Chapter Thirteen

Reconstructing and Assessing the Conditions of Meaningfulness. An Argumentative Approach to Presupposition

Fabrizio Macagno

When we talk, discuss, or try to persuade our interlocutor, we leave most of the information needed to communicate implicit: we simply presuppose it (Saeed 2000: 103; Wilson 1975: 26). We never remind our interlocutor of the definitions of the words that we use; we never describe people, things or places that we think our interlocutor may know. We draw conclusions from conditional premises that we very rarely express; we take turns in speaking and prove a point without telling why we act in such a fashion, or declaring the rules governing our discussion. How is it linguistically possible to leave all such information implicit? How can we perform communication moves leaving whole propositions unexpressed?

The problem of the implicit grounds of dialogue is twofold: it is a linguistic matter, as presuppositions are the conditions of meaning, but also an epistemic problem, as we cannot take everything for granted, and we cannot actually know our interlocutor's knowledge. These two dimensions are related to a third one, the dialogical and argumentative use of presupposition. We can take something for granted because our interlocutor can understand our communicative intent by retrieving or reconstructing the presupposed propositions. However, by presupposing we also commit him to such propositions; he, therefore, needs to have criteria to evaluate the reasonableness and acceptability of presuppositions.

The purpose of this paper is to show how crucial the relation between reasoning and presupposition is. On this perspective, presuppositions can be analyzed from an argumentative point of view as the result and the triggers of processes of reasoning that can and need to be assessed. Interpreting

presuppositions in terms of reasoning can explain why presupposing can be used to deceive, hide, or mislead the interlocutor, and why some uses of the so-called emotive, loaded or slanted words can be extremely powerful instruments.

1. Presuppositions and meaningfulness constraints

Presuppositions have been usually considered as conditions of verification of a sentence (see Wilson 1975): for instance, if the referent of the subject of a sentence does not exist, the sentence cannot be true or false (such as, for instance in the famous example, "The king of France is bald"). However, as reference can be only determined in context, presupposition is a property not of sentences, but of the use of sentences, or statements (Strawson 1950; 1952; Karttunen 1973; Wilson 1975; Keenan 1971). If we consider not sentences but utterances, presuppositions need to be defined as conditions of meaningfulness of speech acts; on this perspective, presuppositional failure will result in the failure of a speech act to carry out its intended effect on the audience (Grice 1975; Grice 1989: 220; Levinson 1983: 97). This social dimension of meaningfulness and presupposition was underscored by Austin, who pointed out how the falsity of presuppositions causes the infelicity of a speech act:

> Next let us consider presupposition: what is to be said of the statement that "John's children are all bald" if made when John has no children? It is usual now to say that it is not false because it is devoid of reference; reference is necessary for either truth or falsehood. (Is it then meaningless? It is not so in every sense: it is not, like a "meaningless sentence", ungrammatical, incomplete, mumbo-jumbo, & c.) People say "the question does not arise". Here I shall say "the utterance is void". (Austin 1962: 50-51)

In Austin's example, the speaker is presupposing that there is a person called John, and that he has children. We can notice that the speaker is not presupposing the existence of such entities, but simply their existence in the listener's domain of knowledge.

This pragmatic view extends the notion of presupposition to several phenomena of meaningfulness constraints (Austin 1965: 34; 51), such as selectional restrictions, coherence relations and felicity conditions. Selectional restrictions can be described as the conditions that a lexical item (or predicate—see Hobbs 1979: 70; Grimes 1975: 162) imposes

on the elements acting as its arguments. Such conditions represent the categorical presuppositions of the predicate (McCawley 1971: 290; Antley 1974; Chomsky 1971: 205), that is, the categorical conditions imposed on the denotation of a semantic structure. For instance, the predicate "to kill" presupposes an animate being as a second argument; therefore, the second argument needs to denote an animate being. Also the conditions that a communicative intention imposes on its argument (Austin 1962: 30) can be described as presuppositions. For instance, just as I can "inform" someone only if he can understand the fact or event I am talking of, placing it in a certain place and at a certain time, I cannot perform the speech act of "appointing" someone if I am not entitled to do so, or if the person that I want to appoint has already been appointed, or is not a person (Austin 1962: 34, 51). A speech act, therefore, imposes a set of presuppositions on the sentence and the context (constructed in a broad sense to include the interlocutors) in which it is uttered (see Vanderveken & Searle 1985: 66-67). Finally, presuppositions can also refer to the conditions imposed by higher level predicates connecting the discourse moves. On Grimes' view, sentences are organized in a coherent way in a text because they are aimed at carrying out a dialogical (or communicative) intention (see also Grice 1975: 45). Grimes (1975: 209ff.) referred to the interlocutors' communicative intentions as "rhetorical predicates", which were later named "logical-semantic connectives" (Rigotti 2005) or "coherence relations" (Hobbs 1979: 68; Hobbs 1985). On this latter perspective, intentions are conceived as abstract predicates representing a dialogical purpose, such as explanation, alternative, support, etc. Such predicates, or relations, connect discourse sequences in two similar fashions, through subordination or coordination. In the first case the predicate is explicit and imposes a set of coherence conditions, or pragmatic presuppositions (Vanderveken 2002: 47; Bach 2003: 163), on its arguments (Grimes 1975: 162). In the second case, an explicit or implicit predicate hides a deeper relationship (Ballard, Conrad & Longacre 1971) that needs to be reconstructed in order to understand the role and the conditions of the discourse segments or sequences. For instance, coordination can express temporal, causal, explanation relations, imposing specific requirements on their sequences. For instance, in causal relations one sequence needs to be the cause of the other; in temporal relations, the sentences need to represent actions in a specific temporal order. From a pragmatic perspective, such relations can be considered as high-level speech acts (Grice 1989: 362; Carston 2002: 107-108), indicating the role of the first level speech acts, or rather, their felicity conditions (Vanderveken 2002: 28).

All such types of meaningfulness conditions can be described in dialogical terms: the speaker subordinates at different levels the felicity of his speech acts to the listener's knowledge or acceptance of certain conditions, which can be epistemic, categorical, or pragmatic (discursive) in nature. This account of presupposition is bound to a dialogical notion of meaning as a direction or purpose of a communicative exchange (Grice 1975: 45).

2. Presuming knowledge

Presuppositions describe the conditions of the use of a sentence in a dialogue, even though they may be triggered by its semantic or syntactic structure, and may be used correctly or lead to acts which are void. However, what is the principle governing the reasonableness of presuppositions? How can a speaker predict, or know that his interlocutor shares or accepts the presupposed information? According to Stalnaker presupposition is defined as follows:

> A proposition *P* is a pragmatic presupposition of a speaker in a given context just in case the speaker assumes or believes that *P*, assumes or believes that his addressee assumes or believes that *P*, and assumes or believes that his addressee recognizes that he is making these assumptions, or has these beliefs. (Stalnaker 1974: 200)

On this perspective, presupposition (Schwartz 1977: 248) is simply an assumption about the interlocutor's common ground. How can a speaker know or assume that a proposition is shared by the hearer? How would it be possible to presuppose proposition which are *known* not to be shared, without the sentence being meaningless? The possible answer can be found in analyzing presupposition as a speech act of a kind.

2.1 Presuppositions as presumptions

Presupposing a proposition amounts to performing an implicit speech act. The speaker subordinates the felicity of his move to the listener's acceptance of some conditions. Ducrot described presupposition as the conditions which need to be fulfilled in order to satisfy the pretension of carrying out an effect on the listener (see Ducrot 1966). If they fail,

namely if the interlocutor rejects them, the move is void, or rather is not a move anymore. Such conditions limit the field of the possible moves of the interlocutor: if he accepts the assertion that "I have met Pierre this morning", he also accepts a conversational situation in which the topic is Pierre. On the contrary, the refusal of the presuppositions of a speech act amounts to rejecting the dialogue game. Ducrot explained this relationship between the possible moves and the presuppositions introducing the notion of act of presupposing (Ducrot 1968: 87). On his view, speech acts need to be divided in an explicit act of stating (the *posé*) and an implicit act of presupposing (the *présupposé*). This latter act deploys the possible moves that can be performed by the interlocutor, or the possible dialogical world:

> The set of all the presuppositions made by a person in a given context determines a class of possible worlds, the ones consistent with all the presuppositions. This class sets the boundaries of the linguistic situation. (Stalnaker 1970: 280)

On this perspective, the speaker can treat a proposition as part of the common ground even if it is not. While assertion can be counted as a proposal of adding a proposition *p* to the shared propositions (see Von Fintel 2008: 139), presupposition can be considered as the act of treating *p* as already shared (see Horn & Ward 2004: xii; Atlas 2004; Lewis 1989: 339). Such an act does not depend on what the interlocutors share: it is possible to presuppose a proposition that has been assumed as not shared, without incurring a communication failure (Burton-Roberts 1989: 26). The possibility of treating as shared a proposition that is actually not granted or that belongs to the common knowledge depends on the phenomenon called "accommodation" (see Lewis 1979; Von Fintel 2008). Accommodation was described by Lewis as a process of adjustment of the common ground, in which the presupposed proposition, needed for the communicative move to be meaningful, comes into existence when not previously known:

> If at time *t* something is said that requires presupposition *P* to be acceptable and if *P* is not presupposed just before *t*, then—*ceteris paribus* and within certain limits—presupposition *P* comes into existence at *t*. (Lewis 1979: 340)

The crucial problem is to determine how a presupposition can come into existence and be added to the shared propositions. On Soames' view, accommodation is possible when no objections are raised, and more

specifically, when the interlocutor has already accepted the proposition or the presupposition is not conflicting with the listener's common ground:

> Utterance Presupposition: An utterance *U* presupposes *P* (at *t*) iff one can reasonably infer from *U* that the speaker *S* accepts *P* and regards it as uncontroversial, either because
> a. *S* thinks that it is already part of the conversational context at *t*, or because
> b. *S* thinks that the audience is prepared to add it, without objection, to the context against which *U* is evaluated. (Soames 1982: 486)

Soames describes the phenomenon of accommodation in terms of speaker's beliefs regarding the interlocutor's common knowledge. However, this account cannot explain how it is possible to describe a belief as good or bad, and therefore it does not provide a criterion for assessing presuppositions.

A possible suggestion for explaining differently the problem of presupposition accommodation can be found in Stalnaker (1998). He maintains that the speaker can only *presume* that the presupposed information is *available* to his or her audience (see Stalnaker 1998: 8). He claims that a speaker can presuppose a proposition only because he or she can conclude that the interlocutor can retrieve such information (on Green's view, he *assumes* the knowledge, see Green 1989). For instance, Stalnaker (1998: 9) provides the following example:

1. I can't come to the meeting—I have to pick up my cat at the veterinarian.

The possibility of presupposing the speaker's possession of a cat depends on the presumption that "usually people have pets" and that the interlocutor shares a culture in which such a habit exists. It would be more controversial to say:

2. I have to pick up my Martian friend at the Voodoo club.

Here the premise "people have Martian friends", needed to the interlocutor to reconstruct the presupposition, cannot be presumed.

2.2 Presumptions and presuppositions

From the speaker's viewpoint, it is possible and reasonable to presuppose because the presupposed proposition is "believed" to be already shared

or known. However, belief needs to be generated by a rational process or mechanism (see Freeman 2005: 43); in case of presuppositions, we can believe that the other party may know a proposition on the basis of his previous declarations (testimony) or dialogues with other people, or because it is part of the so-called common knowledge. As Freeman put it (Freeman 2005: 346):

> (…) the mark of common knowledge is that everyone, or virtually everyone, in an historical or cultural situation believes that statement. As we argued (…) common knowledge is presumptively reliable.

The speaker presumes that the hearer accepts or already knows a given piece of information on the basis of shared and commonly known rules (Kauffeld 1995: 509) such as "Habits are generally known in a given community" or "Important news are usually known". On this perspective, a speaker can utter that, "The king of France is bald" based on the presumption that "Information about an important country is known" and the classification of France as an "important nation". Similarly, he can tell to a friend that, "I have met Bob yesterday" because he is acting on the presumptions that "Common friends are known" and that "Information relative to a friends is interesting", and relying on the reasoning from classification leading to the conclusion that "Bob is a common friend" (Kauffeld 2003: 140; cf. Kauffeld 1995: 510). We can represent the presumptive structure of presupposition as follows:

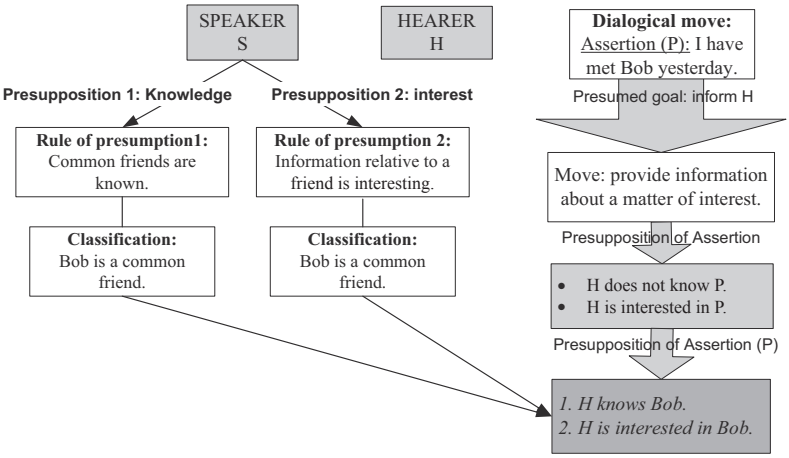

Figure 1: Presumptive structure of speaker's presuppositions

This account of presupposition as presumptive reasoning can explain the grounds of reasonableness or unreasonableness of taking a proposition for granted. Unlike Ducrot, we maintain that the reasonableness of presupposing depends on the conditions of the reasoning underlying such an act. This process describes the speaker's perspective; in order to understand the evaluation of presuppositions we need to confront speaker's presumption with the process of reconstruction, or accommodation, carried out by the listener.

3. Accommodating presuppositions: possibility, acceptability and reasonableness

When the listener interprets a speech act, he needs to reconstruct the missing information taken for granted. This process of accommodation sometimes cannot be carried out, but also when it is successful the communication move can be infelicitous, or a further process of interpretation is needed to retrieve its purpose. For instance, we can consider the following sentences:

3. Bob is a really nice person (*the listener does not know who Bob is*).
4. I have brought my dog to the veterinary.
5. My dog got an A in Math.
6. Just let me park my Bentley and I will reach you (*I have just bought the car*).

These three sentences represent the possible outcomes of the process of accommodation, and more importantly, of the assessment of the accommodated propositions. (3) cannot be accommodated, as the listener does not know who Bob is. (4) can be reasonably used to perform an utterance provided that the listener does not know that the speaker has not a dog. (5) cannot be reasonably used to perform a speech act, as its presupposition cannot be accepted. (6) constitutes a particular type of assertion, in which the listener can retrieve the presupposition, even though he cannot possibly know such information. In this latter case, in order to save the meaningfulness of the move, he needs to interpret the utterance aimed at communicating the very information taken for granted.[1] In order to describe how presupposition works and the conditions of its failure, we can distinguish between four cases:

i) the presupposition cannot be accommodated;
ii) the presupposition is accepted or accommodated as a background assumption;

iii) the presupposition can be accommodated but not accepted;
iv) the presupposed proposition, even if can be accommodated, cannot be considered as a condition, but rather the information which the speaker intends to convey.

In (3) the presupposition cannot be even reconstructed, as the listener cannot retrieve from the sentence and background knowledge the needed information about Bob. In (4) the speaker reasonably subordinates the meaningfulness of the sentence to the knowledge or reconstruction of the factual presupposition "I have a dog", which can be shared by, not known, or known to be false by the interlocutor. In the first and second case it is acceptable, while in the third case, even though it can be accommodated, it cannot be accepted. In (5) the categorical conditions of felicity of the communicative move are not acceptable, as dogs by definition are not reasonable animals. In (6) the speaker can take for granted the information that "I have a Bentley", as it is retrievable and acceptable; however, he behaves unreasonably by taking for granted information which cannot be shared. The difference in the acts can be explained considering the distinction between possibility, acceptability, and reasonableness of presupposition.

The first crucial problem is to understand why and how a presupposition is *possible*, when and how it can be reconstructed. Asher and Lascarides pointed out how the mere concept of adding a proposition to a context cannot explain why and how some presuppositions can be accommodated and why others cannot. As they put it (Asher & Lascarides 1998: 255), "presuppositions must always be rhetorically bound to the context, rather than added". Presuppositions need to be related to the propositions already known, from which they may be derived through defeasible reasoning (Hobbs 1979; Asher & Lascarides 1998: 277). Interpreting this position, we can say that the possibility of reconstructing the presuppositions depends on the possibility of triggering reasoning from the linguistic and pragmatic data provided leading to the missing presupposition. For instance, we can compare the aforementioned sentences with the following:

7. Bob was at the party too (no parties were mentioned before).

Let's consider such sentence as uttered in a context in which no parties and no guests have been previously mentioned. The presuppositions that "Hearer knows which party I am talking about" (triggered by "the") and "Other people were at the party" (triggered by "too") cannot be reconstructed without a specific dialogical context. Unless the party and eventually

Bob can be identified through the context, the presuppositions cannot be reconstructed and the meaning cannot be even retrieved. The hearer can obtain the information that there was a party and that there were other people at the party as they are "implicit contents" of the sentence (Bach 1999); however, if he does not know that there was a party, he or she cannot reconstruct the information "the aforementioned party" triggered by the determinative article. Considering our examples above, the presuppositions of both (4) and (6) can be reconstructed and accepted. The lexical and syntactical structure of, "I have brought my dog to the veterinary" specifies the following information: 1. the dog must exist; 2. the dog must be mine; 3. the dog must be a physical entity; and 4. the veterinary must be a place. In "I will park my Bentley" the following propositions are "implicitly expressed" (Bach, 1999): 1. the Bentley is a car; 2. the Bentley is mine.

Reconstruction is not the only process which needs to be considered for analyzing presuppositions, as (3) and (7) do not represent the only cases in which the speech act fails because of presuppositional failure. Also in (5) we can notice a failure in the presuppositions; however, it is different in nature. In (3) and (7) it is impossible to reconstruct the presuppositions; in (5) the presuppositions can be reconstructed, but the hearer cannot accept them. We can represent the reconstructed information as follows:

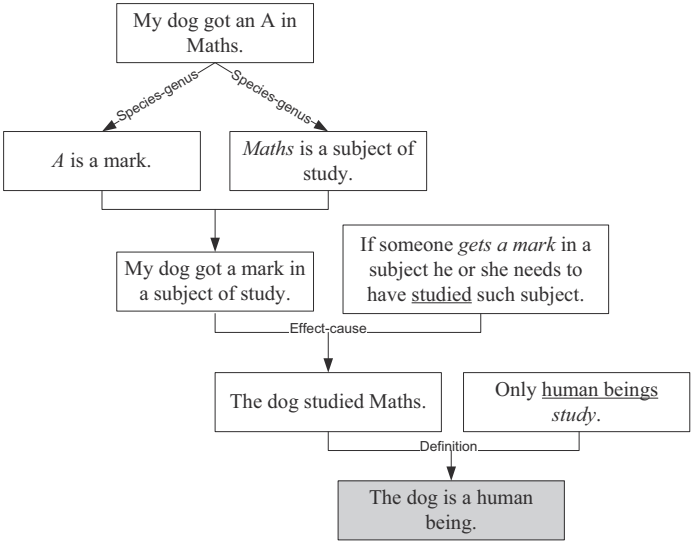

Figure 2: Reconstructing unacceptable presuppositions

In this case, a reasonable hearer cannot accept that the dog is a human being. The whole sentence is not meaningful, as its condition fails. In connectors and higher-level predicates, the process of reconstruction and assessment works in a similar fashion, but the presupposed information is more complex as it refers to connection between states of affairs, such as in the following case (Carston 2002: 108):

8. Bob is nice, but he drives a Ford Capri.

The connector "but" presupposes that the event referred to by the second conjunct is a sign of "being not nice". This proposition can be reconstructed, but it is not commonly shared. In this case, its acceptability depends on the possibility of explaining the relationship between a value judgment on the driver and the car he drives. We can represent such a process as follows:

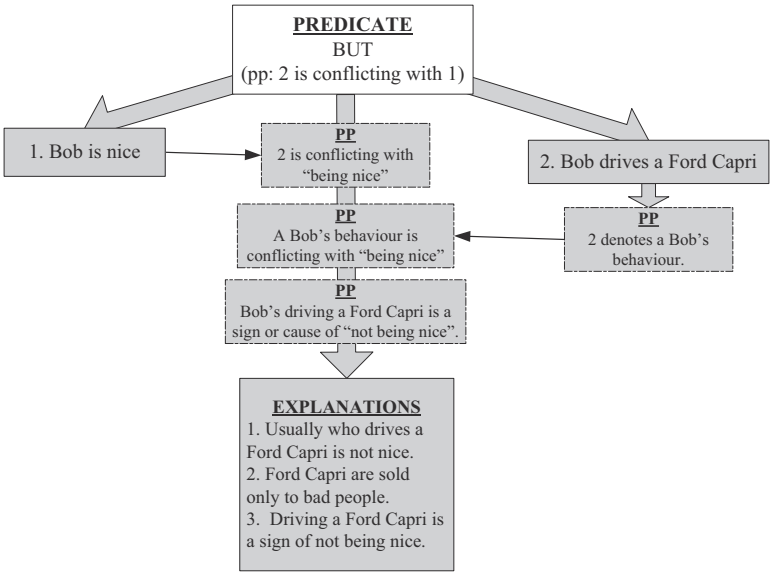

Figure 3: Reconstructing presuppositions/connectors

In this case, the presupposition is reconstructed by specification through the meaning of the conjuncts, and it is assessed against the acceptability of its possible explanations. Depending on the context, and therefore the acceptability of the possible explanations, the utterance will be

meaningful or void. These cases show that another element needs to be considered as essential for a presupposition to be possible, the *acceptability* of the presupposed propositions. Not only needs the hearer to be able to derive the missing information from the semantic, syntactic, pragmatic and discursive conditions that the predicates impose on their arguments, but the presuppositions also need not to conflict with what is commonly known and accepted, or with the propositions that the hearer knows to be true or acceptable. The product of the derivation or specification of the presuppositions needs to be confronted with the process of explanation, which is part of the assessment of the presupposition (see also Hobbs, Stickel, Martin & Edwards 1988 for a different account of reconstruction and evaluation).

The *possibility* of presupposing needs therefore to be distinguished from the *acceptability* of a proposition taken for granted. As seen above, the process of reconstructing a presupposition consists of a chain of reasoning from the sentence structure; such reasoning may be grounded on four different types of principles of inference: 1. undefeasible rules of reasoning (if *x* is an object, *x* has a surface; if *x* studies then *x* is a human being); 2. defeasible but commonly accepted propositions (if there is a party, then there are guests; if *x* is an adult then *x* may have a car); 3. conditionals known to be false (if *x* studies then *x* can be a dog); 4. defeasible and not shared conditionals (if *x* is tall then *x* is rich). Such difference can explain why (3) is meaningful, while (4) is unsound and (9) below is ridiculous:

9. Bob is tall. Therefore he is really rich.

The last crucial problem regarding the foundation of presupposition concerns the *reasonableness* of speaker's presupposition. In our epistemological analysis we have only considered a sentence as a fact, and not as an act. If we analyze presuppositions as acts performed by a speaker, we need to find an answer to the crucial question, why and how can a speaker presuppose a proposition? Stalnaker in his first definition mentioned above explained speaker's presuppositions in terms of belief of knowledge. However, such approach cannot explain why in some cases presupposing is reasonable, while in others is absurd, manipulative or ridiculous. A possible alternative can be developed from the analysis of presuppositions from an argumentative perspective. Instead of considering the concept of belief of the other party's knowledge as the foundation of speaker's presuppositions, we can conceive them as the outcome of

a process of reasoning. On this perspective, the speaker can presuppose what it is reasonable to be considered as known: the reasonableness of presupposing depends on the reason supporting the fact that a premise *can* be shared.

Such approach can account for the difference between (4) and (6). In the first case, presupposing that "I have a pet" is possible and acceptable, as it is grounded on a premise which is commonly accepted, "Usually people have pets". The speaker can presuppose such information because it is a habit, and a common presumption is that habits are shared by a community. In (6), the speaker presupposes that "I have a Bentley"; but he cannot reasonably presume that the hearer can share such proposition. The only warrant bearing out such conclusion would be that "People usually possess Bentleys", which is unreasonable and not acceptable. His reason to presuppose is not acceptable, and even though presupposing is *possible* in such case, it is unreasonable. Often such unreasonableness calls for an explanation; in particular, in (6) the unsound speaker's presumption triggers a second meaning which Ducrot calls connotation.

Three facts need to be considered in the assessment of presuppositions: the *possibility* of reconstructing the presupposition, the *acceptability* of the presupposed information, and the *reasonableness* of presupposing a proposition. This account highlights a fundamental aspect of presupposition accommodation, that it is a double process of reasoning: the hearer infers a proposition as part of the common ground, and the speaker presumes the possibility of such an inference.

4. Dialogical uses of presumptive presuppositions

As mentioned above, presuppositions represent felicity conditions of a dialogical move, which can be possible or impossible, acceptable or unacceptable. From an epistemic perspective they can be conceived as presumptions, which can be reasonable or unreasonable. However, from a dialogical perspective we can notice that even when a presupposition is not previously shared or even not acceptable it carries out a powerful dialogical effect. The listener will try to reconstruct the presupposition based on his knowledge and presumptions, and when he cannot accept it, he needs to reject the move by advancing reasons. In order to analyze this dialogical effect we need to investigate the epistemic dimension of presumption, and show how it can be used mischievously to alter the dialogical situation.

4.1 Dialogical structure of presumptions

The concept of presumption is used to describe a particular type of inference based on general accepted principles stating how things usually happen. They are defeasible generalizations, and hold as true until the contrary is proven (see Rescher 1977: 26). Presumptions are forms of inference (see Ullman-Margalit 1983: 147) used in conditions of lack of knowledge (Rescher 1977: 1-3). For instance, if something has happened in a certain place the previous day, the place can be searched for evidence because it is presumed not to have changed meanwhile. Such inferences are therefore strategies to fill the gap of incomplete knowledge shifting to the other party the burden of providing the missing contrary information or data (see Walton 1996a: 29-30). Their conclusion is recognized as refutable even though it has not been refuted at that point of the discussion (see Hall 1961: 10). Presumptions are grounded on principles of inference that need to be shared and based on the ordinary course of events; in particular, the presumed fact needs to be more likely than not to flow from the proved fact supporting it (for the specific notion of probability of presumptions in law, see *Leary v. United States*, 395 U.S. 6, 36, 1969).

If we apply the notion of presumption to conversation, we can notice that discourse is based on presumptions. The speaker adopts a conversational behavior because he presumes that the interlocutor cooperates or does not cooperate. He conveys an intention through an action because such an action is presumed to be associated with an intention. He uses a certain word to convey a specific meaning because it is presumed to have that meaning (Hamblin 1970: chap. 9). On the other hand, the hearer tries to reconstruct the missing information or presuppositions because he presumes that the speaker intended the discourse to be coherent (Hobbs 1979: 78). Speakers can also breach some presumptions, because they presume that the hearer will rely on a higher-level of presumptions. For instance, indirect speech acts or tautologies are based on the same mechanism of breaching presumptions related to the relationship between speech acts and intentions, and words and meanings. We maintain that interpretation is an argumentative activity that is carried out based on linguistic presumptions and breaches, or rather clashes, of presumptions.

4.2 Manipulating presuppositions

The analysis of speaker's presuppositions as presumptions opens the possibility of explaining their force and assessing their reasonableness.

A false or unacceptable presupposition is dialogically a false or unacceptable presumption, which needs to be rebutted. The listener, in order not to be committed to the presupposed proposition (Walton 1999: 380; Corblin 2003) needs to rebut the speaker's move, by attacking either the principle of presumption or the reasoning underlying the passage from the presumption to the proposition. For instance, considering figure 1 above, the speaker can reject the presumption that information relative to a friend is interesting, or the fact that Bob is a common friend. Assessing the presumptive reasoning underlying presupposition and showing its dialogical effect is necessary in order to understand when and why presuppositions are used to deceive and alter the perspective or reality. The speaker may use presuppositions to manipulate the interlocutor in two fashions: by taking advantage of the other party's ignorance or exploiting the ambiguity of a concept.

In the first case the speaker can presuppose (presume the knowledge of) an unshared or new definition of a concept, or unshared facts. For instance we can consider the following sadly famous use of a word with an unshared meaning (Lifton 1986: 42):

Manipulation Case 1: Presupposing new definitions:
The Nazis had programs of positive and negative Eugenics.

The meaning of "positive and negative eugenics" was not known at the time; its definition was simply presupposed, or rather presumed to be shared by the people. Such information could be retrieved by the known meaning of "eugenics" ("strengthening a biological group on the basis of ostensible hereditary worth"—Lifton 1986: 24), but could not be traced back to the real definition of "sterilization of unhealthy individuals or racially inferior people and sometimes euthanasia". The other use of the first strategy is the use of words to presuppose unshared and false information. For instance we can compare the following controversial case.[2]

Manipulation Case 2:
"Ground Zero Mosque": That three-word phrase has the dubious distinction of being inaccurate not once but twice. The project in question is not actually being planned at Ground Zero—it's planned to go up two blocks away, at the former location of a Burlington Coat Factory that lacks a view of the former site of the Twin Towers. And it's not, strictly speaking, a mosque—it's an Islamic cultural center that includes a swimming pool, basketball court, restaurant and a prayer room.

In this case, an Islamic cultural center, planned to be built near the former Twin Tower site, was referred to as the Ground Zero Mosque,[3] to convey the information that an "Islamic house of worship" was to be built *at* a place which has become a symbol of American identity, values, etc.[4] The problem with this definite description is that it was used to presuppose that the building was planned to become a place of worship. Such a presupposition was unacceptable for two reasons: the center included only a praying room among other facilities, and, more importantly, the building was already used as a praying place.[5] The strength of this move rests on the interlocutors' ignorance of the actual plans and the past use of the building, combined with the emotional appeal to the Islamic threat.

The second strategy relies on the ambiguity of a word, used to presuppose a proposition without being committed to it, or letting the interlocutor know. The speaker can use a word having a specific presumptive meaning presupposing an unshared new meaning, such as in the following case (Lifton 1986: 51):

> **Manipulation Case 3: Introducing ambiguity:**
> Physicians can carry out euthanasia (to indicate direct medical killing of "lives unworthy of life").

Euthanasia here refers to the killing of Jewish children; even though the idea of killing mental patients was considered as euthanasia, the word was presumed to refer to the killing of a man's to relieve him from horrible sufferance (Lifton 1986: 49). The word was used with a new presumptive meaning, while the listener constructed it based on his presumption. The speaker can also use this strategy by relying on the already existing ambiguity and vagueness of a word. For instance, we can consider the following case:[6]

> **Manipulation Case 4: Using existing ambiguous words:**
> "The American People": Politicians love to invoke the American people when talking about why their policies are the right ones. According to President Obama, Republicans have a "lack of faith in the American people" because they blocked an extension of unemployment benefits; according to House Minority Leader John Boehner, the president's policies regularly "defy the will of the American people" in pursuit of a far-left agenda.[7]

The meaning of "American people" is ambiguous, and may refer to supporters of different political parties or ideas; obviously since the meaning is unclear

it may refer to different states of affairs. President Obama's American people are not the Republican readers' American people.

The two aforementioned strategies can be also combined: the speaker can presuppose a proposition that would be unacceptable (or incorrect) if stated, but by combining ambiguity and lack of knowledge its controversial nature can be overlooked:

> **Manipulation Case 5: Combining lack of information with ambiguity:**
> "Take our country back": Sarah Palin is perhaps the most prominent Republican to call on her supporters to "take our country back", which prompts the obvious question: From whom? According to liberal New York Times columnist Frank Rich, the phrase is a response to "the conjunction of a black president and a female speaker of the House—topped off by a wise Latina on the Supreme Court and a powerful gay Congressional committee chairman."

In this case, the presupposition that "Latinos, Afro-Americans and homosexuals are not real Americans", if explicitly asserted, would have been politically incorrect. However, such presupposition is concealed by uttering the slogan "take our country back" without providing a context or background information. The hearer or the speaker suggests a reconstruction, which can be always changed when challenged. Ambiguity and lack of knowledge are combined in such strategy.

In the cases of presupposition manipulation mentioned above, we can notice that much more information needs to be provided to rebut a false presupposition than to display it. The interlocutor needs to prove that such presupposition is false, while the speaker can always defend himself exploiting the ambiguity of the message. For instance, the "Ground Zero Mosque" conveys a particular value judgment, based on false presuppositions (it is an Islamic religious institution; it is on Ground Zero); however, such presuppositions are simply the result of a rational reconstruction, which can be always attacked ("I did not mean that").

Manipulating presuppositions is therefore a tactic to alter the other party's commitments and shift the burden of proof. Such a move is possible because the presupposed information can be reconstructed, but the listener's assessment of it is altered. The listener may have not enough knowledge to assess whether the presupposed information is acceptable, or evaluates some information while the speaker is referring to a different proposition.

Conclusion

Presupposition has been described in the literature as closely related to the listener's knowledge and the speaker's beliefs regarding the other's mind. However, how is it possible to know or believe our interlocutor's knowledge? The purpose of this paper is to find an answer to this question by showing the relationship between reasoning, presumption and language. Presupposition is analyzed as twofold reasoning process: on the one hand, the speaker by presupposing a proposition presumes that his interlocutor knows it; on the other hand, the listener reconstructs the propositions taken for granted and assesses them against the shared presumptions. The possibility of reconstructing a presupposition is distinguished from its assessment, where the consistency of the presupposition with the shared or common ground is evaluated, and its reasonableness established. The analysis of presuppositions from an argumentative perspective provides an instrument for evaluating the reasonableness of a presupposition and understanding its dialogical effect. On this view, the dialogical force of a presupposition lies in its presumptive nature, which sets and shifts the burden of proving its unacceptability or unreasonableness.

Notes

[1] As Ducrot put it, in this latter case the utterance is used connotatively, that is, the simple fact that a sentence is uttered conveys a meaning (see Ducrot 1968: 44): it becomes a sign, from which the interlocutor can infer the conditions of use.

[2] "The Most Loaded Phrases in American Politics" Cbs News | 16 September 2010. Retrieved 30 September 2010 from: http://www.cbsnews.com/2300-250 162-10004783-5.html

[3] "Peace-seeking Muslims, pls understand, Ground Zero mosque is UNNECESSARY provocation; it stabs hearts", Palin wrote in a Twitter post Sunday. "Pls reject it in interest of healing." The former Republican vice presidential nominee also posted a plea asking "peaceful New Yorkers" to "pls refute the Ground Zero mosque plan if you believe catastrophic pain caused @ Twin Towers site is too raw, too real." Retrieved 5 May 2011 from: http://articles.cnn.com/2010-07-19/politics/palin.nyc.mosque_1_prayer-space-muslim-facility-ground-zero-mosque?_s=PM:POLITICS

[4] Retrieved 5 May 2011 from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Park51. For the presupposition, and ensuing reactions, that the center was planned to be built

at Ground Zero, see: http://www.cracked.com/blog/3-reasons-the-ground-zero-mosque-debate-makes-no-sense/ (retrieved 5 May 2011).

[5] Retrieved 5 May 2011 from: http://www.newsvine.com/_news/2010/08/18/4922332-fact-check-islam-already-lives-near-ground-zero

[6] "The Most Loaded Phrases in American Politics" CBS News | 16 September 2010. Retrieved 30 September 2010 from: http://www.cbsnews.com/2300-250_162-10004783-5.html

[7] See also the following conflicting statements, both supported by an appeal to the will of the American People: "It is a war that the great, great majority of American people supported, and my sense is members are approaching this very thoughtfully"; "The internal debate behind closed doors comes as the American people increasingly oppose the war". Retrieved 30 September 2010 from: http://www.eod.com/americanpeople

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