Notes on Presupposition

[this handout largely follows Kai's notes (on the website) with some additions and changes. Most of the examples are taken from there. Parts of the handout follow the discussion in Heim 1990.]

1.   Introduction

<u>Two properties of presupposition</u>:

(i)   "Taken for granted"

(ii)   Generally – but not always– inherited by complex containing structures.

<u>Property 1</u>

1)   It was Sam who broke the typewriter.

         Presupposes: Somebody broke the typewriter
         Asserts: Sam broke the typewriter.

2)   The mathematician who proved Goldbach's conjecture is a woman.

         Presupposes: there is a unique mathematician who proved Goldbach's conjecture.
         Asserts: She is a woman.

•   The "Hey, wait a minute" test (von Fintel, inspired by Shannon 1976).

3)   A: It was Sam who broke the typewriter.
         B: Hey, wait a minute! I had no idea that somebody had broken the typewriter.
         B':   # Hey, wait a minute! I had no idea that Sam had broken the typewriter.

         A: The mathematician who proved Goldbach's conjecture is a woman.
         B: Hey, wait a minute! I had no idea that somebody had proved Goldbach's conjecture.
         B':   # Hey, wait a minute! I had no idea that was a woman.

Property 2

1. Existence presupposition of definites and other noun phrases

4)   The mathematician who proved Goldbach's conjecture was a woman.
5)   John invited every foreign graduate student to his party.

2. Clefts

6)   It was Sam who broke the typewriter.

3. Factive verbs

7)   Bill is aware that Mary kissed John.

4.   Additive particles (too, again)

8)   John is going to drop out of school again.
9)   John lives in NYC too.

5.   Change-of-phase predicates

10)   John has quit smoking.

11)   a. The mathematician who proved Goldbach's conjecture was a woman.
      b. The mathematician who proved Goldbach's conjecture wasn't a woman.
      c. Maybe the mathematician who proved Goldbach's conjecture was a woman.
      d. It is unlikely that the mathematician who proved Goldbach's conjecture was a woman.
      e. If the mathematician who proved Goldbach's conjecture was a woman, then she will get the Fields Medal this year.

12)   a. John invited every foreign graduate student to his party.
      b. John did not invite every foreign graduate student to his party.
      c. Maybe John invited every foreign graduate student to his party.
      d. It is unlikely that John invited every foreign graduate student to his party.
      e. If John invited every foreign graduate student to his party, we will need more beer.

2. Clefts

13)   a. It was Sam who broke the typewriter.
      b. It wasn't Sam who broke the typewriter.
      c. Maybe it was Sam who broke the typewriter.
      d. It is unlikely that it was Sam who broke the typewriter.
      e. If it was Sam who broke the typewriter, then he will have to fix it.

3. Factive verbs

14)   a. Bill is aware that Mary kissed John.
      b. Bill is not aware that Mary kissed John.
      c. Maybe Bill is aware that Mary kissed John.
      d. It is unlikely that Bill is aware that Mary kissed John.
      e. If Bill is aware that Mary kissed John, then he will not talk to John tonight.

4.   Additive particles (too, again)

15)   a. John is going to drop out of school again.
      b. John isn't going to drop out of school again.
      c. Maybe John is going to drop out of school again.
      d. It is unlikely that John is going to drop out of school again.
      e. If John is going to drop out of school again, his mother will be upset.

5. Change-of-phase predicates

16)   a. John has quit smoking.
      b. John hasn't quit smoking.
      c. Maybe John has quit smoking.
      d. It is unlikely that John has quit smoking.
      e. If John has quit smoking, then we won't need ashtrays at the party.

Compare with:

Conjunction:

17)   Thanksgiving will be great. The turkey is organic and Harry's wife is a great cook.

18)   Harry is married and Harry's wife is a great cook.

19)   Harry's wife is a great cook and the turkey is organic.

20)   # Harry's wife is a great cook and Harry's married.

Generalization:

(i)   If *A* presupposes that p then *A & B* will also presuppose that p.
(ii)   If *B* presupposes that p, then *A & B* and   will also presuppose that p, unless *A* entails p (together with assumptions in the context).

Conditionals

21)   If this dish wasn't catered, then Harry's wife is a great cook.
22)   If Harry is married, then Harry's wife is a great cook.
23)   If Harry's wife is a great cook, then Thanksgiving will be a success.

Generalization

(i)   If A presupposes that p, then then *if A, then B* will also presuppose that p.
(ii)   If B presupposes that p, then *if A, then B*, then will also presuppose that p, unless *A* entails p (together with assumptions in the context.)

Questions

(i)   What is the nature of presuppositions?
(ii)   How can we account for the inheritance patterns? The Projection Problem for Presuppositions (= the Compositionality Problem for Presuppositions).

2.   The Stalnaker/Karttunen approach.

Question (i)

Presuppositions are admittance conditions.

[Stalnaker (1973, 1974, 1979); Karttunen (1974).]

•   Presuppositions are requirements on the common ground: B is a presupposition of S iff S can be felicitously uttered only in contexts whose common ground entails B.

•   Roughly, the common ground of a context is the set of propositions that the interlocutors take for granted in that context.

Accommodation.

24)   I am sorry I am late. My car broke down (Heim 1990)

"[...] it's not as easy as you might think to say something that will be unacceptable for lack of required presuppositions.   Say something that requires a missing presupposition, and straightway that presupposition springs into existence, making what you said acceptable after all. (Or at least, that is what happens if your conversational partners tacitly acquiesce -- [...])".   (Lewis 1979)

•   Ease of accommodation

25)   I am sorry I am late. My helicopter broke down.

26)   Oh dad. I forgot to tell you that my fiancée and I are going to Seattle for the
          weekend.   (von Fintel, 2005 LSA lectures).

•   "Hard triggers"

27)   John lives in NYC too.

(see discussion in Heim 1990, and references therein).

Question 2: The Projection Problem

•   As Heim 1990 puts it, viewing presuppositions as admittance conditions allows us
        to formulate the projection problem in the following way:

        Given a sentence like **if Harry is married, then Harry's wife is a good cook**, we
        don't ask "how can the presupposition of **Harry's wife is a good cook** be
        blocked from 'projecting up'?", but rather "what in the utterance guarantees that the
        admittance condition is met?"

        How come a context that doesn't entail the presupposition of **Harry's wife is a
        good cook** can become good enough if you first utter **if Harry's is married**.

- Cf. context-dependency (examples from Heim 1990).

28) She paid the rent.

     [requires a context in which there is some unique maximally salient female individual]

29) I shared the room with a police officer, and she paid the rent.

     [can be uttered in a context where there is not a unique maximally salient female individual.]

- General idea: The inheritance properties or presuppositions are explained by the way the context changes in a discourse.

- Stalnaker on conjunction:

  "Once a proposition has been asserted in a conversation, then (unless or until it is challenged) the speaker can reasonably take it for granted for the rest of the conversation, In particular, when a speaker says something of the form *A and B*, he may take it for granted that A (or at least that his audience recognizes that he accepts that A) after he has said it. The proposition that A will be added to the background of common assumptions before the speaker asserts that B. Now suppose that B expresses a proposition that would, for some reason, be inappropriate to assert except in a context where A, or something entailed by A, is presupposed. Even if A is not presupposed initially, one may still assert A and B since by the time one gets to saying that B, the context has shifted, and it is by then presupposed that A."

- Stalnaker on conditionals:

   "Here we need first the assumption that what is explicitly supposed becomes (temporarily) a part of the background of common assumptions in   subsequent conversation, and second that an *if* clause is an explicit supposition."

- In order to carry out the Stalnaker/Karttunen program, we need "to characterize somehow, directly or indirectly, how the context is changed by the utterances of complex sentences of all kinds, what each component of the utterance contributes to this change, and which stage in the step-by-step evolution of the context is the relevant one for the admittance of each elementary constituent?" (Heim 1990: 29-30)

Issues

(i)   Explanatory adequacy:

•   Can the program above be carried out without stipulation?   Stalnaker's
        explanation for *and* makes it seems so, but things are less clear for other
        connectives (see discussion in Heim's work; also Beaver 1993).

Karttunen:

30)   If the local context for "A and B" is X, then the local context for A is X and the
        local context for B is $X \cup \{A\}$

31)   Either John came, or Bill came too.

        Presupposition 'projects'

32)   Either John didn't come, or Bill came too.

        Presupposition 'doesn't project'.

33)   If the local context for "A or B" is X, then the local context for A is X and the
        local context for B is $X \cup \{\sim A\}$

•   What's the connection between the inheritance facts in sentences involving
        connectives and the truth-conditional content of those connectives?

(ii)   Going below the level of the clause:

34)   Every nation cherishes its king.

Next up: Heim's proposal, which addresses both concerns above.