• Pragmatics: Presupposition

Background reading:

• CL Ch 6, §4.1, especially “Presupposition”
• How is it possible for people to use language in ways that communicate *more* than what is *said*?

• This is part of the linguistic subfield of **pragmatics**, the study of **language meaning in context**

• Two ways that people can use language to communicate more than what is literally stated or asserted are:

  - **Presupposition**
  
  - **The Cooperative Principle in conversation**
  
  (next slide set)
2. Presupposition

- A special type of entailment is **presupposition**
  - As defined in CL (p 246): a presupposition is “the assumption or belief implied by the use of a particular word or structure”

- Here is a more explicit test for identifying **presupposition**:
  - Sentence A **presupposes** sentence B if A **entails** B and the **negation** of A also entails B
  - Careful: when “negating A,” use a negation that doesn’t put any special emphasis on **word choice**
2. Presupposition

• In this sentence pair, does the first sentence presuppose the second?

(1) *Maria knows that Linda likes basketball.*
(2) *Linda likes basketball.*
2. Presupposition

• In this sentence pair, does the first sentence presuppose the second? | yes

(1) Maria knows that Linda likes basketball.
(2) Linda likes basketball.

- (1) entails (2)
- The negation of (1), Maria doesn’t know that Linda likes basketball, also entails (2)

• Reminder: We want the ‘ordinary’ negation of a sentence like (1), not one that puts special emphasis on the word know

- If we emphasize know, we are objecting to the word choice, which is different from negating the sentence
2. Presupposition

• In this sentence pair, does the first sentence presuppose the second?

(3) Oscar assumes that Grover likes basketball.

(4) Grover likes basketball.
2. Presupposition

• In this sentence pair, does the first sentence presuppose the second? | no

(3) Oscar assumes that Grover likes basketball.
(4) Grover likes basketball.

- (3) doesn’t even entail (4) in the first place; Oscar’s assumption might be incorrect!
2. Presupposition

• In these sentence pairs, does the first sentence presuppose the second?

(5) *Linda ate the cookie.*

(6) *There was a cookie (in the relevant context).*

(7) *Linda ate a cookie.*

(8) *There was a cookie (in the relevant context).*
2. Presupposition

• In these sentence pairs, does the first sentence presuppose the second?

(5) Linda ate the cookie.
(6) There was a cookie (in the relevant context). | yes
   - Linda ate the cookie and Linda didn’t eat the cookie both entail There was a cookie
(7) Linda ate a cookie.
(8) There was a cookie (in the relevant context). | no
   - Linda ate a cookie entails There was a cookie, but Linda didn’t eat a cookie does not
3. Presuppositions and indirect communication

• Presuppositions can be used to introduce information into a conversation without actually asserting that information.
  
  A: Hi! How are you? I haven’t seen you in a while.
  B: Things are great. I went to the game yesterday.

• Suppose person A hadn’t known that there was a game yesterday. A now has a choice:
  - Accept “there was a game yesterday” as part of the conversation’s common background knowledge
  - Challenge or question B’s presupposition, such as by asking for more information
3. Presuppositions and indirect communication

• Why are so-called “loaded questions” not allowed in court?
  Lawyer: Have you stopped embezzling money from your company?
  Defendant: !?!

• Suppose the defendant is innocent, and never embezzled any money from the company
  - Are they able to assert their innocence by answering this question yes or no?
  - Why or why not?
4. Presuppositions and effective writing

• Thinking about presuppositions can make your **writing** more effective
  - Check your sentences to see if they are introducing **presuppositions** into the discussion
  - In some cases, presuppositions are harmless
  - But sometimes, dragging too much in as “background knowledge” this way will make your audience feel confused or want to challenge you