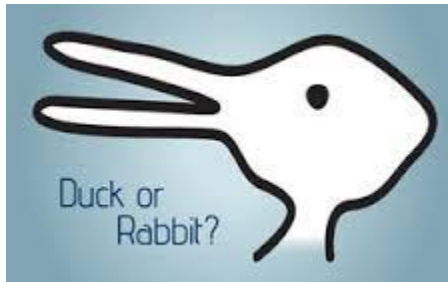


When is a Presupposition Not a Presupposition?

Thor May
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Preface



This very short paper, in spite of its vintage, may still be of interest to anyone delving into the murky relationship between language and intention. What is presupposed by a speaker

about the understanding of a listener goes to the very heart of how natural languages work, since when we get it wrong communication simply fails. For this reason the failure of presupposition is also the common bane of those working across languages, or even moving into another community where the same language seems to be spoken. When I began to look at linguistics seriously, a little before this paper was written, I was intrigued and dismayed to discover that the study of presupposition had apparently been hijacked by formalists who only seemed to find linguistic significance in symbolic regularities. There are indeed whole classes of expressions in English, related to certain verbs like "realize", which are a delight to symbolic formalists who have written volumes on their tidy logic. Even at that early stage of research, I had dark suspicions that the ways in which real human beings used real language was nowhere near as tidy, and all the more interesting for that. The paper below was a first attempt to probe the fortress of symbolic formalism.

Much later I was to explore rather stranger reaches of presuppositional variation in a far longer paper, "Postsupposition and Pastiche Talk" (May, Thor: *Working Papers in Linguistics*, Vol. 14, 1994: 22pp. University of Melbourne. Available online @ http://independent.academia.edu/ThorMay/Papers/1614039/Postsupposition_and_Pastiche_Talk).

WHEN IS A PRESUPPOSITION NOT A PRESUPPOSITION?

By *Thor May*

"Austin says that you can't eat oysters when they're R."

This seemed a little obscure.

"When the month has R", she explained wisely.

Oh.

"You know, like the R in April."

Oh yes. It was, when you thought about it, an interesting classification of dietary advice and the metabolism of oysters.

My amazing landlady had, of course, presupposed that the symbolism of R was commonly understood. But (thank heavens) she had also immediately recognized that dropping of the jaw and glazing of the eyes that signals a communication breakdown ... and hastened to explicate the most likely and most critical source of the failure.

Just as Miss Hayes used 'R', I have used 'presuppose' with some confidence that the word has a familiar meaning. But linguists have done some terrible things to 'presuppose'. One rather influential bunch of them insist that sentences, not people, presuppose. Their intention becomes a little clearer if you look at a sentence like:

- (1) I realize that the war has ended.

The definition to be extracted from such examples is that:

- (2) "If S presupposes S', then whenever S is true S' is true, and whenever S is false S' is true". (Refer Morgan 1973, Karttunen, Kiparsky and others.)

Applied to sentence (1), this translates: whether I realize it or whether I don't realize it, the war has in fact ended.

There is no denying that one can find a class of sentences such as (1), and that their interpretation must conform to something like the rule mentioned. Further, it can be shown that certain elements in the sentence (matrix verbs, for example) may bear crucially on this interpretation. Those attracted by logical formalism abstract the regularity a little more by arguing that in sentence (1) 'realize' (there is a class of such verbs) creates the presupposition.

But I want to argue that the elevation of presupposition to a system of abstracted propositional forms evaluable by truth-functional logic is both unnecessary and deceptive. It will be suggested that presupposition is not located within discrete linguistic class boundaries, that it is not 'located' in language at all, but rather that it is a psychological state whose presence may be betrayed with varying reliability, in the symbolism of language.

What is really going on in a sentence such as (1)? It seems that with some verbs like 'realize' the sentences that they dominate are presumed to have been validated by Ego (the speaker) in the public domain at or until some point of time, or for all time.

This may be clearer if we look at a sentence like:

(3) I think that the war has ended.

In (3) it may or may not be true in the 'real world' (the public domain) that the war referred to has ended. This objective uncertainty can be traced to the influence that 'think' exerts over the lower sentence.

Those inclined to the logical analysis of presupposition would say that sentences (1) (cf. 'realize') presupposes, but that sentence (3) (cf. 'think') does not presuppose that the war has ended. My approach is to say that in sentence (1) the speaker is giving a clear signal that he intends a presupposition about the public domain; in sentence (2) the sentence is more linguistically ambivalent and will require a more extensive context (situational, supra-segmental, para-linguistic etc.) for interpretation.

However this theoretical argument is resolved it remains true that no other speaker in the context of an utterance can claim more certain access to 'reality' (knowledge of the public domain) than Ego. Thus:

(4) *I think but Jack knows that the war has ended.

The source of (4's) unacceptability seems to be a psychological rather than a strictly linguistic one, involving our hierarchies of belief about the world. That is, each speaker believes at the bottom of his heart that HIS reality is the 'true' one, the one that science can verify. Although philosophers might argue, this 'naive realism' appears to have become embodied in the structure and common use of language. (its cross-cultural application would be interesting to test.)

If the circumstances of presupposition divided neatly between the controlling influence of verbs like 'realize' and verbs like 'think', a relatively simple logical system might still prevail.

But as it happens, there are a range of adverbs (and probably other phenomena) which generate an expectation that the speaker is making some kind of presupposition. In some cases this expectation is very strong; in other cases it is quite dependant upon extra-syntactic contexts. In:

(5) Ezzadine believes he will recognize you next time.

we are not sure, as casual observers, whether Ezzadine did or did not recognize the person referred to this time. However, Ego must be cognizant that 'next time', with its explicitly anaphoric reference, has the property of only being usable if he, the speaker, knows that the listener understands his implied reference. In this sense it is guaranteed that a presupposition is intended, but precisely because it is guaranteed listener-knowledge, the

need for explicitness is reduced and the exact import of that presupposition may not be recoverable from the structure of the sentence.

Some other adverbs such as 'still', 'no longer', 'before', are more slippery. In a sentence such as:

- (6) Wolf dreamed that he was in Dresden on Tuesday and was still there on Thursday.

it is explicit that the circumstances referred to are not expected to be validated in a public domain. However, where the discourse environment is not defined by, say, conjoining, in a sentence such as:

- (7) Wolf was still in Dresden on Thursday.

then it seems to be presupposed (validated in the public domain) that:

- (8) Wolf was in Dresden at a time immediately prior to Thursday.

Moreover, in any but the most pedantic interpretation of language, this kind of presupposition seems to survive filtering by verbs like 'think', 'believe', 'feel' and even 'dream':

- (9) Wolf dreamed he was still in Dresden on Thursday.
:- He was in Dresden at a time immediately prior to Thursday.

- (10) Amine believes she is no longer a success.
:- She was a success.

- (11) Kim feels he knew you before.
:- He knows you now.

The traditional formula for presupposition (see (2)) can be applied to sentences like (9), (10) and (11) to confirm our feeling that something is probably being presupposed, but the outcome is neither structurally pleasing (?Kim doesn't feel he knew you before), nor any more rigorous than our interpretive intuitions.

Morgan (1973, p.57 of Thesis) suggests that WH-adverbials presuppose the truth of the proposition underlying the WH-clause. Well, he is wrong, in many cases, again strengthening the argument that it is people, not particles of language, which presuppose. Take:

- (12) The Treaty of Waitangi was signed while the Maori tribes were demoralized.

- (13) Rangi thinks the Treaty of Waitangi was signed while the Maori tribes were demoralized.

- (14) Gretel interrupted while you were speaking.

- (15) Hilda thinks Gretel interrupted while you were speaking.

In (12) and (14) the speaker does seem to be presupposing the truth of the proposition underlying the WH-phrase.

In (15) the truth of the underlying presupposition is also suggested quite strongly (although it is not, in a formal sense, 'necessarily true'). But in (13) the likelihood that the speaker even intended a presupposition seems greatly reduced. That is, it could quite easily be the case that the Maori tribes were not, in the real world, demoralized at all; only in Rangi's imagination of the event.

Here we have then, in two similar structures, a clear divergence in the likelihood that the speaker intended his listener to infer that some information was being presupposed.

The most reasonable explanation of this divergence seems to me to relate to the psychological 'distance' of speaker and listener from the events referred to in the sentences.

Whereas Rangi can think whatever he likes about the Maori tribes, Hilda's thoughts (in the context) on whether you performed a speech act would be rather odd if she contradicted your known behaviour.

This mode of argument is jellylike to say the least, but that seems to be the character of the phenomenon. It raises the interesting question of what linguists should do when they start finding explanations in wobbly psychological environments. Should they retreat to the brittle security of propositional logic? Or learn to navigate in these strange worlds of human perception, memory and mind?

Further Reading:

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Professional bio: Thor May has a core professional interest in cognitive linguistics, at which he has rarely succeeded in making a living. He has also, perhaps fatally in a career sense, cultivated an interest in how things work – people, brains, systems, countries, machines, whatever... In the world of daily employment he has mostly taught English as a foreign language, a stimulating activity though rarely regarded as a profession by the world at large.

Thor's eventually awarded PhD dissertation, *Language Tangle*, dealt with language teaching productivity. *Language Tangle* (2010) is aimed at professional educators and their institutional keepers, and accordingly adopts a generally more discursive style than earlier more formal analysis such as that on presupposition. Thor discontinued a PhD dissertation on *Grammatical Agency* in the early 1980s after rejecting the model assumptions of generative linguistics. Also in cyberspace (representing even more lost years!) is yet another sprawling, unfinished PhD dissertation draft in cognitive linguistics from the university of Melbourne in the early 1990s, parts of which can be seen in the Academia.edu repository as *The Generative Oscillation Model*, *Postsupposition and Pastiche Talk* and a couple of other papers.

Thor has been teaching English to non-native speakers, training teachers and lecturing linguistics, since 1976. This work has taken him to seven countries in Oceania and East Asia, mostly with tertiary students, but with a couple of detours to teach secondary students and young children. He has trained teachers in Australia, Fiji and South Korea. In an earlier life, prior to becoming a teacher, he had a decade of finding his way out of working class origins, through unskilled jobs in Australia, New Zealand and finally England (after backpacking across Asia in 1972).

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