

PRESUPPOSITION IN ADVERTISING LANGUAGE

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Explicit and implicit information

It is generally agreed that one of the things a hearer must do in order to understand an utterance is to identify the thought or proposition that it expresses. That is, he must be able to give a signification of the conditions under which what the speaker has said is true. The truth conditions of an utterance cannot be predicted simply on the basis of its lexical and syntactic properties. In each case, the interpretation supplied by the hearer depends on his assumptions about the world, or, in other words, the context.

As D. Blakemore says (1990), two sorts of information may be communicated by an utterance. On the one hand, there is the proposition expressed. On the other, there is that information which the hearer infers from the proposition he takes to have been expressed on the basis of contextual information; in other words, the proposition the speaker is taken to have expressed and the implications that follow from it.

Grice (1967) had already drawn attention to a fact of fundamental importance: there are aspects of utterance interpretation which cannot be explained in terms of decoding messages according to a set of linguistic rules, but which involve taking the meaning of the sentence uttered together with contextual information and inferring what the speaker meant on the basis of the assumption that the utterance conforms to very general principles of communication.

Grice (1967) distinguished between “what is said” and “what is implicated”, that is, between those aspects of the total meaning of an utterance which are closely tied to the conventional meanings of the words uttered and those aspects of meaning which are due to the interaction of linguistic meaning and general communicative principles (the maxims of truthfulness, informativeness, relevance and manner).

Blakemore (1990) maintains that the distinction between the proposition expressed by the speaker and the implications that follow from it is not a distinction

between “what is said” and “what is implicated”. She (1990: 35) criticises the Gricean account of the distinction between the explicit and the implicit arguing that it takes no account of the role of pragmatic factors in the determination of the proposition expressed by an utterance and hence does not recognize that “what is said” may be explicit only to a certain degree:

It is clear that if explicit means “linguistically explicit”, then there can be no fully explicit thought. Even when the hearer is provided with a highly specific linguistic clue (...) she still has to rely on some contextual information.

In this sense, Sperber and Wilson (1986) draw a distinction between explicit and implicit communication in the following terms: they argue that the linguistic properties of an utterance determine a semantic representation (a logical form) which, given contextual information can be developed and enriched into a complete thought. In contrast, the suggestion or implicature recovered from the proposition expressed is not a development of a semantic representation specified by the grammar, but is recovered on the basis of contextual information. That is, it seems that whereas the proposition expressed by an utterance may be explicit to some degree, the suggestions or implicatures recovered from it are always implicit.

The idea that no thought can be fully explicit might seem to imply that communication is impossible. According to Sperber and Wilson (1986:230-1) communication may succeed provided that the proposition that the hearer receives bears a sufficient resemblance to the speakers thought:

We see verbal communication as involving a speaker producing an utterance as a public interpretation of one of her thoughts, and the hearer constructing a mental interpretation of this utterance, and hence of the original thought...
We see no reason to postulate a convention, presumption, maxim or rule of literalness to the effect that this interpretation must be a literal reproduction.

Bearing this in mind and considering that the hearer constructs the proposition recovered from an utterance on the basis of the linguistic properties of the utterance and the contextual information, let’s introduce the concept of presupposition.

The concept of presupposition

This introduction centred on the distinction between linguistic form and pragmatic interpretation is intended to frame the notion of presupposition since most definitions of the concept refer to a presupposition as an assumption not explicitly stated but which must be true if an utterance is to be meaningful. This is what we find in a general definition like the following:

In its wider sense, a “presupposition” is whatever has to be assumed in order for an utterance to be meaningful (Muraki 1972:300).

According to Levinson (1983/1987) presupposition is a kind of pragmatic inference that seems to be based on the actual linguistic structure of sentences. But, he adds, it cannot be thought of as semantic in the narrow sense, because presuppositions are too sensitive to contextual factors.

For a while it was suggested that there are two distinct kinds of presupposition in natural languages, *semantic and pragmatic* existing independently.

Keenan (1971) was one of the first linguists to make a distinction between semantic or logical presuppositions and pragmatic presuppositions. He understands the latter as being determined by culturally defined conditions on the context.

The simplest view of semantic presupposition is based on the following definition:

A sentence A semantically presupposes another sentence B if

- (a) in all situations where A is true, B is true.
- (b) in all situations where A is false, B is true.

However it soon became apparent that there are some presupposition-like phenomena that don't behave in quite the way that the concept of semantic presupposition requires. Keenan (1971) found examples that, in his opinion, form an independent and distinct class of pragmatic inferences which he called pragmatic presuppositions, which are best described as a relation between a speaker and the appropriateness of a sentence in a context.

Two distinct kinds of phenomena have been differentiated in the literature. Karttunen (1974) and Karttunen and Peters (1975) link Grice's notion of conventional implicature to the concept of pragmatic presupposition. Sgall, Hajicová and Panevová (1986) speak of two categories into which presupposition must be divided up, one of which corresponds to Grice's conventional implicatures, the other category belonging in the domain of conversational maxims. However they think that although the two phenomena are different they in fact overlap.

Deirdre Wilson (1975) makes a distinction between logical and pragmatic presupposition and refers to the latter as the preconditions on the use, or the appropriate use, of a sentence S to perform a speech-act.

Hence, two distinct kinds of presupposition were suggested for a while. But then it became increasingly clear that there were so many problems with the notion of semantic presupposition that a theory of language would do better without it. We find this position in Bach and Harnish (1979). These authors distinguish three main kinds of pragmatic phenomena labelled presupposition although they admit that in fact overlap. They express their preference for doing without semantic presupposition and also avoid the term pragmatic presupposition speaking only of

presupposition. And this is Levinson's position as well, which we will follow from now on.

Let's explain the nature and properties of the phenomena we are dealing with.

According to Levinson (1983/1986) a test for identifying presupposition would be that presuppositions are preserved in negative sentences or statements. This claim he takes from Strawson's definition of presupposition.

Presuppositions, defend Levinson (1983/1987), seem to be tied to particular words, or aspects of surface structure in general. He calls such presupposition-generating linguistic items *presupposition triggers*.

Presuppositions are, according to Levinson (1983/1987), background assumptions against which the main import of the utterance is to be assessed. The main point of an utterance may be to assert or to deny or to question some proposition, and yet the presupposition can remain constant.

Levinson begins by listing some of the constructions that have been isolated by linguistics as sources of presuppositions, i.e. by constructing a list of known presupposition-triggers (as we will see later in this article).

Presupposition in Advertising Language

The use of presupposition is quite frequent in language advertising. The presupposition always seems to be true irrespective of the statement made. It is, consequently, a useful way of conveying information with the minimum risk of that information being rejected.

I will try to exemplify those markers of presupposition distinguished in Levinson (1983/1987) in a series of advertisements taken from magazines and papers. The objective is to see if, once we have observed such examples in advertisements, we can speak of presupposition as a form of conveying information in advertising together with an attempt to analyse the reason for that use, if such use in fact exists.

I have selected 50 ads from the magazine *Time* (10) and the rest from the paper *The Independent* and *The Guardian*, which exemplify each case of presupposition-trigger proposed by Levinson (1983/1987):

1. Definite descriptions: Direct references to a specific person or thing. “*So when you're travelling, you can write letters or memos on the Portfolio, using the familiar Querty Keyboard.*” (*The Independent*).

The presupposition is: there exists a familiar Querty Keyboard.

“*The new Eagle NCT 2 tyres also give increased performance in the wet*” (*The Independent*).

presupposition: There are new Eagle NCT 2 tyres.

“More investors are recognising the potential for superior performance offered by investment trusts” (The Independent).

presupposition: Investment trusts have a potential for superior performance.

2. Factive verbs: Verbs like know, realize, regret, be aware. Expressions like it is a pity that, it is odd that, not to mention, be sorry that, be proud that, be indifferent/glad/sad that. They take a following clause to refer their fact.

“Recognizing that your delivery is as vital to our business as it is to yours” (Time).

presupposition: your delivery is vital to our business.

“These days more and more investors are recognizing the potential for superior performance offered by investment trusts” (Time).

presupposition: Investment trusts are offering superior performance.

3. Implicative verbs: Manage, forget, etc.

“But we never forget how we will maintain your trust” (Time).

presupposition: we maintain your trust or we have the obligation to maintain your trust.

4. Change of state verbs: stop, begin, continue, start, carry on, finish, cease, etc.

“We continue improving our performance”.

presupposition: We have been improving our performance.

“To maintain our lead in the development and supply of global networked switching and transmission systems...” (The Guardian).

presupposition: They are leaders.

5. Comparisons and contrasts marked by particles like too, back, in return, or by comparative constructions:

“the unique inkjet technology means the H P Deskjet PLUS produces high resolution 300 dpi text and graphics that are bolder and more professional than anything you’ll get from a dot-matrix printer” (Time).

presupposition: the text and graphics produced are bold and professional.

“Singapore Airlines introduces Rafles class (It’s more than just business as usual)”. (Time).

presupposition: It is not only business class.

6. Cleft sentences

(A) The it-type cleft sentence can emphasize any part of the sentence.

“It’s the top rates on our Instant Reserve account that are putting smiles on people’s faces” (The Independent).

presupposition: There is something that is putting smiles on people’s faces.

(B) The why-type cleft sentence can emphasize either the subject or the object.

“But perhaps what’s most impressive of all when you test drive a Peugeot 405 isn’t what you hear. It’s what you feel. It’s that incredible sensation you get when you drive the car...” (The Guardian).

presupposition of “why-type” cleft: There is something impressive in test driving a Peugeot 405.

presupposition of “it-type” cleft: There is an incredible sensation felt when one drives the car.

7. Iteratives: Again, anymore, another time, “to come back”, return, restore, repeat, for the nth time.

“Another impressive set of figures from Toyota” (The Independent).

presupposition: There have been other impressive sets of figures from Toyota.

“We won’t have a business class anymore” (Time).

presupposition: They had a business class once.

8. Certain types of question.

“why should you invest in an international PEPP?” (The Independent).

presupposition: you should invest in a international PEP.

9. Judgmental phrases. Verbs of judging. Levinson (1983/1987) says that this kind of implication is, arguably, not really presuppositional at all; for, unlike other presuppositions, the implications are not attributed to the speaker, so much as to the subject of the verb of judging. Bach and Harnish (1979) distinguish, as we have already said, three main kinds of (pragmatic) phenomena labelled “presupposition”. The Second notion of presupposition they distinguish expresses that the presuppositions of a sentence are those conditions that have to be satisfied in order for the intended speech act to be felicitous and appropriate in the circumstances. Examples of this notion given by these authors are precisely verbs like accuse and criticize.

“You’ll have our full support, wherever you and your Toshiba go” (The Independent).

presupposition: They offer support.

10. Non- restrictive relative clauses.

“Investment with Lancashire and Yorkshire’s TAX FREE PLAN is in our Unit Builder Fund or Investor Fund, both of which are amongst the highest performing Friendly Society Unit-Linked funds open to new investment over the last three years” (The Independent).

presupposition: Both Funds are amongst the highest performing funds.

“The Robeco Bank (Switzerland) S.A. is backed by the Robeco Group, which has assets under management of over \$ 22 billion”. (The Guardian).

presupposition: The Robeco Group has assets under management of over \$ 22 billion.

11. Temporal clauses. Clause constructors are before; after, during, whenever, as, etc.

“When you first handle a Patek Philippe, you become aware that this watch has the presence of an object of rare perfection”. (The Independent).

presupposition: You may handle a Patek Philippe.



“When you buy a Toyota Supra 3.0 i or Supra Turbo, the so called extras don't cost extra” (The Independent)

presupposition: You may buy a Toyota.

12. Counterfactual conditions

“If you're one of the 44% of people who can never find anything they want to watch on TV...” (Time).

presupposition: There are 44% people who can never find anything they want to watch on TV.

“When fire can kill within a few breaths anything which gives him a little extra time is vital” (Time).

presupposition: Fire can kill within a few breaths.

Although they are not present in Levinson (1983/1987) we can add two further cases:

13. Embedded information

“You see, even though we're already out in front, we're constantly improving our performance” (The Independent).

presupposition: we are out in front.

14. Particles used negatively

“..... No less impressive are our other figures”

presupposition: our figures are impressive.

In all these cases the presupposition is considered true even if the main utterance is rejected. If the sentences are to be meaningful the presupposition must be assumed.

Conclusions

As we have seen presupposition is marked in the linguistic structures and these markers are used in the language of advertising quite frequently.

The reasons for this use are, from my point of view mainly two:

1. As Sperber and Wilson (1986) say, the information presupposed is treated as given. A presupposition is chosen as a linguistic way of conveying information when the sender regards the information as relevant in its own right, when the assumption is considered to be manifest or manifestly plausible to the receptor.

From this argumentation, if you present something as given, your receptor is obliged to accept it as such.

2. Moreover, an utterance may assert or deny some proposition, but the presupposition remains constant. The advertisers, consequently, choose this way of conveying their messages since they find in it a useful way of conveying information without the risk (or with the minimum risk) of that information being rejected.

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