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Presupposition – The Basics

I. What does it mean to presuppose something?

In a head-on collision, both father and son are critically wounded. They are rushed into hospital where the chief surgeon performs an emergency operation on the son. But it is too late and the boy dies on the table. When an assistant asks the surgeon, "Could you have a look at the other victim?", the surgeon replies "I could not bear it. I have already lost my son".

Does the chief surgeon's reply make sense?

The class will feature (in order of appearance):

Morpheus	Trinity	Neo	Agent Smith

Example:

1. Morpheus has stopped drinking wine for breakfast.
2. Morpheus used to drink wine for breakfast.

What about:

3. Morpheus regrets that Trinity kissed Neo.
4. Presupposition:_____
5. Introduced by:_____ (hint: *regret* / *believe* form a 'minimal pair')

6. It was Trinity that kissed Neo.

7. Presupposition:_____
8. Introduced by:_____ (hint: compare with *Trinity kissed Neo*)

9. Walter bought a white rabbit again.
10. Presupposition:_____
11. Introduced by:_____

12. Walter's rabbit is on the loose again.
13. Presuppositions:_____
14. Introduced by:_____

15. Trinity kissed Neo too.
16. Presupposition:_____
17. Introduced by:_____

(Consider: Who kissed Neo? vs. Who did Trinity kiss? vs. What did Trinity do to Neo?)

A sentence S presupposes P if and only if the utterance of S implies P – and it implies that: (a) P is already *part of the background* against which S is considered and (b) P is *taken for granted* as part of that background.

A sentence S presupposes P if and only if it can be felicitously uttered only in a context in which P is true.
That is, the presuppositions of S limit the class of contexts suitable to utter S.

II. What does it mean for a presupposition P to be part of the background?

- Assert: S.
- Deny: It is not the case that S.
- Question: Is it the case that S? (Command: S!).
- Hypothetically assume: If S, then ….

18. Morpheus has stopped drinking wine for breakfast.
19. Morpheus hasn't stopped drinking wine for breakfast.
20. Has Morpheus stopped drinking wine for breakfast?
21. Morpheus, stop drinking wine for breakfast!
22. If Morpheus stopped drinking wine for breakfast, he must have found the One.

23. Morpheus used to drink wine for breakfast.

Presuppositions are part of the background: they are implied by S not only when S is asserted, but also when it is: denied, questioned (commanded) and hypothetically entertained.

Compare this way of *implying* with:

Entailment:
24. Trinity kissed Neo.
25. Trinity touched Neo.

Conversational implicature:
26. Annette has a child.
27. Annette has exactly one child.

III. What does it mean for a presupposition P to be taken for granted?

Here's an example of something backgrounded, but not taken for granted:

28. Trinity, *who had just got out of the Matrix*, kissed Neo.
29. Trinity, *who had just got out of the Matrix*, didn't kiss Neo.
30. Did Trinity, *who had just got out of the Matrix*, kiss Neo?

Why not taken for granted? Consider the following discourse:

31. As far as I'm concerned, the movie *Matrix* means only this to me: there's this virtual reality called the Matrix that you can get into and out of; there's this guy Neo, there's this special lady friend of his Trinity and there's evil Agent Smith. Agent Smith shoots Neo dead. Then…
32. Trinity, *who has just got out of the Matrix*, kisses Neo and resurrects him. Neo kills Smith. The end.
33. He (i.e. Agent Smith) realizes that *Trinity has just got out of the Matrix*. She kisses Neo and resurrects him. Neo kills Smith. The end.

Another example – compare:

34. At first, Trinity suggests that she doesn't have any feelings for Neo. Next thing you know, she kisses Neo, *who has just been shot dead by Agent Smith*.
35. At first, Trinity suggests that she doesn't have any feelings for Neo. Next thing you know, she deeply regrets that *Neo has just been shot dead by Agent Smith*.

Q: We have talked about four kinds of implications. What implications can you find in the following sentence and of what kind?

36. Trinity doesn't regret that she asked Neo, who does not have a driving license, to drive three children to school.
(hint: … *she asked Neo* … implies … *she asked someone* … – what kind of 'implying' is this?)

IV. Accommodating presuppositions: how and what kind of presuppositions.

37. Walter comes in and says: Sorry I'm late, but I couldn't find a spot to park my car. (Interesting, Walter has a car… Maybe he can help me move.)

38. Walter comes in and says: Sorry I'm late, but I couldn't find a spot to park my spaceship. (Walter has a spaceship?!?)

What is accommodation?_____

Accommodation of presuppositions is sensitive to the particular expressions that introduce them, i.e. to their **particular triggers**.

39. Trinity kissed Neo too.
(?!?)

The infelicity indicates that the presupposition triggered by *too* does not have an *existential* form, e.g. there is someone else besides Neo that Trinity kissed.
It is plausible that Neo wasn't the first man that Trinity kissed in her whole life – so, it shouldn't be hard to accommodate that there is someone else besides Neo that Trinity kissed.
Anyway, it shouldn't be harder than accommodating that Walter has a car.

Q: why is it hard to accommodate the presupposition triggered by *too* as opposed to the one triggered by *my car*? – i.e. why is it hard to accommodate *particularized* presuppositions like the one triggered by *too*?

V. A systematic study of presupposition: three questions.

- How are presuppositions triggered, i.e. introduced, and what is their form?
- How are presuppositions computed and how do they interact during computation?
- How do presuppositions project, i.e. what happens when something carrying a presupposition is embedded in a larger structure?

How are presuppositions triggered, i.e. introduced, and what is their form?

We've already looked at this – and we have seen that **accommodation** distinguishes between different presupposition triggers and between different kinds of presuppositions, i.e. between presuppositions that have an **existential** form vs. presuppositions that target a **particular** salient 'witness'.

This raises the question: what are the presuppositions that have an **existential** form?
For example: do the presuppositions triggered by *again*, *stop* or *still* have an existential form?

Again:

Annette and her husband are planning the birthday parties of their two children John and Mary. Annette says:

40. We will have pizza on John's birthday, so we shouldn't have pizza again on Mary's birthday.

Assume that you know that Annette and her family, like most people, eat pizza rather frequently, but you do not know when John and Mary have their birthdays.
You spontaneously infer from this utterance that John's birthday precedes Mary's. This inference is due to *again*: remove it and you can just as easily imagine the birthdays in the opposite temporal order.

If *again* simply requires the existence of *some* previous event of eating pizza and not a *particular* such event, then the requirement could be satisfied by the frequent pizza eating habit.
But if the requirement is not satisfied by the event of eating pizza on John's birthday, how can we infer that John's birthday precedes Mary's?!

Stop:

41. Neo is cooking. He will stop (cooking) tomorrow when his training starts.

Spontaneous inference: Neo is engaged in one single protracted cooking activity that started before the speech time and will continue through the night. Why should this (implausible) inference arise?

If *stop* presupposes that there was *some* event of Neo cooking prior to the training time tomorrow – and not a *particular* one –, then the presupposition can be satisfied by a (more plausible) event of cooking breakfast tomorrow. In which case: there is no obvious way to derive the spontaneous inference.

Q: Make the same point with respect to *still*, i.e. provide an example, identify an implausible 'spontaneous inference' and show how you can derive it if you assume that the presupposition

introduced by *still* does not have a general existential form but requires a particular, salient 'witness'.

How are presuppositions computed and how do they interact during computation?

42. Walter's rabbit is on the loose again.
   Triggers:_____

   Readings: 1._____
            2._____

(hint: to get one reading, try fronting *again*, e.g. *Once again, Walter's rabbit is on the loose*; to get the other reading, try to replace *Walter's rabbit* with *Peter*, e.g. *Peter is on the loose again*.)

Q: describe two situations such that: reading 1, but not reading 2, is felicitous in one of them; reading 2, but not reading 1, is felicitous in the other.
(hint: on the one hand, Walter can own different rabbits during his lifetime; on the other hand, a rabbit can have different owners during its lifetime)

Q: Give another example of multiple presupposition computation and interaction. Identify the triggers and the readings. Describe different scenarios that establish that the readings you list are indeed *distinct* readings, i.e. scenarios in which only one reading is satisfied to the exclusion of the other(s).

Q*: how many readings does the following example have? What expression is responsible for the difference between this example and the one above? How does the difference arise?

43. That rabbit of Walter's is on the loose again.

How do presuppositions project, i.e. what happens when something carrying a presupposition is embedded in a larger structure?

Why call this 'projection'?
Projection was the term used to refer to meaning *composition* in early generative grammar.

"The semantic component of a linguistic description will be taken to be a projective device [...]. Such a projective device consists of two parts: first, a dictionary that provides a meaning for each of the lexical items of the language, and second, a finite set of projection rules. The projection rules of the semantic component assign a semantic interpretation to each string of formatives generated by the syntactic component. [...] The projection rules then combine [lexical] meanings

in a manner dictated by the syntactic description of the string to arrive at a characterization of the meaning of the whole string [...]." (Katz, J. & P. Postal 1964. *An Integrated Theory of Linguistic Description*, MIT Press, p. 12 – apud von Fintel (2003): 12)

44. It was Trinity that kissed Neo.
Presupposition:_____

45. It wasn't Trinity that kissed Neo.
Presupposition:_____

46. Was it Trinity that kissed Neo?
Presupposition:_____

47. If it was Trinity that kissed Neo, then she must be really in love with him.
Presupposition:_____

Q: Based on the examples above, give a general characterization of presupposition projection.

48. If someone kissed Neo, it was Trinity that kissed him.
Presupposition:_____

49. Someone kissed Neo and it was Trinity that kissed him.
Presupposition:_____

Q: Does your general characterization of presupposition projection cover the above two examples?
If not, focus only on conditionals: characterize presupposition projection in conditionals. Then, focus only on conjunctions: characterize presupposition projection in conjunctions.
Can you see a more general pattern of presupposition projection that is common to both conditionals and conjunctions?

50. If Neo was dead, it was Trinity that kissed him.
Presupposition:_____

51. Neo was dead and it was Trinity that kissed him.
Presupposition:_____

Q: Does your characterization of presupposition projection in conditionals and conjunctions cover the above two examples? If not, revise the characterization accordingly. What about the examples below?

52. Neo's children have super-powers.
Presupposition:_____

53. Neo has three children and Neo's children have super-powers.
Presupposition:_____

54. Neo's children have super-powers and Neo has three children.
Presupposition:_____

Q: Are the two examples below felicitous or not? Why (use your final characterization of presupposition projection in conditionals and conjunctions to answer)?

55. If it was Trinity that kissed Neo, someone kissed him.

56. It was Trinity that kissed Neo and someone kissed him.

Q: Does your characterization of presupposition projection in conjunctions cover the second sentence in the following discourse?

57. If Neo is married to Trinity, then he has children. (As a matter of fact) Neo is married to Trinity and all his children have super-powers.

Q: Does your characterization of presupposition projection in conditionals cover the second sentence in the following discourse?

58. If Neo is married to Trinity, then he has children. Moreover, if Neo is married to Trinity, all his children have super-powers.

VI. Summary:

- presupposition **accommodation** is a form of cooperative behavior;
- certain presuppositions, e.g. *too*, are harder to accommodate: they do not have an existential form, but require a *particular salient 'witness'* with certain properties;
- presupposition **computation** is not a trivial task: a sentence with multiple presupposition triggers can be **ambiguous** between different readings generated by the way the triggered presuppositions interact;
- characterizing presupposition **projection** is not a trivial task: sometimes, a presupposition P triggered in a sentence S projects, i.e. if we embed S in a larger structure S', P is inherited by the larger structure S'; however, presuppositions do not always project;

- there seems to be a **general principle** behind the projection and non-projection cases: whether a presupposition P triggered in a sentence S is inherited by a larger structure S' depends on whether the *local context* in S' relative to which we interpret S *entails* P. If entailment obtains, P is **not taken for granted** anymore in the larger structure S', hence it does not project.

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