

How to Deny a Presupposition

Summary

This paper deals with the puzzle of sentences like (i.a), which denies (i.b).

- (i) a. The King of France is not bald, because there is no King of France.
- b. The King of France is bald.

In previous analyses of such examples two problems are often overlooked: the first is that (i.a) is supposed to express denial of (i.b) specifically on the grounds that the existence of a King of France is its presupposition, but it is not clear how, if at all, (i.a) does so; the second is that (i.a) is quite marked, whereas there are other, much more natural ways to deny (i.b), e.g. (ii).

- (ii) The King of France can't be bald, because there is no King of France.

I propose that the puzzle can be accounted for if negation is taken to be the standard descriptive negation. I argue that, in this case, (ii) demonstrates that the existence of a French King is a presupposition of (i.b), and rejects (i.b) on these grounds. Sentence (i.a) is entailed by (ii), hence it is also a possible way to deny (i.b); however, its marked nature comes from the fact that it is not as informative as (ii), thus violating Grice's Quantity maxim.

1 Introduction

Suppose someone says to you:

- (1) The king of France is bald.

Obviously, there is something wrong with (1): it presupposes (2), which is false.

- (2) There is a King of France.

You wish to correct the speaker who uttered (1). What will you do? Common wisdom has it that one of the plausible things you could say is:

- (3) The King of France isn't bald, because there is no King of France.

In this paper I explain how (3) succeeds in its goal. Note that while it does deny (2), the presupposition of (1), it does not deny the presupposition *relation* between (1) and (2): it does not deny that (1) presupposes (2). On the contrary, it is precisely because there is such a presupposition relation that (1)

is rejected. But by what mechanism is this fact expressed? I will call this the problem of *presupposition-based denial*: (3) expresses denial of (1) because of its false presupposition.

To see further the significance of this problem, consider (4).

- (4) The President of France isn't bald, because he uses Rogaine on a daily basis.

Sentences (3) and (4) have the same structure, but are understood very differently: (4) gives a reason why the President of France manages to avoid hair loss, whereas (3) gives a reason why (1) is denied. The two sentences also differ in their acceptability: while (4) is perfectly good, (3) is rather marked; so marked, in fact, that early work on presupposition (Frege, Strawson) completely ignores such sentences. Exactly what, then, is the difference between the two? And what is its source?

2 Previous approaches

It is possible to identify four main approaches in the literature to sentences like (3).

1. Negation is semantically ambiguous. There is the standard type of negation, which does not deny presuppositions, and another type that does.
2. Negation is ambiguous, but pragmatically, rather than semantically (Horn 1989). We have, in addition to the standard (descriptive) negation, a *metalinguistic* type of negation that negates utterances, rather than sentences, and it is this negation that denies presuppositions.
3. The word *because* is lexically ambiguous (Burton-Roberts 1989; in addition, he proposes that negation is pragmatically ambiguous, as in 2 above). *Because* can be used to indicate real causality between two propositions, as in (4), but it can also indicate the reason why the speaker is licensed to utter a certain sentence, as in (3).
4. There is no ambiguity, either semantic or pragmatic (Geurts 1998). The difference between (3) and (4) lies in nothing more than the projection of the existential presupposition: in (4) it projects, but in (3) it does not, because projecting it would result in inconsistency.

Each of the approaches has a number of empirical and theoretical problems, which I cannot go into in this abstract. But a crucial problem, common to all of them, is that they do not provide any account of how (3) expresses the fact that (1) presupposes something (which is false). But this is precisely the reason why (1) is rejected.

3 Tests for Presupposition

Suppose we wanted to demonstrate to our friend, who uttered (1), that the sentence has a false presupposition. How would we do this? Well, there are standard tests for presupposition we can use.

One such test is negation; we can demonstrate that (2) follows from both (1) and its negation. Crucially, we are talking about descriptive negation here: the test would fail otherwise. So, we could say something like

- (5) “The King of France is bald” entails “There is a King of France,” and
“The King of France is not bald” entails “There is a King of France.”

From (5) it follows that

- (6) “The King of France is bald or the King of France is not bald” entails
“There is a King of France.”

Applying contraposition (with descriptive negation), we get:

- (7) “There is no King of France” entails “The King of France is neither bald
nor not bald.”

To conclude our argument that (1) ought to be rejected, we must conjoin (7) with the proposition that there is no King of France:

- (8) There is no King of France, and “There is no King of France” entails
“The King of France is neither bald nor not bald.”

Sentence (8) is a mouthful, and it might be too technical to be understood by our ignorant friend. We can make it easier to utter and understand by expressing “ p , and p entails q ” as “ q because p .” Of course, saying that q is the cause of p is saying more than simply that q is a sufficient condition for p , but this simplification will do for our purposes here. We can thus turn (8) into (9).

- (9) The King of France is neither bald nor not bald, because there is no
King of France.

Note that (9) is a very natural response to (1); much better, in fact, than (3). Moreover, exactly this type of presupposition-based denial is attested in the works of no other than Strawson, who is usually thought to have ignored any possibility of presupposition denial:

- (10) He neither cares nor doesn’t care; he’s dead (Strawson 1952:18).

Caring presupposes being alive; if the person under discussion is dead, the presupposition is false, a point made clearly by (10).

Another standard presupposition test is the “possibly” test: if Y follows from “Possibly X ”, then X presupposes Y . So, we could point out to our friend that

- (11) If the King of France is possibly bald, then there is a King of France.

Again, applying contraposition (with descriptive negation), we get:

- (12) If there is no King of France, the King of France can’t be bald.

We add the fact that there is no French King, and get:

- (13) There is no king of France, and if there is no King of France, the King
of France can’t be bald.

Again, we can make (13) easier to utter and understand:

(14) The King of France can't be bald, because there is no King of France.

Once more, this sentence is a very natural responses to (1), much more so than (3).

In fact, such sentences can be found in literary texts. It is not often the case that authors make their characters presuppose false information, but in the rare cases where they do, the response they get is often similar to (14). Here is a quote from *Alice in Wonderland*:

(15) 'Take some more tea,' the March Hare said to Alice, very earnestly. 'I've had nothing yet,' Alice replied in an offended tone, 'so I can't take more.'

And here is one from Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (Act V, scene I):

(16) **Vincentio:** Come hither, you rogue. What, have you forgot me?

Biondello: Forgot you! no, sir: I could not forget you, for I never saw you before in all my life.

This, then, is the way to perform a presupposition-based denial: demonstrate, using some standard test for presupposition, that a certain statement is presupposed by the speaker, and point out that this statement is false. Descriptive negation, and the usual meaning of *because* (or similar devices), are quite sufficient for the task.

4 Denial and Informativeness

This is not, however, quite what (3) does. We have explained how sentences like (9) and (14) deny (1) on the grounds of its false presupposition. But what about (3)? How does *this* sentence succeed in denying (1)? And why is it not as good as (9) or (14)?

To answer this question, note that (9) entails (3), because if the King of France is neither bald nor not bald, he is not bald. Sentence (14), too, entails (3): if the King of France can't be bald, he is not bald.

Therefore, if either (9) or (14) is true, so is (3). But (3) can also be true in circumstances where (9) or (14) are not. Specifically, (3) says that the existence of a French King follows from (1), but does not require it to follow by way of presupposition; it may be an entailment. Indeed, if (4) is true, this would be because baldness entails, rather than presupposes, failure to use Rogaine regularly. Hence, (3) is not sufficiently informative—it violates Grice's (1975) Quantity maxim. In general, an utterance that violates a maxim can be judged odd, or misleading, but would not normally be so bad as to be unassertable; it may be assertable, though marked. This is why (3) is true and assertable, but it is marked, and worse than (9) or (14).

To conclude, what *is* the difference between (3) and (4)? Both use the usual descriptive negation (and the usual *because*). The difference is in their informational content. In sentence (4), the cause is directly related to the effect. Not so in (3), where, instead of the full effect of the cause, we only have something that is entailed by the effect. For this reason, (3) has a different *feel* from (4), as if the causal relation is different, when in fact it is exactly the same in both.

References

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