Introduction to the Philosophy of Language

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Presuppositions, Implicatures, and Speech Acts

Nothing is better than a steak.
A steak is better than nothing.
A salad is better than a steak.

author unknown, found on the Internet

Literature

- Excerpts from Levinson (1983)
- Chapter 12 and 13 of Lycan (2000)
- Austin (1962): Locutionary, Illocutionary, Perlocutionary
- Grice (1975): Logic and Conversation
Presuppositions
Examples

Some examples taken from Levinson (1983) pp.181–184:

- **Definite Descriptions**
  John didn’t see the man with two heads.
  ➞ There exists a man with two heads.

- **Factive Verbs**
  Martha regrets drinking John’s home brew.
  ➞ Martha drank John’s home brew.

- **Implicative Verbs**
  John managed to open the door.
  ➞ John tried to open the door.

- **Change of State Verbs**
  John stopped beating his wife.
  ➞ John has been beating his wife.

- **Iteratives**
  The flying saucer came again.
  ➞ The flying saucer came before.

- **Cleft Sentences**
  It wasn’t Henry that kissed Rosie.
  ➞ Someone kissed Rosie.
**Presupposition**
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**Characterization**

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- **Russellian Theory** If one of its presuppositions is not fulfilled, a sentence is false.
- **Strawsonian Theory** If one of its presuppositions is not fulfilled, an utterance doesn’t have a truth value (is neither true nor false.)
Technical Remarks

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- The treatment of presupposition failure is related to the treatment of vagueness, because they both involve a third, epistemically motivated case. (Example of vagueness: Where does the hill start and the valley end?)
**Negation Test**

- John managed to open the door.
  - John tried to open the door.
- John didn’t manage to open the door.
  - John tried to open the door.
- The king of France is bald.
  - There’s a king of France.
- The king of France is not bald.
  - There’s a king of France.

**Constance under Negation**

A presupposition is triggered both by a sentence and the negation of the sentence.
**Cancellation Test**

(1) John managed to open the door, but he didn’t have to try anyway.
   ≫ John tried to open the door.

(2) The king of France is bald, if France has a king at all.
   ≫ There’s a king of France.

(3) John doesn’t know that Bill came.
   ≫ Bill came.

(4) I don’t know that Bill came.
   ≫ Bill came.

(5) Susan cried before she finished her thesis.
   ≫ Susan finished her thesis.

(6) Susan died before she finished her thesis.
   ≫ Susan finished her thesis.

**Cancellability**
A presupposition can be cancelled under certain conditions.
**Projection Problem**

(7) The king of France is bald, **if** France has a king **at all**.
   \[\Rightarrow\] There's a king of France.

(8) John stopped beating his wife, **if** he **ever** did so **anyway**.
   \[\Rightarrow\] John has been beating his wife.

(9) John didn’t manage to open the door, **in fact**, he never tried to.
   \[\Rightarrow\] John tried to open the door.

(10) Either the king of France is bald or he is happy.
    \[\Rightarrow\] There’s a king of France.

(11) Either the king of France is bald or there’s no king of France.
    \[\Rightarrow\] There’s a king of France.

(12) The king of France is bald and there's no king of France.
    \[\Rightarrow\] **false**

**Projection Problem**

Under what conditions and in which way do presuppositions of parts of a sentence or utterance become presuppositions of the whole sentences or utterance, and under what conditions are they cancelled?
Why would presuppositions be relevant for philosophy?
Exkurs: Relevance for Philosophy

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- **Naive Reply** They are strange and interesting. Philosophers like strange and interesting things. (What’s a ‘philosopher’ anyway?)
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- **Semantic Theory** It’s unclear whether they are a semantic or pragmatic phenomenon. At first sight, they appear to be semantic, but cancellability is an argument to regard them as part of pragmatics. This could indicate that truth-conditional semantics is essentially incomplete or ill-founded.
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- **Political & Moral Philosophy** Presuppositions are often used as a rhetorical trick. Since you have to explicitly protest against them if you don’t agree with them, which changes the topic and introduces a ‘meta’-discussion, they can easily be used to introduce silent presumptions that are hard to defy later.
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- **Methodology** Presuppositions, especially existence presuppositions, can inadvertently slip into a philosophical argument, sometimes resulting in a logical fallacy.
Plugs & Holes


Plugs
Plugs block the presuppositions of the embedded part in the whole sentence or utterance.

(13) John, this crazy guy, believes that he's the king of France.
(14) John said that the king of France is bald.

Holes
Holes let all presuppositions of the embedded part become presuppositions of the whole sentence or utterance.

(15) John, this crazy guy, regrets that he's the king of France.
(16) It is possible that the king of France is bald.
Filters

Filters, under certain conditions, cancel some presuppositions of the embedded part in the whole sentence or utterance.

(17) Either the king of France is bald or he is happy.
    \[\Rightarrow\] There’s a king of France.

(18) Either the king of France is bald or there’s no king of France.
    \[\Rightarrow\] There’s a king of France.

**Condition for If... Then**


**Rule for if p then q**

In a sentence of the form *if p then q* the presuppositions of the parts are projected, except if *q* presupposes *r* and *p* implies *r*.

(19) If the king of France exists, then the king of France is bald.
   ➞ The king of France exists.

(20) The king of France exists.
    ➞ The king of France exists. (trivial)

(21) The king of France is bald.
    ➞ The king of France exists.
Condition for Or


Rule for \( p \) or \( q \)

In a sentence of the form \( p \) or \( q \) the presuppositions of the parts are projected, except if \( q \) presupposes \( r \) and \( \neg p \) implies \( r \).

\[ \begin{align*}
(22) & \text{ The king of France doesn’t exist or the king of France is bald.} \\
& \quad \Rightarrow \text{ There’s a king of France.} \\
(23) & \text{ The king of France exists. } \rightarrow \text{ There’s a king of France. (trivial)} \\
(24) & \text{ The king of France is bald. } \Rightarrow \text{ The king of France exists.}
\end{align*} \]

Stupid example? How about:

\[ \begin{align*}
(25) & \text{ Either France isn’t a monarchy or the king of France is bald.} \\
& \quad \Rightarrow \text{ There’s a king of France.} \\
(26) & \text{ France is a monarchy.} \\
& \quad \rightarrow \text{ There’s a king of France.} \\
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Presuppositions affect the truth conditions of sentences, thus can be considered semantic. But there are good arguments why they should not be part of semantics (Levinson 1983):

① Presuppositions can be cancelled.

② In similar environments, presuppositions are sometimes projected, sometimes not.

(28) Peter doesn’t regret that he failed the exams because he passed them.

(29) Susan cried before she finished her thesis.

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   - Both phenomena depend not only on some expression, but on the meaning of surrounding expressions.

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● If $A \gg B$, then there might be a larger expression $C$ embedding $A$ such that $C(A) \gg B$.

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**Semantic vs. Pragmatic Presuppositions**

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- It is generally hard to deal with such a behavior in a purely logical manner.
- Furthermore, background or world knowledge plays a role in determining presuppositions. (Examples [29] & [30])

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Speech Acts
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Examples of **performatives** (Austin), taken from Levinson (1983):

(31) I hereby christen this ship the H.M.S. Flounder
(32) I declare war on Zanzibar.
(33) I apologize.
(34) I object.
(35) I give you my word.
(36) I sentence you to ten years of hard labour.
(37) I warn you that trespassers will be prosecuted.

Examples of **constatives**:

(38) It's cold in here.
(39) Somebody smokes crack in the philosophy department.
(40) There will be a sea battle tomorrow.
Felicity Conditions

Conditions for the success of performatives (Austin):

“A. (i) There must be a conventional procedure having a conventional effect
    (ii) The circumstances and persons must be appropriate, as specified in the procedure

B. The procedure must be executed (i) correctly and (ii) completely

C. Often, (i) the persons must have the requisite thoughts, feelings and intentions, as specified in the procedure, and
   (ii) if consequent conduct is specified, then the relevant parties must so do” (Levinson 1983, 229)

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- Violation of C: abuse (action may be performed, but in an insincere way)
Locution, Illocution, Perlocution

Three simultaneously performed acts that are aspects of a speech act as a whole:

Locutionary Act
The act of uttering a sentence with determinate sense and reference

Illocutionary Act
The act of making a statement, offer, promise, etc. in uttering a sentence, by virtue of the conventional force associated with it (or with its explicit performative paraphrase)

Perlocutionary Act
The bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence, such effects being special to the circumstances of utterance

[paraphrased from (Levinson 1983, 236)]
Phonetich, Phatic, Rhetic Act

The locutionary act (≈utterance) is separated further into three aspects:

- **Phonetic Act** the utterance of a sequence of sounds
  Example: producing the sounds /ɪts kɔːld in hɪːə/

- **Phatic Act** the utterance of a sentence in some language
  Example: utterance of English sentence »It's cold in here«

- **Rhetoric/Propositional Act** expressing a proposition
  Example: expressing the proposition that the temperature in the room
  the speaker is located at is below some norm
(41) It’s cold in here.
Locution: producing an utterance that means that it’s cold in here
Illocution: ordering to close the window
Perlocution: achieving the effect in one of the listeners to go to the window and close it

(42) Nice weather today. *Situation: It’s raining.*
Locution: producing an utterance meaning that it’s nice weather today
Illocution: stating the proposition that it is terrible weather today in an ironical way
Perlocution: causing the listener to assent

(43) *Mafia boss:* There are so many traffic accidents nowadays.
Illocution: warning the listener
Perlocution: causing the listener to be frightened
Basic Actions Performed In Speech

Searle (1976), paraphrased from (Levinson 1983, 240):

- **representatives** committing the speaker to the truth of the proposition expressed (e.g. asserting, concluding)
- **directives** attempts by the speaker to get the addressee to do something (e.g. requesting, questioning)
- **commissives** committing the speaker to some future course of action (e.g. promising, threatening, offering)
- **expressives** expressing a psychological state (e.g. apologizing, thanking, welcoming, congratulating)
- **declarations** effecting immediate changes in the institutional state of affairs (e.g. excommunicating, declaring war, christening, firing from employment)
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- There are alternative classifications.

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In linguistics, the notion of **mode** is used for two different purposes.

1. **Verb Morphology** imperative–indicative–conjunctive verb form
2. **Sentence Type** imperative–declarative—interrogative sentence

(44) _ger._ **lesen**

*Indicative*  
lese, liest, liest, lesen, lest, lesen

*Conjunctive I*  
lese, lesest, lese, lesen, leset, lesen

*Conjunctive II*  
läse, läsest, läse, läsen, läset, läsen

*Imperative*  
lies! lest!

(45)  
**Du liest.**  
*declarative sentence*

**Liest du?**  
*interrogative sentence*

**Lies!**  
*imperative sentence*

(46) Declarative used like an imperative:

**Locution**  
You’ll read the article until tomorrow.

**Illocution**  
order to read the article until tomorrow

**Perlocution**  
achieving the effect of feeling better by terrorizing students?
Implicatures
Conversational Implicatures

(47) A: Can you tell me the time?
   B: Well, the milkman has come.
      \leadsto It is 7 A.M. because the milkman comes at 7 A.M.

(48) A: What happened to the roast beef?
   B: The dog looks happy.
      \leadsto The dog ate the roast beef.

(49) Maria has three cats.
      \leadsto Maria doesn’t have more than three cats.

(50) The soup is warm.
      \leadsto The soup isn’t burning hot.

(51) Captain’s log: The helmsman wasn’t drunk today.
      \leadsto The helmsman was drunk most of the other days.

(52) John earns $ 20000.
      \leadsto John doesn’t earn more than $ 20000.

(53) A: I’m a covert secret agent.
   B: And I’m the Pope!
      \leadsto A isn’t a covert secret agent. (B doesn’t believe A)
first formulated in (Grice 1975)

Cooperative Principle in Conversation
Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. (Grice 1989)
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- Other kind of discourses don’t require you to be cooperative (e.g. police interrogations).
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Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. (Grice 1989)

- In many kind of discourses, it is required to be honest, sincere, stay with the topic (or introduce a new one at the appropriate moment).
- Other kind of discourses don’t require you to be cooperative (e.g. police interrogations).
- In the above formulation, the principle only requires you to be cooperative for the accepted purpose of the talk exchange, not to be cooperative with the speaker in the sense of accepting a common extralinguistic goal.
Grice’s Cooperative Principle

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- In the above formulation, the principle only requires you to be cooperative for the accepted purpose of the talk exchange, not to be cooperative with the speaker in the sense of accepting a common extralinguistic goal.
- The principle is context-dependent: “at the stage at which it occurs”
The following **Gricean maxims** are also called **conversational maxims**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Maxims of Quantity</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Make your contribution to the conversation as informative as necessary.</td>
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<td>2. Do not make your contribution to the conversation more informative than necessary.</td>
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<th><strong>Maxims of Quality</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Do not say what you believe to be false.</td>
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<td>2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.</td>
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<th><strong>Maxim of Relation</strong></th>
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<td>1. Be relevant.</td>
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<th><strong>Maxims of Manner</strong></th>
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<td>1. Avoid obscurity of expression.</td>
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<td>2. Avoid ambiguity.</td>
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<td>3. Be brief.</td>
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<td>4. Be orderly.</td>
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The cooperative principle and more specifically the Gricean maxims specify a wide range of pragmatic mechanisms by drawing special kinds of inferences called **conversational implicatures**. An utterance is said to **implicate** a conversational implicature.

Inferences can be drawn both from the case when the speaker conforms with the conversational maxims and from the case when the speaker violates conversational maxims.

(54) Maria has 2 children.  
→ Maria doesn't have more than 2 children.  
Reason: *If she had more than 2 children, the speaker would be more informative in a more appropriate way.*

(55) A: I'm a covert secret agent. B: And I'm the Pope!  
→ B believes that A’s utterance is false or nonsense.  
Reason: *The maxime of quality has been violated obviously.*
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  - **Clash/Collision** A maxim is violated but this can be explained by other maxims. Then the addressee will figure out what might have caused the collision and draw appropriate implicatures. Example (by Krifka): **A**: *Where does Maria live? I'd like to visit her.* **B**: *In south France.* \[\sim \] **B** doesn't know exactly where **A** lives.
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- If the speaker doesn’t violate the cooperative principle:
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- If the speaker doesn’t violate the cooperative principle:
  - The addressee may draw pragmatical inferences from what the speaker has said in combination with one or more of the maximes.
Some More Examples

(56) A: I’m a covert secret agent. B: And I’m the pope.
   ~ B considers A’s utterance obviously false or nonsense.
   Reason: The maxim of quality was violated. (B’s reply is obviously false)

(57) The soup is warm.
   ~ The soup is not burning hot.
   Reason: By the maxim of quantity the speaker may not be less informative than necessary; since hot(x) → warm(x), using »hot« would be more informative than using »warm« if the soup was hot, hence it must be warm.

(58) A: What time is it?
   B: It is exactly 7 minutes and 23 seconds after the last time you’ve asked me.
   ~ You bother me by asking too often.
   Reason: The maxims of manner and quantity have been violated.

(59) A: How was your talk? B: Nice weather today.
   ~ The talk was miserable or there are other reasons why B doesn’t want to talk about it.
   Reason: The maxim of relation has been violated. (Answer is not related to question.)
Scalar Implicatures

In the literature, a special kind of CIs called **scalar implicatures** have deserved a lot of attention. They provide very clearcut examples. Meanings of lexical items can sometimes be arranged on an implicative scale. A scalar implicature is from the item with weaker, entailed meaning to the negation of the item with stronger, entailing meaning.

(60) hot > warm: If something is hot, then it is at least warm. Implicature: warm ↛ not hot

(61) 4 > 3 > 2 > 1: If there are \( n + 1 \) objects, then there are also \( n \) objects \((n > 1)\). Implicature: 2 ↛ not 3

(62) and > or: \((A \land B) \rightarrow (A \lor B)\) Implicature: \((A \lor B) \sim \neg (A \land B)\)

(63) all > most > many > some

(64) genius > smart > witty
According to Grice (1975), there are also **conventional implicatures**:

(65) He is an Englishman; he is, **therefore**, brave.

→ Being an Englishman is the reason for his being brave.

(66) He is short **but** brave.

→ There's a contrast between the first part and the second one. (The speaker assumes that short men usually aren’t brave.)

They appear to be similar to presuppositions, but don’t affect the truth-conditional content of the utterance. According to Grice, they have been conventionalized and are a part of the word meaning.
(67) Maria has 2 children.
   → Maria doesn’t have more than 2 children.

(68) The soup is warm.
   → The soup is not burning hot.

These implicatures can be drawn without knowledge of the given situation. They are therefore called **generalized conversational implicatures**.

(69) *When it’s raining*: Nice weather today.
   → Speaker is ironic.

(70) *It is known that Peter didn’t drink anything*: Peter must be drunk.
   → Peter is behaving rather unusual.

These implicatures require knowledge of the situation and possibly background world knowledge in order to be drawn. They are called **particularized conversational implicatures**.
(71) The soup is warm, perhaps even hot.

① Conversational implicatures can be cancelled.

(72) Peter must be drunk.

(73) Peter must have had one over the eight.

⇒ Peter is behaving rather unusual (given that it is a shared assumption that he doesn’t behave so because he’s indeed drunk.)

② Conversational implicatures are nondetachable. If you use another formulation with the same semantic content, then the same conversational implicature will arise.
(74) The soup is warm.
Calculation: \( \text{hot}(x) \) implies \( \text{warm}(x) \), therefore it would be more informative to use \( \text{hot} \) for hot soup, hence the soup must be warm if the speaker has conformed with the maxim of quality.

Conversational implicatures can be calculated from the utterance using world knowledge, knowledge about the situation and assumptions about the speaker’s beliefs and intentions.

(75) \textit{It’s raining}: Nice weather today.

Conversational implicatures are non-conventional. The conventional, literal meaning of the utterance has to be taken into account in order to be able to derive the conversational implicature.
Reinforcability, Universality

(76) The soup is warm; you can taste it, it’s not too hot.
    → The soup is not hot.
    ⇓ The soup is not hot.

(77) ? The bucket of flowers in my room is beautiful, and there’s a bucket of flowers in my room.

Reinforcability, Universality

Conversational implicatures can often be reinforced by explicitly stating them, and if done so, this appears to be less redundant than repeating truth-conditional content or presuppositions.

(78) It’s raining: Nice weather today.
   jap. Kyo tenki wa ii desu.

Conversational implicatures are universal, because they are based on general, rational principles of action and derivations based on general knowledge and truth-conditional content of the utterance. (linked to not being conventional)