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HONG KONG BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

An Animated and Narrated Glossary of  
Terms used in Linguistics  
*presents*

# Presupposition



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## Definition

A speaker (S) of a linguistic expression (L) to a hearer (H)  
presupposes proposition (P) if S believes that P is a  
belief held by H.

In other words,

A presupposition is a belief that the speaker assumes is  
held by the hearer.

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## Hearer's Belief

John, "It was Susan who stole the *Mona Lisa*."

1. Mary, "Really? It wasn't Bill?"
2. Mary, "Really? It wasn't the *Grand Canal of Venice*?"

Presupposition: The *Mona Lisa* was stolen.

Given what John said, (1) is rather natural; (2) *non sequitur*. Why?

In (2), the proposition that the *Mona Lisa* was stolen is not part of the hearer's belief.

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## Speaker's belief

Mary, in her deluded fantasy, "The *Mona Lisa* was stolen."

John, who decided to play along with Mary, "It was Susan who stole the *Mona Lisa*."

Contrary to popular thought, John does not have to believe the presupposition that the *Mona Lisa* was stolen.

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## Hearer's Belief - reprise

John, thinking that Mary has already heard the news that the *Mona Lisa* was stolen,

“It was Susan who stole the *Mona Lisa*.”

Mary, “What? I didn’t know the *Mona Lisa* was stolen.”

Presupposition: The *Mona Lisa* was stolen.

Earlier, we said that the proposition must be part of the hearer’s belief. But this is not necessarily true either.

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## Beliefs

A presupposed proposition is

- not necessarily one of the speaker’s beliefs.
- not necessarily one of the hearer’s beliefs.
- NECESSARILY the speaker’s assumption that the proposition is one of the hearer’s beliefs.

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## Who has presuppositions?

- Only **people** can have presuppositions.
- Linguistic expressions themselves do not have presuppositions.
- Linguistic expressions may contain grammatical devices that indicate the presuppositions held by the speaker.

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## Constancy of Presuppositions

John, "It was Susan who stole the *Mona Lisa*."

Presupposition: The *Mona Lisa* was stolen.

- Under negation

John, "It wasn't Susan who stole the *Mona Lisa*."

- Under interrogation

John, "Was it Susan who stole the *Mona Lisa*?"

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## Grammatical signals of *presuppositions*

### Existential indicators:

e.g.

The **cat** roared. (Definite article)

The girl pinched **Joey**. (Proper names)

### Factive/Non-factive indicators:

e.g.

Alex **realized** that Jo was an alien. (Use of factive verbs like *discover, know, realize ...*)

Alex **imagined** that he was rich. (Use of non-factive verbs like *imagine, wish, ...*)

**If only** I were rich, I would have ... (Use of counterfactuals)

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## Grammatical signals of *presuppositions*

### Lexical:

e.g.

Bill **managed** to conjure an elephant. (Presupposes Bill tried)

The Green Lantern **deliberately** stood still. (Presupposes that the Green Lantern is animate and volitional.)

### Structural:

e.g.

It was Susan who pinched the racoon.

When did Susan pinch the racoon?

(Use of constructions like topicalization, questions, clefting, pseudo-clefting etc)

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## Further reading

- Chierchia, Gennaro and Sally McConnell-Ginet (1996) *Meaning and Grammar: An Introduction to Semantics*, Chapter 6.3. MIT Press.
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## Further reading

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- Portner, Paul H. (2005) *What is Meaning? Fundamentals of Formal Semantics*. Chapter 10. Blackwell Publishers.
- Saeed, John I. (2003) *Semantics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Chapter 4.5. Blackwell Publishers.
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**The End**

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