

-WHY PRESUPPOSITIONS AREN'T CONVENTIONAL

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1. CURRENT THEORIES OF PRESUPPOSITION: THE CONVENTIONAL HYPOTHESIS

Since Frege first sought to give presupposition some technical characterization some 90 years ago, there has been an enormous proliferation of work in this area. But despite that we still seem far from any adequate account of the phenomena in question, as this paper we hope will make clear.

Recently though there has been cause for optimism. Two fundamental facts have been established:

1. if semantics is truth-conditional then presupposition is not a semantic relation (see e.g. Boer & Lycan 1975, Wilson 1975, Karttunen & Peters 1975, Gazdar 1979a)
2. presuppositions have precise and determinable properties, the most interesting of which is their peculiar behaviour in some compound sentences (see Karttunen 1973, Wilson 1975, Gazdar 1979).

In accordance with these facts, two recent theories have been constructed that for the first time give what appear at least to be reasonably accurate predictions of presuppositional behaviour. These are due to Gazdar (1979a, 1979b) on the one hand, and Karttunen & Peters (1975, 1977, 1979) on the other. The two theories differ in deep and important ways: In Gazdar's for example presupposition is defeasible and can be cancelled by contrary entailments, background belief and even by conversational implicatures - presupposition is thus the most instable of all known species of Linguistic Inference. In the rival theory due to Karttunen & Peters on the other hand, presuppositions are identified with Grice's (1975, 1978) category of conventional implicatures, with the definitional properties of being non-truth-conditional BUT non-cancelable implications.

Now both these theories share one basic assumption, namely

that presupposition is a conventional part of (the non-truth-conditional part of) the meaning of Linguistic expressions. That is to say the assumption is that the presuppositions of Linguistic expressions are given in the same arbitrary way that Lexical items are assigned core semantic interpretations. There is thus no deeper kind of explanation for why the verb *regret* presupposes the truth of its complement than the kind we would resort to if asked why *dog* refers to a certain kind of animal.

In the case of the theory due to Karttunen & Peters it is clear that this assumption is essential, for all the theory does is add a non-truth-conditional component to a Montague semantics that collects the presuppositions of linguistic expressions as they are built up, allowing for the cases of presupposition-blocking in compound sentences. In Gazdar's theory, on the other hand, the assumption is not crucial - indeed he expresses neutrality on the issue of whether any super-ordinate explanation for the particular presuppositions of linguistic expressions can be found. But such a super-ordinate explanation might in fact require substantial revisions to the apparatus he employs. Both theories then make the assumption that presuppositions are conventionally associated with the forms that give rise to them, and derive at least part of their success from this assumption. For giving an account of the behaviour of presuppositions in complex sentences then becomes an 'engineering' problem, a matter of modelling presuppositional behaviour rather than explaining it. And both theories remain - despite the proliferation of other views (see e.g. the articles in Dineen & Oh 1979) - the only ones that deal with presupposition projection in complex sentences in a sophisticated way.

However there are reasons to believe that this fundamental assumption of the conventionality of presuppositions is quite incorrect. Suppose presuppositions are correctly identified with conventional implicatures as Karttunen & Peters suggest. Then they should exhibit the property of detachability (Grice 1975, 1978): that is it ought to be relatively easy to find some expression that shares the truth conditions with some other expression, but lacks the corresponding presuppositions. In fact, though, however hard one tries to find, say, an alternative way of expressing <1>, it seems impossible to find one which will lack the inference to <2>: consider for example the sentences in <3>:

- <1> John regrets hitting Mary
- <2> John hit Mary
- <3> John is sad that he hit Mary
John repents his hitting Mary
John is sorry that he hit Mary
John feels remorse about his hitting Mary

Such facts certainly undermine our confidence that presuppositions are funny little pragmatic inferences that just happen to accompany certain linguistic forms: rather they seem somehow to be indelibly linked up with the very concepts in question. Remorse is associated with deeds, and if I describe someone else's remorse then other things being equal I subscribe to the factivity of the relevant deeds.

Such arguments might alone be sufficient to rule out the idea that presuppositions are arbitrary conventional parts of the meaning of linguistic expressions. However, as Sadock (1978) has pointed out, in the absence of strong independent tests that will isolate out the truth-conditional component of an expression's meaning, it is difficult to use detachability as a definitional criterion. So we must seek other arguments if we are to challenge this basic assumption of the conventionality of presuppositions.

One other such counter-argument to the conventionality hypothesis is the focus of this paper. If we can show that presuppositions standadardly translate across unrelated languages, then we shall have undermined the conventionality hypothesis. Suppose for example that if we seek a translation of any of the sentences in <1> and <2> in some non-Indo-European language, we always invariably end up with the assumption in <2>, then there simply has to be a way in which it follows from the meaning of such sentences that they have the non-truth-conditional inferences that they do.

In this paper rather than explore the translatability of presuppositions across a significant number of languages, we have chosen to concentrate on the extremely detailed parallelisms between English and one Non—Indo-European language, the colloquial Tamil of South India. While it would be rash to jump from one such set of parallelisms to claims for universality, we know of no contrary facts in any other language. We therefore suggest that it is at

least likely that presuppositional phenomena are associated with certain semantic categories by some language universal mechanisms, and that this constitutes an extremely interesting and non-trivial set of universals in pragmatics.

We propose to proceed as follows: section 2 compares a list of core presupposition triggers in English and Tamil, that is a set of lexical items and constructions that give rise to presuppositions in both languages, and shows that for every such presupposition trigger in English there is a corresponding presupposition trigger in Tamil. Section 3 then goes on to show that the peculiar properties of presuppositions in English, in particular the distinctive properties of defeasibility and the projection problem, are identical in English and Tamil. We shall then return to consider the implications for presupposition theories in general.

2. PRESUPPOSITION TRIGGERS IN ENGLISH & TAMIL

There follows a list of presupposition generating constructions in English and their close Tamil equivalents. We have tried to choose presupposition triggers that are uncontroversial, but clearly given the diversity of theories in this area and the battery of alternative possible pragmatic relations (conventional implicatures, generalized conversational implicatures, particularized conversational implicatures and the like) some of the phenomena might be assigned by some theorists to other kinds of explanatory account. We have therefore provided a generous range of examples. Under each category of presupposition trigger we shall simply give an English example with its associated presupposition, followed by a parallel Tamil example and its associated presupposition. Wherever appropriate the examples will be in the negative, or both positive and negative (options indicated by '/'), as we shall take constancy under negation to be at least a necessary if not necessarily a sufficient test of presuppositionhood. We shall use the symbol '>>' for the relation 'presupposes', and PR to designate a presupposed proposition. We shall simply equivocate here as to whether sentences or utterances presuppose, although this is in effect an important difference between for example Gazdar's theory and that due to Karttunen & Peters. We should like to record a debt here to the extremely useful list of presuppositional phenomena that has circulated unpublished as Karttunen (nd).

1. Definite Descriptions

- <4> I saw/ didn't see the snake with two heads >> <5>
<5> there exists a snake with two heads
<6> reNTu tale paampe paatteen/paakkale >> <5>
two head snake-ACC I saw/didn't see

NB: the distinction definite/indefinite reference is not made in Tamil in the way it is in English, but the provision of the accusative marker (marked ACC in <6>) forces a definite reading for an object in most cases, as here.

2. Non-restrictive relative clauses

- <7> I saw the two headed snake which bit you
<8> a two headed snake bit you
<9> onne katicca reNTu tale paampe paatteen/paakkale you
having bit two head snake-ACC I saw/ didn't see
<10> Our boys, who study well, will/won't pass >> <11>
<11> our boys study well
<12> nallaa paTikkira enka payyanka pass paNNi ruvaanka/
paNNamaaTTanka
well studying our boys pass will do won't do

3. Factives

- <13> I knew/didn't know that it was raining
<14> it was raining
<15> enakku maRe pencatu terincatu/teriyale
<16> to me rain falling was known/not known John realized/
didn't realize that Harry had come
<17> Harry came
<18> jaanukku hari vantatu terincatu/teriyale >> <17>
to John Harry's coming realized/not realized
NB: Tamil *teri* covers both English *Know*
and *realize* or *come to know*
<19> I am / am not sorry that he came >> <20>
<20> he came
<21> avan varalennu varuttappaTTeen/paTale >> <20>
he didn't come-COMP sadness I felt/didn't feel
<21a> I forgot/didn't forget that you came >> <21b>
<21b> you came
<21c> nii vantate marantuTTeen/marakkale >> <21b>
you coming I forgot/ didn't forget

4. Clefts

<22> It was/ wasn't John whom I saw >> <23>

<23> I saw someone

<24> naan paattatu jaane/jaane ille >> <23>

I see-PAST-NOM is John-ACC/is not John

NB: this is a genuine cleft construction just like <21> with a special and distinctive syntactic marking by a pseudo-nominalization of the presupposed material, and an accusative marker on the focus NP. There is also a pseudo-cleft construction as in <27>:

<25> what I saw/didn't see was the book >> <26>

<26> I saw something

<27> naan paattatu pustakam/pustakam ille >> <26>

NB: the absence of the accusative marker on the focus NP *pustakam* makes this a different construction from that in <24>: there is also a construction in <30> parallel to English <28>:

<28> the one I saw was/ wasn't John

<29> I saw someone

<30> naan paattavan jaan

I seeing one is John

4. Implicit clefts by stress

<31> John didn't come yesterday to buy a BOOK >> <32>

<32> John came yesterday to buy something

<33> jaan neettu PUSTAKAM vaanka varale >> <32>

5. Temporal clauses

<34> he came/didn't come before the rain fell

<35> the rain fell

<36> maRe Peyya munnaale avan vantaan/varale >> <35>

<37> When Ramu came, m Sundaram left/didn't leave

<38> Ramu came

<39> raamu vantappa, cuntaram veLiye porappaTTaan/
porappaTale >> <38>

6. Change of state verbs

<40> John stopped/didn't stop smoking >> <41>

<41> John had been smoking

- <42> jaan ciukareT kuTikkirate niruttiTTaan/niruttale >> <41>
John cigarettee imbibing stopped/ didn't stop
- <43> John began/didn't begin to smoke >> <44>
- <44> John hadn't been smoking
- <45> jaan cikareT kuTikka aarampiciTTaan/aarampikale
John cigarette to imbibe began/didn't begin
- <46> I finished/ didn't finish the work
- <47> I had been doing the work
- <48> naan veeleye muTicciTTeen/muTikkale
I work-ACC finished / didn't finish

7. Implicative verbs

- <49> I forgot to tell him >> <50>
- <50> I ought to have told him
- <51> naan avankiTTe colla marantuTTeen/marakale >> <50>

8. Iteratives

- <52> I went/didn't go again
- <53> I went before
- <54> tirumpi pooneen/pookale >> <53>
again I went/ didn't go
- <55> he returned/didn't return >> <56>
- <56> he was there before
- <57> tirumpi vantaan/varale >> <56>
again he came/ didn't come

9. Presuppositions of questions

- <58> what are you doing? >> <59>
- <59> you are doing something
- <60> enna paNNurinka >> <59>
what are you doing?
- <61> Did John come? >> <62>
- <62> Either John came or he didn't come
- <63> jaan vantaaraa? >> <62>
john he came-Q
- <64> Did John come yesterday to buy a book? >> <65>
- <65> John came yesterday to buy something
- <66> Did John come to buy a book yesterday? >> <67>
- <67> John came to buy a book someday

<68> jaan neettu pustakamaa vaanka vantaan? >> <65>
John yesterday book-Q to buy came

<69> jaan neettuvaa pustakam vaanka vantaan? >> <67>
John yesterday-Q book to buy came

3. Properties of presupposition in English and Tamil

Having established that the range of presupposition triggers is essentially similar in English and Tamil, we now wish to show that the inferences that these triggers give rise to display the same sort of distinctive properties in Tamil that they do in English. We shall concentrate on two properties in particular, the ways in which presuppositions are defeasible in context, and the ways in which presuppositions behave in compound sentences, 'or the projection problem' as it is commonly known.

3.1. Defeasibility in context

This property is not uncontroversial; Karttunen & Peters (1975, 1979) for example would seem to hold that presuppositions (or as they would have it, 'conventional implicatures') are not in fact defeasible. Where some alleged presupposition can be shown to be defeasible, Karttunen & Peters will attempt to claim that the inference is in fact some other species of pragmatic implication (see e.g. Karttunen & Peters 1977). However this has the embarrassing consequence that virtually all the core examples of presuppositional phenomena listed above are then relegated to some other problem area (see Levinson *forthcoming* for details). A more productive move would be to face the facts of defeasibility squarely, and attempt to build theories of presupposition that account for this problematic property as, for example, Gazdar (1979b) and Atlas & Levinson (*forthcoming*) have done.

A number of ways in which presuppositions are defeasible by virtue of tacit contradictory assumptions are catalogued in Levinson (*forthcoming*). Some of these involve certain kinds of discourse context, for example argument by elimination as in <70>:

<70> It wasn't John who bitched about you; it wasn't Henry; and it wasn't Steve. In fact it wasn't anybody. You are just imagining it. Where the cleft sentences should presuppose <71> but fail to because the whole point of the argument is to eliminate the assumption that <71> is true:

<71> someone bitched about you

In Tamil we find precisely the same kind of presupposition cancellation in just the same contexts; thus <72> also fails to presuppose <71>:

<72> onne patti kooL connatu jaan ille, ramu ille,
you about bad saying John not, Henry not stiiv ille, collap-
pooanaa yaarum ille. niiyee neneccuki True Steve not, in fact every-
body not. You-emphatic are imagining.

Another kind of contextual defeasibility, first explored in depth by Heinamaki (1972) and Karttunen (1974), involves the interaction of what is said with what is assumed in the context. Thus <73> has the presupposition <75>, but <74> lacks it:

<73> Before Ramu finished writing the story, he cried
<74> Before Ramu finished writing the story, he died
<75> Ramu finished writing the story

The reason for the presupposition failure, of course, is that the fact that Ramu died before he finished his story together with our assumption that humans cannot write after they are dead requires that <75> is false. Not surprisingly exactly the same phenomenon occurs in Tamil, as illustrated by <76>, a translation of <73>, which like <73> presupposes <75>; whereas <77>, a translation of <74>, fails to presuppose <75> in just the same way as the corresponding English sentence.

<76> raamu kateye eRuti muTikka munnaal , aRutaan
Ramu story writing to finish before, cried
<77> raamu kateye eRuti muTikka munneale, cettuppoonaan
Ramu story writing to finish before, died

The important point here is that <74> and <77> are in no way anomalous or self-contradictory sentences; the presuppositions just evaporate where it would be inconsistent, talking background beliefs into account, to subscribe to them. This is a very general phenomenon: in a precisely similar way <78> and its Tamil

translation <79> fail to presuppose the content of the temporal clause:

<78> You can go in after you've paid .

<79> nii paNam kuTuttappuram uLLe pokalaam

Where by virtue of our knowledge of institutions like zoos and cinemas, what is actually conveyed is merely the conditional <80>:

<80> If you pay you can go in

We now turn to the second set of characteristic properties of presuppositions, their behaviour in compound sentences.

3.2: The projection problem: complex properties of presuppositions

One spectacular property of presuppositions is that they can be overtly denied in a conjoined clause, usually only if the clause that contains the relevant presupposition trigger has its main verb negated. The result is perhaps jarring, but it is not anomalous. Thus it is perfectly possible to say:

<81> I didn't finish the work; in fact I didn't even begin it.

Where the first clause would normally presuppose <82>:

<82> I did begin the work.

This property is important, because it forces those like Karttunen & Peters (or any surviving semantic presuppositionalists) who hold that presuppositions are uncancellable, into a claim that natural language negation is always ambiguous between a presupposition-preserving and a presupposition-negating sense. Since there's no independent evidence that such an ambiguity exists, and some that it doesn't, this is an unwelcome claim (see Gazdar 1979:xxx for discussion).

Again Tamil displays exactly the same property. Thus the Tamil equivalent of <81> is also not self-contradictory, and the presupposition <82> is cancelled without anomaly:

<83> naan veeleye muTikkale; collappoonaa aarampikavce ille

I work didn't finish; in fact to begin-EMPH not

Or again, just as in English one can say <84>, thus overtly denying the presupposition due to regret, so in Tamil one can say <85>:

<84> I don't regret that John is coming, because in fact he isn't coming:

<85> jaan varraannu naan kavaleppaTale, eennaa avan varale
John comes-COMP
I sadness don't feel, because he's not coming

Another crucial property of presuppositions is what has become known (after Karttunen 1973) as 'filtering' in complex sentences formed by use of the connectives. Thus <86> presupposes <87>, but <88> does not:

- <86> If the neighbours are at home, then all of their children must be away
<87> the neighbours have children
<88> If the neighbours have children, then all of their children must be away

This behaviour is interesting in two respects: firstly presuppositions survive in contexts like the clauses of conditionals where entailments fail to - hence <86> presupposes <87>: secondly they fail to survive where the antecedent states (or otherwise entails) the presuppositions of the consequent, as in <88>.

Again precisely similar behaviour is exhibited by presuppositions in Tamil, as illustrated by the translations of <86> as <89> and <88> as <90>:

- <89> inta viiTtukkaaranka viiTtule iruntaa, avankaLooTa ellaa
this house's people in house if they are, their all piLLekLum
veLiye pooyirukkaNum
children away gone must have
<90> inta viiTtukkarankaLukka piLLeka iruntaa, avankaLooTa
this house's people to children if they are, their
ellaa piLLekaLum veLiye pooyirukkaNum
all children away gone must have

Once again, only <89> presupposes <87>.

In a similar way we can take any of the presupposition triggers and their corresponding presuppositions discussed above, and filter them out in a conditional in Tamil just as in English. For example taking <92> we may embed it in the consequent of a conditional as in <91> and it will lack the presupposition <92>:

- <91> onne-patti yaaravatu kool coliraankannaa, (kol colratu)
 atu if against you anyone is bitching, it will be ramuaa taan
 irukkum
 Ramu only who is bitching
 <92> someone is bitching about you

Turning now to filtering in disjunctions, again we have precise parallels in English and in Tamil. This <93> does not as a whole have the presupposition <94> which would be a presupposition of its second disjunct alone:

- <93> Either John has no children or all of them have gone away
 <94> John has children

Again the direct Tamil translation of <93> behaves in the same way:

- <95> oNnu jaanukku piLLai ille, allatu pillai ellaarum
 either to John children not, or his children all
 veeLiye pooyirukkaNum
 away must have gone

It is important to note that on at least some theories, e.g. Karttunen & Peters', there is no reason to expect that such behaviour would be the same in English and Tamil. On such theories, it is part of the meaning of the connectives in English that they have built-into them presupposition filtering devices by arbitrary convention (see also von Stechow in press). Again we want to know why such devices translate across quite unrelated languages.

In this section we have illustrated what could be demonstrated at length: namely that not only the particular presupposition triggers but also the detailed characteristics of presuppositional projec-

tion are cross-linguistic phenomena. We now turn to the implications of these facts.

4. CONCLUSIONS

We have shown that:

- (a) presupposition triggers in English and Tamil are precisely parallel: they are either lexical items with specific meanings, or semantic concepts like definite reference, or subordinate constructions like temporal clauses or non-restrictive relatives, or constructions like the cleft coconstruction;
- (b) presupposition behaviour in complex sentences is precisely similar in English and Tamil: the defeasibility properties are the same and the filtering conditions are identical.

If presuppositions were simply *ad hoc* conventional elements of non-truth-conditional meaning as is now generally assumed, then there would be no reason why. On the contrary we should expect there to be the same sort of translational difficulties and conceptual mismatch that one finds when comparing other aspects of two language's lexicons. Thus we are not surprised to find that Tamil has one word covering the set of concepts labelled by *snow*, *mist*, *fog*, and *cloud* in English. It is therefore genuinely surprising on the conventional hypothesis that English *be sorry that S'* and Tamil *S' nnu VaruttapaTu* should both presuppose precisely *S'*; and likewise for a vast list of presupposition triggers compared across languages.

It seems fairly clear, on the balance of evidence like this, that somehow or other presuppositions follow naturally from the nature of presupposition triggers. Specifically it seems likely that presuppositions are generated by the *semantic structure* of the respective presupposition triggers. There seems to be no problem claiming this for lexical triggers like factives or the change of state verbs, or for conceptual devices like definite reference however that is expressed in any particular language. More puzzling perhaps is how e.g. the presuppositions of clefts might be attributed to semantic structure, as it is often claimed that <91> and <92> share identical semantic representations because they share the same truth conditions:

- <91> It was John who kissed Sarah
 <92> John kissed Sarah

It seems on the face of it that any difference in conceptual import must simply be attributed to a non-truth-conditional inference attached to the surface structure of <91> but not <92>. However, as Levinson (1978) and Atlas & Levinson (1979) have argued at length, there is an important distinction between stating the truth conditions for an expression and capturing its semantic structure in a semantic representation. Thus <91> might have the semantic representation in <93> and <92> that in <94> and yet share the same truth conditions:

- <93> Ex (Kxs \& x = j)
 <94> Kjs

The difference in the structure of the semantic representations might thus be held here too to be responsible for the fact that only <93> carries the particular presupposition associated with clefts.

Just how presuppositions should be predictively generated from the truth conditions plus the semantic representations of natural language expressions is of course not yet clear. Atlas and Levinson (*in press*) suggest that bearing in mind an amplified role for logical form or semantic representation, most presuppositional phenomena can be reduced to conversational implicature, the peculiar properties of presupposition notwithstanding. Sperber and Wilson (1979) suggest that presupposition can be reduced to matters of entailment, by employing a non-standard notion of 'ordered entailments' and a correlation between pragmatically foregrounded information and higher ordered entailments, and backgrounded information and lower ordered entailments. The proposal runs into all the difficulties that assailed the notion of semantic presupposition, built as it was on an entailment relation, but it does point up the way in which presupposition might reasonably be viewed as a species of pragmatic inference generated by semantic structure, and thus predictable from that structure.

In any case what is clearly required is some theory that given the semantic representation plus some pragmatic inference rules will *predict* the presuppositions of any sentence in any natural language. Such a theory would offer a hybrid semantico-pragmatic

account of presupposition; it would be based on the assumption that we hope to have made plausible here, that presuppositions are not *sui generis* but the result of complex interactions between semantics and pragmatics. Specifically, presuppositions would not be items of meaning attached by convention to particular surface expressions, and it would not make sense to model presupposition projection directly and essentially independently of other semantic and pragmatic processes.

We conclude that presupposition remains, ninety years after Frege's remarks on the subject, a thorn in the side of a theory of meaning. But it serves nicely to remind us how little we still understand about semantics, pragmatics and especially their interaction.¹

FOOTNOTE

1. This paper written in 1979 is published now without change, as it will be of use to the students of pragmatics in India who are lately increasing.

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