Presupposition

**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.
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.

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.
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.

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.
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.

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*?”
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)

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)
Further reading


The End

Wee, Lian-Hee and Winnie H.Y. Cheung (2009)
An animated and narrated glossary of terms used in Linguistics.
Hong Kong Baptist University.