

# **Pragmatics of Presupposition in Human Communication in the English Language**

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## **Abstract**

A presupposition (PSP) in pragmatics is the assumption that the hearer already knows about the subject and the context of the information. The context includes shared knowledge of the environment, culture, belief or world view. This enables the hearer to make the right assumption or inference as he interprets a piece of information. This paper therefore, intends to highlight presupposition in human communication in the English Language. Pragmatic presupposition depends more on the context for its interpretation and meaning. This paper “pragmatics of presupposition in human communication in the English language” adopts purely narrative and descriptive approach in its discourse. The writers present conceptual clarification and definition of terms as thus: the concept of pragmatics, meaning of presupposition, pragmatics presupposition and human communication. They outline the aim and objectives of the study. Suitable theoretical framework was highlighted by the writers using Adebija’s theory of pragmatics. The writers state the method of data collection used in the paper and analyzed the data using purely narrative and descriptive approach. So, many examples were used from the sources of data collection to analysis the data. The data was lucidly discussed by the writers to express the work more. A sub topic on misrepresentation in human communication as a result of pragmatics presuppositions was also used by the writers for the discussion of the data. They finally present conclusion and recommendation in the work.

**Keywords:** Pragmatics, Presupposition, Pragmatics presupposition and Human communication.

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## **I. Introduction**

In Okafor (2018), “Presupposition underscores what the speaker assumes the hearer knows or what is true”. Messages arte often designed on the assumption of what is true or what we believe the hearer or reader knows.

To Verschueren (2003:27) in Okafor (2018), it is the “aspect of meaning that must be presupposed understood, taken for granted for an utterance to make sense”. In presupposition, the speaker/writer assumes, while the hearer/reader presupposes. It is the knowledge of the world and language that helps the hearer to arrive at the presupposed meaning. **Where did you buy the cold drink from?.** Here, there is a presupposition that the hearer bought cold drink. **When did you stop seeing John?** This contains two presuppositions – that the addressee was seeing John and that the addressee no longer does so.

Speakers or writers usually design their messages on the assumption that the hearer or reader already has a degree of the knowledge of what is being communicated. What the writer assumes the reader already knows about the subject and the context of the information is known as presupposition.

Inference is based on presupposition because whether inference is right or wrong, the reader is acting upon some relevant information about the subject. Take the headline “who killed Dele Giwa” for example. This question presupposed that (a) the writer and reader know who Dele Giwa was (b) both know who Dele Giwa

actually got killed and that his killers are unknown (c) the unknown assassins might be discovered (d) the reader has the right to know and may do something about the information he sets.

The paper “pragmatics of presupposition in human communication in the English language adopts purely narrative and descriptive approaches in its discourse, noting of course the points of interconnectedness and the points of departure. The work explores the following conceptual clarifications and definition of terms: the concept of pragmatics, presupposition, pragmatics presupposition and human communication. The writers carefully stated the aim and objectives of the work. Adebija’s theory of pragmatics was used by the writers. The theory was adopted because, Adebija proposed a balanced and unified theory of pragmatics, building on the words of Searl, Grice, Bach and Harnish. All these are advocators of the theory of pragmatics. The writers mention three methods used in data collection.

Data analysis and discussion of data was presented with some illustrations and examples using the same` three methods of data collection previously mentioned.

Finally, a conclusion and recommendation was also presented by the researchers.

## **Conceptual Clarification and Definition of Terms**

### **The Concept of Pragmatics**

Okafor (2018), in his PhD degree seminar paper presented to the Department of Linguistics and Literary Studies, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, says that for a proper understanding of the concept of pragmatics, it is necessary to first differentiate between semantics and pragmatics, since the two concepts border on meanings. Prasad (2008) captures pragmatics as:

The study of the way in which language is used to express what somebody really means in particular situations, especially when the actual words used may appear to mean something different... while semantics attempts to relate meaning to logic and truth and deals with meaning as a matter primarily of sense relations within the language pragmatics endeavours to relate meaning with context of utterance and it studies language as action performed by the speaker.

From the above definitions, while semantics seems to basically focus on meaning from the words as they appear in the language, pragmatics seems all encompassing, because it combines both aspects of semantics (what the language literally means) and even those other aspects) of meaning that go beyond what a piece of language communicates.

Yule (1996:1) states that “pragmatics is concerned with the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by listener (or hearer). Levinson (1983:21) defines pragmatics as “the study of the relationship between language and content that are basic to an account of language understanding”. This definition promotes the fact that in order for a piece of language to be interpreted accurately, certain things namely, language and context must be taken into consideration. Generally, on both definitions, the two suggest that the form of the message is not really the concern here, but the extra information that the speaker and listener are able to supply. This simply means that the speaker actually communicates more than is said in words and the listener also interprets and gets more information than the words of the speaker seem to say. This is in the same propoundment with Leech and Short (1982:290) cited in Osisanwo (2003:54) view that the pragmatic analysis of language can be broadly understood to be the investigation into that aspect of meaning which is derived not from formal/properties of words and constructions, but from the way in which utterances are used and how they relate to the context in which they are uttered. Language therefore, can only make meaning when it is interpreted within a given context that may include the time, environment and any other variables outside the linguistic item. Essentially, pragmatic meaning basically is concerned with those other items attached to a piece of language outside, it’s grammatical properties.

In Levinson (1983:9) cited in Igiri et al (2020) pragmatics is “the study of those aspects of the relationship between language and context that are relevant to the writing of grammars”. Notice in this definition that interest is mainly in the interrelation of language and principles of language use that are context defendant.

Ejele (1996:35) is apt in her definition of pragmatics as “the study of language usage”. According to Ejele, pragmatics deals with how linguistic and nonlinguistic factors come into play and influence the choices of the variables involved in communication.

Osuafor (2003:32) adds that “Pragmatics is actually the crux of discourse analysis.” Udofot (1998:81) observes that “knowledge of pragmatics enables one to interpret, not only the literal meaning of an utterances, but also the meanings that derive from the norms of formality and politeness and exist in the society where the language is used.” It is also important to understand unstated meanings that derive from the shared previous knowledge of the speaker and hearer and the situation in which the utterances are used. In the words, of crystal (1997:120), pragmatics is seen as “the study of all aspects of meanings other than those involved in the analysis of sentences in terms of truth conditions”. Through pragmatics, the discourse analysis assesses how words are

used and what speakers mean as well as related texts to the physical, social and psychological world in which they take place. Thus, the appropriateness conditions of utterances are determined by matching sentences with the context in which they occur.

### **Meaning of Presupposition**

Presupposition simply means an assumption made before hand, a preliminary conjecture or speculation. It is an act of presumption in linguistics. It can be seen as an assumption or belief implied in an utterance or other use of language. The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of English sees it as “A thing tacitly assumed before hand at the beginning of a line of an argument or course of action”. For example, an utterance such as “John forgot to call Mary” typically has a presupposition inference that “John was supposed to call Mary.” It is not the main point the speaker wants to make by the utterance.

From google.com/search “on the one hand, presuppositions are considered an essential prerequisite for understanding the content expressed by an utterance and for the coherence of the semantic relations between the sentences that constitute a discourse”.

In Cookey and Nwala (2018), presupposition, they say means relation or a truth relation usually studied in logic. It simply describes a shared knowledge between a speaker and an addressee. The speakers presume that the addressees already have knowledge of the message or information, therefore the entire information is not clearly stated. Saeed (2003:87) in the same Cookey and Nwala (2018) “Sentence A Presupposes Sentence B, if Sentence B is part of the background against which A is presupposed. Cookey and Nwala (2018) maintain that presupposition simply means that for a particular opinion to be true, there is an element of truth in it.

For Yule (1996) presupposition is something the speaker assumes to be the case before he makes an utterance. Furthermore, presupposition is largely influenced by the background knowledge of the speaker and it is mainly important to infer the meaning of the utterance.

### **Pragmatics Presupposition**

In Akmajian, Demers, Farmer and Harnish (2008) as cited by Cookey and Nwala (2018) differentiate between semantic and pragmatic presupposition in order to explain the above concept, pragmatics presupposition lucidly well. They explain that the idea behind the former is that “the falsity of the presupposed sentence causes the presupposing sentence not to have a truth value. The writers further explain that presupposition is a relation between sentences, meanings or propositions not just sentences. Although many linguists prefer to see presupposition as strictly pragmatic (having to do with context of use) and not semantic presupposition (having to do with linguistic meaning), presupposition has to do with both. The actual difference between semantic presupposition and pragmatic presupposition is that what is presumed or assumed in the former can be determined from the linguistic content of a sentence, that is, what is not said can be presumed from what is said in the latter. Presupposition is determined by various factors like age, status and others which are subsumed under context.

Finch (2000) in Cookey and Nwala (2018) speaks on the short fall of the semantic presupposition which he terms a truth-based approach. According to him, it does not take full account of all the presuppositions which speakers and listeners make in interpreting communication. In other words, the semantic presupposition dwells on the particular presupposition which is seen as the truth arising from the sentence while pragmatic presupposition is drawn from the context of the sentence.

### **Human Communication**

From en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki, human communication, or anthropose mities, is a field of study dedicated to understanding of what we are referencing or thinking about. Because, humans are unable to fully understand one another’s perspective, there needs to be a creation of commonality through a shared mindset or viewpoint. The field of communication is very diverse, as there are multiple layers of what communication is and how we use its different features as human beings.

Human have communicatory abilities other animals do not have. For example, humans are able to communicate about time and place as though they are solid objects. Humans communicate, do request, help to inform others, and to share attitudes for bonding. Communication as a joint activity is largely dependent on the ability to maintain common attention. E share relevant background knowledge and joint experience in order to communicate content and coherence in exchanges.

The evolution of human communication took place over a long period of time. Human evolved from simple hand gestures to the use of spoken language. Most face-to-face communication requires visually reading and following along with the other person, offering gestures in reply, and maintaining eye contact throughout the interaction.

Human communication can be defined as any shared symbolic interaction. It is shared because each communication process also requires a system of signification (the code) as its necessary condition, and if the

encoding is not known to all those who are involved in the communication process, there is no understanding and therefore fails the same notification.

Human communication is also symbolic, because there is need of a signifier or sign, which allows the transmission of the message. It is an interaction, since it involves two or more people, resulting in a further increase of knowledge on the part of all those who interact.

### **Aims and Objectives of the Study**

This study aims to highlight pragmatics of presupposition in human communication in the English language. Specifically, it aims to:

- define pragmatics comprehensively
- define presupposition broadly
- explain pragmatics presupposition
- give examples of presupposition in everyday speech situations
- identify some clauses that trigger off presuppositions
- explains human communication
- identify some misrepresentations as a result of pragmatics presupposition and its effects in misinforming the public.

All these are aimed at helping both speakers and hearers to make the right assumption or inference as they interpret a piece or pieces of information.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper adopted Adegbija's theory of pragmatics. Adegbija (1982) proposed a "balanced and unified" theory of pragmatics, building on the words of Searle, Grice, Bach and Harnish. He advocates utterance interpretation involving basically an inferencing process. Like Austin and Searle, Adegbija (1999) argues that we perform acts with words and the effects the words produce are not necessary only hearer directed "illocutionary acts may be conventional but need not always be because the force of some illocutionary acts is determined by the intention of the speaker while others still may have to do with the pragmatics of the particular situations of social interaction". Using his example, if my boy is hearing his toy and I say to him "hello", he is likely to interpret this as a warning against his action. The pragmatics of the situation determines the illocutionary force and enables the boy to understand the "hello" is not appropriate to the situation and therefore functions as a warning against his action.

This interpretation is further determined by the relationship obtained between father and son and the linguistic element used in performing the illocutionary act. These factors are called the "pragmasociolinguistic context" and Adegbija argues that these need not necessarily have anything to do with a specific intention of the speaker. The pragmatics of a situation of social interaction according to Adegbija (1982) may consist of any or all of the following:

- the cognitive or effective states of the participants in the interaction at hand
- special relationship obtaining among participants
- mutual beliefs, understanding, or lack of these
- both the hearer and the speaker and the context of interaction

Adegbija (1999) argues that an illocutionary act always takes place and a perlocutionary effect always occurs even if these are not the ones specially intended by the speaker. In other words, the hearer's inference, based on the pragmatics context determines what illocutionary act he perceives the speaker as performing. This inference on the part of the hearer would seem to be more important in identifying and interpreting illocutionary acts than any fixed intentions which the speaker might have. Sevel (1999:203) "pragmatic factors often change in the course of discourse and this may influence the illocutionary force of utterances as well as their perlocutionary".

### **Method of Data Collections**

The data used in this work was collected from the followings [en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki](http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki) examples of presuppositions as found in the internet source above.

- in everyday or day-to-day human utterances – pragmatics presupposition and some clauses that trigger off presuppositions.
- Presupposition found in everyday speech situation – presupposition in the real world of giving more examples.

### **Method of Data Analysis**

The work adopts purely narrative and descriptive approach in its discourse. As a result, the writers objectively describe what they observed hence the motive for considering this method most appropriate to be

used. The analysis of the work started from some examples of presuppositions as found in wikipedia. The writers cited that “in the branch of linguistics known as pragmatics, a presupposition is an implicit assumption about the world or background belief relating to an utterance whose truth is taken for granted in discourse.

**Sample 1 - Examples of the presuppositions as found in the wikipedia include:**

- Jane no longer writes fiction
- **Presupposition:** Jane once wrote fiction
- Have you stopped eating meat?
- **Presupposition:** you had once eaten meat.

A presupposition must be mutually known or assumed by the speaker and addressee for the utterance to be considered appropriate in context. It will generally remain a necessary assumption whether the utterance is placed in the form of an assertion denial, or question, and can be associated with a specific lexical item or grammatical feature (presupposition trigger) in the utterance.

Crucially, negation of an expression does not change its presuppositions.

**I want to do it again and I don't want to do it again.** Both presuppose that the subject has done it already one or more times. **My wife is pregnant and my wife is not pregnant.** Both presuppose that the subject has a wife. In this respect, presupposition is distinguished from entailment and implicative. For example **The President is dead, but if the expression is negated,** the entailment is not necessary true.

**Sample 2 - Data analysis from everyday or day-to-day human utterances**

This simply means pragmatics presupposition and some clauses that trigger off presuppositions in human communication or utterances.

When we speak with people, we generally make valid assumptions about the background of what we say, which we presume to be mutually known, if someone tells you: (i) **Registration for the workshop ends tomorrow.**

For you to respond appropriately it is assumed that you know something about “the workshop” in question. If you do not know, we conclude that the speaker made a wrong assumption about your knowledge of the workshop. This results in a failure of presupposition in which case you also to know what he is talking about.

There would not be any point in saying: **registration for the workshop ends tomorrow** unless the speaker knew that the hearer is properly informed about the upcoming workshop and the process of registration. Infact, this condition must be met before making the utterance. The speaker must presuppose that the hearer is conversant with the workshop and perhaps eager to be registered. This background knowledge can be called pragmatic presupposition because they are not linguistic in nature, they are **felicity condition** which must be met for the utterance to be appropriate otherwise, the speaker will have to go all the way to explain the upcoming workshop the aims, the expected particular, registration procedure, the date etc.

What do you think is pragmatically presupposed in the following statement?

**(ii) Thank you for not smoking**

In English, certain clauses trigger off presuppositions, especially those that express change of state indicates (egs begin, continue, stop etc) introduced by “after” and “before” Grundy (2000) look at the following examples:

- (1) I began drinking eight glasses of water daily after I read the medical book
  - (2) I continued studying after I obtained my first degree at the age of sixty.
  - (3) She stopped smoking after she suffered lung cancer.
- \* Presupposes that (a) I was drinking less than eight glasses of water before. (b) I read a medical book
  - \* Presupposes that (a) I was studying before (b) I obtained a degree at the age of sixty.
  - \* presupposes that (a) she was smoking before (b) she suffered lung cancer (c) smoking could have caused the lung cancer.

Implicature verbs such as **forget, happen and manage** do also prompt presuppositions, Grundy (2000) consider the following examples:

- (i) The lecturer forgot to give a summary of his lecture and left everyone guessing what eh said at the beginning.  
Presupposes that he should have given a summary of his lecture.
- (ii) a similar thing happened to my parents when they travel to Libya.  
Presupposes that what happened was a matter of chance.
- (iii) John managed to pass the examination  
Presupposes that (a) the examination was not easy (b) she lacked the necessary skills to pass the examination (c) her passing the examination was a surprise.

From the above examples, we can argue that presuppositions are conventionally associated with grammatical construction (Grundy, 2000).

**Sample 3 – data analysis using presupposition found in everyday speech situation**

This is presupposition in the real world giving more examples of it in everyday speech situations.

In our daily interactions with people, we often rely on a number of presuppositions in order to communicate effectively with them. In some specialized settings such as the courts, between lawyers and their clients, the hospital, between doctors and their patients, the media during interview or the police stations between policemen and crime suspects? Very often during interviews, questions or cross examinations, people are not often very conscious of the answers and responses they give and before they realize it, they've already accepted the presuppositions contain thereby implicating themselves. Take the example of the policeman and a robbery suspect below as an example:

**Policeman:** Did you say you often met at the hotel?

**Suspect:** We kept our weapons there?

The policeman's question presupposes that the suspect had actually told him that the robbery gang met at hotel. The suspect's answer now confirms that they actually met at hotel since we can easily conclude that "there" point to hotel.

The next example is a dialogue between a doctor and her patient.

**Doctor:** The last time you come, who did you bring?

**Patient:** Who did I bring?

**Doctor:** Yes

**Patient:** She

**Doctor:** So, how come you have another card?

**Patient:** I don't know

**Note:** "Another card" and the patient's response. The obvious presupposition is that the card the patient presents is not the right one. Having been at the hospital before, it is assumed that she must have obtained a card which presently has been substituted for a new one.

Another example is an interview of a former Flying Eagles Defender, his views about the team's performance in one of their intercontinental tournaments and what the coach should do. Study how presuppositions enable the interviewer and the interviewees to interpret meanings.

**Journalist:** What is your impression about the performances of the Flying Eagles?

**Player:** I believe the team has not performed too badly... (Notice performed too badly" presupposing the team has performed badly).

**Journalist:** Are you saying the team has played as well as you expected?

**Player:** The most important thing is that they have qualified for the world-youth championship... instead of criticizing the coach, other coaches should give him advice on how to strengthen the squad.

**Journalist:** Are you backing (the present) Coach because you once played under him?

**Player:** I've played under many Coaches before and every coach has his bad side... I'd tell him to reduce the training sessions of the players.

**Journalist:** Obviously, you are also admitting that they have not played as well as you would have wanted.

## II. Discussion of Data

Further discussion of the data was made by the writers, explaining some misrepresentations in human communication as a result of pragmatic presuppositions.

In Igiri et al (2018). Pragmatics distinguishes two intents or meanings in each utterance of communicative act of verbal communication. One is the informative intent or the sentence meaning and the other the communicative intent or speaker meaning Leech (1983, Sperber and Wilson, 1986). Speakers of any language possess what is called pragmatic competence. This means, his/her knowledge of the Social Status of the speakers involved in an utterance, knowledge of the social distance between the speakers, knowledge of the culture such as politeness, knowledge of how one can infer from an utterance, the intended meaning of the surface form produce and so forth. Pragmatics is the study of how contextual factors inter act with linguistic meaning in the interpretation of utterances.

So, the paper "pragmatic of presupposition in human communication in the English language" which results to the practice of misrepresenting ethnic, religious, gender, sexual, political and corporate entities and interests in public discourse, and the effect it may have on misinforming the public. In this case, one can see pragmatic presupposition as a feature of a normal everyday discourse/conversation. When we communicate, our knowledge of the language system enables us to make valid assumptions and conclusions in order to interpret utterances correctly. However, the interpretation of a speaker chiefly depends on so many factors as have mentioned from the beginning of this work. This attempt by speakers to interpret the correct meanings of utterances often lead to the misrepresentation in human communication due to the pragmatic presuppositions involved.

### III. Conclusion/Recommendation

Presupposition is a feature of a normal everyday discourse/conversation. When we communicate, our knowledge of the language system enables us to make valid assumptions and conclusions in order to interpret utterances correctly. Very often, we don't always express all we have in mind in words, much of the meaning we convey are rooted in the context we find ourselves. We deliberately allow ourselves to mean more than we express in words. And because we rely on some background knowledge and information we have and what we take for granted that the hearer knows about us, we expect them to make the right interpretations of what we say. So, we can rightly conclude that the knowledge of presuppositions will help us communicate effectively and probably keep us from unnecessary embarrassments and troubles of pragmatics of misrepresentation in human communication.

A good understanding of pragmatics will enable a speaker or writer adopt the right kind of language use in different social contexts and possibly achieve the kind of result he/she expects. This is in addition to having the knowledge of presupposition as the writers have said before. As a matter of fact, a good understanding of the roles of language in society demands the kind of linguistic or communicative competence that is required to use language in specific social contexts.

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