LIN1280 Pragmatics I
Presupposition
Mutual knowledge revisited

In discussing reference, we’ve had recourse to the notion of mutual knowledge and common ground:

- Common ground: the knowledge a speaker and a listener hold in common. Sources:
  - Physical environment
  - Community & general knowledge
  - Co-text
  - ...

- We call this mutual knowledge because some utterances require that:
  - We know X
  - Our listener knows X
  - We know that our listener knows X
  - Our listener knows that we know X
  - ...

PRESUPPOSITION

- Already a concept that has been revisited in semantics (LIN1180).

- A presupposition is:
  - Something that a speaker assumes to be the case prior to making an utterance.
  - It is speakers, not sentences that have presuppositions.
  - Presupposition forms part of the knowledge assumed by the speaker in making the utterance.
PRESUPPOSITION VS ENTAILMENT

- **Entailment:**
  - *I assassinated the sheriff* → *the sheriff is dead*
  - It is the first sentence that entails the second
  - This is due to its literal meaning (its semantics)
  - Entailment is a semantic phenomenon.

- **Presupposition:**
  - *Simon’s girlfriend said she likes my car*
  - This presupposes (among other things) that:
    - There is someone called Simon and he has a girlfriend
    - I have a car
  - Not something directly derivable from the literal semantics of the sentence.
  - This is knowledge the speaker must assume in advance in order for the utterance to be felicitous.
  - Presupposition is a pragmatic phenomenon.
Recall that presuppositions survive negation (entailments do not):

- Simon’s girlfriend likes my car
  - >> I have a car

- Simon’s girlfriend doesn’t like my car
  - >> I have a car

In both cases, a speaker must assume that the presupposed part is true, in order to make the statement.
TYPES OF PRESUPPOSITIONS

- Different kinds of utterances make different kinds of presuppositions.

- This in part depends on:
  - Their form
  - Their lexical content
  - The conventions associated with the use of an utterance of a certain type.
EXISTENTIAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

_The tall man in the suit is a criminal_

- We’ve said that definite, referential NPs generally involve an assumption that:
  - The thing referred to exists;
  - It is unique (or at least most salient) in a given context.

- Notice that neither of these is explicitly indicated in the literal meaning of the above sentence.

- If, as we have argued, reference is something a speaker does, we could consider existence as a presupposition.
  - It arises whenever a definite NP is used.
FACTIVE PRESUPPOSITIONS

- *I didn’t realise you were married.*
  - >> You’re married.
- *I regret having burgled that house.*
  - >> I burgled that house.

Notice:
- All these verbs take sentences as complements (*you were married, having burgled that house* etc)
- The presupposed part needs to be true (needs to be a **fact**) for the utterance as a whole to be felicitous.
- A lot of this seems to depend on the verb.
NON-FACTIVE PRESUPPOSITIONS

- *I dreamed that I was rich.*
  - >> I was (am) not rich.
- *He pretended he was ill.*
  - >> He was not ill.

A non-factive presupposition is one that is assumed not to be true.
Non-factive presuppositions

- *I dreamed that I was rich.*
  - >> I was (am) not rich.
- *He pretended he was ill.*
  - >> He was not ill.

The presupposition here is **counter-factual**.

Not only is the underlined part presupposed not to be true, it is actually **contrary to what is in fact the case**.
COUNTERFACTUALS AND PRESUPPOSITION

- A counterfactual conditional is one that posits a reality which is contrary to the actual one.

- *If I had lots of money, I’d buy a yacht.*
  - >> *I don’t have lots of money.*
LEXICAL PRESUPPOSITION

- *I managed to find my dog.*
  - >> *I tried* to find my dog.

- *I didn’t manage to find my dog.*
  - >> *I tried* to find my dog.

There’s a subtle difference between what is asserted and what is presupposed.

With some lexical items, the utterance:
  - Makes an assertion
  - Presupposes something as a result of using that lexical item.
**Lexical vs Factive**

- With *lexical* presupposition, the speaker’s use of an expression presupposes another concept (which is unstated).

- With *factive* presupposition, the speaker’s use of a particular expression is taken to presuppose the **truth of the statement** that is stated after it.
**Structural Presuppositions**

- Some structures seem to trigger presuppositions, independently of their lexical content.

- *When did you leave?*
  - >> *You left.*

- *Who did you meet?*
  - >> *You met someone*

**Notice:**
- The question presupposes a statement as a result of its form.
- The presupposed statement is actually part of the question formation itself.
The kind of presupposition conventionally associated with structures like questions can be quite controversial.

In legal proceedings, for example, one can be forced to answer questions even though one doesn’t believe in what they presuppose.

Similarly, politicians frequently refuse to answer questions if they reject the presupposed content.
A WORD ABOUT ENTAILMENTS

- We’ve said that entailments are semantic (in fact, logical) not pragmatic.
- But there is a pragmatic element...
- Whenever we utter a statement, it often carried several entailments.
Several entailments

*I shot three hares.*

- → Someone shot three hares
- → Something happened to three hares.
- → I shot three things.
- → Something happened.
- ...

All of these are conclusions we can logically draw from the sentence, just on the basis of its literal meaning.
SEVERAL ENTAILMENTS

- *I shot three hares.*
  - → Something happened to a certain number of hares.
  - → Someone shot three hares
  - → Something happened to three hares.
  - → I shot three things.
  - → Something happened.
  - ... 

- Of course, we often don’t consider all the entailments of a sentence equally relevant.

- We may indicate which entailments are more relevant (in the **foreground**) using mechanisms such as stress and intonation.

- The others become **background** entailments.
FOREGROUND VS BACKGROUND ENTAILMENTS

- *I shot THREE hares.*
  - → *Something happened to a certain number of hares.*
  - → *Someone shot three hares*
  - → *Something happened to three hares.*
  - → *I shot three things.*
  - → *Something happened.*
  - ...

- The stress on a particular word is a speaker’s way of shifting the focus.
- In this example, it foregrounds the information that **a certain number** of hares were shot.
FOREGROUNDING WITH CLEFT CONSTRUCTIONS

- *It’s three hares that I shot.*

- Rather than rely on stress or intonation, *it-clefts* are syntactic mechanisms which are conventionally associated with the pragmatics of foregrounding.