Projection and Conditionalization

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Abstract

To date, no theory has provided a comprehensive solution to the projection problem of presupposition in compound sentences, though Gazdar (1979) and, notably, van der Sandt (1988) come closer than other analyses to providing one. These two theories are based on the idea that the potential or elementary presuppositions of a compound sentence, i.e. the presuppositions carried by its constituent clauses, project except for cases in which they are pragmatically constrained.

In a nutshell, I maintain that, upon the utterance of a sentence that contains a presuppositional trigger, it is natural for the hearer to infer that the speaker presupposes the relevant proposition. However, it may happen that the speaker’s utterance contains some element that makes the hearer realize that, if the speaker presupposed the relevant proposition, s/he would be either uninformative or inconsistent in his/her beliefs. If this is the case, the hearer will not infer that the speaker presupposes the relevant proposition. Put another way, the potential presupposition will remain potential, i.e. will not project.

Specifically, I provide an answer to the following two questions: 1. What exactly constrains presupposition projection? 2. What happens to the presuppositions that do not project? In order to answer the first question, I elaborate on Stalnaker’s (1973, 1974) notion of speaker presupposition and on the work of Gazdar (1979) and van der Sandt (1988). In relation to the second question, I analyse the phenomenon of presupposition conditionalization.