separate semantic relationship between sentences, different from implication and necessitation. He also wants to use this difference to answer self-reference paradoxes like the Liar paradox (van Fraassen, 1968, p. 136). His method is based on formal semantics, which focusses on the logical structure of language and the circumstances under which statements become true or false. He also knows that classical logic doesn't work well with presuppositional failures. Van Fraassen agrees with Strawson's basic premise that a phrase's truth or falsehood depends on the presence of its referents. For example, the sentence 'The King of France (in 1967) is bald' has no truth value if there is no such monarch (van Fraassen, 1968, p. 137; Strawson, 1950). He makes this idea clearer by saying that A implies B if and only if A is neither true or untrue unless B is true (van Fraassen, 1968, p. 137). This is the same as saying that (a) if A is true, then B is true, and (b) if A is false, then B is true. He then uses a material conditional to get: A presupposes B if and only if (a) if A is true, then B is true, and (b) if $\neg A$ is true, then B is true (van Fraassen, 1968, p. 138). This description shows how presupposition depends on the notion of bivalence (every phrase is either true or false). It also points out that under stringent bivalence, presupposition becomes trivial since every sentence only presupposes sentences that are universally true (van Fraassen, 1968, p. 137). Van Fraassen looks at how these two types of relationships behave logically to tell them apart. Implication supports both modus ponens and modus tollens, but presupposition only supports an analogue of modus ponens (if A presupposes B and A is true, then B is true) and not modus tollens (if A presupposes B and $\neg B$, then $\neg A$ does not follow, as A may be neither true nor false) (van Fraassen, 1968, p. 138). This difference shows that presupposition is not the same as implication, even though they both have one thing in common: if A presupposes or implies B, then A requires B (i.e., if A is true, B is true) (van Fraassen, 1968, p. 139). Van Fraassen talks about necessitation as a more general semantic relation: A requires B if and only if B is true whenever A is true. He also talks about presupposition as a specific instance where both A and $\neg A$ necessitate B (van Fraassen, 1968, p. 139).

This formal difference lets him say that presupposition is a meaningful semantic relationship in situations where bivalence does not work, such in presuppositional languages. Van Fraassen creates a formal model of presuppositional languages to evaluate these differences. It includes a syntax (vocabulary and grammar) and semantics (acceptable valuations) that allow sentences to not have truth values since the presuppositions failed (van Fraassen, 1968, pp. 140–141). In this system, classical valuations give sentences a truth value or a false value without taking into account failures of presupposition. Admissible valuations, on the other hand, give sentences a truth value (T) if they are true, a false value (F) if they are false, and leave those with unmet presuppositions undefined (van Fraassen, 1968, p. 142). He uses the idea of supervaluations – functions that give a sentence a T or F if all classical values that agree on a certain set G (the set of true sentences in a scenario) do, and leave it undefined otherwise – to connect classical and admissible valuations (van Fraassen, 1968, p. 143). This makes sure that classical logic is valid (like the rule of excluded

middle, $A \vee \neg A$), but bivalence (every phrase is true or false) is not, since certain sentences are neither (van Fraassen, 1968, p. 143).

Van Fraassen's explanation is quite semantic since it looks at the logical prerequisites for truth-evaluability and how language is formally modelled. Van Fraassen's approach is different from Strawson's logico-semantic concentration on reference (Strawson, 1952) or Black's pragmatic focus on performance and context (Black, 1952). Instead, he puts a systematic semantic analysis at the top of his list, employing tools like supervaluations to bring together classical logic and presuppositional phenomena. His approach helps us grasp presupposition better by giving it a formal structure that looks at how it works in self-reference. However, he admits that it is not possible to create a language without presupposition (van Fraassen, 1968, p. 150).

Presupposition from a Pragmatic Point of View:

The pragmatic explanation of presupposition, as described by Robert Stalnaker, radically shifts the idea of presupposition from a semantic relationship between sentences or propositions to a propositional attitude held by speakers in a conversational setting. The semantic definition says that a sentence *S* presupposes a proposition *P* if *P* must be true for *S* to have a truth value (van Fraassen, 1968; Strawson, 1950). The pragmatic definition, on the other hand, says that presuppositions are propositions that speakers assume their audience does as well in order to make communication easier. This method puts presupposition in the context of rational cooperative behaviour, as suggested by Paul Grice's conversational maxims (Stalnaker, 2002, p. 701; Stalnaker, 1973, p. 448). It focusses on the social and deliberate aspects of language usage.

Core Features of the Pragmatic Account:

1. **Presupposition as a Propositional Attitude:** Stalnaker characterises a speaker's presupposition as a tendency to behave as if a statement *P* is true and to presume that others in the discourse likewise accept it as true (Stalnaker, 1973, p. 448; Stalnaker, 1972, p. 387). This does not need the speaker's belief in *P* or certainty about others' beliefs; instead, it entails acting as if *P* is integrated into the common background, sometimes in an unconscious manner, to influence linguistic actions such as affirmations, enquiries, or directives (Stalnaker, 1973, p. 448). For instance, when a speaker states, "I must retrieve my sister from the airport", they presuppose the existence of a sister, treating this as common knowledge, regardless of the audience's prior awareness (Stalnaker, 2002, p. 710).
2. **Common Ground and Context:** At the core of Stalnaker's theory is the notion of common ground, which refers to the collection of ideas that conversational participants collectively acknowledge as background information (Stalnaker, 2002, p. 701). Stalnaker first equates common ground with common belief—propositions that all participants accept, think that all accept, and so on iteratively (Stalnaker, 2002, p. 704). A proposition ϕ is considered common belief inside a group *G* if every member believes ϕ , every member believes that all members believe ϕ , and this pattern continues indefinitely, represented by the transitive closure of individual belief accessibility relations in a Kripke-style semantic framework (Stalnaker, 2002, p. 707). Speaker presupposition is defined as a speaker's belief about the common ground, denoted as $B_a C\phi$ (where B_a represents the belief operator for speaker *a*, and *C* signifies the common belief operator) (Stalnaker, 2002, p. 707). Stalnaker expands this concept to include acceptance, a more comprehensive

category that includes belief, supposition, or pretence for the sake of discourse (Stalnaker, 2002, p. 716). Consequently, common ground is redefined as a shared view about what is accepted: ϕ is common ground if all individuals accept ϕ , think that all accept ϕ , and so forth (Stalnaker, 2002, p. 717). This permits instances when participants consciously endorse false beliefs to enhance communication, as shown in fiction or pretence (Stalnaker, 1973, p. 449).

3. **Presupposition Requirements of Sentences:** While presuppositions primarily belong to speakers, sentences can have presuppositions in a derivative sense: a sentence S requires a presupposition P if its appropriate use typically depends on the speaker presupposing P (Stalnaker, 1973, p. 451). For instance, 'John regrets voting for Nader' requires the presupposition that John voted for Nader, as its use would be inappropriate unless the speaker assumes this is common ground (Stalnaker, 2002, p. 702). This requirement is not tied to truth-value gaps (as in semantic accounts) but to conversational appropriateness, which may stem from semantic constraints, pragmatic conventions, or contextual expectations (Stalnaker, 1973, p. 452).
4. **Accommodation and Contextual Dynamics:** Accommodation is an important aspect of the pragmatic account. It is the process by which an assumption becomes part of the common ground when a speaker's utterance suggests it, as long as it is not contentious and the listener is ready to accept it (Stalnaker, 2002, p. 710; Lewis, 1979). If Alice says, "I can't come to the meeting because I have to pick up my sister at the airport", and Bob doesn't know about her sister, he may agree that Alice has a sister, which would make it common ground after the fact (Stalnaker, 2002, p. 710). Accommodation is a normal part of how conversations work since what people say changes what everyone believes, usually without any pretence (Stalnaker, 2002, p. 711). But when the environment is bad and the parties' assumptions are different, accommodation may mean agreeing with something that is known to be incorrect in order to keep the discussion going. For example, Bob agrees with Alice's wrong assumption that a guy is sipping a martini (Stalnaker, 2002, p. 718).
5. **The Projection Problem:** The pragmatic explanation solves the projection issue, which is about how the assumptions of complex sentences are connected to those of their parts (Stalnaker, 2002, p. 703). The pragmatic theory explains presupposition inheritance via how conversations work, but semantic models have trouble with non-truth-functional behaviour in three-valued logics (such as asymmetric conjunctions). For a conjunctive sentence A and B , the first conjunct A is asserted first, adding its content to the common ground before B is evaluated. So, B 's assumptions are only needed if A or earlier common ground doesn't already imply them (Stalnaker, 1973, p. 455). For instance, "John has children and all his children are asleep" doesn't need the assumption that John has children since the first part makes it clear (Stalnaker, 1973, p. 455). This gives us a simpler, more intuitive explanation than semantic explanations, which need complicated criteria to deal with gaps in truth value (Stalnaker, 2002, p. 703).

Conclusion:

Thus, we see that Stalnaker's analysis presents a distinction between pragmatic perspective and the semantic viewpoint, wherein a sentence S presupposes P if the truth of P is a prerequisite for S to hold true or false (van Fraassen, 1968). Although semantic presuppositions frequently imply pragmatic ones (as speakers generally believe their

sentences possess truth-values), the reverse is not necessarily true (Stalnaker, 1972, p. 387). For example, a speaker may assume that Nixon is a candidate, even though this assumption is not a semantic presupposition of their statement (Stalnaker, 1973, p. 449). The pragmatic perspective, therefore, encompasses a wider array of phenomena, incorporating presuppositions that emerge from conversational context or the intentions of the speaker, rather than being limited to mere semantic structure (Stalnaker, 1973, p. 452).

The practical perspective on presupposition presents numerous benefits compared to semantic interpretations, offering a more adaptable and insightful framework for comprehending linguistic occurrences. Consequently, the pragmatic perspective embraces the variety of presupposition triggers – such as factive verbs (e.g., ‘know’, ‘regret’), temporal expressions (e.g., ‘before’, ‘after’), and particles (e.g., ‘even’, ‘too’) – without necessitating a singular semantic interpretation (Stalnaker, 1973, p. 448). For instance, the assumption that another individual is dining in New York, prompted by the statement ‘Sam is having dinner in New York too’, relies on the surrounding context rather than merely the conditions of truth (Stalnaker, 2002, p. 719). Semantic interpretations face challenges in elucidating these instances without resorting to arbitrary stipulations, while the pragmatic perspective ascribes them to the conversational norms surrounding prominence and mutual knowledge (Kripke, 1990). This adaptability enables the practical perspective to address non-linguistic origins of presupposition, including implicatures or contextual signals. This framework embraces flawed contexts and misunderstandings while offering a pragmatic perspective for examining real-world dialogue, rendering it an exceptional instrument for both rational and linguistic exploration of underlying assumptions.

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