Obligatory redundancy in discourse: presupposition, antipresupposition and non-truth conditional content

Pascal Amsili* & Claire Beyssade**

* Université Paris-Diderot & CNRS Lattice
UFR de Linguistique, case 7003, 75205 Paris Cedex 13
Pascal.Amsili@linguist.jussieu.fr

**Institut Jean Nicod, CNRS ENS EHESS
Pavillon jardin, 29, rue d'Ulm, 75005 Paris
Claire.Beyssade@ehess.fr

This talk is concerned with the following contrast, which illustrates a situation where the speaker has to say the same thing twice, or, in other words, has to be redundant.

(1) a. Jean a fait une grosse erreur. Il ne la fera plus.
   
   John made a big mistake. He won't do it any more.

   b. # Jean a fait une grosse erreur. Il ne la fera pas.

   John made a big mistake. He won't do it.

It is well-known that ne... pas and ne... plus only differ in presuppositional contents: contrarily to ne... pas which bears no presupposition, ne... plus triggers a presupposition (that something was the case). They both share the same asserted content, namely the negation of what's in their scope. So the surprising fact here is that the speaker has to use the presuppositional negation, instead of the simple negation, even though the presuppositional content is not new, but already asserted in the discourse. In other terms, the speaker has to repeat some information: once it is asserted, and then it is presupposed.

What we want to do in this talk is firstly to explain when (§1) and why (§2) a presupposition trigger becomes obligatory in the very case where it is redundant, and secondly to suggest that such an obligatory redundancy is a very general phenomenon, which can be explained in pragmatic terms and which involves not only presupposition, but, more generally, non-truth conditional content (§3).

1. When presupposing is compulsary

The observation that too or again may, in some contexts, be compulsory is not new (a.o. Kaplan, Krifka, Zeevat, van der Sandt & Geurts). But we will show that the phenomenon appears much more often: as a matter of fact, a whole class of presupposition triggers gives rise to such an obligatory redundancy. Here are a few examples:

(2) a. Il était là hier, il est (# ∅/ encore) là.

   He was there yesterday, he is (∅/ still) there

   b. Léa est partie en Afrique. Jean ne le dit à personne, bien qu'il sache (que / # si) elle est partie là-bas.

   Lea's gone to Africa. John tells no one, even though he knows (that / whether) she's gone there

   c. Quelqu'un a préparé le dîner. (# Jean ne l'a pas fait / Ce n'est pas Jean qui l'a fait).

   Someone fixed the dinner. (John didn't do it/ It is not John who did it)

What we conclude from this observation is that the phenomenon is not restricted to the class of additive particles (as defined either by Krifka or by Zeevat). We will show that a new class of presupposition triggers has to be defined which can be roughly described as the set of presupposition triggers with no asserted content.

2. Pragmatic explanation

We account for these data via a conversational principle, which can be viewed as an extension of a principle that has recently been put forward by Sauerland (after Heim and Hawkins): "Maximize presupposition". The reasoning goes as follows: just like the pair <some, all> gives
rise to an implicature based on the gricean maxim of quantity (*not all* is inferred from *some*), the pair \(<a, \text{the}>\) forms a scalar alternative pair when taking presupposition into account. From the use of the indefinite \(a\), one can infer that the use of the definite \(\text{the}\) would be inappropriate. This explains why (3a) is unfelicitous: the indefinite triggers the inference that the victim may have several fathers, which is incompatible with common knowledge. This kind of inference is called an antipresupposition by Percus: the indefinite antipresupposes the definite.

(3)    a. # A father of the victim arrived at the scene.
       b. The father of the victim arrived at the scene.

So, what is proposed by these authors is an extension of the maxim of quantity from asserted content to presupposed content. The alternative sentences they consider can be formed by substituting a term with another term bearing more presuppositions. (There is not enough room in this abstract to say more than a word on the difference between Sauerland's principle « Maximize presupposition » and our formulation, more in line with Percus & Schlenker's viewpoint, which would rather say "Don't anti-presuppose something for which you don't have enough evidence".)

We claim that the same kind of pragmatic explanation is involved in our examples, but a generalization has to be performed. The alternative pairs that have to be considered are of the form \(<\emptyset, p>\) where \(p\) is a presupposition trigger without assertive content (for instance, a pair of alternative sentences could be \(<\emptyset, \text{P too}>\)).

3. Generalization

We also claim that the following examples can be explained by the same principle1.

(4)a. Je suis fatigué. Est-ce que tu es fatigué (# \(\emptyset / \), toi) ?
    *I'm tired. Are you tired (\(\emptyset / \), you)*
    b. A(i): Est-ce que Marie est venue ? Has Mary come ?
       B: Oui. Yes

In these examples, what is involved is not presupposition triggers, but uses of topic markers or connectives in dialogue. Our claim is that we can account for all these data by generalizing Sauerland's principle from presuppositional content to non truth-conditional content in general. The idea is to compare a sentence not only to sentences which presuppose more, but also with alternative sentences bearing more conventional implicatures (à la Potts).

Roughly, in (4a), the use of \(\text{toi}\) doesn't convey any specific truth-conditional content, it duplicates the meaning of \(\text{tu}\) in the sentence. But its use is compulsory to indicate the change of topic: in the absence of this redundant \(\text{toi}\), the hearer would infer that there is no change of topic, which is incompatible with the alternance of \(\text{je vs. tu}\). Let's note that in (4a), the speaker is free to use \(\text{toi}\), or \(\text{aussi}\), but the use of one marker is compulsory2. The example (4b) illustrates a case where discourse relations have to be taken into account (very roughly again, from the absence of the connective \(\text{et}\), the hearer infers (anti-implicates) that there is no discourse relation between (i) and (ii); which makes the resolution of the ellipsis impossible3).

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1An alternative path could be taken, about the generalization we propose: considering that all our non-truth conditional examples are instances of (generalized) presupposition. Such a move would need first to be spelled out in details, and then further investigation would probably be necessary to decide which of the alternative proposals has the better empirical coverage.

2A suggestion has been made by a reviewer that the obligatoriness of \(\text{toi}\) could be explained by Schwarzschild's theory of givenness. Roughly, since elitic personal pronouns cannot bear a focus, and since focus has to be marked in such examples, a strong pronoun is required. However, the application of Schwarzschild's theory to French is not straightforward --- it has been suggested that in French the subject position is focal. In addition, and more importantly, the same kind of examples can be built with NPs which can bear a focus, and we conclude from that that the phenomenon is more general.

3It should be noted that \(\text{Jean}\) in isolation is a correct dialogue turn in many cases.
Conclusion

We propose to revisit the gricean maxim of quantity, and to extend its application to non-truth-conditional contents. In doing so, we revisit the role of redundancy in discourse. Contrarily to what is usually assumed (i.e. redundancy as a cause of discourse unfelicity), there are cases where redundancy is required in discourse. But the main claim of this work is that the principle proposed by Sauerland and Percus about presupposition seems to apply to a much wider range of non-truth-conditional contents, providing new evidence in favour of a multidimensional semantics as advocated for by Potts or Geurts (among others).

REFERENCES:

Potts, Chris, Into the conventional implicature dimension. Philosophy Compos, 2007.