PRESUPPOSITION OR ASSERTION ?

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These days, the notion of presupposition is already largely used as a technical term in all kinds of disciplines connected with language: philosophy of language, linguistics, psycho-linguistics, socio-linguistics, rhetorics, etc.

The notion of presupposition is introduced by Strawson (1964, pp. 174-175).

In the history of logic we find several authors (Aristotle and Frege) before Strawson who introduced notions akin to his interpretation of presupposition (Vandamme, 1973).

Strawson defines a presupposition as follows: «A presupposition of a sequence is that which must be true in order that the sequence is being either true or false». As such this definition of presupposition is rather metaphysical and vague. Therefore several authors have tried to make this notion operationally.

The most commonly used criterium for the presupposition is the property that presuppositions are constant under negation and question (Kiparsky, 1970, Droste, 1973).

What is meant, is the following: Look at the sentences (1) (2) and (3):

(1) It is odd that the door is closed.

(2) It isn't odd that the door is closed.

(3) Isn't it odd that the door is closed.

In these three sentences, it is always accepted (asserted or agreed upon (?) that the door is closed. What is negated or questioned is the oddness of the phenomenon. That the door is closed, is called the presupposition of the sentence (¹). Of course, one can also negate this so-called presupposition (.i. (4)).

(4) It is odd that the door isn't closed.

Already in Antiquity, and in Medieval times, one has turned attention to the limited scope of operators (note 1).

What the sentences (1) to (4) illustrate is only the necessity of limiting the scope of the negation and questioning operator

in a theory on logical operators. The importance of this for the appreciation and caracterization of the negation operation is enormous (Vandamme 1971, 1972).

But, however important it may be, this phenomenon doesn't justify the introduction of the notion of presupposition. Although one says that sentences 5-8 have no presupposition (or at least they don't presuppose that the door is open), the negation and qustion operation do not either operate inside the complementizer sentence: «that the door is open». This is clearly shown by sentences (9) and (10).

    (5) It is probable that the door is open.

    (6) It s possible that the door is open.

    (7) I think that the door is open.

    (8) I believe that the door is open. etc.

    (9) It isn't probable that the door is open.

    (10) Isn't it probable that the door is opn. etc.

When making an analysis of the negation and the question (Vandamme, 1972a) it clearly appears that when one gets a whole string of information, one can in this string negate or put in question a certain link or certain links between certain words or concepts. Now the question arises: what about the information in those given strings which fall outside the scope of a certain negation or question operation. Is it presupposed rather than asserted ?

To assume the point of view that it is presupposed, doesn't take enough into account the relevance of context for language and its use, nor the possible stylistical variations.

One can for instance say sentence (11) or (12):

    (11) The door is open. This isn't odd.

    (12) The door is open. Isn't that odd ? etc.

There is clearly a strong semantic connection between sentence (2) and (11). Semantically speaking, is the difference between (2) and (11) essential or rather stylistical ? If stylistical, then only the remark of oddness (or the question about the oddness (3)) is stressed more in (2), then is the case in (11) (or 12). The fact that one can deduce the same from (2) and (11), points to the latter interpretation. In this respect, we want to refer to Schelstraete (1974, p. 178) who is well aware of the

presupposition analysis and who is working in the framework of the Chomskian standard theory. He treats sentences of type (2) as the conjunction of two sentences of the type (11).

In the case of the stylistic variation hypothesis between (2) and (1) one has to prefer the point of view that the links in (2) which are not questioned nor negated, are asserted rather than presupposed. In this connection we want to turn attention to the arbitrarity in choosing the negation operation as a criterium for an operational definition of presupposition. Why not define presupposition on the basis of other operations which are also limited in scope. It is important to be aware that the scope of the several logical operations (f.i. conjunction) aren't the same. Would this mean that we have the choice between several types of presuppositions ? Each type defined by one operator ?

So, from this it appears that we get a simpler logical, semantic and linguistic account by using the assertion hypothesis rather than the presupposition hypothesis. Of course, even when one uses the assertion hypothesis, one has still to give an account of the difference between sentences (1) and (5). However, this can be done without complicating so much the logical, semantic and grammatical framework, as happens in the prsupposition approach.

Although it is true that in the present language studies, one generally does not bother that much about simpliciy and economicity we believe that this is an important point.

We (Vandamme, 1972c, p. 64-65) have already pointed out the important difference between the semantic object (N/1) (type 1) and the concept operations (N/"1") (type II) (remark the presence of quotation marks in type II).

An example of an object operation is given in sentence (13). Sentence (14) illustrates a concept operation.

(13) I eat meat.

(14) I expect Mike to come.

The object operation (N/1) is an operation with properties N, which are exerted upon an object "1" (meat).

In a concept operation, a certain operation (N) is exerted upon a concept combination "1". In (14) an operation of 'expec-

tation' is said to be exerted upon the concept combination 'Mike comes'.

An object operation corresponds with what is in logic commonly called the expression of intention. The concept operation corresponds with the designation of intention (Kneale, 1962).

A classic example to illustrate the difference between the expression and designation of intention is the following.

a) The number of apostles is twelve.
b) The number of apostles equals the sum of the fourth and the fifth prime number.
c) The pope believes that the number of apostles is twelf
d) The pope believes that the number of apostles equals the sum of the fourth and fifth prime number.

Although if (a) is true, (b) is also true and vice versa, this isn't the case with (c) and (d). This indicates that what is at stake in (c) and (d) isn't the expression of the intentions in the that-clause but rather an attitude towards an intention.

Of course, the argument of both the concept and the object operation can be simple or complex. An instance of an object operation, where the argument of the operation has a complex structure is (15).

(15) I open the door which is green.

We can divide the object operation in two types:

First, the type $(N_1/1)$ (type I.A) where the operator describes physically manipulating activities (e.g. 13, 16).

The second type is $(N_2/1)$ (type I.B.) where the operator describes conceptual activities about objects: the phenomena in the world (f.i. 17)

(16) I beat the boy.

(17) I am dismayed that our money is gone.

Some examples of the several types are given in this following table:

type I_A: eat, beat, close, drink, etc.
type I_B: dismay, surprise, regret, observe.
type II: think, believe, hope, expect.

Now, it is clear that adjectives as «odd, annoying, happy, etc.», are related to the type I.B. of operations, while «possible, probably, etc», are rather related to the type II (note 2).

This means that the difference between sentences (1) and (5) can be explained by a different semantic content (a different operator), which is anyway necessary, without the need of introducing the notion of presupposition (note 3).

In a logical terminology, in (1) the intention of «the door is open» is expressed, in (5) the intention of «the door is open» is not expressed but designated.

This means we can have an attitude towards an intention; this is what happened in sentences (14), (5). But we can also have an attitude towards a certain state of affairs. This is what happens in sentence (1). Of course, if we express an attitude towards a tsate of affairs, *the state of affairs is asserted too* (note 4).

NOTES

(¹) The Stoics e.g. explicitly introduced the notion of the scope of an operator, and especially of the negation operator (Kneale, 1962, p. 147).

(²) A discussion of the relation between adjectives and operators would imply a whole discussion of the verb and the copula. As far as this is concerned, we refer to Vandamme (1972c, VI. 2.8.).

(³) In the technical framework of Vandamme (1972c), the semantic structure of (a) and (b) is roughly respectively (c) and (d).

a) I regret that the door is open.

b) I hope that the door is open.

c) I   regret / (the door ⊓ open).

d) I   hope / «(the door ⊓ open)».

Remark the presence of quotation marks in (d). They indicate the designation of intention: the concept operation.

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