The Presuppositions Cheat Sheet – Extended Edition

The Linguistic Phenomena

Examples of presuppositions in simple sentences:

"Tess lost her wallet again."

Presupposition: Tess lost her wallet before.

"The president of Spain is hairy."

Presupposition: Spain has exactly one president.

"Jane stopped smoking."

Presupposition: Jane used to smoke.

"John likes pear juice, too." (in a conversation about Bob)

Presupposition: Bob likes pear juice and Bob is not John.

Empirical Tests:

- *Infelicity test*: If a sentence carries a false presupposition, we sometimes hear the sentence as being infelicitous.
 - Example: it would be infelicitous, and not false, to say "Jane hasn't stopped beating her husband" when Jane never used to beat her husband.
- *Negation test*: If a simple sentence carries a certain presupposition, its negation (usually) carries the same presupposition.
 - "My sister lives in Dubuque." and "My sister doesn't live in Dubuque." both presuppose I have a sister.
- *Question test*: If a simple sentence *S* carries a certain presupposition, the question *S*? carries the same presupposition.
 - "It was John who murdered Jane." and "Was it John who murdered Jane?" both presuppose someone murdered Jane.
- *"Hey wait a minute" test*: If a sentence presupposes *P*, it is usually appropriate to reply by saying *"Hey wait a minute! I had no idea that P!"*
 - It's appropriate to respond to "Anne's cats are crazy" by saying "I had no idea Anne had cats!", but not by saying, "I had no idea Anne's cats were crazy!"

Karttunen and Peters' heritage rules:

Let P_A and P_B be the presuppositions of A and B respectively. Then:

- *Negation:* 'Not *A*' presupposes *P*_A (that's just the negation test again)
- *Conditionals*: 'If A then B' presupposes $(P_A \land (A \rightarrow P_B))$
 - Motivating example: "If a Nobel Peace Prize is awarded this year, the Nobel Peace Prize awarded this year will go to the Dalai Lama.", which presupposes and does not assert that at most one Nobel Peace Prize will be awarded this year.
- *Conjunction:* 'A and B', remarkably, also presupposes $(P_A \land (A \rightarrow P_B))$
 - Motivating example: "Someone shouted, and it was Daisy who shouted." presupposes nothing, although "It was Daisy who shouted" presupposes that someone shouted.
- [*Disjunction* (highly controversial!): 'A or B' presupposes $((B \lor P_A) \land (A \lor P_B))$]

Theories of Sentence Presupposition

Logical/Expressive Presuppositions (Frege/Strawson)

- A sentence presupposition is a condition that has to obtain in order for the sentence to have a truth value.
 - For Strawson, a sentence with a false presupposition fails to express a proposition. For Frege, a sentence containing an empty name expresses a thought, but has no *Bedeutung*, i.e. no truth value.
- This conception looks like it can't cover the whole range of phenomena just discussed. It's implausible that "Jane stopped smoking" has no truth value.
- *Heritage Rules:* On Frege's picture, one expects universal projection, which certainly is wrong even for the case of singular terms. Certainly "Either there is no king of France, or the king of France is in hiding" should come out true!
 - One may attempt to fix this by going for e.g. Strong Kleene semantics rather than Weak Kleene semantics, but this doesn't work. (See Soames §4).

Semantic Conception of Presupposition (Karttunen and Peters)

- Build a two-level compositional semantic account: one level for truth-conditional content, another level for presuppositional content.
 - "The president of Spain will address the people again." in effect gets to express two propositions. The truth-conditionally expressed proposition is something like "There is a unique president of Spain and she will address the people"; the presuppositional content is something like "There is a unique president of Spain and she addressed the people before."
 - Some words, like "again", do not affect the truth conditions and function solely to modify the presuppositional level.
- *Heritage Rules:* The heritage rules given above are simply written into the semantics explicitly.
 - This way of proceeding has been criticised for lacking in explanatory power.

Pragmatic Presuppositions (Stalnaker)

- Our explanations should not focus on the presuppositions carried by sentences, but rather on the *presuppositions collectively held by the participants in a conversation,* a.k.a. the *conversational background,* a.k.a. the *common ground.*
 - The presuppositions carried by a sentence are simply those presuppositions that can plausibly be attributed to anyone who utters that sentence. In some cases, the fact that a presupposition is attributable to the speaker is due to the truth-conditional content of the sentence.
 - In a normal, truth-directed conversation, Stalnaker thinks the conversational background is given by something like the participant's *common beliefs*.
 - In a *defective* conversation, some participants presuppose more than is actually warranted by the conversational background.
- Some general pragmatic rules involving presuppositions:
 - Never assert what is already presupposed (that would be redundant)
 - Always presuppose what has already been asserted
 - Try to render all presuppositions collective (i.e. adopt those presuppositions of the others and drop those presuppositions that aren't shared.)
- *Heritage Rules:* The heritage rules are to be explained in terms of listeners' pragmatic reasoning about the speaker's presuppositions.

Presupposition Cancellation (Gazdar and Soames)

- Motivation: the K&P rules don't explain the heritage rules, merely posit them.
- Gazdar and Soames propose that the presuppositions of simple sentences are (almost) *always* inherited by the complex sentences in which they occur. However, presuppositions can get *cancelled* by literal content that conflicts with them or by conflicting conversational implicatures.
- Motivating examples (counterexamples to K&P):
 - "There is no king of France! So the king of France isn't in hiding."
 - "Either John met the King of Slobovia or he met the president of Slobovia."
 - "If I later realize I didn't tell the truth, I will admit it."
- Descriptive problems:
 - Too little cancellation. "Maybe Bill proved the theorem and Mary proved it too." This doesn't presuppose that someone other than Mary proved the theorem, as Soames predicts.
 - Too much cancellation. "Tess has never lost a wallet in her life. If she loses her wallet again, God help her soul." This sounds infelicitous. According to Gazdar/Soames theory, however, the presupposition that Tess lost a wallet before should simply get cancelled.
 - "If John has twins, Mary won't like his kids." / "If John has kids, Mary won't like his twins."

Irene Heim's Dynamic Account of Sentence Presuppositions

The basic idea

- Heim's account incorporates elements from all the theories examined so far.
- Using the Stalnakerian framework, she sets up the following formalism:
 - Let *c* be the conversational background of our conversation. We'll think of this of a set of worlds, usually called the *context set*, or simply the *context*. We then write the result of uttering a sentence *S* in context *c* as *c* + *S*.
 - We take the expression 'c + S' to be defined just in case the presuppositions of S are entailed by c (i.e. are true in all worlds in c). If this is the case, we say S is *admissible* in c. The presuppositions of S, on this way of thinking, are the *admittance criteria* of S in a context.
 - For our purposes, we will always assume that, wherever c + S is defined, we have
 - $c + S = \{w \in c : S \text{ is true at } w\}$
 - The partial function $c \mapsto c + S$ is called the *context change potential* (CCP) of *S*.
- *Revolutionary Proposal*: Abandon the semantic programme of finding the compositional rules determining the truth conditions. Instead seek to find the compositional rules that determine the CCPs of sentences.
 - "a compositional assignment of CCPs to the sentences of a language can fully replace a compositional assignment of truth conditions of the sort normally envisaged by semanticists, without any loss of empirical coverage." (Heim)
 - In a CCP-based semantics, like on K&P's proposal, rules have to be specified that determine the domain of admissible contexts of the resultant CCP.
 - A CCP-based semantics is relieved from the task of asking whether a sentence has a truth-value in world *w*, and which it is, once it's determined that that sentence is inadmissible in contexts that include *w*. So a CCP-based semantics doesn't determine whether "The present king of France is bald" is false or lacks a truth value in the actual situation.

Analysing the connectives

In a CCP-based semantics, the compositional rules for connectives have to state how the CCP of the whole sentence (e.g. "*A* and *B*") depends on the CCPs of its constituent clauses (i.e. the CCPs of "*A*" and of "*B*"), rather than giving the truth conditions of the whole sentence in terms of the truth conditions of the constituent clauses. Here's the proposal:

$$c + \operatorname{Not} A = c \setminus (c + A) \tag{i}$$

$$c + A \text{ and } B = (c + A) + B \tag{ii}$$

$$c + \text{If } A \text{ then } B = ((c + A) + B) \cup (c \setminus (c + A))$$
(iii)

We can explain the K&P heritage rules by means of these analyses:

- The *local context* of a clause *A* is the context to which that particular clause is applied. Thus the local context of *B* in '*A* and *B*' is (*c* + *A*), according to (ii).
- Whether the whole sentence is admissible, depends only on whether each clause is admissible in its local context.
- Thus, according to (i), 'Not *A*' is admissible in exactly the same contexts as *A*. Hence it has the same admittance criteria, i.e. the same presuppositions.
- ▶ In order for '*A* and *B*' to be admissible two conditions have to be satisfied, according to (ii). Firstly, *A* has to be admissible, so P_A has to be entailed by *c*. Secondly, *B* has to be admissible in the context c + A, so P_B has to be entailed by *c*. These criteria can be summarised by saying that *c* must entail ($P_A \land (A \rightarrow P_B)$). Thus we recover the K&P rule for conjunction.
- 'If *A* then *B*' gets the same heritage rule, since the local contexts of the clauses *A* and *B* are the same.

Accommodation

- When an inadmissible sentence *S* is uttered in a context *c*, we can accommodate by adding the presupposition P_S to *c* before applying the CCP, thus giving $(c + P_S) + S$ as the resulting context.
- In case *S* is a complex sentence, however, we can accommodate in a different way, by locating the inadmissibility of the sentence in the local context of the inadmissible clause. In the case of the sentence 'Not *A*', *local accommodation* yields the context $c \setminus ((c + P_A) + A)$, while global accommodation would yield the context $(c + P_A) \setminus ((c + P_A) + A)$.
- For negation, local accommodation effectively ends up replicating the cancellation effects Soames and Gazdar drew attention to. But Heim's proposal doesn't overgenerate in the same way that Soames and Gazdar's proposal did, because only some presuppositions can get cancelled through local accommodation.
- Sometimes, the sentence indicates a speaker presupposition stronger than the admissibility condition for pragmatic reasons. In such cases, the stronger presuppositions should be expected to be accommodated.
- In particular, this sort of pragmatic effect is meant to account for the *proviso problem*. If you say "If Miss Marple gets the case, the murderer of Baron Fipps will certainly be caught" for example, you normally presuppose that Baron Fipps was murdered, and not merely that (Miss Marple gets the case → Baron Fipps was murdered), as the K&P rule would dictate.