

- **Pragmatics:**
Presupposition

Background reading:

- CL Ch 6, §4.1, especially “Presupposition”

1. Pragmatics: Language in context

- 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