PRESUPPOSITION COMPUTATION
AND PRESUPPOSITION JUSTIFICATION:
ONE ASPECT OF THE INTERPRETATION
OF MULTI-SENTENCE DISCOURSE

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1. Introduction

As a rule discourse meanings are more than plain conjunctions of sentence meanings.\(^1\) And this “more” is often the effect of interpretation principles that are an integral part of linguistic knowledge, and thus legitimate objects of linguistic study. This observation has been the main driving force behind dynamic theories of discourse semantics such as Discourse Representation Theory (DRT) and its extensions S(egmented) DRT and U(nderspecified) DRT.

\(^1\) The substance of this paper goes back several years. I have used the example with which the paper is exclusively concerned repeatedly in oral presentations, going back as far as 1996, as a simple illustration of the inferential effects of presupposition justification, and of the interaction between different presuppositions triggered within one and the same sentence. I know that over the years I have benefited from feedback of more people than I now recall. On pain of offending some who ought to be mentioned here, I would like to thank some of them by name: Peter Krause, Uwe Reyle, Antje Roßdeutscher and Michael Schiehlen have helped me not just to understand better the details of the example in question, but also to arrive at the general perspective of the role of presupposition in discourse of which the treatment proposed in this paper is a single illustrative instance. I am grateful also for the recommendations of an anonymous referee, which I have found very helpful and with which I have tried to comply to the best of my ability. Thanks, finally, to Peter and Antje for seizing this opportunity to wean me (almost) off Word 5.1 and throw me into the deep end of \LaTeX{}.

\(^a\) Editors’ note: This article was originally published in M. Bras & L. Vieu (eds.), Semantics and Pragmatics of Discourse and Dialogue: Experimenting with Current Dynamic Theories, Elsevier, Amsterdam, 2001, 7–84. (Current Research in the Semantics / Pragmatics Interface 9—now published by Brill). We carefully edited the article and corrected some typos. We would like to thank Emar Maier for careful proofreading and constructive comments. Hans Kamp provided additional footnotes, indicated by Roman letters, which clarify some of the arguments in the original text.
Our understanding of the mechanisms for computing discourse interpretations is still quite limited. But there has been significant progress, and one thing which has become much clearer in recent years is the role played by presupposition. Most natural language sentences come with presuppositions of one kind or another. These presuppositions must be justified in the context in which the sentence is used. In ongoing discourse or text, the relevant context is often the ‘discourse context’ established by the sentences or utterances preceding the one whose presuppositions are in question. In such cases presupposition justification is justification in the discourse context.

Often presupposition justification takes the uneventful form of finding the given presupposition or presuppositions satisfied in the given context. But not always. In many other cases the context does, as it stands, not quite measure up to the verification task. It doesn’t verify the presuppositions as is, but needs adjustment—by ‘accommodation’, as linguistic parlance has it—to fit the requirements that the presuppositions impose. This doesn’t mean, however, that whenever direct verification fails, the unverified presuppositions get accommodated lock, stock and barrel. There are many instances where the context, while failing to verify the presuppositions at issue, nevertheless contains much of what is needed for their verification; just a small bit of information is missing to make verification complete. In such cases it is not only possible to achieve accommodation by accommodating just this little bit; as a rule, when such a limited accommodation suffices, that accommodation is highly preferred or even mandatory: Even if other, more comprehensive accommodations are possible which also transform the given context into one in which the presuppositions are also satisfied, the rules of interpretation require the smaller, ‘less costly’ accommodation. As a consequence, the bit of information that gets accommodated will be perceived as one of the discourse’s entailments.2

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2 To my knowledge the fact that presupposition justification often takes the form of exploiting as much of the information that is part of the context as given, while accommodating only those bits which are needed to make verification complete, and the importance of this fact for discourse interpretation, were first stressed explicitly in Kamp & Roßdeutscher (1994). The term ‘presupposition justification’ was introduced in that paper as a cover term which subsumes (i) the cases of straightforward presupposition verification (including cases of ‘anaphoric binding’, van der Sandt 1992), (ii) the cases of wholesale accommodation and (iii) the cases which can be seen as a mixture of verification and accommodation. More about this in Section 6.