

Learning From Presupposition

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Thesis: presupposition can provide a distinctive testimony-based way to learn about the world.

Strawson's Observation

Strawson imagines a situation in which someone says to you, quite seriously, 'The King of France is wise', and then asks whether what she said was true or false. After first insisting that you would be inclined to say that the speaker's utterance is neither true nor false, Strawson goes on as follows:

You might, if he were obviously serious (had a dazed astray-in-the-centuries look), say something like: "I'm afraid you must be under a misapprehension. France is not a monarchy. There is no king of France." And this brings out the point that if a man seriously uttered the sentence, his uttering it would in some sense be *evidence* that he *believed* that there was a king of France. It would not be evidence for his believing this simply in the way in which a man's reaching for his raincoat is evidence for his believing that it is raining. But nor would it be evidence for his believing this in the way in which a man's saying, "It's raining" is evidence for his believing that it is raining. We might put it as follows. To say, "The king of France is wise" is, in some sense of "imply", to *imply* that there is a king of France. (Strawson 1950, p. 330)

Strawson's core observation is that what a speaker presupposes in making an utterance can provide an audience with a special kind of evidence.

Presupposition Survives Extraordinary Defeat

A speaker's presuppositions can provide an audience with new information about how things stand in the world.¹ Instead of a clearly pathological case, Strawson might have begun instead with examples like the following:

CENTENARIAN EMPEROR: Simone knows almost nothing about Japan, and certainly nothing about its specific institutional structures. One day, her friend Thomas says to Simone: "The Emperor of Japan is over a hundred years old!" Simone remembers that no monarch is a centenarian, and so rejects her friend's claim as false.

CENTENARIAN EMPEROR shows that presupposition-based knowledge can survive assertion's defeat. An audience can learn about the world from a speaker's presuppositions even when the audience knows the speaker's utterance to be false.

However, Strawson's choice to focus on a case where a presupposition is known to be false suggests an even more distinctive epistemic profile for presupposition. Consider:

TWO POPES: A hermit journeys to Rome in 1380 after two years in total seclusion following the death of Pope Gregory XI. Eager for news after his long absence, he asks a friendly shopkeeper about the state of the Church. The shopkeeper says "The popes are fighting". The hermit is taken aback, and thinks to himself: "Well, the man is clearly confused, but at least there's a pope!" (Unbeknownst to the hermit, there really are two popes: one in Rome, the other in Avignon.)

Cases like TWO POPES show that a speaker can use presupposition to inform an audience even when her utterance fails to meet even a minimal conversational standard.

¹ While the observation is usually credited to Karttunen (1974) and Stalnaker (1973, p. 449; 2014, pp. 56-57), the passage from Strawson shows him to be aware of the phenomenon. Cases of 'informative presupposition' are taken by some to pose a challenge to Stalnaker's pragmatic account (cf. Abbott 2008; Garcia-Carpintero 2016). Informative presupposition also plays an important role in well-known discussions of the social and testimonial significance of presupposition (e.g. Langton and West 1999, Sbisa 1999, and Langton 2017).

Why is this news?

My TWO POPES result goes beyond extant treatments of presuppositional testimony that permit speakers to use presuppositions to transmit knowledge (e.g. Langton and West 1999, Hawthorne 2012).

These accounts are concerned with the question of whether speakers can exploit presupposition to testify: to introduce information that is new to their audience, and which their audience can thereby come to know. A related recent debate explores whether we can *lie* with presuppositions, and whether the capacity to lie with presuppositions indicates that at least some presuppositions are also assertions (see especially Viebahn 2020).

However, contributors to these connected debates focus on cases where either a hearer has no reason to doubt a speaker, or the hearer's reasons to doubt the speaker are confined to reasons which bear exclusively upon the truth of the speaker's (explicit) assertion.

TWO POPES, by contrast, brings out how the phenomenon of presuppositional knowledge transfer—which I shall later argue is a form of testimonial knowledge transmission—does not generally require the presumed good standing of the assertion which carries the informative presupposition.

Presupposition's Epistemic Distinctiveness

In the present context, presupposition provides a distinctive way for an audience to learn about the world if an audience's entitlement to accept what is presupposed is not straightforwardly parasitic upon the good standing of a speaker's assertion.

*First Pass Parasitic Account:*² suppose a speaker asserts 'The Queen of England was born before 1950', and her audience has no reason to doubt her word. When her audience accepts that the Queen of England was born before 1950, they ordinarily incur a commitment to whatever the speaker's utterance presupposes. And what explains the audience's entitlement to that commitment is their entitlement to accept the speaker's claim that the Queen of England was born before 1950.

Anyone who accepts a distinction between what a speaker asserts and what she presupposes must accept some distinction—not necessarily captured in terms of truth and falsity—between ordinary falsity and whatever results from presupposition failure.³

Second Pass: The hearer in CENTENARIAN EMPEROR (i.e. Simone) has reason to reject what the speaker (i.e. Thomas) has asserted. Yet her reasons leave untouched the assertion's presuppositions. Hence, the speaker's assertion retains a type of good standing within the conversation (at least from the hearer's standpoint). And this good standing may seem sufficient to explain why the speaker can accept the relevant presuppositions.

Even if we can extend the parasitic approach to cases like CENTENARIAN EMPEROR, we run into obvious trouble when we try to extend it to cover cases like TWO POPES.

The distinctiveness that TWO POPES reveals for presupposition's epistemic profile goes beyond that required by those who already accept the phenomenon of informative presupposition. It is not simply that presupposition permits non-explicit encoding of novel information, which is a fact that speakers frequently exploit to sneakily introduce new information without its being subject to

² Stalnaker (2002, p. 714) sketches an explanation of informative presupposition that falls under this general rubric.

³ Dummett (1959) argues that Strawson ignores the fact that an assertion is correct when true, and incorrect when false. Given this connection between truth and assertion, presupposition failure becomes merely one more way for an assertion to be false. A theorist then can justify the introduction of presupposition only if she can find a principled reason to distinguish amongst the ways for an assertion to be false.

the same epistemic scrutiny as explicitly introduced content (cf. Sbisa 1999, Hawthorne 2012, Langton 2017).

Rather, presupposition enables an act of explicit assertion to carry a message whose epistemic force survives both the known falsity of the original assertion, and the knowledge that the assertion itself carries false presuppositions.

Presupposition as Testimony

The audience in TWO POPES is most naturally regarded as acquiring a testimony-based belief from what the speaker presupposes. Objection: unlike Simone in CENTENARIAN EMPEROR, the hearer in TWO POPES learns about a pope's existence not from what the speaker presupposes (and thus not through testimony), but through an independent reconstruction of the speaker's reasons.

Reclassifying TWO POPES in this fashion likely sacrifices a substantial epistemic role for presupposition. An audience would not learn that *p* on the basis of a speaker presupposing *p*, but because she can make sense of the speaker's actions only by treating *p* as true.

Reply: An observer's interpretation of another agent's actions will not ordinarily be constrained by anything as strict as the rules of a common language. Yet it seems clear that the rules of a common language do constrain what the audience in TWO POPES can learn from the speaker, and thus that the speaker's presuppositions play a substantive role in explaining what the audience can learn.

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