

Presupposition: How Discourse Coherence Is Conducted*

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Presupposition is a complex linguistic phenomenon that involves in human linguistic intuition. The study of presupposition has aroused much interest of linguists, scholars, and experts since it was introduced into linguistics. The aim of this paper is to explicate what value presupposition bears on discourse. The heat-debated topic of the nature of presupposition is analyzed first. Then by employing the better understanding of the nature presupposition, the paper explores the roles of semantic and pragmatic presupposition play in discourse coherence. That is, semantic presupposition, by linguistic devices, contributes to discourse coherence by avoiding redundancy and ensuring economy. Pragmatic presupposition, bearing with encyclopedic, social or cultural knowledge, bridges the understanding gap, also guarantees discourse coherence.

Keywords: presupposition, semantic presupposition, pragmatic presupposition, coherence, cohesion

Introduction

The concept of presupposition could be traced back to philosophy and was not introduced into linguistics until the 1960s. Gottlob Frege first took notice of presupposition in terms of reference. As he states, “if any thing is asserted there is always an obvious presupposition that the simple or compound proper names used have reference” (Frege, 1970, p. 69). As is illustrated in *John is depressed* presupposes there exists a name *John* which designates something. The referential dealt of presupposition seems too simple and leaves much to accounting for, thus leads to the wide interest of the study of presupposition. Among these studies, one of the hot debates is about whether presupposition is semantic or pragmatic in nature.

Presupposition: A Semantic or a Pragmatic One

Semantic Presupposition

The semantic perspective of study of presupposition is mainly from the truth value, entailment and most prominent, from the linguistic items. Here due to the need of present study, the paper mainly accounts for semantic presupposition from the linguistic features. Proponents of semantic presupposition exemplify presupposition arises with certain content of the lexicon and some special grammatical structures (see Example (1)).

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Example (1) I know he is a teacher.

This sentence carries with the presupposition that he is a teacher. The embedded *that-clause* is taken for granted to express a true proposition and the matrix clause makes some assertion about that proposition. However, if the predicate *know* is replaced by *suppose* as in *I suppose he is a teacher*, then the initial presupposition *he is a teacher* is cancelled. Here, *know* is called a factive predicate and “the *that-clause* of a factive predicate P is presupposed to be true when P is the main lexical predicate of a main clause” (Seuren, 1994, pp. 3311-3320).

Like some lexical items, certain grammatical structures can also give rise to presuppositions (see Example (2)).

Example (2) When Jim’s mother and father divorced, he was still a little boy.

Obviously, the thought *Jim’s mother and father once divorced* is the presupposition of the whole compound sentence. Likewise, other temporal sentences can also give birth to presuppositions.

Example (3) (a) After the shower, the rainbow appeared in the sky.

(b) Before the earthquake, there were 300 people in the village.

In Example (3), the *after-clause* in first sentence arouses the presupposition that there once was a shower. Similarly, *an earthquake once happened* is also presupposed by the *before-clause* in the second sentence. In addition to temporal clause, other grammatical structures like cleft and pseudo-cleft sentences, non-restrictive relative clauses and counterfactual conditionals can also trigger presuppositions. The propositions expressed by these grammatical structures presumed to be true and be the presuppositions of the whole sentences.

The semantic perspective of presupposition, as is shown above, if analyzed further, treats presupposition as being stable, linguistic-related and context-independent. This is questioned by the defeasibility problem of presupposition, which means, presuppositions tend to evaporate in certain context.

Example (4) (a) At least John won’t have to regret that he did a Ph.D..

(b) John did a Ph.D..

(Levinson, 1983, p. 187)

In Example (4), a semantically presupposes (b) obviously. However, if the participants mutually know that *John failed to get Ph.D.*, the presupposition (b) is undoubtedly cancelled.

Example (5) (a) Sue cried before she finished her thesis.

(b) Sue died before she finished her thesis.

(c) Sue finished her thesis.

(Levinson, 1983, p. 187)

Likewise, in Example (5), (c) is a presupposition of (a), but not a presupposition of (b). Since the common knowledge shows that a dead person can do nothing, not to mention finishing thesis.

From the above examples, it can be seen that presuppositions can be cancelled either by immediate context or by encyclopedia knowledge. It highly depends on the context. This context-dependent feature seems to prove that presupposition is a pragmatic matter.

Pragmatic Presupposition

Proponents of pragmatic approach intend to prove presupposition is pragmatic rather than semantic. They account for presupposition in terms of speaker’s beliefs, listener’s knowledge, felicity condition, and speech acts,

etc.. One of the most promising efforts was proposed by Gazdar. In Gazdar, sentences possess pre-suppositions (which are also called “potential presuppositions”) all the times, but only those “which are satisfiable in the context of utterance actually emerges as the presuppositions of the utterances” (Gazdar, 1979, p. 90). Deep down from his accounts, there seems to be a mechanism that can either cancel pre-supposition to be nothing or make pre-supposition to be actual. Consider the following example:

Example (6) Linda has three millions and Linda’s three millions are invested in the real estate.

In Example (6), *Linda has three millions* is potentially presupposed since the second conjunct *Linda’s three millions are invested in the real estate* does, while the initial part implicates that it is not known by others that *Linda has three millions*, otherwise it is not necessary to say so. Therefore, the potential presupposition is suspended. Here is another example:

Example (7) Linda hasn’t regretted marrying because in fact he has not married.

The first clause shows that Linda got married; while the second obviously entails that Linda did not marry (see Example (7)). Obviously, what is supposed in the first clause is cancelled by the entailment of the second. All enlighten that pre-suppositions can be cancelled when it is contradictory with implicature and it is context-dependent.

From the above analysis, that presupposition, in nature, seems pragmatic rather than semantic is more explainable. However, as a way to approach the formation of discourse coherence, both semantic presupposition and pragmatic presupposition play a distinctive role in discourse coherence. What roles do semantic presupposition and pragmatic presupposition play in discourse coherence? Before this question is touched, it should be clarified first what is discourse coherence through the distinction of the concepts of coherence and cohesion.

Coherence and Cohesion: Their Differences and Connection

Discourse can refer to sentences, paragraphs, stanzas, or chapters, etc.. A coherent discourse consists of sentences not arbitrary but connected. This connectivity is typically reflected by linguistic devices which are called “cohesion”. A relation of cohesion is set up when the meaning of one element cannot be effectively decoded except by resorting to another somewhere in the same discourse. As Halliday and Hasan (1976) states: “the potential for cohesion lies in the systematic resources of references, ellipsis and so on that are built into the language itself” (p. 5). For example:

Example (8) A: Look at the bird with beautiful feathers.

B: Where is it?

Here, *the bird* and *it* illustrate the anaphoric relation which makes the dialogue achieve cohesion and it is coherent too. The following sentence serves as another example:

Example (9) I am upset and so I can’t write a paper.

The two conjuncts are connected by the cohesive marker *so* that a cause-consequence relationship is explicitly illustrated.

From Examples (8)-(9), cohesion is something about linguistic devices that a coherent discourse is always employed to form connectivity. However, is cohesion sufficient enough to guarantee discourse coherence? That is to say, does a piece of discourse that lacks cohesion necessarily lack coherence? The answer is definitely no.

The coherence of discourse actually relies on the underlying meaning connectivity, not the explicit presence of cohesive markers. And the realization of discourse coherence does not necessarily resort to the cohesion although cohesion is usually the feature and effective device employed by a coherent discourse. The dialogue in Example (10) does not employ any cohesive markers, but it is coherent and explicitly understandable.

Example (10) A: Would you like to dance with me?

B: I am enjoying the wonderful sightseeing.

Apparently, there are no cohesive markers but the dialogue seems coherent. This again proves that discourse coherence is not guaranteed simply by linguistic devices, but the underlying meaning relations of sentences that consisting of discourse. And this arouses another question: How do the underlying meaning relations of sentences connected? Presupposition, as is mentioned before, contributes a lot to the underlying connectivity of discourse.

Presupposition: A Guarantee of Discourse Coherence

Presupposition, perceived by the addresser that it is known by the addressee, is treated as background. In Halliday's (1976) view, it is also called "given information". In contrast to the "given information", the "new information" is the information that the addressor believes is not known to the addressee. In a discourse, not all the information is of equal importance. The topic-related information should be highlighted and conveyed through assertion, while less important information is backgrounded through presuppositions. Hence, the economy and the effectiveness of communication are achieved. The excerpt cited from the "Frog Story" (see Example (11)) can serve as an example:

Example (11)

How odd, I thought, last November when I first noticed him sitting atop my sound board over my computer. I figured that he (and I say he, though I really don't have a clue if she is a he or vice versa) would be more comfortable in the greenhouse. So I put him in the greenhouse. Back he came. And stayed. After a while I got quite used to the fact that as I would check my morning email and on-line news, he would be there with me surveying the world. (WU, 2002, p. 19)

The main topic or the goal of the above discourse is the author found a frog sitting on his computer and he put the frog into the greenhouse, thinking that the greenhouse is better and more comfortable for it. Surprisingly, the frog went back to the computer time to time which aroused the curiosity of the author. The topic-related information in this discourse is *I figured that he would be more comfortable in the greenhouse*. However, *I first noticed him sitting atop my sound board over my computer* is exact time that *I figured*, which is less important and is dealt with by a time clause. Furthermore, *my sound board*, *my computer*, *the greenhouse*, *my morning email*, and *on-line news* are less relevant for the topic and are presupposed as background information. Suppose if all the presupposed information is asserted as of equal importance, the discourse will become redundant and the coherence of discourse is destroyed. Hence, through presupposition, the topic-related information is made prominent while the less important information is backgrounded. In this sense, presupposition plays a positive role in enhancing discourse coherence.

If it is believed that the linguistic devices generated from the semantic perspective of presupposition guarantee the economy and coherence of discourse, pragmatic presupposition, in this regard, plays a determinant role in one's perception of discourse coherence.

The presupposition involved in encyclopedic knowledge is taken first into consideration. For example:

Example (12) A: I feel very cold.

B: Here are clothes.

In Example (12), speaker A feels cold and speaker B mentions the clothes available. Without certain encyclopaedic knowledge, B's response seems irrelevant to A and the dialogue is incoherent. However, the presupposed encyclopaedic knowledge shows that clothes can protect human beings from coldness, and any normal person with mature cognitive ability knows it. Thus, in this dialogue the presupposition serves as the bridge to help achieve the coherence of the dialogue.

Likewise, pragmatic presupposition involved in social knowledge can also achieve discourse coherence by bridging the understanding gap.

Example (13) (a) Too many new words make it difficult to read.

(b) You can just give up reading.

(c) I have a dictionary.

In Example (13), (b) is the direct answer to (a), while (c), superficially, is not the coherent continuity of (a). However, the social constructed knowledge that "a dictionary can be used for looking up new words" effectively bridges the gap between the two propositions. Thus, the response of (c) is relevant in that (c) implicates that the speaker in (a) can borrow his dictionary and overcome reading difficulties by resorting to the dictionary. With this presupposed message the discourse becomes unified and coherent.

Not only presuppositions involved in encyclopedic and social constructed knowledge can help form discourse coherence, but cultural-specific presupposition can also help overcome the understanding obstacles and achieve discourse coherence. Consider the following example:

Example (14) A: Do you like pork?

B: I am a Muslim.

In Example (14), A asks B whether he/she likes pork or not. Instead of answers like *Yes* or *No*, B just shows he/she is a Muslim. The discourse seems disconnected and lacks coherence without cultural background. However, if the presupposed cultural knowledge that Muslims do not eat pork is known by the addresser, the addressee's answer becomes relevant and acceptable. As is seen above, the cultural presupposition that *a Muslim does not eat pork* bridges the gap and makes the whole discourse coherent.

Conclusion

Through the analysis it can be seen both the semantic perspective of presupposition and the pragmatic perspective of presupposition are crucial to discourse coherence. By guaranteeing effectiveness and economy through linguistic devices, the formal connectivity of discourse is achieved with semantic presupposition. And by bridging the information gap through context-dependent knowledge, the underlying connectivity of discourse is conducted with pragmatic presupposition. However, since both presupposition and discourse coherence are concerned with human linguistic intuition, further study of presupposition from the perspective of discourse coherence is necessary and has much more research value.

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