Presupposition

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Our semantic competence underwrites the validity of inferences such as the following, for both (1) and (2):

(1) John infected the PC.
(2) It was John who infected the PC.
∴ Someone infected the PC

However, there is a difference between the syntactic constructions in (1) and (2); unlike the less marked way of expressing what we perceive as the same content in (1), the cleft construction in (2) also validates (at least, in default contexts) the same inference when placed under different embeddings, such as negation — (3), conditionals — (4), modals — (5), and still others; presuppositions are said to be thereby “projected”, i.e., inherited by the embedding constructions:

(3) It was not John who infected the PC.
(4) If it was John who infected the PC, the Mac is also infected.
(5) It may have been John who infected the PC.
∴ Someone infected the PC

Other presuppositional constructions exhibit this behavior; consider the case of definite descriptions:

(6) The Sants station newsstand sells The Guardian.
(7) The Sants station newsstand does not sell The Guardian.
(8) If the Sants station newsstand sells The Guardian, we will buy it there.
(9) The Sants station newsstand may sell The Guardian.
∴ There is exactly one Sants station newsstand.

This projection behavior invites the traditional characterization of presuppositions as conditions for the truth and the falsity of the sentences/propositions including them. But, as the discussion in the past decades has shown, this cannot be a correct initial characterization (even if something along such lines can be ultimately defended on a
more complex theoretical basis). In the first place, Strawson pointed out cases of what Yablo (2006) calls “noncatastrophic presupposition failure”. For instance, if as a matter of fact there are two newsstands in Sants station, but both of them sell *The Guardian*, many people feel that (6) is nonetheless true; on the other hand, if there is no newsstand there, many people feel that (10) is false, not just neither true nor false:

(10) I waited for you for two hours at the Sants station newsstand.

Secondly, presuppositions are not projected in some cases; hence, they are not there “globally”, but they are still there, somehow, “locally”. They cannot be in those cases conditions for the truth and falsity of the whole claim, and thus the intuitive test we are considering does not witness their nonetheless “local” presence:

(11) If someone infected the PC, it was John who did it.
(12) Someone infected the PC, and it was John who did it.

Finally, conventional implicatures, which intuitively differ from presuppositions, share their projection behavior with presuppositions in the embeddings we have considered; following Potts (2007), I use non-restrictive wh-clauses as illustrative examples:

(13) John, who infected the PC, teaches in Oxford.
(14) It is not the case that John, who infected the PC, teaches in Oxford.
(15) If John, who infected the PC, teaches in Oxford, he will attend the conference.
(16) It may be the case that John, who infected the PC, teaches in Oxford.
\[ \therefore \] John infected the PC.

Geurts (1999, 6-8) uses the projection behavior illustrated by (3)-(5) and (11)-(12) as an intuitive test to characterize presuppositions; even though he acknowledges that the test is defeasible, I think the fact that conventional implicatures also pass it shows that it is not
even a good intuitive characterization, aside from its defeasibility. Von Fintel (2004, 271) proposes an alternative *hey, wait a minute* test to distinguish presupposition and assertion, which, even if also far from perfect, appears to be better. Consider the following dialogues, with ‘#’ being an indication of conversational impropriety or infelicity:

(17) It was not John who infected the PC.
(18) # Hey, wait a minute, I had no idea that John did not infect the PC.
(19) Hey, wait a minute, I had no idea that someone infected the PC.
(20) It is not the case that John, who infected the PC, teaches in Oxford.
(21) # Hey, wait a minute, I had no idea that John does not teach in Oxford.
(22) # Hey, wait a minute, I had no idea that John infected the PC.

Intuitively, this is why von Fintel’s test provides a better initial characterization of presuppositions. As opposed both to asserted contents and conventional implicatures, presuppositions are presented as information already in possession of the conversational participants. Asserted content is presented as new information for the audience, and the same applies to conventionally implicated contents, even if the latter are somehow backgrounded relative to the main assertion. This is why targeting the asserted or conventionally implicated content with the “hey, wait a minute” objection does not feel right, whereas objecting in that way to the presupposed content does. In other words, presuppositions are presented as part of the “common ground”, while asserted and conventionally implicated contents are presented as new information.

Von Fintel’s test, whether or not it is ultimately acceptable, is a useful, if rather blunt, instrument for isolating the phenomenon of presupposition. It shows that the skepticism expressed by writers such as Böer & Lycan (1976) and Levinson (1983) — who argue for a form of the eliminativist view about presuppositions to be described below in part on the basis of the alleged miscellaneous character of
the phenomenon — is prima facie unreasonable. The intuitions un-
veiled by the “Hey, wait a minute” test are quite robust, and robustly
related to grammatical constructions like those we have used for il-
lustration, as can be established by considering variations on them,
or others in the list given by Levinson (1983, 181-5). The robustness
of the intuitions suggests at least prima facie that presupposing is a
sufficiently “natural” kind, amenable to a precise characterization. A
philosophically adequate definition, if it is good, should elaborate on
the preceding intuitive explanation for why von Fintel’s character-
ization succeeds where the others previously considered fail.

In a series of papers, Stalnaker (1973, 1974, 2002) has pro-
vided an influential account of the phenomenon of presupposition. The ac-
count has been slightly modified along the way; here we will just
present the core aspects — Simons (2003) provides a helpful sympa-
thetic discussion of the evolving details. Stalnaker’s proposal is in the
spirit of Grice’s account of phenomena such as conversational impli-
cature in particular and meaning in general: it purports to explain
those phenomena as a specific form of rational behavior involving
communicative intentions, avoiding irreducibly social notions such
as conventions or (socially construed) norms.

Stalnaker bases his analysis on a notion of speaker presupposition,
which he then reluctantly (for reasons to be indicated presently) uses
to provide a notion of sentence presupposition. Speaker presupposition
is explained in terms of common beliefs about what is accepted
by the conversational partners; and common belief follows the pattern of
Schiffer’s and Lewis’ proposals about it and about common knowledge:
p is common belief in a given group G just in case (almost) everybody
in G believes p, believes that (almost) everybody in G believes p, and
so on. Acceptance is in its turn defined by Stalnaker (2002, 716) as a
category of mental states “which includes belief, but also some at-
itudes (presumption, assumption, acceptance for the purposes of
argument or enquiry) that contrast with belief and with each other.
To accept a proposition is to treat it as true for some reason.” The
need to invoke acceptance in the definition derives from many cases in
which, intuitively and according to our initial characterization above,
p is presupposed while not commonly believed. Thus, consider Don-
nellan’s example: the secret conspirator asks the usurper’s minions,
“Is the king in his countinghouse?” Here the speaker does not believe
that the intended referent is king, nor perhaps that there is a king, and hence does not believe that these propositions are commonly believed in the context, but nonetheless it is presupposed that the referent is king and that there is exactly one king. (This characterization of what is presupposed in this case, involving a referential use of the description, is along the lines of García-Carpintero’s (2000) “identification” presuppositions for cases of reference.) Nonetheless, acceptance cannot be invoked all the way down; the account is given in terms of common belief about what is commonly accepted, because only the more specific category of belief has the required explanatory links with behavior.

This is thus the final account. We first define a proposition $p$ to be in the common ground in a group $G$ — $\text{CGG}(p)$ — and then we define speaker presupposition:

\[(\text{CGG}) \quad \text{CGG}(p) \text{ if and only if it is common belief in } G \text{ that everybody accepts } p.\]

\[(\text{SpP}) \quad \text{Speaker } S \text{ presupposes } p \text{ (relative to } G) \text{ if and only if } S \text{ believes that } \text{CGG}(p).\]

Stalnaker (1973, 451; 1974, 50) then defines a notion of sentence presupposition in terms of this:

\[(\text{SnP}) \quad \text{Sentence } S \text{ presupposes } p \text{ if and only if the use of } S \text{ would for some reason be inappropriate unless the speaker presupposed } p.\]

Stalnaker (1978) complements this analysis of presuppositions with an equally deservedly influential analysis of assertion, on which an assertion is a proposal to update the common ground, which, if accepted, is “added” to it (i.e., it then becomes common belief that every participant accepts it); and he combined the two accounts to suggest intuitively plausible explanations of some aspects of the projecting behavior we presented in the previous section. This (together with the related independent work of Lauri Karttunen) was the origin of the new important tradition of Dynamic Semantics (DS), developed for instance in Heim (1983), Beaver (2001) or von Fintel (2004). This tradition has the resources to provide the philosophical account requested before. Unlike the traditional account of presuppositions as conditions on the truth and falsity of claims, it can explain the
selective projection behavior we have seen to be characteristic of presuppositions, and it can distinguish them from conventional implicatures, accounting also for the adequacy of von Fintel’s test; last but not least, when properly elaborated it also has the resources to explain the phenomenon of noncatastrophic presupposition failure (cf. von Fintel 2004).

Geurts (1999, 17), however, is right in pointing out the important conceptual differences between the DS tradition and Stalnaker’s viewpoint. Renouncing Stalnaker’s Gricean reductive aims, in this tradition presuppositions are taken to be, both with respect to their triggering and projecting behavior, a constitutive feature of the semantics of natural language expressions. Geurts (1999, 14) distances himself from DS, on account of its betrayal of Stalnaker’s truly pragmatic stance, and, like Stalnaker, he helps himself to a notion of expression-presupposition, defined in normative terms on the basis of the pragmatic notion of speaker presupposition. Unlike Stalnaker, however, Geurts also appeals to unexplained normative notions in characterizing speaker presupposition: “a speaker who presupposes something incurs a commitment … regardless whether he really believes what he presupposes” (ibid., 11).

What is exactly the difference between Stalnaker’s “pragmatic” view and the “semantic” one provided by DS? As Stalnaker (1974, 61) notes, there are two contrasting ways of understanding the semantic/pragmatics divide. In the truth-conditional account, semantics deals with the truth-conditions of sentences, and the truth-conditional import of expressions. It is in this sense that presuppositions understood as conditions for the truth and falsity of sentences are said to be a semantic phenomenon. An important strand of Stalnaker’s early defense of a pragmatic account, as he notes, is to oppose such a “semantic” conception; for reasons mentioned before (non-catastrophic failure, projection behavior), this opposition was well taken. However, the truth-conditional way of tracing the semantic/pragmatic divide is not theoretically useful, because it displaces from the purview of semantics facts that should be studied together with those it keeps there (cf. García-Carpintero (2001, 2004, 2006)): among others, semantically driven context-dependence, semantics for conventional indicators of speech acts such as the interrogative and imperative mood, and perhaps in addition some presuppositional
facts.

On a different constitutive understanding of the divide, linguistics in general purports to theoretically characterize the constitutive facts about natural languages (in an indirect way of putting this, the linguistic competence of speakers), and semantics is the part thereof dealing with meaning facts constitutive of natural languages. This is the conception of the divide that Grice (1975) had in mind when he tried to account for the apparent asymmetric, non-truthconditional behavior of conjunction or referential uses of descriptions as generalized conversational implicatures, i.e., as “pragmatic” features. Although his views here are complex (cf. Bezuidenhout (2010)), this also appears to be Grice’s (1981) own view on the presuppositional phenomena discussed here. After noting the two different interpretations of the divide, Stalnaker (1974, 61) points out that he is mainly arguing for a pragmatic account of presuppositions only on the first understanding, but notes also that his arguments have repercussions for the other: while he is open to the possibility that in some cases “one may just have to write presupposition constraints into the dictionary entry for a particular word” (ibid.), he conjectures “that one can explain many presupposition constraints in terms of general conversational rules without building anything about presuppositions into the meanings of particular words or constructions” (ibid.).

In fact, although as seen above Stalnaker (reluctantly, as it was said) introduced a notion of sentence presupposition (SnP) in his early writings, and still assumes it in recent work, he repeatedly expresses qualms about it, because of the unexplained appeal to the normative notion of inappropriateness, and because it suggests the existence of a “mysterious relation X” between sentences and propositions worthy of analysis, while “we don’t need the mysterious relation X to describe the phenomena, and it does not make any contribution to explaining them” (2002, 712-3). We find claims along these lines already in his earlier writings: “the facts can be stated and explained directly in terms of the underlying notion of speaker presupposition, and without introducing an intermediate notion of presupposition as a relation holding between sentences (or statements) and propositions” (1974, 50). We may say that Gricean generalized conversational implicature accounts of referential uses of descriptions (such as the one in Kripke (1977)) or manifest non-truth-conditional
asymmetries in conjunctions are not simply reductionist, but in fact eliminativist vis-à-vis semantic accounts of those phenomena, on the second understanding of the divide: although it is acknowledged that definite descriptions and conjunctions are in fact commonly used in those ways, it is claimed that a semantic theory should not encompass them. This is the way the label ‘(Gricean) eliminativist view’ of the phenomenon here studied, presupposition, is understood; it applies to writers such as Böer & Lycan (1976), Levinson (1983) and, as indicated, Grice (1981). The proposal is not to deny the phenomenon altogether, but only the need for a semantic account for it. Presuppositions do exist, but they can be accounted for without including them in our theoretical constitutive characterization of natural languages.

The Stalnakerian view of presuppositions, in contrast with the DS view, is ultimately eliminativist in this sense. This stance was present from the beginning, but the emphasis is stronger in more recent work:

[O]ne might define a notion of sentence presupposition in terms of speaker presupposition, but […] the attempt to do so would be a distraction, and would not yield any theoretically useful notion (2010, 150).

In recent work, Philippe Schlenker (2008, 2009) has advanced several new theoretical proposals, which he advertises as Stalnakerian alternatives to DS: both regarding the Projection and the Triggering issues, Schlenker contends that his proposals are pragmatic, not semantic. Schlenker, however, is not clear whether he has in mind the truth-conditional or the constitutive view of the semantic/pragmatic divide, but he seems to intend the first one. His “Local Contexts” proposal (Schlenker 2009) — which offers interesting solutions to well known problems of DS theories with quantified or disjunctive sentences — assumes a bivalent, non-dynamic semantics for connectives and quantifiers, and thus counts as “non-semantic” on the truth-conditional view. However, exactly as in DS, the account straightforwardly assumes that presuppositions are calculated in a compositional way “locally”, i.e., with respect to phrases that are proper parts of the whole sentence. This is probably why Stalnaker (2010, 149-151) distances himself from Schlenker’s proposals.
While it seems clear that Stalnaker is right that presupposition is a pragmatic, not semantic phenomenon in the truth-conditional sense, ultimately having to do with the propositional attitudes of speakers, there are some good reasons to prefer the DS semantic account (in the constitutive sense) to his Gricean eliminativist stance, and hence to reject that presupposing is a pragmatic phenomenon also on the constitutive account. García-Carpintero (2013) mentions the fact of informative presuppositions in this regard.

As Stalnaker (1973, 449; 1974, 51-2) noted in his early writings, it is common for speakers to communicate a piece of information by uttering a sentence that presupposes it. These are examples from Abbott (2008, 531, cf. sources there):

(23) The leaders of the militant homophile movement in America generally have been young people. It was they who fought back during a violent police raid on a Greenwich Village bar in 1969, an incident from which many gays date the birth of the modern crusade for homosexual rights.

(24) If you’re going into the bedroom, would you mind bringing back the big bag of potato chips that I left on the bed?

Speakers who utter sentences (23) and (24) do not typically assume their presuppositions — that some people fought back during a violent police raid on a Greenwich Village bar in 1969, and that there is exactly one big bag of potato chips that the speaker left on the bed, respectively — to be in the common ground. To utter sentences with those presuppositions is just an expedient resource for them to inform their audiences of such contents, plus the assertion, woven together in a terse package. That the contents are nonetheless presupposed is shown by the “Hey, wait a minute!” test — even though a “Hey, wait a minute!” objection in these cases might feel, even if literally adequate, pedantic, smug, or otherwise uncooperative — just like it feels to fail to grasp a manifest implicature.

The examples above help us to appreciate the ordinariness of the phenomenon, but it is better to have a simpler case for discussion (Stalnaker (1974, 52, n. 2) attributes the following example to Jerry Sadock.). We assume that the speaker utters (25) in the knowledge that his audience knows nothing about his family:

(25) Presupposition

I cannot come to the meeting — I have to pick up my sister at the airport.

The “Hey, wait a minute!” test shows again the presence of the presupposition that the speaker has a sister (in addition to others, such that there is a salient airport, and so on, but we will focus on this), even if, as before, precisely to the extent that speakers are entitled to assume that the presupposition will be accommodated without further ado by ordinary audiences, it would feel awkward if somebody objected to it with the “Hey, wait a minute …” complaint. (It would feel much better if the speaker had made the utterance with ‘my lover’ replacing ‘my sister’.) These are cases where speakers exploit what Lewis (1979) called the “Rule of Accommodation for Presuppositions”, which he characterized thus:

(ra) If at time \( t \) something is said that requires presupposition \( p \) to be acceptable, and if \( p \) is not presupposed just before \( t \), then – ceteris paribus and within certain limits – presupposition \( p \) comes into existence at \( t \).

Cases in which a “Hey, wait a minute …” complaint is actually made, which the ‘my lover’ variant illustrates, explain the need for the hedge: the hearer is not always prepared to accommodate. Now, the initial problem for Stalnaker’s account that cases of informative presupposition pose is as follows: (i) as he (1973, 449; 1974, 51-2) acknowledges, a presupposition is present; however, (at first sight at least) (ii) the speaker does not presuppose it, on Stalnaker’s characterization, because he does not believe that his audience accepts it; while (iii) the fact that cases like these are commonplace suggests that there is nothing inappropriate in their use, and certainly nothing feels inappropriate in them.

Although he has been aware of the issue all along, only in recent work has Stalnaker (2002, 708-9) confronts it squarely, arguing that in fact these cases are not at odds with his account, because only at first sight is (ii) correct: when the proper time at which the presupposition is to be accepted is considered, it turns out that the speaker is presupposing the relevant content. Although writers sympathetic to Stalnaker’s pragmatic account such as Simons (2003, 267-8) and Schlenker (ms) endorse Stalnaker’s suggestion to account for infor-
native presuppositions in an eliminativist setting, von Fintel (2008), García-Carpintero (2013), Gauker (2008, 185) and Simons (ms.) have manifested skepticism about it.

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