THE THEATRE AND PRESUPPOSITIONS

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Abstract

Background belief or assumption about the world shared by the speaker and the addressee is widely used, especially in linguistics, pragmatics, logic and epistemology; it is called presupposition. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part of this paper makes an excursion into different views on this concept. The second part relates the concept to a specific art – the theatre and to its corresponding literary genre – drama. There follows a discussion of some basic presuppositions that appear in the theatre and an exploration which shows the use of presuppositions as a means of understanding the workings of discourse in drama. The data items come from Shakespeare and G.B. Shaw.

Defining Presupposition

Frege (1960) was the first linguist to introduce the concept of presupposition. He discussed it mainly in connection with singular referring expressions (proper names and definite descriptions): "If anything is asserted there is always an obvious presupposition that the simple or compound proper names used have a reference. If one asserts 'Kepler died in misery', there is a presupposition that the name Kepler designates something". Frege also advanced the idea that the presuppositions of a sentence are not contained in the sense of the sentence and that the presupposition of a sentence and of its negation are the same: "That the name Kepler designates something is just as much a presupposition for the assertion ´Kepler died in misery` as for the contrary assertion".

Russel (1905) In his famous paper *On Denoting*, gave an example of the semantic analysis of presuppositions:

- *The King of France is bald*

Was analyzed as:

a) There is a King of France   and

b) There is only one King of France and

c) If anyone is a King of France, then he is bald.

In Russel's opinion, names serve a more complex function; they not only refer, but also introduce quantification into sentence structure. The negation of the sentence under discussion will appear as: Either there is no king of France or there is more than one king of France or it is not the case that if anyone was the king of France he was bald. Since in 1903 there was no king of France, the sentence was simply false.

Strawson (1950) defended Frege's theory and objected to Russel's analysis on the ground that it fails to draw a distinction between assertion and presupposition. He shows that a statement like *´The King of France is bald`* is neither true nor false, because one of its presuppositions, i.e. *´There is a King of France`* is not satisfied. Strawson's view is that *´The King of France is bald`* has no truth value. "Suppose someone were in fact to say to you with a perfectly serious air *´The King of France is wise`*, and suppose he went on to ask you whether you thought that what he had just said was true or false. I think you would be inclined with some hesitation to say that you did not do either, that the question of whether his statement was true or false simply did not arise because there was no such person as the King of France". Like Frege, Strawson insists on the difference between what a speaker asserts and what he presupposes or presumes. In his view, a statement A presupposes a statement B if B is a precondition of the truth or falsity of A – a negative sentence, when uttered, will preserve its presuppositions. Statement A presupposes another statement B:

a) if A is true, then B is true;

b) if A is false, then B is true.

Strawson envisaged presupposition as "a species of pragmatic inference, a species which derives from logical implication or entailment, a species which derives from conventions about the use of referring expressions". To solve the problem of presupposition failure, he resorts to his intuitions and concludes that sentences suffering from presupposition failure are neither true nor falls.

There are pragmatic views which offer other definitions of the concept. Stalnaker (1974), who devoted a series of interesting papers to the concept of presupposition, proposes the following definition: A speaker pragmatically presupposes that p by uttering an expression e in a certain context just in case:
i) the speaker assumes or believes that p,
ii) the speaker assumes or believes that in the given context the addressee assumes or believes that p, and
iii) the speaker assumes or believes that in the context the addressee will recognise that the speaker is making these assumptions or has those beliefs, or
iv) the speaker acts as if or pretends that (i) – (iii) are true.

Thus, the pragmatic view on presupposition stresses the aspect of the speaker presupposing something about the addressee or/and the context, and not that of a sentence having a certain presupposition. The pragmatic view distinguishes clearly between presupposition and conversational implicature.

In Huntley's (1967) opinion, saying and implicating something is an instance of "giving it to be understood" while presupposing is a case of "taking it to be understood". To say something and also to conversationally implicate something is an attempt to communicate it, an attempt to get an audience to believe something. Saying and implicating are means of communicating, the first one direct, the other indirect; what is said or implicated is something that the speaker is giving to be understood. Presuppositions are assumed or believed to be true, they cannot be false in a context.

Another pragmatic view of presupposition focuses on the fact that pragmatic presuppositions represent shared, common ground information; they are propositions which must be true in a context if a certain sentence is to be felicitously used. The act of presupposing, of taking it to be understood, requires that the speaker should be certain that the hearer will recognize from what is said that the speaker would presuppose something and that the speaker is certain that the hearer would presuppose the same thing. In the view of what was said, Caton (1981) proposes another definition of presupposition, in fact a refined version of Stalnaker's definition. A speaker pragmatically

presupposes that fp by illocuting that q, by uttering e in a context c, just in case either:
(i) the speaker would say that fp (where f is a strong or moderate EQ),
(ii) the speaker is certain that the addressee would say that fp and,
(iii) the speaker is certain that the addressee will recognise, from his/her illocuting that q by uttering e in c, that (i) and (ii) are true or false,
(iv) the speaker acts as if or pretends that (i) – (iii) are true.

Most of the definitions of presupposition to be found in the recent literature take the presuppositions of an utterance to be a set of propositions. An alternative view is that they are the conditions that may be satisfied before the utterance can be used felicitously to perform its function as a statement, a question, a promise, a request. The point is that in saying that the presuppositions of an utterance are necessary conditions for its felicitous use we have to distinguish between various kinds of felicity conditions. Cooper (1978) argued that the conditions that count as presuppositions are all ontological, in that they have to do, not necessarily with existence, but with whatever kind of ontological satisfaction is appropriate to the entity, state-of-affairs, event, process, in question. This view of presupposition has the advantage that it provides a unified and theoretically motivated account of most of what has been considered to be a case of presupposition.
Properties:
1. Presuppositions remain constant under clause internal negation.
2. They survive embedding in higher predicates, even when those predicates do not entail the embedded proposition (unlike presuppositions, implicatures do not ordinarily survive embedding in higher predicates).
3. Ducrot's loi d'enchaînement [8]. If a sentence A is connected in a discourse by a coordinating or subordinating conjunction, the relation which is thus established does not concern what is presupposed, but only what is asserted.
4. Defeasibility (Presupposition Cancellation). Presuppositional inferences are taken to be conventional; they are not cancellable at least in simple declarative sentences.

As a general rule, however, presuppositions are liable to vanish in certain context. Thus, they may be cancelled in negative sentences. Presuppositions may also be cancelled in other environments. When it is mutually known that certain facts do not obtain, we can use sentences that might otherwise presuppose these facts, with consequent presupposition arising. Presuppositions are defensible in certain intrasentential contexts, or in certain discourse contexts.

5. Presupposition suspension. Presuppositions may not only be overtly denied, but may also be suspended. The speaker explicitly suspends his/her commitment to the truth of the presupposition. This characteristic is true for all presuppositional adverbs.

6. Presupposition projection. Langendoen (1971) proposed a «projection principle for presuppositions», specifying that the presuppositions of the whole discourse represent the sum of the presuppositions of the constituents.

- *The milkman knows that what Angela wants is a good husband*.

Presuppositions:

a) There is a milkman

b) Angela exists

c) The milkman knows something about Angela

d) Angela wants something (presupposition of the pseudo-cleft construction)

e) What Angela wants is a good husband

One of the things taken for granted in drama is the world in which the plot is taking place. According to Paul Werth (1999), there is more than just the semblance of the 'real world'. R.L. Trask explains the text world theory of Werth this way on page 297, which is really relevant to topics of the theatre and the presupposition:

> Text world theory places text-drivnness at the heart of the process and provides a range of semantic processes (assertion, entailment, presupposition, inferencing and so on) to explain which knowledge is nominated to bear upon the discourse situation. (p.29)

This will be activated in the analysis to come.

Presuppositions in Drama

Generally, theatrical discourse appears disconnected from its real world referent, it seems to be connected only with the stage referent or Discourse World, in Paul Werh's terminology. Theatre becomes the space where the sacred words are no longer sacred, where they can no longer baptize or sanctify a marriage – the space where jurisdiction has no value, where one cannot make an oath or sign a contract. There are different kinds of presuppositions on which the theatrical discourse is based:

1. A referential presupposition, which points to the possible world depicted by the énoncé. The theatrical referent is presupposed by the theatrical discourse in the space and time of the performance.

2. A pragmatic presupposition, which brings about the felicity conditions of the speech act: the different status of the participants in the speech event, their relationship (intentions, wishes), space, time. The pragmatic presupposition in the theatre refers to the situation-of utterance:

a) the speaker must have a motive, a reason for uttering his/her dramatic discourse (wish, stage directions, ticket price);

b) the speaker must believe that the interlocutor can give an appropriate response to his/her utterances;

c) the speaker must believe that the interlocutor has the necessary competence in order to respond to him/her;

d) the speaker must believe that the interlocutor wants to respond to his/her utterances;

e) the participants in the verbal exchange must accept the presupposition which is basic for the theatrical performance (we are playing on a stage).

In Shakespeare's Tragedy of *Julius Caesar* there is an example of oratory based to a great extent on the speaker's skilful manipulation of his audience's beliefs and presuppositions. When Mark Antony delivers his speech at Caesar's funeral, he starts from the audience's presupposition "Brutus is an honorable man, / So are they all, all honorable men", while in

the end he makes the citizens of Rome share his own belief – "Brutus and the other conspirators are traitors":

A n t o n y: *I fear I wrong the honorable men*

  Whose daggers have stabb'd Caesar.

(William Shakespeare – The Tragedy of Julius Caesar)

In order to change people's opinion, Antony makes doubtful indirect assertions (by quoting Brutus' opinion) or uses hypothetical conditions: "If it were so, it was a grievous fault". After a plain assertion "He was my friend, faithful and just to me", Antony introduces contrastive opinion "But Brutus says he was ambitious". Contrast is achieved by means of the coordinator ´but` and it lies in the unexpectedness of what is said in the latter sentence in view of the content of the former sentence. So, Brutus' assertive appears unexpected in view of what Antony has told about Caesar. This unexpectedness depends on the audience's presuppositions and their knowledge of the world. Contrast is emphasized by means of the coordinator ´and`. "And Brutus is an honorable man". The same strategy is repeated later on: Antony casts again doubt upon Brutus' words and motives when using the concessive conjunct ´yet` after a rhetorical question: "...Was this ambition? /yet Brutus says he was ambitious". ´Yet` signals here the unexpected, surprising nature of what is being said – "Caesar was ambitious" in view of what was said before. The next sentence, introduced by ´and`, instead of clarifying Antony's attitude towards his utterances, increases the surprise: "And, sure, he is an honorable man". The citizens' eagerness arises as a result of Antony's playing with presuppositions. In fact, he exploits one of their properties; that of remaining constant under clause internal negation: "It is not meet you know how Caesar lov'd you" Presupposition: Caesar loved you. " 'Tis good you know not that you are his heirs" Presupposition: You are his heirs. While seemingly trying to make the people ignore the content of Caesar's will, Antony renders his assumptions explicit. His presuppositions are in the end shared by all the citizens. There is only one step to the explicit assertion of the basic presupposition: far from being "honorable men", those who stabbed Caesar are "traitors".

There is a manipulated variable at work here, leading to a turning-point by a twisted logic. The speaker is rearranging the audience's presupposition of the real world into another alternative reality in which the discourse world replaces the real world. Mark Antony's discourse world is that in which Caesar is a victim, not a dictator, and the "honorable men" are actually repulsive traitors. It is this discourse world which becomes the predominant one in the text. The outcome in the text itself is a sub-world in which the Antony version of Caesar implicitly says "Caesar loved you" and the honorable men who stabbed Caesar are "traitors". Thus, the sub-text acquires a life of its own.

The court martial scene in *The Devil's Disciple* contrasts the basic theatrical presupposition ´we are at the theatre` with the basic juristic presupposition ´each utterance has a certain effect`. The character who disregards the illocutionary force of legal discourse (and implicitly its presuppositions) is Richard Dudgeon, who behaves as if he were a mere spectator and not a participant in the court martial scene. He mocks at the formal style used in law-courts and at the tendency to make everything explicit by avoiding presuppositions:

S w i n d o n (to Richard, sharply). *Your name, sir*?
R i c h a r d (affable, but obstinate). *Come: you don't mean to say that you've brought me here without knowing who I am*?

Richard avoids the clear-cut answers a trial asks for, favoring presuppositions instead, as something taken to be understood.

B u r g o y n e . (…) *Any political view, Mr. Anderson*?
R i c h a r d . *I understand that that is just what we are here to find out*.
S w i n d o n (severely). Do you mean to deny that you are a rebel?
R i c h a r d . *I am an American, sir*.
(G. B. Shaw – The Devil's Disciple)

Richard's paradoxical attitude is to be accounted for by his sharing the fundamental assumption regarding the outcome of this encounter: ´No matter what I say, I will be hanged`. Since any move is supposed to bring about the

same outcome (death), all speech acts are equal, words have no value: "Why should I be civil to you? I may as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb". Swindon, as president of the court martial, tries to cancel Richard's presupposition: "You have no right to assume that the court has made up its mind without a fair trial". General Burgoyne makes Richard's presupposition explicit, although at first it is only a hypothesis: "if we should have the misfortune to hang you, we shall do so as a mere matter of political necessity and military duty..." In the end the hypothesis becomes a polite and cynical directive: "Let me persuade you to be hanged, Mr. Anderson?" Since the outcome of the court martial scene is already known by the accused, Burgoyne is the one to stop the verbal interaction: "Nothing more to be said, gentlemen".

Conclusion

After examining two sets of examples from Shakespeare and G.B.Shaw, the following conclusion can be drawn. The fundamental presupposition and principle of dramatic representation is the fiction of the presence of a world known to be hypothetical; the spectator allows the dramatis personae, through the actors, to designate as the here and now a counterfactual construct. The spectators' awareness of the counterfactual standing of the drama permits them to judge and enjoy what is represented according to less literal standards than those applied to their own social experiences. As Urmson (1972) points out, "the attitude of the theatergoer is a very sophisticated one, which he has to learn from long experience... The spectator who can distinguish drama from reality is constantly aware that his interpretation is counterfactual". Spectators familiar with the dramatic world can become "involved" in the representation without losing a detached consciousness that what they are witnessing is the way things could have been. It also becomes quite clear from the analysis that the presuppositions turn into a manipulated variable within the context of the dramatic situation near the climax or leading to the turning-point of the dramatic resolution. The coding of the representation as variable relies on a sort of twisted logic, playing on leaner relationships between the apparent sign and the covert intention of the dramatis pressure.

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المسرح والافتراضات

المستخلص

يستخدم الافتراض وخلفية الاعتقاد على نطاق واسع حول العالم حيث يشترك فيها المتكلم والمخاطب، وخاصة في اللسانيات والمنطق، ونظرية المعرفة البراغماتية. ينقسم اليحث إلى جزأين. الجزء الأول يتناول وجهات نظر مختلفة حول هذا المفهوم. والجزء الثاني يتعلق بربط هذا المفهوم بالمسرح اما. وهنلك مناقشة لبعض الافتراضات الأساسية التي تظهر في المسرح واستكشاف ما يدل على استخدام هذه الافتراضات في المسرح عناصر البيانات تأتي من مسرحيات شكسبير وشو كوسيلة لفهم طريقة عمل الخطاب في الدراما.

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