

PRESUPPOSITION

We look at **presupposition**, another kind of inference.

You will recall from lesson 2 that the **entailments of a sentence are other sentences which are automatically true if the original sentence is true**. However, as we have seen, only declarative sentences can be 'true' or 'false'. Does this mean what we cannot draw some very strong inferences from utterances based on imperative and interrogative sentences?

Look at the following sentences:

Where has Faye looked for the keys?

`Faye has looked for the keys.'

Did you buy this awful wine?

`This wine is awful.'

Don't sit on Annie's sofa. Stop being lazy.

`Annie has a sofa.' `You are being lazy.'

Lucy knows that George is a crook.

`George is a crook'.

These inferences all seem quite obvious ones to make. They look suspiciously like entailments, yet only the sentence uttered in (e) is declarative. Sentences (a) and (b) are interrogatives, and sentences (c) and (d) are imperatives. These sorts of inferences are sometimes called **PRESUPPOSITIONS**. Since not all utterances consist of full declarative sentences, presupposition can be a useful concept when analysing speaker meaning. However, it has proved very difficult for authors in the area to agree on a definition for it.

This definition problem is partly a reflection of the **fuzzy boundary between pragmatics and semantics**. Some definitions of presupposition are very broad and speaker oriented: anything the speaker assumes to be true before making the utterance. Others are much more narrow and sentence oriented: a necessary precondition for the sentence to be true.

Presuppositions are inferences about what is assumed to be true in the utterance rather than directly asserted to be true:

Presuppositions are inferences that are very closely linked to the words and grammatical structures actually used in the utterance, but they come from our knowledge about the way language users conventionally interpret these words and structures.

Presuppositions remain constant under NEGATION of the main sentence. This is sometimes used as a `test' for a presupposition, and it highlights how a presupposition can take on the appearance of 'established truth'.

The words *the, that, this, these, those*, and POSSESSIVES like *Annie's, my, your*, etc. make it a DEFINITE NOUN PHRASE and trigger a very basic kind of presupposition. Possessives lead to a particularly strong presupposition about the existence of Y, and in addition lead to the presupposition that `X has Y'.

This basic type of presupposition is sometimes called an **EXISTENTIAL PRESUPPOSITION**.

Presupposition has a great deal of importance in persuasive language, particularly in the courtroom and in advertising. Advertisers are not allowed to directly assert claims about their products or their competitors' for which they have no evidence. However, they can generally get away with making indirect assertions via presupposition.

Wh-words like *when, why, how, etc.* can trigger suppositions both when they are used to ask a question and when they introduce a SUBORDINATE CLAUSE.

The use of verbs like *regret* triggers the presupposition that what follows is 'fact'. Other verbs that can behave like this are *know, realize, discover* and *find out* as well as constructions like *I'm aware that...* and *It's strange that...* On the other hand, the use of *pretend* triggers the presupposition that what follows is 'fiction'. Other verbs that can behave like this are *imagine* and *dream* and constructions like *If I were ...* as in *If I were the Prime Minister, I'd...* ban presuppositions. The use of *stop* triggers the presupposition that the action was going on before. Other verbs that can behave like this are *continue* and *keep*. On the other hand, *start* and *begin* can presuppose that the action was not going on before.

Presuppositions seem to be inferences that can be made with very little knowledge of the context. In the next lesson we will start looking at inferences that require considerably more contextual knowledge and possibly more work for the hearer as well.

SUMMARY

- We have described presuppositions as inferences about what is assumed in an utterance rather than directly asserted.
- Presuppositions are closely linked to the words and grammatical structures that are actually used in the utterance and our knowledge about the way language users conventionally interpret them.
- Presuppositions can be drawn even when there is little or no surrounding context.