

A CASE STUDY OF THE PRESUPPOSITION TRIGGER TO MANAGE

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Abstract: Presupposition triggers play a vital role in communication. Presuppositions are typically generated by the use of lexical items or linguistic constructions. This paper intends to analyse a series of presupposition triggered by the verb to manage, figuring out and broadening the field of possible scenarios for occurrences of that verb, allowing more and more leeway for its usages and meanings. We will try, by means of an empirical study, to establish several interpretations the speaker wants to impinge on the reader by using the verb to manage as a trigger.

Keywords: presupposition trigger, implicature, inference, likelihood.

One of the few things in Linguistics which are generally allowed to assume to be a constant is the presupposition of a given word at a given time. The first thing that makes presuppositions so important in conversations is that they are ubiquitous, as speakers take a lot for granted, that is they presuppose information. It is very important to see what triggers presupposition.

As regards the ubiquity of presuppositions, at least the following lexical classes and constructions are widely agreed to be presupposition triggers, according to Yule (2010):

- *factives*

Berlusconi knows that he is signing the end of his era.

→ Berlusconi is signing the end of his era.

- *aspectual verbs*

- Cube has stopped selling drugs.

- → China used to stockpile metals.

- *temporal clauses headed by “before”, “after”, “since”, etc.*

- The guy released this video before he went on singing folk.

- → The guy went on singing folk.

- *manner adverbs*

- John ducked quickly behind the wall.

- → John ducked behind the wall.

- *sortally restricted predicates of various categories (e.g., “bachelor”)*

Michael is bachelor.

→ Michael is an adult male.

- *cleft sentences*

It was the police who set me free.

→ Somebody set me free.

- *quantifiers*

I have written to every headmaster in the area.

→ There are headmasters in the area.

- *definite descriptions*

- The Prime Minister of Romania stood up and took the floor

- → Romania has a (unique) prime minister.

- *names*

The author is Margret Atwood.

→ Margret Atwood exists.

- *intonation (e.g., focus, contrast)*

HE set me free.

→ Somebody set me free.

This is only a small sample of the words and syntactic constructions that have been classified as presupposition triggers, so even if in some cases there may be doubts about this diagnosis, it can hardly be doubted that presupposition triggers abound in everyday language.

The hallmark of presuppositions, as well as the most thoroughly studied presuppositional phenomenon, is *projection* (Langendoen and Savin, 1971). Consider the following sentence:

(1) *It is the boy who broke the window.*

This sentence can be followed by a series of pragmatic presuppositions:

(2a) There is a salient and undeniable boy.

(2b) There was an unbroken window.

(2c) Somebody broke the window.

Now consider the sentences in (3):

(3a). It isn't the boy who broke the window. (*negation*)

(3b). If it's the boy who broke the window, he will be punished. (*antecedent of a conditional*)

(3c) Is it the boy who broke the window? (*question*)

(3d). Maybe/It is possible that it's the boy who broke the window. (*possibility modal*)

(3d). Presumably/probably it's the boy who broke the window. (*evidential modal, probability adverb*)

(3e) The teacher thinks it's the boy who broke the window. (*belief operator*)

In all these examples, sentence (1) is embedded under various operators. What is notable is that whereas the statements in (3) do not follow from any of these embeddings (and would not be expected to follow according to classical logics), the presuppositions do follow. In this case, the presuppositions are *projected*.

Projection from embeddings, especially negation, is standardly used as a diagnostic for presupposition (hence the term "negation test"). It makes sense to try several such embeddings when testing for presupposition, because it is not always clear how to apply a given embedding diagnostic. Thus, for example, we might be specifically interested in the presuppositions of the *cleft* construction in (1), confirming that the it-cleft construction is a presupposition trigger.

But, sometimes, as many linguists in the field have tried to analyze, the presupposition does not project, and when it doesn't, it is said to be "cancelled". The classic cases of cancellation occur when the presupposition is directly denied, as in the following variants of some of the sentences in (1):

(4a) In this school, it isn't the boy who broke the window.

(4b) If that boy broke the window, then I'm Virgin Mary!

(4c) Is it the boy who broke the window? Certainly not, there are no boys here.

Presuppositional inferences are typically subject to cancellation by direct denial only when the presupposition trigger is embedded under some other operator. When the presupposition is not embedded, such cancellation (by the same speaker) is usually infelicitous, just as is cancellation of entailed content which is not embedded.

In what follows, we are going to analyse the verb *to manage* in terms of the trigger of different types of presuppositions. As it is commonly known, a presupposition trigger is a construction or item that signals the existence of a presupposition in an utterance.

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These presupposition triggers, as they were firstly called by Levinson (2001) and later on by Huang(2007), are usually used when the speaker wants to impinge on the reader's or listener's interpretation of facts or events, establishing either a favourable or unfavourable bias throughout the text . According to Richardson (2007), presupposition refers to the information triggered by certain linguistic constructions which is irrefutably credited as absolute truth by participants in an utterance in a specific context.

Take the following examples:

(1a) Michael managed to cash the check.

(1b) Michael didn't manage to cash the check.

(2). Michael tried to cash the check.

The (2) sentence follows from both the first (a and b), therefore, *manage* presupposes *try*. Unfortunately, there are a number of counterexamples, where the subject „manages” something that he or she is clearly not „trying” to do, as in the following examples:

(3) My dog manages to get dirty every time it goes out.

(4) John managed to get himself killed.

(5) Michael accidentally managed to get caught in the fire.

(6) Ted managed to insult Ann, and he has no idea how he did it.

(7) I seem to have managed to lose my umbrella.

(8) I wonder how I managed that.

In the examples above a reading of *try is* blocked by overt semantic information sentences (5)-(8) by words like ”accidentally” or ”seem ”. The presupposition is not overtly blocked in (3) and (4), it requires a contextual reading that also blocks the idea of trying.

Furthermore, *mange* is still possible even if it is specified that the subject tried not to accomplish the action in question, as in the example:

(9) Ted spent all evening trying not to insult Ann, but he managed to insult her, all the same.

The verb *mange* can also trigger presupposition when its subject is inanimate, so it can not *try* to do anything, as in the examples:

(10) Sad movies have always managed to make me cry.

(11) It always manages to rain when I go out for a walk.

(12) The next door apartment has managed to stay unoccupied for years.

(13) Writing this paper has managed to become quite a problem.

As a conclusion, it seems that *mange* sometimes presupposes *try* and sometimes it does not. Interestingly, the use of get-reflexive construction in (4) and get-passive

construction in (3) and (5) trigger a more natural interpretation and imply some responsibility on the part of the subject (Lakoff). Although, none of the subjects in these examples were trying to accomplish the action, it is implied that the result is not necessarily what would naturally have happened without any interference from the subject, which implies that the action was difficult (had the subject been trying to do it) or unlikely. In a similar sentence, for example:

(14) It is pretty difficult to get yourself killed while sweeping the streets, but John managed it.

the implication, unless otherwise specified, is that John was not by any means trying to be killed, but rather he did something unintentionally which resulted in his death.

Thus, *manage*, if it does not presuppose *try*, it presupposes difficulty, as it can be seen in the example (6), where by negating a sentence like the first clause will commit us to the assumption that it is difficult to insult Ann. As it happens, difficulty is a presupposition of *try* and we can prove that in the following examples where *a* and *b* commit to *c*:

- a. Marry tried to write a 500 word essay.
- b. Marry didn't try to write a 500 word essay.
- c. It is difficult to write a 500 word essay.

In other words, if X presupposes Y and Y presupposes Z, it follows that X presupposes Z, *manage* would, by virtue of its presupposition of *try*, presuppose difficulty in any case.

What is peculiar is that *manage* can presuppose difficulty when such presupposition clearly does not come via *try*. However, a presupposition of difficulty will not necessarily account for examples like those from (10) to (13), in the sense that we don't want to say that it is difficult to make the speaker of (10) cry, or for an apartment to remain unoccupied. There is, however, an implicature of unlikelihood in all these sentences, that is, for instance, in (13) an implication that the speaker did not expect that the essay would be problem to write – that he thought it unlikely. Note that if the frequentative adverb in (10) and (11) is removed the sentences carry out a greater degree of likelihood:

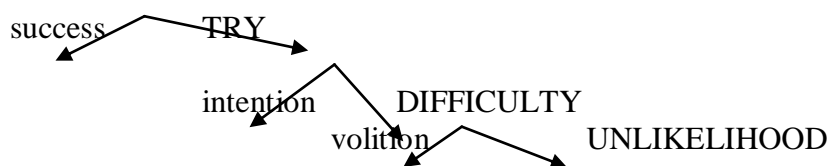
- (10)a That movie managed to make me cry.
- (11) a. It managed to rain when I went for a walk.

That is, rain on any given day off is hardly odd, nor is the idea of crying at one movie, at some point in someone's life, while rain every time one goes out for a walk and crying at all sad movies are much more unlikely. Another possible interpretation of (10), (12) and (13) has it that the speaker of (10) was trying not to cry, that efforts were made to get occupants for the apartment and that the speaker in (13) was trying not to allow the essay to become a problem.

Like difficulty, unlikelihood can be based on inherent properties, or on the fact that someone with some power in the matter is trying to keep the event from occurring. Therefore, *manage* presupposes unlikelihood. There is, in fact, a relationship between difficulty and unlikelihood, that is, in a totally natural situation dependent upon abilities, if a thing is difficult, then it is probably true that, for any random person, it is unlikely that he or she would do it. On the other hand, if a thing is not unlikely in a similar situation, it would be assumed to be also not difficult. We could call this relationship either entailment or implicature.

As a conclusion, we might synthesize the types of presuppositions triggered by the verb *manage* in the contexts analysed above by using a lexical tree:

MANAGE



As we could see, we have a continuing line of presuppositions, and, at each step something is filtered out of the meaning. Let us assume that *manage* is decomposed into *try* + *success*, i.e., we have already shown that *manage* presupposes *try*, and if you say *It is the boy who broke the window*, you have committed yourself to the truth of "The boy broke the window". *Try*, however, requires intentional action, and, in order to account for sentences which block this interpretation, (such as those in (3)-(8), we must filter out this notion of intention, which leaves us with difficulty; difficulty again requires volition: e.g. „*It would not be difficult to fall down the stairs* „, is a possible sentence, but not „*It would not be difficult for that tree to fall over*“. By moving down to unlikelihood, we have eliminated volition, which will allow us to handle sentences like (10- (13).

This hierarchical analysis has allowed us to explain the various occurrences of *manage* used as a lexical trigger for different possible presuppositions, furnishing us some predictive possibilities of interpretation.

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