ON PRAGMATIC PRESUPPOSITION

Abstract. I argue that (a) the phenomenon characteristic of pragmatic presupposition, is
distinct from (b) the phenomenon characteristic of semantic presupposition, and that there are
sentences exhibiting (a) alone. I apply this to Stalnaker's defense of van Fraassen's theory of
semantic presupposition against Karttunen. I show that, since Stalnaker fails to distinguish (a)
from (b), this defense amounts to an unsuccessful attempt to explain pragmatically the supposed
instances of (b) in Karttunen's counter-examples. I observe that, given the distinction between
(a) and (b), we can salvage from Stalnaker the strategy of discounting certain of Karttunen's
counter-examples which exhibit not (b) but merely (a).

1. Traditionally, presupposition has been taken to be a semantic notion. Letting 'P' and 'Q' be metavariables ranging over sentences, we may define
this with (1).

\[ P \text{ semantically presupposes } Q \text{ iff } P \text{'s being either true or false necessitates that } Q \text{ is true.} \]

However, in a set of recent papers, Robert Stalnaker introduces a second,
pragmatic notion of presupposition, definable with (2).

\[ P \text{ pragmatically presupposes } Q \text{ iff whenever the utterance of } P \text{ is conversationally acceptable, the speaker of } P \text{ assumes } Q \text{ and believes his audience to assume } Q \text{ as well.} \]

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1 An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the meetings of the Eastern Division APA in New York, December 27-30, 1975. In preparing the present version, I have benefitted from the comments of Jay Atlas, Asa Kasher, and my anonymous referee. I would also like to thank Lauri Karttunen and Robert Stalnaker, both of whom have been very generous in their willingness to discuss their views with me. I hope that I do not misrepresent them in what follows. I should add that work on this paper was supported in part by grants from the Mount Holyoke Faculty Grants Committee.

2 van Fraassen, [10], p. 68. I observe van Fraassen's distinction between 'necessitation' and 'semantic entailment'; cf. his [9], esp. p. 138.

3 Stalnaker, [6], pp. 200-203. Stalnaker provides a number of alternative definitions for his notion of pragmatic presupposition. (2) represents my selection of one from among these; Stalnaker himself pointedly declines to choose a favorite here. It can be verified that nothing in what follows turns upon this selection; all of my contentions can be recast to fit any of Stalnaker's alternatives. It is worth adding that while Stalnaker holds pragmatic presupposition to be invariant under denial, he appears to exclude this invariance from his actual definition of this notion. It will be noted that my attack on his commitment to (3) (cf. infra) depends on the supposition of this exclusion (cf. infra, sect. 2). If this point of interpretation is contested, then I might have to allow (3). However, I would then argue a corresponding point, viz. that in view of sentences (7), (9), (11), (13), and (15) (infra, sect. 2) - and also sentence (19) (infra, sect. 3) - we need a notion of pragmatic presupposition whose definition does exclude this invariance. Thus, the point of interpretation determines only the form - but not the substance, of what I have to say.
Concerning the relation between these two notions, Stalnaker’s position can be expressed with (3).

(3) The semantic and pragmatic notions of presupposition provide two alternative accounts of the same linguistic phenomenon.

As for the linguistic phenomenon in question, it can be given, in Stalnaker’s words, with (4).

(4) Under normal circumstances one can reasonably infer that a speaker believes that \( Q \) from either his assertion or his denial that \( P \).

In what follows, I would like to take issue with (3). Then, as a way of motivating this worry, I would like to explore Stalnaker’s defense of the van Fraassen theory of semantic presupposition against Lauri Karttunen’s counter-examples. I will argue that Stalnaker’s commitment to (3) substantially vitiates these efforts. I will then show how in rejecting (3) we can salvage a very credible response to Karttunen on van Fraassen’s behalf. By undertaking this little exercise, I hope to dispel some considerable unclarity that has accompanied this introduction of ‘pragmatic’ into the discussion of presupposition.

2. To begin, then, we may grant Stalnaker’s observation that the semantic notion of presupposition accounts just for (4). Hence, if (3) is correct then (5) must be true as well.

(5) The pragmatic notion of presupposition accounts just for (4).

(5), however, is not quite right. Given (2), strictly speaking the pragmatic notion of presupposition accounts just for (6).

(6) Under normal circumstances, one can reasonably infer from a speaker’s assertion of \( P \) that he believes \( Q \) to possess assumed common ground status.

Consider, then, that (6) is at once weaker and stronger than (4). (6) is weaker than (4), since it includes nothing about what we may infer from a denial of \( P \). (6) is stronger than (4), however, in that if we can infer that the speaker believes \( Q \) to have assumed common ground status then we can infer that the speaker believes that \( Q \), but not vice versa. Now, of course, none of this is to say that (4) and (6) are incompatible with each other. Indeed, we may allow – with Stalnaker – that an instance of (4) is always an instance of (6) at the same time. Thus, it may well be that given the semantic presupposition

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4 Stalnaker, [6], pp. 197–9, esp. p. 198, top.
5 Ibid., p. 197.
6 Karttunen, [2], [3]; van Fraassen, [9], [10].