

Presuppositions as conversational implicatures

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Aim

To evaluate recent proposals that some presuppositions are conversational implicatures

- ▶ Proponents: Abusch (2005, 2002), Simons (2001)
- ▶ Concerned with the Trigger Problem rather than the Projection Problem

Soft and hard triggers

Some presuppositions are so easy to defeat that it becomes appealing to analyze them as having a conversational source

- ▶ Soft triggers: know, discover, stop, continue, ...
- ▶ Hard triggers: too, again, it-clefts, ...

Karttunen's discovery of truth

- (1)
 - a. Did you regret that you had not told the truth?
 - b. Did you realize that you had not told the truth?
 - c. Did you discover that you had not told the truth?

Karttunen's discovery of truth

- (1)
 - a. Did you regret that you had not told the truth?
 - b. Did you realize that you had not told the truth?
 - c. Did you discover that you had not told the truth?
- (2)
 - a. If I regret later that I have not told the truth, I will confess it to everyone.
 - b. If I realize later that I have not told the truth, I will confess it to everyone.
 - c. If I discover later that I have not told the truth, I will confess it to everyone.

Explicit Ignorance Contexts

Imagine that the speaker doesn't know the addressee at all:

- (3) a. I noticed that you keep chewing on your pencil. Have you recently stopped smoking?
- b. #Are you renting "Manhattan" again?

Explicit Ignorance Contexts

Imagine that the speaker doesn't know the addressee at all:

- (3) a. I noticed that you keep chewing on your pencil. Have you recently stopped smoking?
- b. #Are you renting "Manhattan" again?

Imagine we're watching a couple engaged in a fight:

- (4) a. Perhaps she has just discovered that he's having an affair.
- b. #Perhaps he has cheated on her too.

Aspectual verbs are easily defeated

- (5) After the first meeting, John will either continue missing meetings, or continue attending meetings.

- (6) #After the first meeting, John will either miss the second meeting too, or attend the second meeting too.

Factives are defeasible

- (7) A: I know how you feel.
B: No offense, but I don't know that you do.

Two sources of presupposition

“My hypothesis is that hard triggers encode semantic presuppositions in their semantic values, and that the pragmatic presuppositions triggered by soft triggers are easily suspendable and dependent on linguistic and extra-linguistic context because they do not come from semantic presupposition.” (Abusch 2005)

- ▶ hard triggers induce semantic presuppositions
- ▶ soft triggers induce pragmatic presuppositions (implicatures)

Lexical Alternatives

Soft triggers have lexical alternatives

- ▶ 'know' comes with the alternative 'be unaware'

- (8)
- a. 'x knows that p ': $p \wedge believe(x, p)$
 - b. 'x is unaware that p ': $p \wedge \neg believe(x, p)$

Alternative Sets

Soft triggers contribute an alternative set Q

(9) John knows that it is raining.

$$Q = \{rain \wedge believe(j, rain), rain \wedge \neg believe(j, rain)\}$$

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Uttering (9) raises the question whether John knows that it is raining or not

- ▶ Typically, when a question is under discussion, it must be taken for granted that some alternative is true
- ▶ A speaker who utters (9) thus takes it for granted that it is raining

Generalization G

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If ψ is uttered in a context with information ground c and ψ embeds a clause ϕ which contributes an alternative set Q , then typically c entails that some element of Q is true

This is a default! It may be overridden in:

(10) If I discover later that I had not told the truth, ...

Problems for Abusch

There are several problems for Abusch's theory:

- ▶ The use of question raising is dubious
- ▶ The choice of lexical alternatives is unfounded
- ▶ Wrong predictions in a number of cases

Question raising

Why would I raise the question whether I have discovered that Sophia is in Paris or not while I obviously do not know that she is in Paris?

- (11) If I discover that Sophia is in Paris, I'll let you know.
- ▶ It is not implausible that the speaker assumes one of the answers to be true
 - ▶ but rather that the speaker intended to raise the question

Choice of alternatives

Why should 'be unaware' be the alternative of 'know' ?

- ▶ they intuitively share the same presuppositions!

Wrong predictions

Abusch predicts that a speaker who utters (12) presupposes that the cat is on the mat

(12) The cat is on the mat and John knows that the cat is on the mat.

- ▶ The question under discussion is whether John believes that the cat is on the mat or not
- ▶ There is no reason not to assume that the speaker takes it for granted that one alternative is true

What about existing theories?

- ▶ What does Van der Sandt's Anaphoric Binding Theory of Presuppositions predict?

Local Accommodation

According van der Sandt (1992), presuppositions are never canceled, but locally accommodated

- (13) a. If I later discover that I have not told the truth, I will confess.
b. If I have not told the truth and I later discover it, I will confess

- ▶ Accommodation respects conversational principles
- ▶ Global accommodation is blocked for (13-a) by constraints on informativity

Some triggers fail to accommodate

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(14) John is having dinner in New York too.

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Also, even though Priscilla has eaten many breakfasts in her life, a speaker can only utter (15) if some earlier breakfast is salient in the context of utterance

(15) Priscilla has been eating breakfast again.

Hard vs soft triggers

Can the distinction between soft and hard triggers be made in terms of ability to accommodate?

- ▶ Soft triggers are able to accommodate
- ▶ Hard triggers never accommodate

Distinguishing soft and hard triggers

When does a trigger count as 'soft'?

- ▶ If it can be suspended?
- ▶ If it can be suspended in various contexts?
- ▶ If it can be easily suspended?
- ▶ If it's more often suspended than projected?

'Regret'

Abbott (2004): 'regret' is a hard trigger:

- (16)
- a. If I later regret that I had not told the truth, I will confess it to everyone.
 - b. If I later discover that I had not told the truth, I will confess it to everyone.

'Regret'

Abbott (2004): 'regret' is a hard trigger:

- (16) a. If I later regret that I had not told the truth, I will confess it to everyone.
b. If I later discover that I had not told the truth, I will confess it to everyone.

But:

- (17) Do you regret living together? If living together is tearing your relationship apart, submit below.
(18) After the first meeting, John will either regret attending it or regret missing it.

- ▶ 'regret' can be suspended

Ease of suspension?

Is the presupposition in (19) easier defeated than in (20)?

- (19) After the first meeting, John will either continue attending meetings or continue missing meetings.
- (20) After the first meeting, John will either regret attending it, or regret missing it.

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- ▶ 'regret' is not more difficult to suspend than other triggers
- ▶ So is it soft?

Definite descriptions

Abusch: definite descriptions are hard

- ▶ But, “ it’s presupposition is suspendable”

(21) It is not true that John’s girlfriend does not like his children, because he has no girlfriend

- ▶ Similarly, (22-b) could be understood as asking whether France is a monarchy:

(22) a. Is the king of France is De Gaulle?
b. Is De Gaulle the king of France?

(23) If De Gaulle is the king of France, France is a monarchy.

Alternatives for definite descriptions?

What would be the lexical alternative of a definite description?

(24) Is De Gaulle the king of France?

- ▶ One can only compare alternative sentences

$$Q = \{\exists!x(KF(x) \wedge x = g), \exists!x(KF(x) \wedge x \neq g)\}$$

Frequent suspension

If triggers are soft because they can sometimes be suspended, the difference between soft and hard triggers can be made solely in terms of their ability to accommodate

- ▶ But perhaps we must look at the frequency of suspension?

Beaver's belly button

- (25) Have you noticed that your Belly Button Lint color is related to the color of your clothing?
- (26) I haven't tried this with wombats, though, but if anyone discovers that the method is also wombat proof, I'd really like to know.
- (27) Mrs London is not aware that there have ever been signs erected to stop the use of the route.
- ▶ Even third person uses of factives do not imply that the speaker is taking the factive presupposition for granted
 - ▶ We cannot maintain that factives normally presuppose their complement?

Conclusions

If the soft-hard distinction corresponds to the distinction between presuppositions that do and do not accommodate, Van der Sandt's AB-theory is to be preferred

- ▶ Abusch's theory makes wrong predictions, and she offers no new insights about what causes accommodation failure

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- ▶ Abusch's theory makes wrong predictions, and she offers no new insights about what causes accommodation failure

If, on the other hand, the distinction is about how often a presupposition must be locally accommodated, a conversational theory might be attractive for some triggers

- ▶ But preferably not Abusch's theory, because of questionable use of alternatives
- ▶ More research needs to be done: does the use of a trigger normally imply the alleged presupposition?