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Locating Presupposition and Shared Knowledge in Pragmatics

[1]Bamitale Balogun, [2]Acheoah John Emike*

[1]Department of English, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria
[2]Department of European Languages, Federal University Birnin-Kebbi, Kebbi State, Nigeria

*Corresponding author: Acheoah John Emike

Department of European Languages, Federal University Birnin-Kebbi, Kebbi State, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper investigates the position of presupposition and shared knowledge in pragmatics. As a field of language study, pragmatics is the use and interpretation of verbal and non-verbal elements of communication which participants of discourse deploy in conveying messages (illocutionary goals). To understand what is meant by a speaker, the hearer relies on different pragmatic variables, including presupposition and shared knowledge. In this study, we examine the functionality of presupposition and shared knowledge in the transaction of "meaning", as evident in the way participants of discourse use and interpret language. The study explores Frege's Theory of Presupposition (cited in Levinson 1983, p. 170) as a theoretical framework. Different findings are established by this study: presupposition and shared knowledge are pragmatic inference tools; the two concepts operate at literal and non-literal sentential levels; the concepts are referents; they are based on conventions; and they prevent pragmatic failure.

Keywords: presupposition, shared knowledge, pragmatics, speech act, Frege's Theory of Presupposition, Traugott's Tendency of Semantic Change.

1. INTRODUCTION

Research in pragmatics is replete with the explanation of the communicative potentials of theoretical concepts such as speech act, presupposition, context, shared knowledge, among others. Like presupposition, shared knowledge is any fact which participants of discourse take for granted as part of the background assumption. Background assumptions prevent hindrances in communication by facilitating the inferential process. This study is restricted to the roles that presupposition and shared knowledge play in pragmatics. To identify such roles, different perspectives in the literature of pragmatics and semantics are explored. However, insights from other fields of language give this study direction.

2. Literature Review

This section of the paper examines concepts that are germane to the thrust of the study: pragmatics, presupposition, and shared knowledge.

2.1 Pragmatics

The origin of pragmatics is linked to the Greek "*pragma*" which means "deed" or "action)" Pragmatics emerged as a reaction against formalist approach to language study. Formalism trivializes man's creative potentials in the use of language; emphasis was on "linguistic competence" rather than "communicative competence". According to the *Encyclopedia Americana* (1994), pragmatics is "the subfield of the study of language that investigates the techniques by which language is processed for communication purposes." According to Crystal and Varley (1993), "pragmatics is the study of the factors that govern our choice of language (sounds, construction, words) in social interaction, and the effects of our choice upon others. The subject includes the cooperation in our speaking behavior and it thus involves using

language to convey politeness, intimacy, playfulness, rudeness, awkwardness and a range of other social attributes." Austin (1962) submits that crucial concepts in pragmatics include:

- participants (users of language in context);
- speech acts (**locutionary act** which is an utterance with determinate sense and reference; **illocutionary act** which is the making of a statement, offer, promise, etc. in uttering a sentence by virtue of the conventional force associated with it; and **perlocutionary act** which is the bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence);
- context (the relevant aspects of the physical or social setting of an utterance or discourse);
- non-verbal communication (extra-linguistic communication);
- inference (the process of making logical conclusions from all that a particular context provides to arrive at what a speaker means);
- presupposition (facts that the participants of discourse take for granted in a particular context of communication); and
- shared knowledge (common background information shared by the participants of discourse).

For more insights on pragmatics, see Levinson (1983), Adegbija (1999), Mey (2001), Grice (1975) and Searle (1969; 1979).

2.2 Presupposition and Shared Knowledge

In this section of the paper, we merge the treatment of the two concepts due to their pragmatic connection. Jacob Mey (ibid., p. 184), reports that "the notion of presupposition was originally developed in a semantic environment; as such, it does not hold up to our pragmatic expectations. For one thing, semantic presuppositions deal with truth or falsity: they are defined as 'holding' (that is, being true), even if the sentence containing the presupposition is false ..." Like shared knowledge, presupposition is a theoretical concept in pragmatics. Both concepts are deployed as tools for inference-making on literal and non-literal utterances. Participants in a communicative event achieve successful interaction when inferences are made based on the background information (presupposition) that the participants have. The background information constitutes shared knowledge. We contend that presupposition and shared knowledge can be viewed in "macro" (general facts) and "micro" (communication-specific facts) perspectives. Yule (cited in Rita Bossan (2018, pp. 70-71), presents and explains types of presupposition:

1. **Existential Presupposition:**
   This has to do with entities named by the speaker and assumed to be present. When we name an object, it is presupposed that the object exists. All nouns are presuppositions e.g. Simba's car is new.
2. **Factive Presupposition:**
   It is the assumption that something is true due to the presence of some verbs such as know and realize. For example, when a teacher says that he didn't realize someone has failed the exam, we can suppose that someone has failed the exam.
3. **Lexical Presupposition:**
   It is the assumption that, in using one word, the speaker can act as if another meaning (word) will be understood. Example:
   ₒ Clara stopped smoking (She used to smoke).
   ₒ You are pregnant again (You were pregnant before).
   The use of the expression "stop" and "again" are taken to presuppose another (unstated) concept.
4. Structural Presupposition:
   This is the assumption associated with the use of certain words and phrases. WH-questions in English (e.g. when and where) are conventionally interpreted with the presupposition that the information after the Wh-form is already known to be the case. Examples:
   ₒ When did she leave home? (She left.)
   ₒ Where did you get the information? (You got the information.)
5. Non-factive Presupposition:
   It is an assumption that something is not true. For example, verbs like "imagine", "pretend" and "dream" are used with the presupposition that what follows is not true.
   ₒ I dreamt that I got married (I am not married).
   ₒ We imagined that we were Americans (We are not Americans).
6. Counterfactual Presupposition:
   It is the assumption that what is presupposed is not only untrue, but is the opposite of what is true or contrary to facts.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study hinges on two theoretical underpinnings: Frege's Theory of Presupposition and Traugott's Tendencies of Semantic Change

3.1. Frege's Theory of Presupposition
Frege (cited in Levinson (1983), p. 170) comments on the theory:
i. Referring phrases and temporal clauses (for example) carry presuppositions to the effect that they do in fact refer;
ii. A sentence and its negative counterpart share the same set of presuppositions;
iii. In order for an assertion or a sentence to be either true or false, its suppositions must be true or satisfied.

3.2 Traugott's Tendency of Semantic Change
Traugott (1989, pp. 34-5) proposes three major tendencies of semantic change. These are:
i. Tendency I: Meanings based in the external described situation > meanings based in the internal evaluative/perceptual/cognitive) described situation
ii. Tendency II: Meanings based in the external or internal described situation > meanings based in the textual and metalinguistic situation
iii. Tendency III: Meanings tend to become increasingly based in the speaker's subjective belief state/attitudes towards the proposition.

The above theories are suitable for this paper because they accommodate the roles of grammar (language conventions) in the use of presupposition (and shared knowledge by implication) in communication. Apart from positing that presuppositions are used to refer (have referents), the theories reveal that: appropriateness of language is instrumental in using sentences to convey messages; speaker-meaning is important in discourse; internal (linguistic) and external (extra-linguistic) variables impinge on the use and interpretation of language.

4. The Position of Presupposition and Shared Knowledge in Pragmatics
The roles of presupposition and shared knowledge accentuate their position in the literature of pragmatics from classical era to this present time. To identify and explain the place of presupposition and shared knowledge in pragmatics, the paper presents instructive perspectives and arguments.

4.1 Presuppositions and Shared knowledge reveal non-truth-conditional feature of sentences.
The Truth Conditional Theory holds the view that the proposition of a sentence can be true based on the truth or falsity of linguistic structures attached to it. However, presupposition and shared knowledge give extra-linguistic realities (referents) the potentials to make utterances true in communication. This is expected because pragmatics evolved as a reaction against the hitherto formalist approach to language study – an approach which de-emphasizes extra-linguistic underpinnings of communication. Classical pragmatic theorists oppose Chomsky's grammar-driven theory because it does not give expected account of language users' pragmatic competence (communicative competence). See Chomsky (1957) for insights on linguistic conventions. Caffs, cited in Mey (ibid., p. 186) notes that "pragmatic presuppositions not only concern knowledge, whether true or false: they concern expectations, desires, interests, claims, attitudes towards the world, fears, etc." Presuppositions and shared knowledge are used as the pragmatics of regional or cross-cultural communication. In this regard, truth of expressions or utterances is immersed in background assumptions. In (i) below, the participants infer meaning using shared knowledge:
(i) Those who engage in 419 cannot get the contract.
In (i), "419" which is actually a number, is given an extended meaning in Nigeria. It means "fraudulent activity" (criminality). This implies that in a linguistic string that conveys the expression "419", the truth of the conveyed proposition is based on extra-linguistic elements rather than linguistic elements (of communication).

4.2 Presuppositions and shared Knowledge are used with linguistic conventions (rules of appropriateness).
The fact that presupposition and shared knowledge are immersed in extra-linguistic underpinnings of language use does not mean the normative properties of language (grammar) are not applied when presupposition and shared knowledge are deployed in communication. To deviate from grammar to pragmatic use of language, appreciable knowledge of the latter is not only crucial, but also inevitable. For example, Christian faithful believe it is good to use (ii) below to convey the proposition of a sentence even if the encoder is sick:
(ii) I will not go to work today because I am strong.
The encoder of (i) understands the meaning of "strong" (normative property), but uses it as a pragmatic choice, motivated by speaker-hearer shared knowledge/presupposition. In other words, the encoder demonstrates knowledge of the English vocabulary regarding using synonyms and antonyms (semantic knowledge).

4.3 Presuppositions and shared knowledge convey speaker's intention.
In pragmatics, the reason for a speaker's utterance is important as it determines the illocutionary strategy to be used and perlocutionary act to expect. Speakers do not ignore speaker-hearer background knowledge because these two pragmatic tools enable the hearer to infer whether the speaker is being literal or non-literal, direct or indirect.

Presupposition and shared knowledge impinge on the category of illocutionary acts that utterances contain; the hearer has to know whether or not the speaker is: informing or ordering; asserting or persuading; stating or condemning. John T. Kearns, cited in Savas L. T. (1994, p. 50) notes that "a linguistic act, or speech act, is an intentional, meaningful act performed with an expression or expressions. Even though the word 'speech' suggests saying something out loud, I use the two expressions 'speech act' and 'linguistic act' interchangeably for acts performed with expressions, whether they are out loud, in writing, or 'in one's head'. Both speakers/writers and their audiences (when they understand the speakers/writers) perform linguistic acts[1]."

4.4 Presuppositions and shared knowledge make speech acts felicitous.

According to Bosco et al. (2006), "conversation is a two-fold activity in which the participants form utterances that are products of shared meaning, and such utterances produce felicitous results to the communicative event." Austin (ibid.) contends that speech acts can be felicitous (happy) when the required conditions (appropriate participants, the right words at the right place) for their performance are met. For instance, performing a felicitous speech act such as declaring a man and a woman as husband and wife presupposes that: the person making the declaration should be in a position to do so (e.g. a priest); the usual utterance should be uttered; the utterance should be uttered in the correct physical setting (e.g. a church) and the person making the declaration should have the consent of those to be declared as husband and wife. In the performance of other institutional (social) acts, felicity conditions are compulsory. If the felicity conditions for declaring a man and a woman as husband and wife are not met, a word-to-world direction of fit (as in Searle's (ibid.) speech at theory) does not emerge. People in society explore their shared knowledge of socio-cultural practices in responding to a wedding declaration. Chilton (2005a, p. 23) rightly notes that " cognitive pragmatics is defined as a study of mental states of the interlocutors, their beliefs, desires, goals, and intentions (cf. Bara 2010: 1) produced and interpreted by human individuals interacting with one another … If language use (discourse) is, as the tenets of CDA assert, connected to the construction of knowledge about social objects, identities, processes, etc., then that construction can only be taking place in the minds of (interacting) individuals."

4.5. Unexplored presuppositions and world knowledge could result in pragmatic failure.

In communication, a speaker's utterance may not be understood even if it is literal. This occurs when the hearer lacks the needed background assumptions (presupposition and shared knowledge). According to Bach and Harnish (ibid.), mutual contextual beliefs (MCBs) facilitate the inferential process in a communicative event. Thomas, cited in Adeyemi (2000, p. 77), submits that "pragmatic failure refers to the inability to understand what is meant by what is said." We consider the utterance below in which what is meant is not understood by the hearer who is not a Nigerian:
(iii.) You can only get it done properly in a standard business centre.
In Nigeria, the expression "business centre" is understood as "a place where computer services are commercialized". Acheoah (2011) evolves the term "geoimplicatures" to refer to expressions that are region-specific in use and meaning.

4.6 Presuppositions and shared knowledge operate as inference tools at both literal (direct speech act) and non-literal (indirect speech act) levels.

Due to interpersonal communicative necessity, discourse participants choose either liteal or non-literal use of language. Corroborating this view, Eva Alcon Soler (2012, p. 511) notes that "pragmalinguistics refers to the resources for conveying communicative and interpersonal meaning, whereas sociopragmatics refers to the social perception underlying participants' interpretation and performance of communicative acts." Literal and non-literal utterances can be interpreted through the use of presupposition and world knowledge. Sapir (1956) opines that "every cultural pattern and every single act of social behavior involves communication in either one explicit or implicit sense." The use of indirect speech act is also informed by communicative necessity. Presupposition and shared knowledge are instrumental in decoding the meaning of indirect speech acts. According to Adegbija (ibid.), indirect speech acts are interpreted at a higher level of inference-making which presupposes the use of linguistic and extra-linguistic variables to arrive at total meaning. Searle (ibid.) contends that "indirect speech act belongs to a higher level of pragmatic meaning. The meaning in indirect speech act is not explicit, and it requires pragmatic elements such as context, mutual contextual beliefs (MCBs) and world knowledge to bring out its meaning."

4.7 Presuppositions relate with language rules (grammar).

There are sufficient reasons to assert that presupposition and shared knowledge interact or operate with grammar: simple sentences lose their presuppositions when expanded to create complex ones; the use of grammatical categories can imply the reason for what is said by a speaker; knowledge of the grammar of a language enables discourse participants to process messages; grammar impinges on perlocutionary acts; grammar reflects participants' status and reveal their speech acts as in the use of modal auxiliaries which help the decoder of an utterance to presuppose that a hearer is being addressed by his/her boss; our world knowledge (shared knowledge) about "the language of power/authority" helps us arrive at this conclusion. Acheoah (2015) uses the term "Linguistic Presupposition" to refer to this kind of presupposition. Marmaridou's (2000) submission (cited in Levinson 1983, p. 198) corroborates the claim that presupposition and shared knowledge relate with grammar:

i. Presuppositions may be overtly denied without contradiction or anomaly; and they may also be suspended by the use of if-clauses;
ii. Presuppositions may be filtered in specifiable contexts when they arise from sentences that are part of compounds formed by the use of the connective or, if, then and others;
iii. Presuppositions survive in contexts where entailments cannot: in modal contexts, conditionals and disjunctions in particulars."

Given the interaction between presupposition and grammar, scholars hold the view that semantic investigation of presupposition is essentially a pragmatic endeavour.

4.8 Presupposition and shared knowledge perform preparatory-speech-act function in communication.

Discourse participants use certain sentences to make their interlocutors welcome and accommodate their proposed interaction. In this case, the preparatory speech act can be viewed as a face-saving act. As part of participants' world knowledge (or shared knowledge), a greeting (speech act) precedes a conversation; a speaker presupposes that his/her interlocutor expects and understands this fact as a norm of the larger society. In this regard, the position of presupposition and shared knowledge in pragmatics is covert.

4.9 Presupposition and shared knowledge are referents in pragmatics.

Acheoah (2015) views referents as Objects Referred (OR) which is a candidate for meaning. The referent is either in the remote world or immediate, physical setting of the communicative event. Consider (iv) which is strictly a Nigerian referent:
(iv) The house that he built is carry-go.
The encoder of (iv) expects the decoder to interpret the expression "carry-go" as an adjective which in the Nigerian speech community, means "sophisticated", "good", "standard" and "reliable"). The decoder is not expected to interpret it as a verb-verb compound. Another Nigerian referent which is not meaningful in other parts of the world is "Up NEPA" which in the Nigerian speech community, means "the electricity has been restored".

The use of presupposition and shared knowledge in communication is about the mental states of the participants: their feelings, emotions, thoughts and worldview. In a collaborative manner, they deploy these variables in communication not only to make the activity hitch-free, but also to impinge on locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. The role of presupposition and shared knowledge in pragmatics is therefore a facilitating role. The principles used by discourse participants to work out the presuppositions of utterances (retrieval of information) essentially define pragmatics. In (v) below, the decoder understands "Macleans" as a cover-term for all brands of toothpastes simply because the construct is about "principle" (the pragmatics of a Nigerian context) rather than "linguistic norm":
(v) Trader: What do you want to buy?
Buyer: Macleans.
Trader: The only Macleans in my shop is Close-up.

In cross-cultural or regional pragmatics, expressions are products of shared knowledge. There are different kinds of toothpastes: Macleans, Close-up, Aqua Fresh, Dabur, Pepsodent, Oral-B, etc. The reason for regarding all these brands of toothpaste as co-hyponyms of Macleans is extra-linguistic. See Acheoah (2016) for similar perspectives. According to Bach and Harnish (ibid.), when a speaker (S) utters an expression (e) in a linguistic community (LC), the speaker does so with the communicative presumption (CP) that the expression will be understood by the hearer. Elements that are presupposed (shared knowledge) are indeed, contextual underpinnings. Participants of discourse demonstrate their awareness of pragmatic, linguistic, social and psychological contexts by making sure their utterances can be processed by their interlocutors. Therefore, communication is a cooperative behavior. Adegbija (ibid., p. 192) posits that "broadly, we may identify at least four types of context as impinging on utterance interpretation: the physical, the socio-cultural, the linguistic, and the psychological. Pertinent questions for probing into the context include the following:

Did the communicative exchange occur at night, in the morning, twenty years ago, at a church, at a mosque, in a bedroom, in the market, at a cemetery, at a hospital? Socio-culturally, one may ask questions such as these: what are the beliefs, habits, value systems, or cultures of those involved? Are their religious and cultural beliefs at hand? Linguistically, what are the other words appearing in the environment of the word used? What do they mean? What do they imply within the physical and socio-cultural setting? Psychologically, what is the state of mind of those involved in the interaction?" It is the responsibility of the participants of a communicative event to actualize it by processing embedded presupposition and world knowledge, not only as a demonstration of linguistic competence, but also as a display of communicative competence. Inference-making is not arbitrary. It is based on mutually shared facts about societal phenomena, which can be region-specific. In operating within pragmatics to facilitate inference-making and generate sequels, presupposition and shared knowledge are both micro and macro underpinnings. This view captures Mey's (ibid, p. 94) use of the expression "thinking locally while acting globally": The micro perspective concerns the

immediate background assumptions that are text-specific (conversation-specific). The macro underpinnings concern the world knowledge of discourse participants across domains of life; it precedes the text (conversation). Jacob Mey (ibid., p. 95) submits that "as to the question of intentions, any discussion of intentionality should be aware of the relationships that exist among the individuals to whom the intentions are ascribed, and of the ways they perceive the others as intentional beings, in a greater, societal context. It is not primarily what I say, or intends to say, that determines my speech act, but the way it fits into the entire pattern of acting as a social being that is typical for my culture. Even though speech is a constitutive component of human individual and social life (as is language in general), it is still part of a larger context, of an even more encompassing activity. In the final analysis, we will have to ask ourselves how speech acts relate to our human activity as a whole: thinking 'globally' while acting 'locally', as the saying goes. It is for this ecological view of human acting, to which the societal and global environment provides the adequate (necessary and sufficient backdrop that I have devised the term 'pragmatic act' …)."

As pragmatic concepts, presuppositions and world knowledge operate more at discourse level rather than textual or conversational level. "Text" (collection of sentences) and "conversation" are subsumed at discourse level (context-bound level) which is broader (more encompassing). This implies that discourse analysis (extra-linguistic analysis) presupposes conversational analysis (grammar-oriented analysis), whereas the reverse is not the case; the two terms are not the same as commonly misconstrued.

The pragmatic relevance of presupposition and shared knowledge is essentially about processing language via the realities it picks from the universe of discourse (our real world). Jacob Mey (ibid., p. 312) submits that "the British linguist, Dale Spender (1984: 195) has remarked that the relationship between language and reality can be summarized in two seemingly contradictory statements: on the one hand, language represents the world in a symbolic fashion: on the other hand, language is also an instrument that we use for organizing the world and 'constructing our culture' ..." Indeed, presupposition and shared knowledge give language use its "living" component. This view aligns with Mey (ibid., p. 313) who submits that "language, in Marx and Engel's immortal phrase, is our 'practical consciousness' … But this consciousness is not an independent entity … as it is realized through our actions. Language is the practical consciousness of our actions: it tells us what we're doing; but at the same time, it is the conscious instrument of our planning: it tells us what to do … thus, language is both the record-keeper of reality, in that it reflects our actions, and its rule and guideline, in that it, through our actions, continually creates and re-creates reality. Moreover, since our practice of reality (including language) cannot but be social, our linguistic consciousness (being realistic and practical) is by the same token a social consciousness. We are born as social humans, long before we realize that we are human individuals …"

4. Conclusion

This study presents presupposition and shared knowledge as crucial concepts in pragmatics due to their potentials to function as speaker-hearer referring matrix. In this regard, C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards' (1923, pp. 186-7 cited in Leech 1981, p. 1) definition of meaning is instructive: … the connotation of a word; the place of anything in a system; the practical consequences of a thing in our future experience; that to which the user of a symbol actually refers; that to which the user of a symbol ought to be referring; that to which the user of a symbol believes himself to be referring; that to which the interpreter of a symbol: (a) refers; (b) believes himself to be referring; and (c) believes the user to be referring." The place of presupposition and shared knowledge in pragmatics is to practically reveal the fact that pragmatic principles of language use is about participants' reference to already existing phenomena as they apply to an on-going communication. Phenomena that are not known participants of discourse are naturally not invoked by discourse phenomena to prevent some problems, including the problem of pragmatic failure[2]. Commenting on aspects of meaning, Charles W. Kreidler (1998, p. 42) submits that "generally we can recognize three aspects of meaning in lexemes: the relation to phenomena outside language, the relation to people's attitudes and feelings and the relation to other lexemes." This study concludes that presupposition and shared knowledge are immersed in the mental states (social consciousness) of discourse participants. This facilitates the intentional use of illocutionary acts, and establishes the position of presupposition and shared knowledge in pragmatics.

Notes

1. He adds that "an intentional act is characterized by the agent's intention for the act; this is what the agent intends for her act to be – what she intends to be doing. Agents commonly realize the intentions for their acts, but they are not always successful. The child, who scribbles, intending to write a letter to his grandparents, is unable to realize his intention for his act because he is unable to read and write. An agent must have an intention for her intentional act; there is also an intention of many intentional acts. An intention of an act is the purpose the agent intends to achieve by performing the act. Even when the agent's intention for her act is realized, the intention of her act may not be."
John T. Kearns, cited in Savas L. T. (ibid., p. 51)
2. Charles Kreidler (ibid., pp. 11-12) presents an elaborate perspective about speakers of a language:
Speakers of a language generally agree as to when two sentences have essentially the same meaning and when they do not …

3. Speakers generally agree when two words have essentially the same meaning – in a given context …

4. Speakers recognize when the meaning of one sentence contradicts another sentence …

5. Speakers generally agree when two words have opposite meanings in a given context …

6. Synonyms and antonyms have to have some common elements of meaning in order to be, respectively, the same or different. Words can have some element of meaning without being synonymous or antonymous …

7. Some sentences have double meanings; they can be interpreted in two ways. Speakers are aware of this fact because they appreciate jokes which depend on two-way interpretation …

8. Speakers know how knowledge is used when people interact. If one person asks a question or makes a remark, there are various possible answers to the question or replies one might make to the remarks …

9. Speakers are aware that two statements may be related in such a way that if ane is true, the other must also be true.

10. Speakers know that the message conveyed in one sentence may presuppose other pieces of knowledge …"

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