



snippets

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2.

Hazel Pearson - Harvard University ***A modification of the “Hey, Wait a Minute” test***

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Von Stechow (2004) notes that if a sentence S entails that P, one cannot generally respond to S with “Hey, wait a minute. I didn’t know that P” (1a). However, one may respond thus if P is a speaker presupposition of S (1b). He concludes that the ability to occur in the frame, ‘Hey, wait a minute. I didn’t know ...’ is diagnostic of speaker presupposition. Call this the HWAM test.

- (1) Mary’s aunt is visiting today.
 - a. # Hey, wait a minute. I didn’t know Mary’s aunt is visiting today.
 - b. Hey, wait a minute. I didn’t know Mary has an aunt.

Speaker presupposition and semantic presupposition part company in conditionals. (2) carries a speaker presupposition that Mary has a boyfriend, but its semantic presupposition is that if Mary made a reservation, she has a boyfriend (Karttunen 1974). The felicity of (2a) and infelicity of (2b) verify that the HWAM test targets speaker presupposition, not semantic presupposition.

- (2) If Mary made a reservation, she will have dinner with her boyfriend tonight.
 - a. Hey, wait a minute. I didn’t know Mary has a boyfriend.
 - b. # Hey, wait a minute. I didn’t know that if Mary made a reservation, she has a boyfriend.

Since a speaker presupposition may asymmetrically entail a semantic presupposition, (2a), it may be difficult to tell whether the HWAM test has diagnosed a speaker presupposition that is also a semantic presupposition, as in (3b), or one that is only a speaker presupposition, as in (2a). We propose a modification of the HWAM test that offers an answer to this question. A rational speaker cannot express uncertainty about a semantic presupposition before asserting a sentence carrying it (3c). However, speakers may retreat from a speaker presupposition that is not a semantic presupposition, while reaffirming what they originally said (4c).

- (3) a. Mary will have dinner with her boyfriend tonight.
 - b. Hey, wait a minute. I didn’t know Mary has a boyfriend.
 - c. # Well, I don’t know whether she does or not. But she will have dinner with her boyfriend tonight.

- (4) a. If Mary made a reservation, she will have dinner with her boyfriend tonight.
b. Hey, wait a minute. I didn't know Mary has a boyfriend.
c. Well, I don't know whether she does or not. (But she only eats out when she is seeing someone. So) if she made a reservation, she will have dinner with her boyfriend tonight.

Note that, more generally, this test distinguishes speaker presuppositions from entailments. Semantic presuppositions constitute one kind of entailment, but there are also others such as the backgrounded content that we find with non-restrictive relatives. Roberts (submitted) argues that these should not be considered as presuppositions, even though they pass the HWAM test (5b). On the other hand, adding our continuation yields an infelicitous discourse (5c). That is, since non-restrictive relatives are entailments they behave together with semantic presuppositions according to our test.

- (5) a. Mary, who is a linguist, will do fieldwork this summer.
b. Hey, wait a minute. I didn't know Mary is a linguist.
c. # Well, I don't know whether she is or not. But Mary, who is a linguist, will do fieldwork this summer.

References

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