

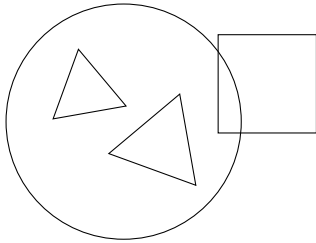
Presuppositions

Reading: Coppock & Champollion, Ch. 1.1.2

1. Sentence meaning beyond truth conditions

- Consider the scenario depicted below. What is the truth value of sentence (1) in this scenario?

(1) The triangle is inside the circle.



- A speaker can only (*felicitously*) use (1) in a conversation if they take it for granted that there is exactly one triangle. That is, if they think that this fact is uncontroversial and known to all conversation participants.
- We say: sentence (1) *presupposes* that there is exactly one triangle.

2. What are presuppositions?

- Presuppositions are entailments, but special entailments. Ordinary entailments disappear when the sentence is negated, turned into a question, or embedded under a *possibility modal* like *maybe*:
 - (2) a. Alice has a cute dog.
→ Alice has a dog.
 - b. Alice **doesn't** have a cute dog.
 - c. **Does** Alice have a cute dog?
 - d. **Maybe** Alice has a cute dog.
(b-d): \nrightarrow Alice has a dog.
- But presuppositions survive in all of these environments (we also say: presuppositions *project*):
 - (3) a. Bob's sister is a professional wrestler.
→ Bob has a sister.
 - b. Bob's sister is **not** a professional wrestler.
 - c. **Is** Bob's sister a professional wrestler?
 - d. **Maybe** Bob's sister is a professional wrestler.
(b-d): → Bob has a sister.

- *Projection tests*: we can use this behavior of presuppositions to distinguish them from ordinary entailments.

(4) It was the beeping that bothered him.

In-class Exercise 1

- Apply the projection test to show that the entailments in ??-?? are presuppositions.

- (5)
- a. The king of France is bold.
→ France has a unique king.
 - b. It stopped raining.
→ It was raining before.
 - c. Mary knows that the door is locked.
→ The door is locked.
 - d. Bill regrets eating the whole cake.
→ Bill ate the whole cake.

- Use the projection test to determine whether the inference in each of the examples below is an ordinary entailment or a presupposition. If it's a presupposition, say what triggers it.

- (6)
- a. He wrote a letter.
→ The referent of *he* is male.
 - b. Lisa has started going for a swim in the evening.
→ Lisa goes for a swim in the evening.
 - c. John was petrified, too.
→ Someone else was petrified.

3. Complications

3.1. Accommodation

- We said that if a sentence has a presupposition, then this sentence can felicitously be used only if all conversation participants already know/believe the presupposition.
- This is too strict. Even if the addressee of ?? didn't previously believe the speaker has a dog, they can tacitly adjust their beliefs. We call this kind of adjustment *accommodation*.

(7) Sorry, I'm late. I had to take my dog to the vet.

- Via accommodation, speakers can use presupposition to communicate new information:

(8) Did you know your shoes are untied?

(9) Why are you driving me crazy?

- However, accommodation isn't always easy:

(10) Sorry, I'm late. I had to take my wombat to the vet.

(11) Sarah is seeing a movie in Boston tonight too.

3.2. Metalinguistic negation

- Negation can be an unreliable test for detecting presuppositions, because sometimes presuppositions do not survive under negation:

(12) John hasn't stopped smoking. He never used to smoke.

(13) The peas didn't thaw. They were never frozen.

- The negations in (12) and (13) are instances of *metalinguistic negation*. Metalinguistic negation doesn't target the truth-conditional content. Rather, the speaker can use it to object to a previous utterance for a variety of reasons, including pronunciation, word choice, or presupposition failure.

(14) I didn't eat the toMAHto—I ate the toMAYto.

(15) I don't *like* chocolate, I *love* it!

4. Holes, plugs and filters

- **The projection problem:** how to determine the presupposition of a complex sentence from the presuppositions of its parts?
- You might expect: all presuppositions of component expressions become presuppositions of the complex sentence. But this isn't true for presupposition triggers embedded under *believe* and some other verbs:

(16) John **believes** that his horse likes carrots.

- Constructions like this which block the presuppositions of the component expressions from passing through to the sentence are called *plugs*.
- For some other constructions, we already know that they allow presuppositions to project:
 - (17) a. John's horse **doesn't** like carrots.
 - b. Does John's horse like carrots?
 - c. Maybe John's horse likes carrots.
- These constructions are called *holes*.
- Finally, there are also constructions that allow presuppositions to project under certain conditions and otherwise block them. For example:
 - (18) a. If the weather is good, then I'll go swimming in the pool.
 → There's a pool.
 - b. If the weather is good and there's a pool, then I'll go swimming in the pool.
 ↯ There's a pool.
- Constructions like this are called *filters*. The hole/plug/filter-terminology was introduced by Lauri Karttunen.

What you need to know

Key notions: presuppositions, presupposition triggers, projection, accommodation, metalinguistic negation, the projection problem, holes, plugs, filters

Skills:

- Distinguish between presuppositions and ordinary entailments via the projection test.