

Presupposition Accommodation is a Relevance Implicature

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One of the outstanding problems around presupposition projection is the question why accommodation prefers the outermost context. Especially on the satisfaction view this is hard to understand while Gazdar, to whom the original observation of the preference should be attributed (he does not discuss it in terms of accommodation though), offers little more in the way of an explanation than that the use of trigger is a sign that the speaker accepts the presupposition as true. One is tempted to retort that, if that were the whole story, cancellation of presuppositions (really the absence of accommodation to the outermost context) makes no sense at all: why would the speaker produce a signal that she accepts the presupposition if she does not.

Relevance implicatures can be analysed in the following way. They arise when the utterance seems to address questions that are raised in the context or are activated by the utterance itself. If this is so, the information that the utterance gives about the question can be taken as settling it, provided that it can be assumed that the speaker knows the answer to the question. Scalar implicatures and other exhaustivity effects can be considered to be relevance implicatures in this sense, just as the strengthening implicatures in Grice's petrol example.

- (1) A. Can I get some petrol around here?
B. There is a garage around the corner.
implicated: the garage sells petrol and is open

The use of a presupposition trigger plays a double role for relevance implicatures. The preference for resolution over accommodation requires a search for the presupposition in the context of the trigger. The search can be described as a question: does the presupposition hold in this context. Failure of resolution in fact raised such a question for all its contexts, from the outermost to its most local context. The choice of the trigger can then be taken to be a sign that the speaker would give a positive answer to any of the questions: the second effect of the use of the trigger.

This suffices for the default of accommodation in the outermost context, when a resolution is not possible: global accommodation is the positive answer to the question with respect to the global context. The cancellation mechanism of Gazdar describes the cases in which it cannot be assumed that the speaker would give a positive answer to the question. The trapping mechanism of Van der Sandt describes the case where the question raised is meaningless because it contains an

unbound variable.

An account of this kind faces two obstacles. One is the existence of non-monotonic contexts, context that when informationally strengthened, decrease the information of the sentence as a whole: negated contexts, the antecedents of implications or the restrictors of positive quantifiers. I will argue that in fact such contexts do not raise a question that the speaker can be taken as giving a positive answer to and that seeming examples of accommodation in such contexts must be attributed to quotation or to accommodation in the corresponding Aristotelian existence presuppositions of the quantifiers or a postulated corresponding Aristotelian presupposition for implications.

The other obstacle is given by such examples as

- (2) John hopes his rival will be hit by a truck.
- (3) Many students lost their bikes.

Here we should not get the effect that, according to the speaker, John hopes that he has a rival or that, according to the speaker, the many students that lost it were the ones that had a bike in the first place.

This can be dealt with by being precise about what question is raised in which context. In the first case, the relevant context is not so much John's hopes (that is not even a proper information state) but John's mind as a whole, thus giving rise to the question:

- (4) Is it the case that, according to the speaker, according to John, John has a rival?

In the second case the question should be:

- (5) if x were an arbitrary student from the set of students referred to by "the students" in the sentence, would x have a bicycle according to the speaker?

The claim is that for contexts that allow presuppositional questions these are always of the form "operator p?" where the operator can be determined from the operators that embed the context in the outermost context. These are precisely the natural questions associated with the contexts and a positive answer to them would justify the trigger. In the examples, the positive answers generate the implicatures:

- (6) John thinks he has a rival.
- (7) All the students had a bicycle.

The corresponding resolution possibilities are unrelated to the questions. If John it is given that John hopes he has a rival, the rival would be a good antecedent and prevent the raising of the question and the ensuing accommodation. The contrast is brought out well in the following example, due to Ewan Klein. Examples of this kind are extremely difficult in views in which it is assumed that accommodation is a repair mechanism that tries to restore a situation in which resolution would work. In the view of this paper, accommodation is not a repair mechanism: it is

merely a side effect of the search for an antecedent.

- (8) Mary thinks John has left and she regrets that he did. (does not presuppose that John left)
- (9) Mary regrets that John has left. (presupposes that John did)

Combining this theory of accommodation with the treatments of Heim or Van der Sandt (the only serious difference between them is in their view of accommodation, other differences merely concern the representations assumed and the logical means employed) improves these treatments considerably and can save Van der Sandt from the problems raised by Beaver (on the lines sketched above) or Heim from the fat man problem. (“a fat man” is not a quantifier and the only question raised is whether the speaker referent of “a fat man” has a bike according to the speaker). It even solves the old problem that Karttunen raised in 1973, that (a) really projects the two presuppositions (b) and (c) instead of just a single one. This problem has found no explanation in subsequent work.

- (a) John regrets that Mary left
- (b) Mary left.
- (c) John believes that Mary left.

The full paper gives a formal account of the questions raised by presupposition triggers in their contexts, a treatment of the non-monotonic contexts and a full comparison with the treatments of Heim and Van der Sandt.

References

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