Lab Week 7:
Presuppositions and definite descriptions
November 4, 2013

1.   Finger Exercises on Definite Descriptions

See other handout

> ★ ★ ★ ★ **For this part, use the semantic notion of presupposition: If S presupposes P and P is false, then S is neither true nor false (it is undefined).** ★ ★ ★ ★

2.   Exercises on Presuppositions: **Applying the P-Family and 'Hey, wait a minute!' tests**

- Certain expressions 'trigger' presuppositions: that is, they "signal that the speaker is taking something for granted" (Chierchia and McConnell-Ginet, pg. 28).

- If A presupposes B, then A not only implies that B, but also implies that the truth of B is somehow taken for granted or is being treated as uncontroversial.

2.1   Definite descriptions are presupposition triggers

(1)   a. The president of Bhutan is vacationing in Rome.
          b. There is a unique president of Bhutan.

We can say that (1a) presupposes (1b). The presupposition in (1b) is triggered by the use of the definite description *the president of Bhutan*.

How do we know that (1a) presupposes (1b)? We can do two things.

★ **First,** we can apply the "P-Family Tests" to (1a). That means that we change (1a) in three ways and see if each of the new sentences we create still presupposes (1b). We can say that **presupposition survives under negation, in questions, and in conditionals.**

(2)   a. **Question:** Is the president of Bhutan vacationing in Rome?
          b. **Negation:** It is not the case that the president of Bhutan is vacationing in Rome.
          c. **Conditional:** If the president of Bhutan is vacationing in Rome, then he'll probably meet the Pope.

> A presupposes B if and only if not only A but also A's P-family members **imply** (and assume as background) B.

Informally: When you hear sentence A, it sounds like the speaker of A is assuming that everyone agrees that some fact B about the world holds.

★ **Second,** we can see if the 'Hey, wait a minute!' test can target (1b). Here's how to apply this test:

(3)   Speaker A says: The president of Bhutan is vacationing in Rome.
         Speaker B says: Hey, wait a minute! I didn't think there *was* a president of Bhutan! (I thought it was a monarchy!)

By contrast, the following dialogue sounds a bit stranger:

(4)   *Speaker A says:* The president of Bhutan is vacationing in Rome.
         Speaker B says: # Hey, wait a minute! I didn't think that he was vacationing in Rome! (I heard that he always went to Paris…)

This dialogue sounds weird because in English, it's odd to question **asserted** material with 'Hey, wait a minute!'. The dialogue would have to be more like (5):

(5)   *Speaker A says:* The president of Bhutan is vacationing in Rome.
         Speaker B says: Woah, are you sure? I didn't think that he was vacationing in Rome! (I heard that he always went to Paris…)

A presupposes B if and only if not only B can be questioned with 'Hey, wait a minute!' after A is uttered.

★**But how exactly are presupposition and entailment related?**

Remember that some sentence A only presupposes a sentence B if all of A's P-family members (negated form, questioned form, and conditional form) **imply/assume B as background**.

It is **not** necessarily the case that just because A **entails** B, all of A's P-family members will also B.

(6)   a. John has three children **entails** John has two children.
         b. John doesn't have three children **does not entail** John has two children.

Remember, to test for entailment between two sentences A and B, see if you can put A and B in the following frame without giving rise to a logical contradiction.
         A, and/but it's not the case that B.

Sometimes, A will both presuppose and entail B.

(7a)   a. A = It was Lee who got a perfect score on the semantics quiz.
         b. B = Someone got a perfect score on the semantics quiz.

★To show that (7a) presupposes (7b), apply the 'Hey, wait a minute' and 'P-family tests.' **We want to see your reasoning on your homework wherever you are claiming something is a presupposition and/or entailment.**

★ To test for entailment, try putting A and not-B together. I've done it for you in (8). The result (8) is a logical contradiction…the two sentences can never be true at the same time.

(8)   # It was Lee who got a perfect score on the semantics quiz, and/but it's not the case that someone got a perfect score on the semantics quiz.

We could do the same entailment for our President of Bhutan sentence. We already did the P-family and 'Hey, wait a minute!' tests up above.

(9)   # The president of Bhutan is vacationing in Rome, and/but it's not the case that there is a president of Bhutan.

2.2   Semantic vs. pragmatic definitions of presuppositions

★ **Presuppositions survive under negation, in questions, and in conditionals. What about entailments? Do they survive?**

This question only makes sense to ask about negation (questions and *if*-clauses don't have truth values). So, **do entailments necessarily survive under negation?**

That is, does (10a) entail (10b)? We know that (10a) presupposes (10b) (do the P-family and 'Hey, wait a minute!' tests to it to check).

(10)   a. It wasn't Lee who got a perfect score on the semantics quiz.
        b. Someone got a perfect score on the semantics quiz.

If you read Chierchia and McConnell-Ginet, you'll see that they say that (10a) does not entail (10b). Why? Because we can come up with a context in which (10a) is asserted yet (10b) is not true (Chierchia and McConnell-Ginet, pg. 30, adapt.).

(11)   *Speaker 1:* I wonder whether it was Lee or someone else who got a perfect score on the semantics quiz.
        Speaker 2: It wasn't Lee who got a perfect score…in fact, it's not the case that *anyone* got a perfect score on the semantics quiz this time.

If you find a pair of sentences A and B to sound contradictory to you when put in the frame 'A and not B,' this is evidence that A entails B.

It is very important that you show us your reasoning like this using the P-family and 'Hey! wait a minute!' tests for presuppositions and the contradiction test for entailments. If your judgments differ from ours, we want to still see that you understand what presuppositions and entailments are and how to check for them.