



# Choosing to presuppose

Chris Cummins

University of Edinburgh

[c.r.cummins@gmail.com](mailto:c.r.cummins@gmail.com)

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# Presupposition

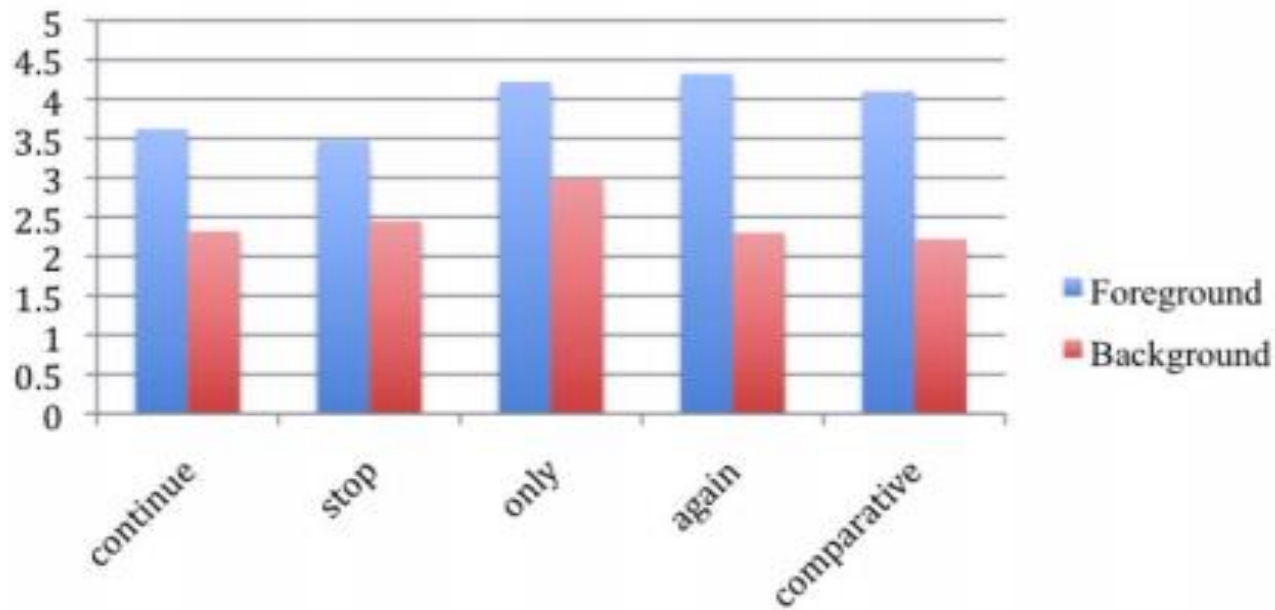
- Multifaceted:
  - “the phenomenon whereby speakers **mark linguistically** the information that is presupposed or taken for granted” (Beaver 2011)
  - “Intuitively, a presupposition constitutes a **necessary assumption** required to understand the meaning of a sentence” (Zabbal, following Kearns 2000?)
  - “Presuppositions convey information that is typically assumed to already be **taken for granted** by the discourse participants” (Schwarz 2019: 84)
  - “Presupposition, broadly conceived, is a type of **inference** associated with utterances of natural language sentences” (Sudo 2014)

# Canonically, all lined up

- *The President of the United States is the most powerful person in the world*
- *Trump will stop being President in 2021*
- Here, presupposed content is triggered, necessary, and already common ground to S and H
- Today – what are speakers doing in cases that are not like this? (+ three kinds of example)

# Need to acknowledge ps.?

- Amaral, Cummins and Katsos (2011) – looking at ratings of foreground- vs. background-addressing responses
  - *Did Jane stop smoking?*  
*No, she smokes / No, because she never used to smoke*



# Need to acknowledge ps.?

- Amaral, Cummins and Katsos (2011) – looking at ratings of foreground- vs. background-addressing responses
  - *Did Jane stop smoking?*  
*No, she smokes / No, because she never used to smoke*
- Foreground-addressing continuation is appreciably suboptimal in this case
  - Better to say *she still smokes* or *she continues to smoke*
- Odd given how presupposition is supposed to work
  - The questioner triggers this ps. – wouldn't we normally expect it just to quietly stand, if the responder doesn't mention it?

# Maximize Presupposition

- Possible explanation for such cases, following Heim (1991)
- Preference for presupposing everything we can
- Notably, antipresuppositions can arise from the failure to use presupposition where possible
  - *John assigned the same exercise to all of Mary's students +> Mary does not have exactly two students (Percus 2006)*
  - Although this assumes that *both* is a more presuppositional alternative to *all*, but *all 12, say*, is not
  - *Will Trump win another term? No / ?Not another one*
  - Question about relevant alternatives (familiar from quantity implicatures etc.)

# Alternatives to null forms?

- *Mary saw John (again) last night*
- Possible exhaustivity antipresupposition? Which would suggest the need for ‘scales’ with null elements
  - See Bade (2016), Bade and Tiemann (2020) for *wieder, auch*
  - Although presumably we would have to be careful not to overgenerate – *again* is often an alternative to  $\emptyset$
- But for *she (still) smokes*, can there be an antipresupposition that we’re trying to avoid conveying?

# “Bookkeeping”?

- Zeevat (1992) – taxonomy of presupposition triggers
  - **Resolution** triggers retrieve entity/eventuality from prior context, e.g. definite descriptions, factive *when* or *after* clauses
  - **Lexical** triggers presuppose prior conditions for the factuality of an assertion, e.g. *stop*, *regret*
  - A third category participate in “the bookkeeping involved in storing information by humans” (ibid., 22), e.g. *too*, *also*, *another*, *again*
- In these terms, this use of *still* seems to serve a bookkeeping function
  - But it’s a bit odd, because we can also do this with *continue*, which feels as though it should pattern with *stop* as a lexical trigger (and indeed did, in our subsequent experimental tasks)



# Bookkeeping: when and why?

- Outside of the domain of antipresupposition, not clear why we would do this (relevance?), or empirically when we do

I'll (also) have...



I'll have the soup,  
and the beef.

I'll have the pâté,  
and the chicken.

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I'll (also) have...

- Exhaustivity with domain restriction?
- Memory effects? (cf. Jakub on Monday)

# Production vs. processing

- How is this relevant to the aims of this workshop?
  - Because production is tightly time-constrained and has processing relevance in that way?
  - Perhaps better: understanding the speaker's motivation should influence the hearer's parsing preferences

# Projection ambiguities

- e.g. *John didn't quit his job as a police officer...*
- Should the ps. project (to the discourse level)? If so, when?
  - Could be a case exploiting accommodation...
  - ...but could continue *because he wasn't ever a police officer*
  - So a risk of garden-pathing at *quit*, which the hearer would only realise (potentially quite a lot) later
- Abstractly, a bit like quantity implicature
  - Speaker might only be trying to convey the weaker reading...but if they are, why are they being so seemingly uncooperative?
  - And how do we deal with this?
  - Possible answer: circumstances influence speaker to use the trigger anyway; hearer understands that and interprets accordingly

# Focal stress as a cue to suppression

- Cummins and Rohde (2015) (actually comparing presupposition, implicature and pronoun resolution)
- Idea that ps. projection failure might be associated with particular focus placement (prosodically signalled)
  - *John didn't quit his job as a police officer* vs.  
*JOHN didn't quit his job as a police officer* vs.  
John didn't quit his job as a POLICE OFFICER
  - Different presuppositions arise (in the sense of 'what is necessary for the predication to make sense')
  - Hearers appear somewhat able to deal with this (also in the implicature and pronoun resolution scenarios)

# Misleading?

- Why use *quit* if you don't mean to convey the obvious ps.?
- Well, perhaps in this case it doesn't matter – the likely context of utterance is one in which the previous speaker has already used *quit*
  - *Why did John quit his job as a police officer?*
- No obligation to use *quit* (could say *That wasn't John*, for instance), but no prospect of the hearer accommodating the false ps. if you did so (because they already think it)

# Restating presuppositions

- *Did Jane quit smoking? / No, she still smokes vs. Did John quit his job? / No, JOHN didn't quit his job*
- The first involves a soft requirement to restate a presupposition, perhaps in order to signal agreement
- The second involves an option to restate a presupposition in order to signal disagreement
- Perhaps both bookkeeping, in some sense? Making the presupposed content somewhat more accessible for discussion – just to different ends?

# Avoidability of triggers

- Naively I would conjecture that triggers should differ in how easy it is to avoid them
  - Some can be omitted (easily?) while preserving sentence grammaticality (even more easily when utterance-final?)
  - Some can be substituted with non-presuppositional alternatives (e.g. factive verbs)
  - Some can't be substituted easily (e.g. definite descriptions)
- I say “naively” because
  - thinking in terms of a simplistic view of sentence production
  - ignoring risk of antipresupposition etc.
  - taking a superficial view of potentially problematic cases like *only*



# Avoiding addressability

- Possible to use ps. to introduce content in such a way as to make it seemingly less addressable
  - *We all know that...*
  - *...before it was ruined by...*
- Several possible motivations, though
  - Honest attempt to use accommodation over a supposedly unproblematic premise
  - Optimistic assumptions about the common ground
  - Attempt to steer the conversation away from interrogating controversial claims

# Does that work?

- Idea of “Hey, wait a minute” test (von Stechow, after Shanon) is that you need a circumlocution to address a ps.
- However, this might be about informational backgrounding rather than formal status of the content
  - *I never knew that Dua Lipa was her real name*
- Tested by Alex Lorson in a paradigm in which a speaker is expected to try to conceal false information this way
  - Confederate plays a suspect in an art robbery
  - Participant takes the role of the police officer interrogating them, checking what is claimed against their briefing notes
  - Confederate gives some false information as assertion and some as presupposition (still at-issue in either case)

# Outline results

- Participants did not use longer expressions when challenging presupposed compared to asserted content
  - Which would suggest that “Hey, wait a minute”-type effects are usually restricted to not-at-issue content rather than ps.
- However, participants were significantly less likely to challenge false presuppositions compared to assertions
  - 79% versus 89% success, in raw numbers
  - Could have to do with the relative complexity of presuppositional forms, making it harder to spot the lie
  - But apparently there is some motivation here for the use of presupposition as an evasive strategy

# Overview

- More to be learnt about speakers' motivations for presupposing...
- ...which we might hope will tell us something about hearers' processing strategies
  - Also true for implicature, and indeed metaphor – but this is perhaps at an intermediate level of complexity
- Speakers influenced by
  - prior context, both at a low and a high level (e.g. priming, “bookkeeping”)
  - goals at the current moment, in terms of what should and should not be made accessible
  - future aims, in terms of which topics should (not) be taken up

# References

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