

Revisiting Presupposition as Semantic Theory

Dr. Samadhan S. Mane

Assistant Professor in English

K.B.P. Mahavidyalaya, Pandharpur

balwantseminareng@gmail.com

Abstract

Presupposition has long history in philosophy of language and linguistic semantics. Recent works in linguistics have given a central place to the notion of presupposition. It is studied as an essential aspect in providing semantic as well as pragmatic representations. Resultantly, presupposition has obtained a significant place in linguist's, logician's and philosopher's sphere of interest. It has been studied as a kind of unspoken information that accompanies an utterance. Moreover, presuppositions perform a significant role in our understanding of how context and background determine proper interpretation of any utterance. They are studied as conditions which must be fulfilled for an expression to be interpreted meaningfully.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Presupposition, Semantics

Introduction

In everyday sense, to presuppose something is to assume something or to take it for granted in advance without saying it. Levinson (1983) points out that there are significant distinctions between the ordinary usages of the term 'presupposition' and its technical usage in the field of linguistics. He provides some examples that distinguish these two usages of the term:

1. Effects presuppose causes
2. John wrote Harry a letter, presupposing he could read
3. John said "Harry is *so* competent," presupposing that we know Harry had fouled things up – in fact we didn't know and so failed to realize that he was being ironic
4. Harry asked Bill to close the door, presupposing that Bill had left it open as usual; he hadn't so he threw a chair at Harry
5. Adolph addresses the butler as "Sir", presupposing that he was the host Sir Ansel himself
6. The theory of evolution presupposes a vast time-scale

7. The article by Jackendoff presupposes Chomsky's theory of nominalizations (1983:168).

In the above examples, ordinary notion of presupposition is used to narrate background assumptions which make the utterances meaningful. On the other hand, technical usage of presupposition refers to certain inferences built onto linguistic expressions.

Apart from ordinary usage of the term, there are two kinds of presupposition in natural languages, that is, Semantic Presupposition and Pragmatic Presupposition. Gazdar (1979) states that modern discussion of the semantic theory of presupposition began essentially with Strawson, although the idea can be traced further back to Frege.

Fregean Theory

Gottlob Frege (1892, 1952 in Geach and Black ed.) introduced the notion of Presupposition. He treated it as special condition that must be fulfilled in order to attribute denotation to a linguistic expression. Frege in his article 'Über Sinn und Bedeutung' (1892) focused presupposition in accordance with problems that arise regarding the use of non-denoting terms. Frege states that:

If anything is asserted, there is always an obvious presupposition that the simple or compound proper names used have a reference. If one therefore asserts 'Kepler died in misery' there is a presupposition that the name 'Kepler' designates something
(Frege 1952:69, qtd. in Levinson 1983:169).

Thus, according to Frege, the name 'Kepler' has a denotation that is a presupposition of both of the following:

1. Kepler died in misery.
2. Kepler did not die in misery.

Here, the main point of Frege's analysis is that the name 'Kepler' has a referent, which is not a part of the assertion 1 and 2. The basic difference between the views of Frege and Russell (1905) is that the former studies it semantically, whereas, the later considers the issue purely syntactically. For any sentence to acquire a truth-value, its presuppositions must be satisfied. In this way, Frege draws a fundamental distinction between what is presupposed and what is asserted by an utterance of 'Kepler died in misery'. Levinson points out that Frege has devised the following theory of presupposition:

- (i) Referring phrases and temporal clauses (for example) carry presuppositions to the effect that they do in fact refer
- (ii) A sentence and its negative counterpart share the same set of presuppositions

- (iii) In order for an assertion or a sentence to be either true or false, its presuppositions must be true or satisfied (1983:170).

On the other hand, with Russell's analysis of a sentence containing a referring expression, Frege's distinction between presupposition and assertion here seems to be evaporated.

Strawsonian Theory

In 1952, Strawson fiercely attacked Russell's theory and revived the concept of presupposition. Strawson's theory is based on the distinction between the facts that an expression has unique reference and every individual is unique having certain properties. This attitude of Strawson is closely related to Frege, who believes that the truth of the presuppositions of a sentence is a condition for the possibility of making an assertion by means of that sentence. Van Der Sandt (1988:6) states that, if the presupposition of a sentence fails, that sentence can't be treated as statement and consequently, it loses its truth-value. According to Strawson, a statement, and not a sentence, is the bearer of truth value. Thus, a given statement can't be identified with the sentence used to make it, but with the utterance of that sentence. Strawson has given the following observation of presupposition:

A statement S presupposes a statement S', if and only if the truth of S' is a necessary condition for the truth or falsity of S
(Strawson 1952, qtd. in Van Der Sandt 1988:7).

The above observation makes it clear that the presupposition does not belong to what is asserted in an utterance of a sentence. It explains that any statement that must be true for another statement to have a truth value is a presupposition of that statement.

Presupposition as Binary Relation

In semantic theory, as Beaver (2001) states, presupposition is usually defined as a binary relation between parts of sentences of a language. Definition of presupposition in terms of semantic valuation might say that one sentence semantically presupposes another, subject to the condition if the second one is true for the semantic value of the first in terms of truth and falsity. Linguists like Hausser (1976), Keenan (1971), Horn (1972) and Katz (1972) argue that the semantic theory of presupposition should be constituted into linguistic theory. Gazdar (1979) mentions that semantic presupposition has been defined traditionally, as a relation between statements or between propositions; rather than between sentences, or sentences and propositions.

Defining Semantic Presupposition

Various philosophers have defined the term as per their own approaches. Couple of them have been quoted here.

Stephen Levinson

Levinson defines semantic presupposition as:

A sentence A semantically presupposes another sentence B iff:

- (a) in all situations where A is true, B is true
- (b) in all situations where A is false, B is true (1983:175).

Rob A. Van Der Sandt

Rob A. Van Der Sandt defines semantic presupposition as:

$\phi \gg \chi$ iff

- (a) in any interpretation where ϕ is true, χ is true
- (b) in any interpretation where ϕ is false, χ is true (1988:14).

Semantic Account: Limitations

In semantics, presupposition is studied with reference to the truth-conditional aspects of meaning. Attempts to formulate the semantic theories of presupposition, as Levinson (1983:199) argues, are largely misplaced. Truth-conditional theories of presupposition treat it as a special species of entailment, namely one in which a logical consequence relation can be defined in such a way that it is affected by negation. As a result, semantic presupposition remains a kind of invariant relation. Levinson states:

Semantics on this view is concerned with the context independent, stable meaning of words and sentences, leaving to pragmatics those inferences that are special to certain contexts. Given this much, it is clear that presupposition belongs in pragmatics and not in semantics (1983:200).

Presupposition is a context dependent aspect of meaning and pragmatics studies meaning in context. Based on this fact, it can be reasonably concluded that presupposition is a pragmatic concept. Beaver poses a number of challenges for a 'purely semantic multivalent/partial' account of presupposition. He states that semantic account of presupposition

presents a number of challenges ... and thus provides motivation for either considering pragmatic addition to the semantic theories, or for considering alternative accounts of presupposition(2001:43).

From 1970's onwards, it became prevalent that the difference between presupposition and other semantic relations is that of context-sensitivity. It cannot be studied simply as a semantic relation. More precisely, presupposition should be studied with a pragmatic point of view. From pragmatic perspective, sentences are seen as utterances of individuals communicating through the language.

Conclusion

Thus, semantic theories of presupposition concerning with the specification of invariant, stable meaning, are not capable of analyzing presupposition independently. Consequently, such semantic theories of presupposition have been deserted, paving ways to pragmatic presupposition.

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