Presupposition: An (un)Common Attitude?

ROBERT VAN ROOIJ

Abstract

In this paper I argue that presupposition should be thought of as a propositional attitude. I will separate questions on truth from questions of presupposition satisfaction by making use of a two-dimensional analysis. The update of what is presupposed will be accounted for by eliminating arrows, which also makes possible an appealing analysis of modal subordination.

Introduction

In traditional pragmatic theories the notion of context plays two roles. First, it should contain enough information about the conversational situation to determine what is expressed by a sentence. Second, it should contain enough information about what the participants of the conversation commonly assume about the subject matter of the conversation to determine whether what is said by a speaker is appropriate or not. The central idea behind Stalnakerian pragmatics is that there is a single notion of context that plays both of these two roles, and that both kinds of information modeled by this single context change during a conversation in an interactive way. A context, modeled...
by a set of possibilities, represents that what is presupposed by the participants in a conversation.

Despite the fact that Discourse Representation Theory (Kamp, 1981; Heim, 1982) and dynamic semantics (Groenendijk & Stokhof, 1991; Veltman, 1996) can be looked upon as attempts to incorporate Stalnaker’s ideas into a rigorous theoretical model, the resulting dynamic theories differ on some essential points from Stalnaker’s suggestions. First, where Stalnaker (1978) argued that the possibilities that are used to represent contexts should be possible worlds, proponents of these dynamic theories account for the antecedent-pronoun relation in terms of possibilities that are finer-grained than worlds. Second, although Stalnaker always argued for a dynamic view of language use, he didn’t give up the traditional distinction between content (truth conditions) and force (the way a sentence changes a context) of an assertion, while in dynamic semantics the meaning of a sentence is equated with its context-change potential. Third, where Stalnaker tried to explain linguistic presupposition in terms of what speakers normally presuppose by their use of these sentences, and thus taking presupposition to be primarily a propositional attitude, dynamic semantics either accounts for presuppositions in a way equivalent to Peters’ (1975) three-valued logical account (Beaver, 1995), or (partly) in terms of a syntactic underspecification analysis (van der Sandt, 1992).

The three ways in which standard dynamic semantics differs from Stalnaker’s original suggestions are closely related to each other.

First, what is presupposed by the participants in a conversation is according to all a crucial contextual parameter to determine content and appropriateness of sentences. Stalnaker argues that it is an attitude playing a role in action very similar to that of belief. As a result it should be modeled in terms of possibilities whose fine-grainedness is relevant for the analysis of deliberation: possible worlds. Dynamic semanticists – following Lewis (1979) for the analysis of belief – argue that contexts should consist of possibilities much finer-grained than worlds, i.e. world-assignment pairs. In distinction with Lewis (1979), however, no one has ever explicitly argued how this fine-grainedness could be relevant for action. Perhaps because proponents of dynamic semantics have given up the idea that contexts represent that what is presupposed, i.e. a propositional attitude of participants in a conversation. Now, Stalnaker (1998) argues for a partly referential analysis of anaphoric pronouns, and one of the main reasons for this – no doubt – is that in this way the fine-grainedness of possibilities could, and should, be that of possible worlds. The reason being that on a