

Week 5 - Cross-Linguistic Presupposition

This Week

This week we will talk about **cross-linguistic variation in presuppositions**, which is a topic that is not commonly discussed. This is because it's kind of taken for granted that presuppositions are conceptually universal: all languages have presupposed meaning in some way or another with variation existing in the domain of presupposition triggers. We will be reviewing Matthewson (2006) and Matthewson (2009), which makes the bold claim that pragmatic presuppositions are **not universal**, at least not in the Stalnakerian sense that we have used up to this point.

Cross-Linguistic Variation

We might expect cross-linguistic variation to arise when we think about certain types of presupposition triggers e.g., words that trigger presuppositional sortal restrictions might be language specific:

- (1) a. Japanese words *haku* and *kiru* presuppose which part of the body the clothes in worn is neutralised in English *wear*.
- b. English words *eat* and *drink* presuppose the 'type' of thing being ingested (consistency of food/drink maybe?) is neutralised in Thai *kin*.
- c. Thai words *bart* and *tat* is neutralised in English *cut*.
- d. English *see/look* and *read* is neutralised in Mandarin *kan*¹

We may also expect presupposition triggers with the same presupposition to be compositionally distinct e.g., presuppositional content of English *again* is realised in Thai as *more* + PVF marker.

This idea that presupposition structures systematically vary has been previously explored as a challenge against the **effability hypothesis** (Keenan 1974). The argument is as followed: if two sentences that are translations of each other have the same meaning then they must make the same assertions and presuppositions. However, using Hebrew, Keenan suggests that equivalent expressions in Hebrew and English do not carry the same presupposition.

Where might we expect there to be universal presupposition triggers? A good starting point might be change-of-state predicates. We would expect any language with the word meaning 'to stop' to presuppose a prior state. In fact, this is automatically assumed during L2 acquisition.

Matthewson 2006

In this paper, Matthewson argues that St'at'imcets does not have **Pragmatic presuppositions** the way we previously characterised them under a Stalnakerian view (Stalnaker 1973; Stalnaker 1973 etc. see handout from week 1).

¹maybe not actually??

A proposition P is a pragmatic presupposition of a speaker in a given context just in case the speaker assumes or believes that P, assumes or believes that his addressee assumes or believes that P, and assumes or believes that his addressee recognizes that he is making these assumptions, or has these beliefs.
(Stalnaker 1974 quoted in Matthewson 2006).

This claim is empirically difficult to prove because eliciting intuitions regarding inferences ‘taken for granted’ by discourse participants is challenging. Of course, you can’t just ask people ‘Do you take this information for granted?’ and you also cannot simply ask for intuitions regarding a truth-value gap as intuitions are not stable. Methodological challenges are highlighted in Krifka (2011).

The diagnostic used here is grounded in the ‘Hey, wait a minute’ test (Von Stechow 2004) which predicts that if a presupposition is not in the common ground at the time of an utterance, the utterance can be challenged by a ‘Hey, wait a minute!’. You’re essentially saying ‘You assumed I accepted the presupposition in the common group, but I don’t.’

- (2) a. Gump has gone back to visit his son.
b. Hey, wait a minute. I had no idea Gump had a son!

Using this, Matthewson attempted to elicit ‘Hey, wait a minute’ responses for several presupposition triggers using four different methodologies. This included: intentionally causing presupposition failure, asking consultants to translate English discourses with responses to presupposition failure, constructing presupposition failure responses in St’át’imcets and asking the consultants to judge them and explicitly discussing the test with English to demonstrate.

Here is an example from the paper:

(12) Context: No prior discussion of anyone being in jail.

- A: wá7 t’it l-ti gélgel-a tsitcw k Lisa
be also in-DET strong-DET house DET Lisa
‘Lisa is also in jail.’
- B: stam’ ku s-záyten-s
what DET NOM-business-3POSS
‘What did she do?’

When examples like this were presented (researchers also made sure they were not easily accommodable presuppositions), it was noted that the consultant did not seem to react in a way consistent with the Hey, wait a minute test. Additionally, when presuppositions do fail, they they can be challenged or questioned in the exact same manner that you would with assertions.

Gauker 1998 Approach to (Pragmatic) Presuppositions

Her analysis is to say that pragmatic presuppositions in St’át’imcets do not restrict a common ground to facts taken for granted by discourse participants, but instead adopts the Gauker (1998) approach!

Gauker (1998) took issue with the Stalnakerian conception of context as a common ground, that is, a body of mutual beliefs or assumptions shared by discourse participants (again c.f. week 1). He argued that this model cannot adequately explain how presuppositions work, particularly in cases of presuppositions where the presupposed content is new to the hearer but the utterance is still felicitous (accommodation). Because presuppositions can inform the hearer, Gauker claimed that a speaker who utters a sentence with a presupposition does not assume that the hearer already believes or accepts the presupposed content.

His alternative was to propose that context is not a set of mutual beliefs, but rather an ‘objective propositional context’, a set of relevant objective facts (contrasted w/ belief states) that determine the appropriateness of an utterance. A presupposition is simply the speaker’s take on what belongs to this objective context, and it does not encode assumptions about what the hearer already accepts.

So how does this fit into presuppositions? The idea is that a presupposition is the speaker’s judgment about what facts are relevant enough to belong in the propositional context. e.g., with our sentence ‘Gump has gone back to visit his son’, the presupposition that ‘Gump has a son’ is what is identified by the speaker as a relevant fact for interpreting the sentence.

Presuppositions in St’át’imcets

Matthewson’s idea is that we can account for the fact that speakers of St’át’imcets do not challenge presupposition failure with Gauker’s analysis of pragmatic presuppositions. Since presuppositions do not represent assumptions about the hearers beliefs in this framework, the hearer has no basis for objecting to presupposition failure in line with the Hey, wait a minute test. Another prediction that Gauker makes is that if a presupposition is extremely bizarre, it would not plausibly belong to the objective propositional context, and the hearer will object. Matthewson tests this prediction and found that when she said ‘Another sun appeared’ (Example 20 in the text), the speaker laughed a lot.

Crucially, Matthewson does not argue that St’át’imcets **lacks** presuppositions, but rather that there is cross-linguistic variation when it comes to the properties of presuppositions. To prove this point, she argues that presuppositions in St’át’imcets still show projection behaviour in line with standard presupposition triggers in English.

Finally, Matthewson makes it a point that consultants were not hesitant to provide a Hey, wait a minute response due to cultural reasons e.g., seniority, politeness or ‘high-listening society’. Her point relies on the fact that consultants were willing to challenge other kinds of infelicitous utterances, including infelicitous parts of a sentence that has a failed presupposition that isn’t the failed presupposition itself!

A semantic universal or not?

A question remains of whether or not there is actually cross-linguistic variation like what Matthewson is claiming or if Stalnakerian approaches (and maybe the Gauker approach) is simply inadequate at accounting for presuppositions in general (as a universal category). Gauker’s initial claim was based on English and some data suggests that maybe this approach better describes English more generally. This is super hard to test, but some work suggests

that presupposition accommodation is so widely utilised in communication that perhaps the Stalnakerian model of pragmatic presupposition is insufficient. For example, Krifka (2011) Truth value judgment (TVJ) tasks did not block presupposition failure. When participants were shown a picture of two dogs with one dog eating a bone, the sentence ‘The dog is eating the bone’ was judged as true even though the presupposition that there is one unique salient dog was not necessarily satisfied. The accommodation process is the participant mentally selecting one of those dogs (the one eating).

Matthewson 2009

In this paper, Matthewson investigates third-person pronouns, claiming that these pronouns in St’át’imcets are not definite and do not carry the **familiarity presupposition** that is found in English. Recall how this presupposition was defined in satisfaction theory (c.f. week 3):

(3)

$$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} (\langle [1 \rightarrow a, 5 \rightarrow \text{Cathy}], w_1 \rangle), \\ (\langle [1 \rightarrow a, 5 \rightarrow \text{Erying}], w_1 \rangle), \\ (\langle [1 \rightarrow a, 5 \rightarrow \text{Jisu}], w_1 \rangle), \\ (\langle [1 \rightarrow b, 5 \rightarrow \text{Cathy}], w_1 \rangle), \\ (\langle [1 \rightarrow b, 5 \rightarrow \text{Erying}], w_1 \rangle), \\ (\langle [1 \rightarrow a, 5 \rightarrow \text{Cathy}], w_2 \rangle), \\ (\langle [1 \rightarrow b, 5 \rightarrow \text{Erying}], w_2 \rangle), \\ (\langle [1 \rightarrow b, 5 \rightarrow \text{Saki}], w_2 \rangle), \\ (\langle [1 \rightarrow c, 5 \rightarrow \text{Erying}], w_3 \rangle), \\ (\langle [1 \rightarrow c, 5 \rightarrow \text{Erying}], w_3 \rangle) \end{array} \right\} \quad [\text{she}_5 \text{ was angry}] = \left\{ \begin{array}{l} (\langle [1 \rightarrow a, 5 \rightarrow \text{Cathy}], w_1 \rangle), \\ (\langle [1 \rightarrow a, 5 \rightarrow \text{Erying}], w_1 \rangle), \\ (\langle [1 \rightarrow b, 5 \rightarrow \text{Cathy}], w_1 \rangle), \\ (\langle [1 \rightarrow b, 5 \rightarrow \text{Erying}], w_1 \rangle), \\ (\langle [1 \rightarrow a, 5 \rightarrow \text{Saki}], w_2 \rangle) \end{array} \right\}$$

The idea is that pronouns in St’át’imcets do not need to presuppose that their discourse referent is already defined in the assignment. This is based on several pieces of data, including the fact that pronouns can be used to introduce someone with no prior discourse referent, demonstrated with this example from the paper:

wa7	pro _{ABS}	áku7	káti7,	ka-7ats’x-s-ás-a	lt7u
be	pro _{ABS}	DEIC	DEIC	CIRC-see-CAUS-3ERG-CIRC	DEIC
	x7ilh=a		i=wa7	záw-em	
	other.side-DET		DET.PL=IMPF	fish-MID	

Literal translation: ‘He was there, he caught sight of the ones who were fishing over on the other side.’

Felicitous English translation: ‘There was *this man* ...’

(van Eijk and Williams 1981:72)

Other examples include expressions with backwards pronominalisations, which I think is pretty cool, here is an example from Davis (2007):

ni=s-pála7-s=a [q'7-ál'men *pro_{ABS}*], nilh [s=wa7=s
DET=NOM-one-3POSS=EXIS eat-want *pro_{ABS}*] then [NOM=IMPF=3POSS
cwíl'-em *tí=nk'yáp=a* ku=sq'a7-s]
seek-MID DET=coyote=EXIS DET=food-3POSS]
'Once upon a time, *he* was hungry, so *a coyote* went looking for his food.'

Again, if presuppositions do not require a discourse referent, then it doesn't have to be assumed by the speaker to be mutual knowledge!!!

Some more things

Two key questions that I want to think about:

- How can we accurately elicit judgments regarding presuppositions in a fieldwork setting?
- When does cross-linguistic data regarding presuppositions become informative for semantic/pragmatic theory?

There may not be a clear answer for either question. As far as we know, key semantic properties of presuppositions e.g., projection are universal. If a presupposition was 'unfilterable' or something and not conventionally implicated then this could inform trivalent accounts, however such a language has probably not been described. As for methodology... I don't know. Discuss this.

List of References

Stalnaker, Robert (1973). "Presuppositions". *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 2 (4): 447–457.