

Introduction to presuppositions

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1 Working definition

A presupposition is a meaning that must be true (at the time of use) for the sentence containing it to have a defined semantic value (to be true or false, to convey information).

2 Examples

- (1) “Are you really looking for a job?” [spam email]
- (2) “Why be an average guy any longer?” [spam email]
- (3) “Confirm your eBay transaction” [spam email]
- (4) From the movie *High Fidelity*:

ROB (V.O.)

There's something different about the sound of her voice... And what did she mean last night, she hasn't slept with him yet. Yet. What does "yet" mean, anyway? "I haven't seen... *Evil Dead II* yet." What does that mean? It means you're going to go, doesn't it?



- (5) It is or is not my fault, but either way, someone's to blame...

“I used to think it was my fault that Windows didn't work properly.”

3 Presupposition accommodation

If a speaker utters a sentence S whose content presupposes a proposition p that is not entailed by the input information state, then hearers will adjust the input information state so that it entails p , in order to update the content of S successfully.

4 Presupposition triggers

- (6) a. Ed realizes that it is Wednesday.
 b. Ed doesn't realize that it is Wednesday.
- (7) a. The dog is outside.
 b. It is not the case that the dog is outside
- (8) Ed took the class. Sue took it too.
- (9) a. Where did you study last night?
 b. Why did you murder Prof. Jones?

5 Two tests for presuppositions

Presuppositions behave differently from other meanings in a variety of contexts. We'll look at two: *negation* and *questions*.

- (10) The order you placed is not ready.
- a. Presupposes that you placed an order.
 b. Informs you that it is not ready.
 c. Cannot be construed as asserting that you did not place an order.
- (11) Have you noticed unusual behavior on your Bank of America account?
- a. Presupposes that you have a Bank of America account
 b. Asks you whether you something about that account.
 c. Cannot be construed as asking whether you have such an account.
- (12) To or about someone who has never smoked:
- a. When did you stop smoking?
 b. You should stop smoking.
 c. You shouldn't stop smoking.