

## Presupposition as a Pragmatic Inference toward a New Conceptualization of the Term

Mustafa Shazali Mustafa Ahmed

Nile valley University- Sudan

Email: mustafashazali65@gmail.com, Phone: 0024919182450

### Abstract

*The paper glosses the pragmatic inference of presupposition in a way different from what has been mentioned elsewhere in the previous researches. All researches conducted on this inference viewed it as an internally linguistic system. To have figured it that way, the writer of This paper thinks that is the main reason which made a linguist like Levinson(1983) to consider it as partially understood after Frere's (1952) remarks on the subject . Basing its data on some authentic texts taken from media besides making use of the English philosopher François Bacon's Four Idols, the writer of this paper has contributed on the field by considering this inference as an external and cultural linguistic item which can always help extend the discourse analysis of interlocutors. Many current studies have described linguistics pragmatics as to read into or compute out from a particular utterance meanings which truth conditional semantics could not captured. It is believed, however, that there is a paradox here to describe linguistic pragmatics as such, and at the other extreme to describe presupposition as a pragmatic inference which triggers its meaning from the internal system of language. Drawing on some literature on the subject, the writer of this paper has attempted to reconcile between these two extremes. The difference which makes the differences among pragmatics inferences of deixis, implicature, speech acts and presupposition has clearly shown in this paper. It has been observed that the literature on these inferences has described them as if they were one inference, however, they are different in the job they do to linguistic pragmatics. The present work illustrates these differences.*

### 1. Introduction:

Presupposition was a central linguistic issue during the period 1969-1975 that contradicted almost all kinds of generative linguistic theories then available and which have treated language as an abstract device dissociable from users , users and function of language ( Levinson :1983). Many theories have studied what is called semantic presupposition. These theories are Frege's (1952) theory of reference, Russell's (1905) theory of description, Straw son's (1952:187) theory of cancelled presupposition and entailment or logical consequence, defeasibility of the presupposition, the projection problem (that is the behavior of presupposition in complex sentences). Every theory from the above has come to improve on the other one. They have unanimously agreed upon one item that presuppositions seem to be tied to particular words. These presuppositions – generating linguistic items are called presupposition triggers. Karttunen alone quoted in Levinson (ibid: 181) has collected thirty one kinds of such triggers. Karttunen's verbs that allow presuppositions to pass up to the whole sentence (project) are called 'holes', the verbs which block the projection of presupposition are called 'plugs'. The third type of verbs is 'filters' whose main function is to block some presuppositions and to allow others to be projected. The following conditional sentences show the notions of 'block' and 'filters' in turn:

If I have a wife, then my wife is blonde.

If it's already 4 a m, then my wife is probably angry.

The antecedent of the conditional in the first sentence does not imply that I have a wife so the presupposition triggered by ' my wife' which is normally ' I have a wife' is blocked. The conditional in the second sentence acts as filter for presuppositions that are triggered by expressions in its consequent clause. What is assumed as presuppositions in the aforementioned examples might be overlapped with what is called lexical synonyms, multi word units, and grammatical elements which have always been studied under the rubric of conventional implicature. These studies also share the following questions.

- What are all the structures and lexemes that give rise to presupposition?
- Do they have anything in common?
- Why do some linguistic items have such inferences built into them and not others?

It is important to note the distinction and change caused by the linguistic theories to refine logical implication or entailment in the category of semantic presupposition which is stated by Frege, (1952), and Strawson, (1952), and which shows that presuppositions are preserved in negative sentences or statements. They have provided the following example to support their argument.

1. John managed to stop in time.
2. John stopped in time.
3. John tried to stop in time.

From (1) they infer (2) and (3). However, from the above sentence's negation we can infer only (2) and not (3). So semantic presupposition lists have concluded that negation alters a sentence's entailment, but it leaves the presupposition untouched... Gazdar's (1979:142) example of presupposition defeasibility shows that in sentences where 'know' has second or third person subjects, the complement is presupposed to be true, as in (4). But when the subject is first person and the verb is negated, the presupposition clearly failed, e.g. (5) does not presuppose (6).

4. John doesn't know that Bill came.
5. I don't know that Bill came.
6. Bill came.

Gazdar (ibid) explains that the speaker knows that (6) is precisely what the sentence denies and such denials overriding contradictory presupposition. Frege (ibid) shows 'Presupposition' as a relation between sentences, while Strawson (ibid) views it as relation between statements. Entailment is the relationship of logical inclusion between the circumstances described by the pairs of sentences e.g.

- Chris has a bear and a pig. Entails Chris has a pig.
- Chris dropped Winnie. Entails Winnie fell.

Levinson (ibid) also attempts to test a model that an utterance 'A' pragmatically presupposes a proposition 'B' 'if' 'A' is appropriate, and only if 'B' is mutually known by participants. Example of this is the following.

- I'm sorry I'm late, I'm afraid my car broke down.

Presupposition inference is unlike synonyms and entailments since it concerns with knowledge which is not asserted by the speaker or the writer although this knowledge can be presumed to be as part of the background of a sentence. Many studies show presupposing propositions as complements which are recognized by hearers who confirm their validity. So Levinson (ibid) states that the above sentence presupposes that the speaker has a car. Both semantic presupposition and pragmatic presupposition look at this inference of presupposition as it can possibly be delivered from the exploitation of social deixis, conventional implicature and from a conversational maxim (For further discussion about these maxims see Grice's four maxims: 1975), and also from the notion of felicity condition employed within the theory of speech acts (see Searle: 1969). Pragmatic presupposition lists also saw it as a background and foreground entailments which have in common the notion of figure and ground in the Gestalt psychology.

In the Gestalt psychology the figure of an utterance is what is asserted or what the main point of what is said is, and the ground is the set of presuppositions against which the figure is assessed. The figure in this theory can vary within limits and can be a question, assertion, denial etc, while the ground remains the same. Presupposition is also always considered and thought of in singular terms like 'proper names', quantified noun phrases, temporal clauses, and in change of state verbs. For example presupposition- triggers in the following sentence can be seen in the proper noun 'Mary'; the non restrictive relative clause ; the factive verb 'regret' ; the change of state verb 'stop' ; and the temporal clause initiated by 'before'.

- Mary who is a talented girl regrets that she stopped taking acting lessons when she married.

Levinson (ibid) states that the following sentence presupposes that Bertrand has been beating his wife. 'Bertrand has stopped beating his wife'

Levinson (ibid :204) has summed up that semantic presupposition is not viable for that it is concerned with the specification of invariant stable meanings while presuppositions are not stable and have evasive meanings need to be captured pragmatically and though he suggested the category of pragmatic presuppositions. But this suggestion itself, however, seems to be insufficient because it refers the inference of presupposition to the swimming pool of conventional and conversational Implicatures, and to semantic entailments and matters of logical forms and felicity conditions. The present study attempts to find sensible orientations to this pragmatic inference by investigating it in few examples of media language. By doing that the study tries to prove this inference as the heart of discourse whether it is spoken or written.

## **2. Methodology**

Levinson (ibid: 225) concludes that presupposition' remains ninety years after Frege's remarks on the subject, still partially understood'. Therefore, the present study attempts to conceptualize presupposition theory by referring the linguistic term to philosophy and the four idols of the British philosopher François Bacon (1561 - 1625). Having perceived that, the researcher has collected the data by doing textual analysis in some texts taken from the language of media. Those media texts have been chosen just as models which may represent any kind of discourse ranging from media political discourse to an ordinary conversation between two interlocutors. The study and by doing this kind of content analysis ( unobtrusive observation) depicts the confidence of its results and controls many threats of internal validity such as instrumentation, maturation, selection biases of time and history .

### 3. Toward a New conceptualization of the Term

Lyons (1995: 299) states that one cannot successfully refer to an item that does not exist. That is one cannot presuppose for something that does not exist. What Lyons said leads us to consider François bacon's philosophy of the four idols (tribes, cave, marketplace, theatre) which describes the intellectual philosophy of his time. The idols of tribes can briefly be stated according to Bacon's description as deceptive believes inherent in the mind of man. They are abstractions in error arising from common tendencies to exaggeration, distortion, and disproportion mingled with the facts until the compound become inseparable. His epitaph here is 'let all compounds be dissolved'. So how much deceptive believes inherent in our minds and how much we are presupposing according to our mere abstractions in error mingled with some existing facts? An example of this idol of tribes can be conceived in Fisk (2006: 22) and which represents an interview between Fisk and Bin Laden showing why Bin Laden declares war against America.

*Bin Laden was speaking slowly and with precision, an Egyptian taking notes in a large exercise book by the lamplight like a middle Ages scribe. 'This doesn't mean declaring war against the West and western people – but against the American regime which is against every American'. I interrupted bin Laden. Unlike Arab regimes, I said, the people of the United States elected their government. They would say that their government represents them...*

In the above example there are common tendencies of disproportion lie in the two men's statements which enable them to extend their opinions. The common presupposition- trigger in the above example is Bin laden's proposition 'This does not mean declaring war against the west and western people – but against the American regime which is against every American'. This evokes an immediate response between the interlocutors of the discourse and it might also invoke further discussions. The speaker (Bin laden) by using the mentioned trigger , he presents some information that are not open to discussion and the hearer ( Fisk) has the option to identify the presupposition and to question its contents if he wishes to do so, but in all cases the hearer is definitely not authorized by the speaker to do so. These presupposition triggers which help extend the discourse have been observed in media writing in general. These kinds of presuppositions show how news is received by the audience? ; How audiences actually use the news; how far new stories actually do inform and influence the audience? Those questions which are asked by (Watson & Hill: 151) can have appropriate answers if one contemplates media writing via presupposition theory as a significant element of communication.

Unlike Foucault in (Watson & Hill: ibid .68) who saw that discourse always seeks power and that kind of power is always marks out its range, the present study sees the power of discourse lies in the discourse itself and the presuppositions that it triggers to compel and shape people's awareness and consciousness by providing extended and well convincing points in the process of discussion. Searle's (1969) two types of questions draw a clear distinction between pragmatic inferences of speech acts, implicature and presuppositions. The first type is real questions in which the speaker wants to know the answer. The second type is exam questions in which the speaker wants to know if hearers know. So it can be said that real question always trigger presuppositions and this can be glossed in the political standpoints and approximations based on the authors' subjective evaluations reflecting upon foreign news, home news, human interest stories, and features. While exam questions always implicate for other acts such as 'challenge', 'advice', and 'request' . So real questions wherever they are used , they are embedded this sense of illustrating and extending the discourse in question. The second type (exam question) can be seen in media advertisements. An example of an advertisement which uses exam question to implicate for speech act of request 'or say 'advice' is the following one.

*Do you want the FREEDOM to choose your doctor and hospital in anywhere in the world? £ 2.000 in patient & outpatient medical cover premier gold plan ... (Newsweek, No. 20 November 16:1998)*

The idols of the cave according to Bacon arises within the mind of the individual. The thoughts wander over in this dark cave and are modified by elements such as temperament, education; habit, environment, and accident . Individuals in these idols usually interpret things according to their own peculiar interests, or it can be said according to their own presuppositions. For example the education and acculturation of individual can be taken as a potential account of this individual's presuppositions, so it can be said that whatever learning an individual has got, it is still considered as little compared with other human knowledges. This puts forward a pragmatic philosophy of why an individual always needs the presuppositions of the others to extend and negotiate by accepting or rejecting what s/he has already learned. For example if you ask some politicians why they join this political party and not the other one, you might receive different justifications ranging from deep to shallow answers. However deep or shallow these individuals' responses, there is a kind of individual complete satisfaction and full conviction of what s/he presents as answers to that question.

Unless s/he has logically been convinced by his or her misconception, his or her presupposition will remain constant. An example of that can be drawn from Menken (1994:239) where there was an ideological conflict in Baltimore a city which was full of Catholics at that time. S. Miles Boston a Berlin correspondent of the Sun published an article equalizing in it Hitler with the Spanish theologian Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556). This story had triggered presuppositions in the Catholic archbishop of Baltimore and they attempted to force all the Catholics of the archdiocese to boycott the Sun presupposing that (extending the discourse) by replying and saying that neither Ignatius nor any of his members of the Society of Jesus have ever held or taught such a doctrine? Below are one paragraph of the article, and another paragraph which shows the reacted presuppositions it triggers by the Catholic archbishop in Baltimore city.

*It has seemed to me at times that there is a kinship between him {Hitler} and Ignatius Loyola. One finds in both men the same complete faith in their mission, the same readiness and determination to exercise their power with utter ruthlessness and brutality in order to carry out that mission. No consideration of personal profit or glory ever entered Loyola's mind, and I believe that the same can be said of Hitler. (Menken, 1994: 239).*

*In his article this morning on Hitler, your former Berlin correspondent made an assertion, though he offered no proof or substantiation that Hitler and Ignatius Loyola were alike in "their readiness and determination to exercise their power with utter ruthlessness and brutality in order to carry out their mission." No one wonders that the German government asked for his return to America when one realizes that this is a sample of his powers of observation, and his lack of regard for the truth... (Menken, 1994:239-40)*

The idols of the marketplace anticipated the modern science of semantics by assuming that words often betray their own purposes. This of course can be seen in modern linguistics in Grice's conventional implicature. Conventional implicature arises from the conventional meaning of words and the discourse they occur in. Conventional implicature can be seen in lexical synonyms, particles, rhetorical questions, socially deictic items, and discourse deictic items. This inference helps clarify and illustrate about the discourse, but it does not add or extend it. For example lexical synonyms are different in that they implicate for different meanings. This is the reason which made Palmer (1981:89) maintains that 'there are no real synonyms'. Synonymy can produce different propositional content as in the verb 'get' and 'buy' in the following sentence:

John didn't get a university degree; he bought it.

Pragmatic inferences such as implicature, speech acts, and deixis can be glossed when reporting new stories. Presuppositions can be triggered when commenting about these same new stories. So it can be said all pragmatic inferences are static. The only exception lies in the presupposition inference which is considered as a dynamic because of its underlying ability to cause change and growth in the communication process. One may ask what should be the difference between presuppositions as such and what is called intertextuality. The answer to that question lies in Beaugrande and Dressler (1981:10) who point out that intertextuality is responsible for the evolution of text types as classes with typical patterns of characteristics. They indicate that intertextuality cannot exist without relying on another text or utterance and that it is involved four issues which are text type, text allusion, conversation, and the making of reports and summaries of texts. That is, the notion of intertextuality shows how the production and reception of a given text depend upon the participant's knowledge of other texts. The example below illustrates the difference between implicature and presupposition:

*Editor to quit*

*THE Editor of the Sunday Times, Mr. Frank Giles, 63, is to retire on October 1, nine months before his contract expires. He will be succeeded by 34-year-old Mr. Andrew Neil, an executive on The Economist. See Duff & Swindler, (1984:14).*

The headline in the above article implicate that Mr. Giles has not left yet, but he will do that in the future. The verbal is used in the headline to indicate the future. The main point of the article is that the Editor of 'The Sunday Times' is going to leave his job early. Presupposition can be triggered if a journalist for example attempts to comment about this focal point of that article by giving some educational hints or extending some visions of the job, the retirement or some problems inside the paper etc. Whatever commentaries s/he makes are considered as presuppositions. The idols of the theatre according to Bacon are due to sophistry and false learning. Those idols are built up in the field of theology, philosophy, and science and they are accepted without question by the masses because they are defined by learned groups. This idol of theatre may lead to intercultural communication problems if its presuppositions are not appropriately delivered. For example Varner and Beamer (2005:114) show how low context cultures (doing cultures) think of the individual self as the starting point or the final arbiter in their societies.

However, in high context cultures ((being cultures) the basic unit in society is individual but as interdependent. Low context cultures views interdependency as to be weak and lacking in assertiveness, while high context cultures views independency as to be selfish and lacking in social skills. They have seriously recommended considering such cultural calculations in the processes of intercultural communications in the global workplace. They have attributed the doing cultures to Aristotelian philosophy of syllogism and how this linear pattern of cause and effect has been employed by westerners in many culturally determined aspects. They even claim that '*many sentences in English employ this pattern*'. They have analyzed their above sentence as that the subject is 'sentences', and it has some descriptors around it such as the words 'many' and 'in English'; the word 'employ' is what the 'sentences' do; 'this pattern' is the outcome, or the result of the activity of the verb.

They have asked the question 'What a blow western business minds suffer when they discover that logical means something very different to non-western people?' The answer for the above question is that the patterns of reasoning vary from culture to culture. It is believed, however, from what has been said in this idol that theology, philosophy and science presuppositions as globally issues should interculturally be understood by the learned grouped in order that this idol can adequately be rendered to the masses. But how far the media of today achieve this? Modern technologies invite people of today to globally understand each other, how can presupposition trigger conception illustrated in this paper help shape media writing and the ideological discourses of the different people who share living in this world? I will leave it as an open question.

#### 4. Conclusion:

A number of pragmatic phenomena can be explicated by reference to features such as deixis, presupposition, and speech act. These pragmatic inferences are in turn thought of as based on the assumptions of mutual orientation, shared knowledge of a domain and its updating, and the making explicit ,for the participants, of one's interactional co- operation ( Levinson,ibid:45) . The above assumptions on which these inferences are based can be considered as having the same function since the phrases describing them; *mutual orientation*, *shared knowledge*, and *interactional co- operation* have the same meanings. All pragmatic inferences are normally decoded by different interpreters in the same way. Presupposition, however, is decoded by different interpreters in different ways. Russell (1947: 9) for example indicated that most philosophers' ethical opinions involved a kind of political consequences. He said that some of these philosophers had valued democracy, others oligarchy; some had praised liberty, others discipline.

If everyone of those philosophers was asked to speak of his own philosophy, what kind of linguistic inferences that would give him the freedom of illustrating and extending his personal philosophy and believes, convictions , and 'ourselves' concept?. Presupposition triggers are clearly understood where functional accounts of language structures are interpreted according to culture – specific aspects of interaction. The example which mentioned earlier '*Bertrand has stopped beating his wife*', presupposing that Bertrand has been beating his wife according to Levinson's (ibid) conception of pragmatic presupposition , is still considered by this study as conventional Implicatures , or illocutionary act . The above example can be taken as presupposition trigger if it is decoded by reference to pragmatic or contextual parameters (speakers, addressees, times and places of speaking), and if it really helps interlocutors generate new points by extending its meaning to their different ideological and cultural measures.

An individual may say as a response to the above example ' Oh, we haven't got such thing in our society', another may say ' all religions prevent this, how he dared? '. Infinite responses can be drawn out of this presupposition suiting the varied subjective approximations of the different interlocutors involving in written or spoken discourses. Presuppositions of spoken discourses can promptly be delivered if there is an access for that, while presuppositions of written discourses may be received silently. This conception of silent presupposition indicates that this inference is normally assimilated through the mind and it is always available in written discourses even if it is not be compromised orally by interlocutors. Compromising presupposition – triggers is seen in this paper in the four idols of François Bacon (1561-1626). The four idols are (tribes, cave, marketplace, theatre). The idols of tribes are thought of as deceptive believes inherent in the mind of man.

The idols of the cave arise within the mind of individuals, and it is modified by elements such as temperament, education, habit, environment and accident. The idols of marketplace anticipated the modern science of semantics. The idols of theatre are due to sophistry and false learning and they are built up in the field of theology, philosophy, and science. The writer of this paper thinks that what is genius about Bacon's philosophy of the four idols have resulted from his attempt to produce a synthesis of infinitely extended presuppositions of man who lives in this earth. He has recommended the scientific method as the only method of controlling this kind of infiniteness.

The paper has arrived at that these four idols help generate presuppositions and extend the communication process of both the producer of the utterance and the decoder of that utterance. Unlike previous analyses which refer this inference to the internal system of language, the writer of this paper projects it as an externally and culturally system whose main function it is to illustrate and extend the process of discourse analysis. 'We need to know' proposition and Searle's (2008) philosophical question of 'how do we fit in?' will continue to exist as man's presuppositions exist. The conception of language users presuppositions illustrated in this work is partly supports Searle's (ibid) conception of 'ourselves'. That is man has genuine choices and alternative possibilities to decide voluntarily his /her free will which is very compelling . Thus, Presupposition inference in this paper has been thought of as a compelling force which spontaneously motivates language users to fit in their ideas with others and to select their semantics in order to extend and adjust the discourse they are in.

The table below illustrates how *Presupposition Inference* role differs from the other pragmatic inferences.

#### The Role of Pragmatic Inferences in Discourse Analysis process

Deixis categories	Speech acts	Implicatures	Presuppositions
Clarify/ illustrate	Identify/illustrate	Beautify/illustrate	Illustrate/ extend

### References

- Beaugrande and Dressler 1981. *Introduction to Linguistics*. Longman, London and New York.
- Fisk, R. 2005. *The Great war for civilization-The conquest of the Middle East*. London, New York, Toronto and Sydney: Harper perennial.
- Frege, G. 1952. *On sense and reference*. In p. T. Each and M. black (eds.) *translations from the philosophical Writings of Got lob Free*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp.56-78.
- Gazdar, 1979. *Pragmatics: Implicature, Presupposition and Logical Form*. New York: Academic Press.
- Grice, H.P.1975. *Logic and Conversation*. In Cole & Morgan (1975:41-58). (Part of Grice (1967).
- Karttunen, L. 1971. *Implicative Verbs*. Language, 47, 340-58.
- Levinson , S. 1983. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- Lyons. J. 1995. *Linguistic Semantics: An Introduction*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- Mencken, H.L. 1994. *Thirty- five Years of Newspaper Work*. Baltimore and London. The John Hopkins University Press.
- Palmer F. R. (end) 1981. *Semantics* . Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.
- Russell ,B . 1905 . On Denoting. Mind,14,479-93.
- Russell, B. 1947. *Philosophy and Politics*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, J. R. 1969. *A Speech Acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, J. R. 2008. *Freedom and Neurobiology*. Online Available: [www.books.google.com](http://www.books.google.com).
- Straw son, P. F. 1952. *Introduction to Logical Theory*. London: Methuen.
- Varner, I. & Beamer, L. 2005. *Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace*. New York: Mc Grew-Hill Irwin.
- Watson, J. & Hill, A. 1997. *A dictionary of communication and Media studies*. London: Arnold.