Presupposition as a cohesive device
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Starting point While it has been noticed long ago that additive particles like too, again, are obligatory in a number of contexts (1), recent works [1, 2] have shown that the phenomenon concerns not only additive particles, but a larger class of presupposition triggers, like cleft constructions, or some factive verbs. See examples (2).

(1) a. Jo had fish and Mo did (too/∅).
   b. A: What did Peter and Pia eat?  
      B: *Péter ate pasta, and Pía ate pasta.
      B′′: Péter ate pasta, and Pía ate pasta, too.

(2) a. Quelqu’un a fermé cette porte ! (*Jean ne l’a pas fait / Ce n’est pas Jean qui l’a fait)
   Somebody closed that door! Jean didn’t do it / It is not Jean who did it
   b. Sam has been cheating on Pam for ages, and he (*believes/knows) it.
   c. Max tells no one that Lea is gone, even though he knows (*whether / that) she’s gone to Africa.

Very roughly, the explanation proposed by these authors is based on the same idea: these triggers are obligatory because their absence, through a pragmatic mechanism, would give rise to an inference (an antipresupposition [6], or an inference induced by a distinctiveness constraint [4]) which is incompatible with the context.

Additional data A number of authors [7, 8] have put forward other cases where a similar situation occurs, while no presuppositional trigger is involved. For example, in (3), the version without aussi (too/also) is clearly bad, but the correct version can be formed either with aussi or with et (and), which is not a presupposition trigger. In (4), the absence of the adverb now induces an interpretation where C is contradicting B. Similarly, in (5), the particle is not considered as a presupposition trigger.

(3) A: Marie était absente.  A: Marie was absent.
    B: *Pierre?  B: *Pierre?
    B: Pierre aussi ? B: Also Pierre ?
    B: Et Pierre ?  B: And Pierre ?

(4) a. A: Where’s John ?
    b. B: He was at home an hour ago.
    c. C: He’s in his office #(now).

(5) a. Bill is ill.
    B: He is *(indeed).

The previous examples all involve dialogues, but the phenomenon is not restricted to dialogue:

(6) a. The fugitive is *(back) in jail.
    b. That bachelor is *(now) married.
    c. The employees are *(currently) unemployed.

1The work reported here is concerned with French data, but for expository reasons, examples are given in English whenever possible.
There is another field where it’s possible to speak about obligatoriness: the field of anaphoric expressions. Pronouns are devices that mark discourse cohesion, which is another way to say that they are obligatory in some cases, in a fashion parallel to what was observed with presuppositions. The following contrasts illustrate this parallelism:

(7) a. Jean a fait une erreur qu’il ne fera (* pas / plus ).
   Jean made a mistake that he won’t make ( * ∅ / again )

b. Jean a fait une erreur que (* Jean / il) n’avait jamais faite.
   Jean made a mistake that (* Jean / he) never made before.

A similar observation can be made with indefinite NPs, whose semantic contribution is often described as the introduction of a new discourse referent:

(8) a. *[Un homme], est entré et [un homme], a fermé la porte.
   A man entered and a man closed the door

b. [Un homme], est entré et il, a fermé la porte.
   A man entered and he closed the door

Proposal  It is worth noting that all the obligatory elements we’ve seen have in common that they don’t bring new truth conditional content in the context. Our claim is that the phenomenon of obligatoriness is much larger than was previously thought: it involves a large set of devices used to insure discourse cohesion. The list of relevant devices includes pronouns, anaphoric definite descriptions, presupposition triggers, but also temporal adjuncts like in (6), which are usually not listed as cohesive devices.

In our talk we’ll propose a list of those devices that are both cohesive devices and obligatory, and we’ll also propose a precise characterisation of the contexts in which this obligatoriness manifests itself. This part requires careful investigations, for clearly it’s not possible to say, for instance, that pronouns are always preferred over proper names: it also depends on the potential ambiguities induced by the choice of a pronoun.

The analysis we propose here is not contradictory with previous approaches: it’s rather a generalisation. Instead of saying that one must obey a “Maximize Presupposition!” principle in order to avoid unwanted antipresuppositions, we claim that one must obey a “Maximize cohesion!” principle, in order to avoid a range of inferences which share with antipresuppositions a reasoning taking into account competition between alternative expressions that differ on their cohesion effect. We’ll propose a list of these unwanted inferences, which include antipresuppositions, but also the novelty of discourse referents introduced by non anaphoric NPs, or the identity (by default) of temporal references of the subject and the predicate in a sentence.

References


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2 For instance, in (4), now is redundant with respect to the temporal interpretation given by the tense.