Accommodation and Presupposition

It is commonly accepted that if a sentence B presupposes a sentence A (or B ≫ A; see *Presupposition*), then a text composed of A followed by B is always well-formed. Conversely, it is often required that for a text to be well-formed presuppositions must precede their carrier sentences. And indeed, as is now widely accepted, a sentence B_A (i.e., B presupposing A) is to be interpreted against the background set by A.

A number of authors have observed, since the 1970s, that more often than not texts fail to satisfy this condition without, for that reason, lacking wellformedness. Seuren (1972: 360) speaks of 'naturally well-formed' texts where the condition is satisfied, as against 'artificially well-formed' texts where it is not, and where the missing presuppositions must be inserted 'by reconstruction.' Karttunen (1974: 191) makes the same observation:

> I think the best way to look at this problem is to recognize that ordinary conversation does not always proceed in the ideal orderly fashion described earlier. People do make leaps and shortcuts by using sentences whose presuppositions are not satisfied in the conversational context. This is the rule rather than the exception, and we should not base our notion of presupposition on the false premiss that it does not or should not happen.

He illustrates the phenomenon by giving sentences like, 'We regret that children cannot accompany their parents' or 'I would like to introduce you to my wife,' which presuppose, respectively, that children cannot accompany their parents (see *Factivity*) and that the speaker has a wife (see *Existential Presupposition*). Such sentences are perfectly interpretable even when their presuppositions have not been overtly uttered. Heim (1982), concentrating on existential presuppositions and anaphora, speaks of the 'Novelty-Familiarity-Condition' on texts, which, she says, is often not satisfied without the text becoming unwellformed. Lewis (1979) coined the term 'accommodation' to refer to the fact that presuppositions are 'slipped in' post hoc when they have not been uttered overtly. This term has since been widely adopted. (Seuren (1985) speaks of 'post hoc,' or 'backward suppletion.')

Accommodation is normally possible since presuppositions are structurally retrievable from their carrier sentences (see *Presupposition*). It is blocked, however, when background knowledge fails to provide a proper scenario. Scenario failure is most likely to occur with presuppositions involving a possessive predicate (*have, with,* genitive relation). Possessive predicates always contain an open parameter in their lexical conditions, referring the listener to available background knowledge. For example, the sentence *Joan's train was late* presupposes that Joan had (that is, stood in a well-known kind of relationship with respect to) a train. There is no problem here, as trains and their

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timetables have been an integral part of our world for a long time. Such a presupposition is accommodated without a hitch. But a sentence like *The room's steering wheel was on the left* will meet with interpretative problems, precisely because we have no idea of what it could be for a room to 'have' a steering wheel.

The assumption of accommodation as a regular process that makes for more succinct texts by appealing to the listener's intelligence and knowledge, makes it possible to maintain the wellformedness condition on texts requiring presuppositions to precede their carrier sentences. But a distinction must then be made between 'overt' and 'underlying texts.' The condition applies to the latter, not (obviously) to the former.

A distinction can be made between accommodation and the phenomenon known as 'bridging' in psycholinguistics (Clark 1977; Clark and Haviland 1977). An often-quoted case of bridging is this: 'We had a nice picnic but the beer was warm.' To make this little discourse interpretable something like 'Picnics often involve beer, so in this case, apparently, there was beer with the picnic' must be inserted. This insertion is, however, not structurally retrievable from the whole text or from either of its component sentences. Bridging is typically the tacit insertion of missing propositions that are not structurally retrievable from the sentence or text that triggers the bridging process. Presuppositional accommodation is always structurally retrievable from the carrier sentence.

See also: Discourse Semantics; Incrementation; Presupposition.

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