

12

Insinuating Information and Accommodating Presupposition*

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12.1. Introduction

In the several decades since Peter Strawson appealed to the notion of presupposition in his debate with Russell on how definite descriptions work, there has been an explosion of scholarship on the topic. To a considerable extent, this scholarship focused on descriptive issues, with semanticists helpfully incorporating the notion into dynamic approaches that have shed light on issues such as presupposition-projection, cancellation, accommodation, catastrophic and non-catastrophic presupposition-failure, etc, and on how different expressions ('presupposition-triggers') affect them. However, and as perhaps is to be expected, regarding fundamental questions, it would be rash to claim that much illumination has been achieved. This chapter focuses on Stalnaker's well-known accounts of assertion and presupposition. I propose a normativist counterpart to both Stalnakerian accounts, and I deploy it in order better to understand a feature of presuppositions closely related to how we achieve brevity in our ordinary conversational practices. Lewis (1979) referred to that process when he characterized the 'rule of accommodation for presuppositions', that is, a process whereby, typically, presuppositions which are not part of the 'context set' (the set of mutually accepted propositions relative to which discourse takes place) are

* Financial support for my work was provided by the DGI, Spanish Government, research project FFI2010-16049 and Consolider-Ingenio project CSD2009-00056; through the *ICREA Academia* award for excellence in research, 2008, funded by the Generalitat de Catalunya; by the AGAUR of the Generalitat de Catalunya (2009SGR-1077), and by the European Community's Seventh Framework Programme *FP7/2007-2013* under grant agreement no. 238128. Versions of the paper were presented at a LOGOS seminar, and at conferences in Prague, Leuven, Lisbon, and Barcelona; I thank the audiences there for comments and suggestions. Thanks to Anne Bezuidenhout, Ambròs Domingo, Chris Gauker, Laurence Goldstein, Max Kölbel, Josep Macià, Teresa Marques, François Recanati, Sven Rosenkranz, Philipp Schlenker, and Andreas Stokke for helpful discussion ~~of some topics in this review~~.

‘included’ in it without further ado, giving rise to the so-called ‘informative presuppositions’, as for example when I say, ‘I cannot go to the meeting, because I have to pick up my sister at the airport’, without assuming that my audience knows that I have a sister.

On the view advanced here, brevity is achieved in such cases by indirectly conveying information rather than by asserting it outright. This phenomenon constitutes an important *prima facie* objection to Stalnaker’s (1973, 1974) pragmatic characterization of the phenomenon of presupposition, in particular of the triggering of presuppositions, to which he (2002) has replied that it is important to take into account the time at which presupposition-requirements are to be computed. In recent work in the Stalnakerian framework, Philippe Schlenker (2012) has endorsed Stalnaker’s proposal. In defence of a different, (in a sense) ‘semantic’, account of the phenomenon of presupposition, my goal is to object to that proposal and to portray Lewisian ‘accommodation’ (Lewis 1979) as one way in which speakers adjust to one another in the course of conversation.

Some natural language expressions are conventional indicators of illocutionary types: thus, the interrogative mood conventionally indicates a question, and embedding under a performative construction—‘I promise to S’—is a conventional indicator of a promise. According to Searle (1969), referential expressions such as proper names, indexicals, and demonstratives (and perhaps definite and even indefinite descriptions, in some uses) share an expressive feature that is a conventional indicator of an *ancillary* speech act of *referring*—‘ancillary’ in that it is auxiliary to the performance of another speech act. In this chapter, I will defend an assumption many researchers make, while others dispute: that some expressions traditionally regarded as presupposition-triggers, such as clefts or definite descriptions, are conventional indicators of another ancillary speech act: *presupposing*. In the next section, I will provide an initial characterization of presuppositions, which, against sceptical claims to the contrary, suggests that this is a robust kind, in need of elucidation. In Section 12.3, I will present the Stalnakerian account. In Section 12.4, I will argue that the well-known practice of informative presupposition puts a heavy strain on that account, supporting instead a conventionalist (semanticist) solution to what is known as the Triggering Problem for presuppositions. In the final section I show how a semantic account deals with that problem.

12.2. Presupposition

Our semantic competence underwrites the validity of inferences such as the following, for both (12.1) and (12.2):

(12.1) John infected the PC.

(12.2) It was John who infected the PC.

∴ Someone infected the PC.

However, there is a difference between the syntactic constructions in (12.1) and (12.2). Unlike the less marked way of expressing what we perceive as the same content in (12.1), the cleft construction in (12.2) also validates (at least, in default contexts) the same inference when placed under different embeddings, such as negation (12.3), conditionals (12.4), modals (12.5), etc. Presuppositions are thus said to be ‘projected’, that is, inherited by the embedding constructions:¹

(12.3) It was not John who infected the PC.

(12.4) If it was John who infected the PC, the Mac is also infected.

(12.5) It may have been John who infected the PC.

∴ Someone infected the PC.

Other presuppositional constructions exhibit this behaviour. Consider the case of definite descriptions:

(12.6) The Sants station newsstand sells *The Guardian*.

(12.7) The Sants station newsstand does not sell *The Guardian*.

(12.8) If the Sants station newsstand sells *The Guardian*, we will buy it there.

(12.9) The Sants station newsstand may sell *The Guardian*.

∴ There is exactly one Sants station newsstand.

This projection behaviour invites the traditional characterization of presuppositions as conditions for the truth or the falsity of the sentences/propositions in which they are included. However, the debates of the past few decades suggest that this cannot be right. In the first place, Strawson (1971) pointed out cases of what Yablo (2006) calls ‘non-catastrophic presupposition failure’. For example, if there are in fact two newsstands at the Sants station and both of them sell *The Guardian*, many people feel that (12.6) is nonetheless true; on the other hand, if there is no newsstand there, many people feel that (12.10) is false, not just neither true nor false:

(12.10) I waited for you for two hours at the Sants station newsstand.

Secondly, presuppositions are not projected in some cases; hence, they are not there ‘globally’, but they are still there, somehow, ‘locally’. They cannot be in those cases conditions for the truth *or* falsity of the whole claim, and thus the intuitive test we are considering does not witness their nonetheless ‘local’ presence:

¹ Throughout this paper I will be using clefts and definite descriptions as good candidates for conventional presuppositional triggers. Levinson (1983: 220–2) summarizes joint work with Jay Atlas allegedly providing an account of clefts that (in terms explained in the next section) counts as ‘eliminativist’ in that it is not supposed to assume conventional triggers. With other writers (Beaver 2001: 29–30; Simons 2006: 367), I doubt that such an account (putting aside its plausibility) is truly eliminativist, because it relies on ‘Gricean’ inferences *sensitive to a specific logical form they ascribe to clefts*. On the constitutive account of the semantic/pragmatic divide explained later, this is just an alternative semantic account.

(12.11) If someone infected the PC, it was John who did it.

(12.12) Someone infected the PC, and it was John who did it.

Finally, conventional implicatures, which intuitively differ from presuppositions, share their projection behaviour with the presuppositions in the embeddings we have considered earlier. Following Potts (2007), I use non-restrictive *wh*-clauses as illustrative examples:

(12.13) John, who infected the PC, teaches in Oxford.

(12.14) It is not the case that John, who infected the PC, teaches in Oxford.

(12.15) If John, who infected the PC, teaches in Oxford, he will attend the conference.

(12.16) It may be the case that John, who infected the PC, teaches in Oxford.
∴ John infected the PC.

Geurts (1999: 6–8) uses the projection behaviour illustrated by (12.3)–(12.5) and (12.11)–(12.12) as an intuitive test to characterize presuppositions. Even though he acknowledges that the test is defeasible, I think that the fact that conventional implicatures also pass it shows that it is not even a good intuitive characterization.² Von Stechow (2004: 271) proposes an alternative *hey, wait a minute* test to distinguish presupposition and assertion, which, even if also far from perfect, I take to be better. Consider the following dialogues, with ‘#’ being an indication of conversational impropriety or infelicity:

(12.17) It was not John who infected the PC.

(12.18) # Hey, wait a minute, I had no idea that John did not infect the PC.

(12.19) Hey, wait a minute, I had no idea that someone infected the PC.

(12.20) It is not the case that John, who infected the PC, teaches in Oxford.

(12.21) # Hey, wait a minute, I had no idea that John does not teach in Oxford.

(12.22) # Hey, wait a minute, I had no idea that John infected the PC.³

² Beaver (2001: 19–20), Chierchia and McConnell-Ginet (1990: 283), and Kadmon (2001: 13) make a similar point. Perhaps more details on projection behaviour would after all make it possible to distinguish presuppositions and conventional implicatures, as Andreas Stokke suggested to me, mentioning embeddings under attitude ascriptions. The resulting test would in any case be complex, which would give us reasons to prefer von Stechow’s simpler test.

³ When this material was presented at conferences, some members of the audience questioned the intuitive judgment reported here. This matter (as other aspects of the debate examined here) should be investigated empirically. Note that the test deploys the ‘wait a minute’ objection followed by something like ‘I had no idea that...’, which will be important later when we try to accommodate it in our theoretical proposal to account for presuppositions. We can also object to the assertion, ‘John infected the PC’, with something like ‘Wait a minute! John couldn’t have done it, he doesn’t know anything about computers!’

Intuitively, this is why von Fintel's test provides a better initial characterization of presuppositions. As opposed to both asserted contents and conventional implicatures, presuppositions are presented as information already in the possession of the conversational participants. The asserted content is presented as information new to the audience. The same applies to conventionally implicated contents, even if the latter are somehow backgrounded relative to the main assertion. This is why targeting the asserted or conventionally implicated content with the 'Hey, wait a minute' objection does not feel right, whereas objecting in that way to the presupposed content does. In other words, presuppositions are presented as part of the 'common ground', while asserted and conventionally implicated contents are presented as new information.

Von Fintel's test, whether or not it is ultimately acceptable, provides us with a useful, if rather blunt, instrument for isolating the phenomenon in which we are interested. It shows that the scepticism expressed by writers such as Böer and Lycan (1976) and Levinson (1983)—who argue for a form of the eliminativist view about presuppositions that I will describe later, in part on the basis of the alleged miscellaneous character of the phenomenon—is *prima facie* unreasonable. The intuitions unveiled by the 'Hey, wait a minute' test are quite robust, and robustly related to grammatical constructions like those we have used for illustration, which the reader may supplement by considering variations on them, or others in the list given by Levinson (1983: 181–5). The robustness of the intuitions suggests at least *prima facie* that we are confronted with a sufficiently 'natural' kind, amenable to a precise characterization. What we are after is a philosophically adequate definition, which, if it is solid, should elaborate on the preceding intuitive explanation as to why von Fintel's characterization succeeds where those previously considered fail. This is what we will try to accomplish in the next pages; we will start by presenting Stalnaker's influential proposal.

12.3. The Stalnakerian picture

In a series of papers, Stalnaker (1973, 1974, 2002) provided an influential account of the phenomenon of presupposition. The account has been slightly modified along the way; here I will just present what I take to be its core aspects.⁴ Stalnaker's proposal is in the spirit of Grice's account of phenomena such as conversational implicature, in particular, and meaning in general: it purports to explain those phenomena as a specific form of rational behaviour involving communicative intentions, avoiding irreducibly social notions such as conventions or (socially construed) norms.

⁴ Simons (2003) provides a helpful sympathetic discussion of the evolving details.

Stalnaker bases his analysis on the notion of *speaker presupposition*, which he then reluctantly (for reasons to be indicated presently) uses to provide the notion of *sentence presupposition*. The notion of *speaker presupposition* is explained in terms of common beliefs about what is *accepted* by the conversational partners; and *common belief* follows the pattern of Schiffer's (1972) and Lewis' (1969) proposals about it and about *common knowledge*: *p* is common belief in a given group *G* just in case (almost) everybody in *G* believes *p*, believes that (almost) everybody in *G* believes *p*, and so on. *Acceptance* is in turn defined by Stalnaker (2002: 716) as a category of mental states 'which includes belief, but also some attitudes (presumption, assumption, acceptance for the purposes of an argument or an inquiry) that contrast with belief and with each other. To accept a proposition is to treat it as true for some reason.' The need to invoke *acceptance* in the definition derives from many cases in which, intuitively and according to our initial characterization above, *p* is presupposed while not commonly believed. Thus, consider Donnellan's (1966) example: the secret conspirator asks the usurper's minions, 'Is the king in his countinghouse?' Here the speaker does not believe that the intended referent is king, nor perhaps that there is a king, and hence does not believe that these propositions are commonly believed in the context; nonetheless, it is presupposed that the referent is king and that there is exactly one king.⁵ Acceptance, however, cannot be invoked all the way down; the account is given in terms of common belief about what is commonly accepted, because only the more specific category of belief has the required explanatory links with behaviour.

Thus, this is the final account. We first define a proposition *p* to be in the *common ground in a group G*— $CG_G(p)$ —and then we define *speaker presupposition*:

(CG_G) $CG_G(p)$ if and only if it is common belief in *G* that everybody accepts *p*.

(SpP) Speaker *S* presupposes *p* (relative to *G*) if and only if *S* believes that $CG_G(p)$.

Stalnaker (1973: 451; 1974: 50) then defines the notion of *sentence presupposition* in the following terms:

(SnP) Sentence *S* presupposes *p* if and only if the use of *S* would *for some reason* be inappropriate unless the speaker presupposed *p*.

Stalnaker (1978) complements this analysis of presuppositions with an equally influential analysis of *assertion*, in which an assertion is a proposal to update the common ground which, if accepted, is 'added' to it (ie, it then becomes common belief that every participant accepts the assertion). Stalnaker further combined the two accounts to suggest intuitively plausible explanations of some aspects of the projecting

⁵ I believe this is an intuitively correct characterization of what is presupposed in this case, which I take to be a referential use of the description; in general, as I argue in García-Carpintero (2000), all cases of reference involve 'identification' presuppositions.

behaviour we presented in the previous section. Stalnaker's contribution (together with the related independent work of Lauri Karttunen (1974)) was the origin of the new important tradition of Dynamic Semantics (DS), developed for example in Heim (1983/2002), Beaver (2001), and von Stechow (2004). This tradition has the resources to provide the account we were after at the end of section 12.2. Unlike the traditional account of presuppositions as conditions of the truth or falsity of statements, it can explain the selective projection behaviour we have seen to be characteristic of presuppositions, and it can distinguish them from conventional implicatures, accounting also for the adequacy of von Stechow's test. Last but not least, when properly elaborated, the account provided in the DS tradition also has the resources to explain the phenomenon of non-catastrophic presupposition failure (see von Stechow 2004). Geurts (1999: 17) is, however, correct in pointing out the important conceptual differences between the DS tradition and Stalnaker's viewpoint, which in fact go to the heart of the main issues I want to discuss here. Renouncing Stalnaker's Gricean reductive aims, in this tradition, presuppositions are taken to be, both with respect to their triggering and projecting behaviour, a constitutive feature of the semantics of natural language expressions.⁶

Let us be a bit more clear and explicit about the differences between Stalnaker's 'pragmatic' view and the 'semantic' one I want to defend here. As Stalnaker (1974: 61) notes, there are two contrasting ways of understanding the semantic/pragmatics divide. In the *truth-conditional* account, semantics deals with the truth-conditions of sentences, and the truth-conditional import of expressions. It is in this sense that presuppositions understood as conditions for the truth or falsity of sentences are said to be a semantic phenomenon. An important strand of Stalnaker's early defence of a pragmatic account was to oppose such a 'semantic' conception; for reasons mentioned in the previous section (non-catastrophic failure, projection behaviour), I think that this opposition was well aimed. However, as I have argued in detail elsewhere,⁷ the truth-conditional way of tracing the semantic/pragmatic divide is not theoretically useful, because it displaces from the purview of semantics facts that should be studied alongside those that are kept there: among others, semantically driven context-dependence, semantics for conventional indicators of speech acts such as the interrogative and imperative mood, and, indeed (if the view promoted later is correct), certain presuppositional facts.

⁶ Geurts (1999: 14) distances himself from Dynamic Semantics on account of its betrayal of Stalnaker's truly pragmatic stance, and, like Stalnaker, he helps himself to the notion of expression-presupposition, defined in normative terms on the basis of the pragmatic notion of speaker presupposition. Unlike Stalnaker, Geurts also appeals to unexplained normative notions in characterizing *speaker presupposition*: 'a speaker who presupposes something incurs a commitment . . . regardless whether he really believes what he presupposes' (Geurts 1999: 11). Consequently, I think that his understanding of the pragmatic stance is closer to the one to be adopted here, than to Stalnaker's own.

⁷ See García-Carpintero (2001, 2004, 2006).

On a different *constitutive* understanding of the divide, linguistics in general purports to theoretically characterize the constitutive facts about natural languages (to put it indirectly, the linguistic competence of speakers), and semantics is a part of linguistics dealing with meaning facts constitutive of natural languages. This is, I think, the conception of the divide that Grice (1975) had in mind when he tried to account for the apparent asymmetric, non-truth-conditional behaviour of conjunction or referential uses of descriptions as generalized conversational implicatures, that is, as ‘pragmatic’ features. Although his views here are complex,⁸ I take this also to be Grice’s (1981) own view on the presuppositional phenomena we are discussing here. Having noted the two different interpretations of the divide, Stalnaker (1974: 61) points out that he is mainly arguing for a pragmatic account of presuppositions *only on the first understanding*, but also notes that his arguments have repercussions for the issue taken in the second interpretation: while he is open to the possibility that in some cases ‘one may just have to write presupposition constraints into the dictionary entry for a particular word’ (61), he conjectures ‘that one can explain many presupposition constraints in terms of general conversational rules without building anything about presuppositions into the meanings of particular words or constructions’ (61).

In fact, although, as we have seen, Stalnaker introduced (*reluctantly*) the notion of sentence presupposition (SnP) in his early writings, and still assumes it in recent writing, he has repeatedly expresses qualms about it: both due to the unexplained appeal to the normative notion of *inappropriateness* and because it suggests the existence of a ‘mysterious relation X’ between sentences and propositions worthy of analysis, whereas ‘we don’t need the mysterious relation X to describe the phenomena, and it does not make any contribution to explaining them’ (Stalnaker 2002: 712–13).⁹ We may say that Gricean generalized conversational implicature accounts of referential uses of descriptions or manifest non-truth-conditional asymmetries in conjunctions are not simply *reductionist*, but in fact *eliminativist* vis-à-vis semantic accounts of those phenomena, on the second understanding of the divide: although it is acknowledged that definite descriptions and conjunctions are in fact commonly used in those ways, it is claimed that a semantic theory should not encompass them. This is the way I understand in this chapter the label ‘(Gricean) eliminativist view’ of the phenomenon of presupposition, and I apply it to writers such as Böer and Lycan (1976), Levinson (1983), and, indeed, Grice (1981). The proposal is not to deny the phenomenon altogether, but only the need for a *semantic*

⁸ Bezuidenhout (2010) provides a good discussion of Grice’s views on this matter.

⁹ We find claims along these lines already in his earlier writings: ‘the facts can be stated and explained directly in terms of the underlying notion of speaker presupposition, and without introducing an intermediate notion of presupposition as a relation holding between sentences (or statements) and propositions’ (Stalnaker 1974: 50).

account for it. Presuppositions do exist, but they can be accounted for without including them in our theoretical constitutive characterization of natural languages. The Stalnakerian view of presuppositions, in contrast to the DS view, is ultimately eliminativist in this sense.¹⁰ This stance was present from the beginning, but the emphasis is stronger in more recent work:

[O]ne might define a notion of sentence presupposition in terms of speaker presupposition, but ... the attempt to do so would be a distraction, and would not yield any theoretically useful notion (Stalnaker 2010: 150).

In the next section I will critically examine these contentions. While I will essentially agree with Stalnaker that presupposition is a pragmatic, not semantic, phenomenon in the truth-conditional sense, ultimately having to do with the propositional attitudes of speakers, I will find reasons to question his Gricean eliminativist stance, and hence to reject that it is a pragmatic phenomenon also on the constitutive account.

12.4. The problem of accommodating accommodation

As Stalnaker (1973: 449; 1974: 51–2) noted in his early writings, it is common for speakers to communicate a piece of information by uttering a sentence that presupposes it. These are real life examples from Abbott (2008):

- (12.23) The leaders of the militant homophile movement in America generally have been young people. It was they who fought back during a violent police raid on a Greenwich Village bar in 1969, an incident from which many gays date the birth of the modern crusade for homosexual rights.
- (12.24) If you're going into the bedroom, would you mind bringing back the big bag of potato chips that I left on the bed?

Speakers who utter sentences (12.23) and (12.24) do not typically assume their presuppositions—that some people fought back during a violent police raid on a Greenwich Village bar in 1969, and that there is exactly one big bag of potato chips that the speaker left on the bed, respectively—to be in the common ground. To utter

¹⁰ In recent work, Philippe Schlenker (2008a, 2009) has advanced several new theoretical proposals, which he advertises as Stalnakerian alternatives to DS: with regard to both the Projection and the Triggering issues, Schlenker contends that his proposals are pragmatic, not semantic. Schlenker is not clear whether he has in mind the truth-conditional or the constitutive view of the semantic/pragmatic divide, but I assume it must be the first one. His 'Local Contexts' proposal (Schlenker 2009)—which offers interesting solutions to well-known problems of DS theories with quantified or disjunctive sentences—assumes a bivalent, non-dynamic semantics for connectives and quantifiers, and thus counts as 'non-semantic' on the truth-conditional view. However, exactly as in DS, the account straightforwardly assumes that presuppositions are calculated in a compositional way 'locally', that is, with respect to phrases that are proper parts of the whole sentence. This is why, I take it, Stalnaker (2010: 149–51) distances himself from Schlenker's proposals.

sentences with those presuppositions is just an expedient resource for them to inform their audiences of such contents, plus the assertion, woven together in a terse package. That the contents are nonetheless presupposed is shown by the ‘Hey, wait a minute!’ test—even though a ‘Hey, wait a minute!’ objection in these cases might feel, even if literally adequate, pedantic, smug, or otherwise unco-operative—just like it feels to fail to grasp a manifest implicature.¹¹

The examples above help us to appreciate the ordinariness of the phenomenon, but it is better to have a simpler case for discussion.¹² We assume that the speaker utters (12.25) in the knowledge that his audience knows nothing about his family:

(12.25) I cannot come to the meeting—I have to pick up my sister at the airport.

The ‘Hey, wait a minute!’ test shows again the presence of the presupposition that the speaker has a sister (in addition to others, such that there is a salient airport, and so on, but we will focus on this), even if, as before, precisely to the extent that speakers are entitled to assume that the presupposition will be *accommodated* without further ado by ordinary audiences, it would feel awkward if somebody objected to it with the ‘Hey, wait a minute . . .’ complaint. (It would feel much better if the speaker had made the utterance with ‘my lover’ replacing ‘my sister’.) These are cases where speakers exploit what Lewis (1979) called the ‘Rule of Accommodation for Presuppositions’, which he characterized as follows:

(RA) If at time *t* something is said that requires presupposition *p* to be acceptable, and if *p* is not presupposed just before *t*, then—*ceteris paribus* and within certain limits—presupposition *p* comes into existence at *t*.

Cases in which a ‘Hey, wait a minute . . .’ complaint is actually made, which the ‘my lover’ variant illustrates, explain the need for the hedge: the hearer is not always prepared to accommodate. Now, the initial problem for Stalnaker’s account that cases of informative presupposition pose is as follows: (i) as he acknowledges (1973: 449; 1974: 51–2), a presupposition is present;¹³ however, (at first sight at least) (ii) the speaker does not presuppose it, on Stalnaker’s characterization, because he does not believe that his audience accepts it; while (iii) the fact that cases like these are

¹¹ On the view that I will defend later, an informative presupposition is similar to an implicature: the speaker uses a device that conventionally presupposes something without himself presupposing it, but rather volunteering it as a piece of (background) information; there is a semantic presupposition without a corresponding speaker presupposition. Tests like von Stechow’s directly tract our linguistic intuitions, which by themselves do not distinguish semantic from pragmatic matters. Hence, I do not give much weight to the suggestion that the test could nonetheless be deployed to manifest the presence of the presupposition even in these cases among the sufficiently enlightened. (Thanks to Chris Gauker here.)

¹² Stalnaker (1974: 52 n 2) attributes the following example to Jerry Sadock.

¹³ Kadmon (2001: 219–21) describes these, instead, as cases of presupposition ‘disappearance’, on the basis of her characterization of presuppositions as propositions ‘intuitively felt to be taken for granted’. But I think this is a bad choice, based on a bad, manifestly over-generating characterization.

commonplace suggests that there is nothing inappropriate in their use, and certainly nothing *feels* inappropriate about them.

Although he has been aware of the issue all along, only in recent work has Stalnaker confronted it squarely, arguing that in fact these cases are not at odds with his account, because *only at first sight* is (ii) correct: when the proper time at which the presupposition is to be accepted is considered, it turns out that the speaker *is* presupposing the relevant content. In what follows, I will critically discuss the adequacy of his arguments endorsed by writers sympathetic to Stalnaker's pragmatic account such as Simons (2003: 267–8) and Schlenker (2012, 397–8).^{14, 15}

Stalnaker (2002: 708–9) points out that utterances themselves are manifest events, which become part of the common ground. Given that speakers take advantage of this, speakers' presuppositions should only be satisfied at a '(perhaps somewhat idealized) point after the utterance event has taken place, but before it has been accepted or rejected'. Stalnaker (1998: 101) motivates this with a convincing example:

The point of a speech act... is to change the context, and since the way the speech act is supposed to change the context depends on its content, interpretation must be done in the prior context—the context as it is before the assertion is accepted, and its content added to what is presupposed. But the prior context cannot be the context as it was before the speaker began to speak. Suppose Phoebe says 'I saw an interesting movie last night'. To determine the content of her remark, one needs to know who is speaking, and so Phoebe, if she is speaking appropriately, must be presuming that the information that she is speaking is available to her audience—that is shared information. But she need not presume that this information was available before she began to speak. The prior context that is relevant to the interpretation of a speech act is the context as it is changed by the fact that the speech act was made, but prior to the acceptance or rejection of the speech act.¹⁶

Stalnaker thus rejects (ii) in the characterization of the problem given earlier: the attitudes constitutive of speaker presupposition on his account were there after all—not

¹⁴ Simons (2003: 267–9), who shares Stalnaker's eliminativist leanings, shows that more complex sentences may pose difficulties for Stalnaker's 'idealized time' strategy that is described below. In more recent work (Simons, *ms.*), in which she deepens her eliminativist viewpoint, she doubts that the strategy might suffice to account for informative presuppositions, on the basis of considerations related to the ones developed below.

¹⁵ In his insightful discussion of accommodation (to which I am much indebted), von Stechow (2008) makes heavy use of Stalnaker's point about the proper time at which presuppositions should be satisfied by the common ground. However, his view of presuppositions differs from Stalnaker's precisely on the matter we are discussing: he accepts semantically triggered presuppositions (2008: 138). There is no problem at all in accepting that speakers do make the relevant presuppositions, acknowledging Stalnaker's claim about the time when they should be accepted, *if* in the cases under discussion they were semantically triggered. The problem originates in Stalnaker's claim that the same applies even if there is no linguistic trigger in the sentences. My account of accommodation in the next section is very close to von Stechow's.

¹⁶ The point was in fact made earlier by Stalnaker (1978: 86): 'the context on which assertion has its *essential* effect is not defined by what is presupposed before the speaker begins to speak, but will include any information which the speaker assumes his audience can infer from the performance of the speech act'.

relative to the time *before* the speaker made his utterance, which is not after all when they should be present, but to the ‘somewhat idealized time’ at which they are required.

Now, although Stalnaker’s contention about the time when the speakers’ attitudes he takes to be constitutive of presuppositions should (ideally) be present is undoubtedly correct—as the Phoebe example clearly shows—this, by itself, does not suffice to account for informative presuppositions in an eliminativist setting; in assuming that it does, Stalnaker begs the main question at stake. For our present purposes, the two times in idealized interpretation—one after the utterance ends, when the presuppositions are checked, before the second one at which acceptance or rejection of the assertion is decided—exist insofar as the presuppositions do: presuppositions are just those contents considered at the first moment in ideal interpretation.¹⁷ What is at stake in this debate, however, is whether there are cases in which they are *semantically* triggered. They are not in all cases: there clearly are ‘pragmatically’ triggered presuppositions, for which the two ideal moments nonetheless also exist (as when the husband tells his wife out of the blue at breakfast, ‘they should have left earlier’, assuming information about their guests last night to fix the referent of ‘they’). What is here in question is whether their presence can be accounted for ‘pragmatically’ *in all cases*, including those that at first sight require a semantic trigger, such as the ‘my sister’ case. Stalnaker assumes the presence of the two moments in all cases, including those without a semantic trigger (a ‘mysterious relation X’), and in so doing he begs the question as to whether, in the cases under dispute, the existence of the two separate moments in idealized interpretation can be duly justified.¹⁸

What is at stake is whether informative presuppositions are compatible with the Gricean eliminativist stance that Stalnaker ultimately professes. Even if he declares himself open to the existence of conventional triggers, Stalnaker (2002: 713–14) presses for the eliminativist stance:

Suppose we assume that the semantics tells us exactly this about the sentence ‘I have to pick up my sister at the airport’: it is true if and only if the speaker has a sister whom he or she has to pick up at the airport, and false otherwise. So we are supposing that the semantics tells us nothing either about relation X, or about what speakers must take to be common ground. Are there facts about the use of the sentence that cannot be explained by this semantic hypothesis, together with general conversational rules?

This is a rhetorical question. But the facts of informative presupposition suggest that the answer is ‘yes’, disappointing the rhetorically conveyed expectations.

The Phoebe example does support Stalnaker’s claim about the time when speakers should believe that their presuppositions are accepted; but, in the context of our

¹⁷ Information in addition to presuppositions, such as ‘that Phoebe is speaking’, is also added at the first moment, and this is not a presupposition. (Thanks to Andreas Stokke here.)

¹⁸ Gauker (2008a: 185) makes a similar point.

dialectics, the his problem is that the presupposition in the example (that x is the unique utterer of 'I') might well be as much conventionally (semantically) triggered, as the one in (12.25) we are discussing. It rings true that, at a 'somewhat idealized time' after the utterance, before acceptance or rejection of the main assertoric claim—that x saw an interesting movie last night—the presupposition that x is the unique utterer of 'I' must be accepted. But this might well be induced by the *semantics* of the sentence, and this is certainly what partisans of Stalnaker's rival account of presuppositions would want to say.¹⁹ In the context of the present dialectics, Stalnaker should rather have considered an utterance of, say, 'there is exactly one agent of this very utterance, and s/he saw an interesting movie last night' (which articulates for this case the semantically given truth-conditions he considers for (12.25) in the quotation two paragraphs back). Would an ideal interpretation of *that utterance* require two different interpretative 'moments': an earlier one at which a speaker presupposition identifying an individual as the agent of the speech is checked, and a later one at which acceptance or rejection of the claim that that individual saw an interesting movie is decided? I do not see why: in this case, those two propositions are part of a single assertoric content, the one to be considered in the second moment. By parity of reasoning, the same applies to the case in dispute of (12.25) *on Stalnaker's assumptions about what the semantics tells us*. Simply taking for granted that the ideal moment in question exists even on eliminativist assumptions begs the question at issue: for it simply assumes, without independent justification, that the presuppositional requirement is somehow triggered even without conventional indicators.

12.5. Accommodation in a semantic account of presupposing

As I have already mentioned, although accounts of presupposition such as Heim's (1983/2002), Beaver's (2001) and perhaps even Geurts's (1999) are in the spirit of Stalnaker's, they outright abandon his eliminativist leanings. Presupposing is a pragmatic notion in the truth-conditional sense, but not in the constitutive one, involving attitudes of speakers. Presuppositions can be triggered in different ways, even when standardly associated with sentence-types—allowing for conventional triggering in such cases, but not requiring it. These accounts explicitly assume that there are conventional indicators of presuppositions (such as the cleft construction or definite descriptions), which a semantic theory should properly take into consideration, perhaps in its lexical semantics component.

To give an account of what happens in the case of informative presuppositions on the basis of such assumptions is relatively straightforward. Conventionally (and semantically, on the constitutive view of the semantics/pragmatics divide), whoever

¹⁹ García-Carpintero (2000) promotes such a view about the semantics of indexicals, demonstratives, and proper names.

utters ‘Who the heck would want to see that film?’ is asking a question, but the speaker is in fact asserting something. Conventionally, and semantically, an utterance of ‘Paul is a good friend’ is an assertion that Paul is a good friend; in some contexts, it might be perfectly clear that the speaker is not making such an assertion, but in fact one with a contrary content. Conventionally, and semantically, ‘Thanks for not browsing our magazines’ is an expression of gratitude, but when we find an utterance of it in a train station kiosk, we know that its author was doing no such thing, but in fact making a request. Conventionally, and semantically, the sentence with which George Eliot opens *Middlemarch*, ‘Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress’, presupposes the existence of a specific ‘Miss Brooke’ naming practice, on which she relies for the purpose of identifying a person about whose beauty she makes a claim; but Eliot is neither presupposing nor asserting, she is just putting her audience in the position to imagine something.

Something similar happens in cases of informative presuppositions. Speakers who utter ‘I cannot come to the meeting—I have to pick up my sister at the airport’ or ‘I am sorry I am late—my car broke down’, use sentences that conventionally and semantically presuppose that they have a sister and a car, respectively, and they themselves as speakers might be presupposing it: for instance (if this is what presupposing ultimately is, which I have not discussed here), they might be assuming that they are performing an act—ancillary to their main speech act—which is correct if, and only if, it is mutually known to all involved that he has a sister, or a car. But in the cases of informative presuppositions we have been discussing, they are doing no such thing, because they know fully well that such a requirement is not met. They are rather relying on their audiences’ awareness of the presuppositional requirement conventionally attached to the form of words they are using, and their awareness that in their context the requirement is not met, the speaker knows that it is not, knows that the audience knows that it is not, and so on and so forth, in order indirectly to provide them with those pieces of non-controversial background information in a conveniently brief and non-verbose way.^{20, 21}

This is thus my diagnosis of the case of informative presuppositions, vis-à-vis the triad I used in the previous section to describe Stalnaker’s difficulty: (i) semantically, a presupposition is present; (ii) the speaker is not presupposing, for he knows very well that the relevant proposition is not common knowledge, but he is not doing

²⁰ I take it that these are all examples of indirect speech acts, which is the way I propose to understand informative presuppositions (remember that I take presupposition and reference to be ancillary speech acts). Some of those cases are described in the literature as non-literal uses—a category I would rather reserve for metaphors and loose talk. Whatever the best classification of the preceding examples is, I would suggest to include in it informative presuppositions.

²¹ The proposal thus provides an elaboration or explanation of Lewis’ RA, the Rule of Accommodation for presuppositions. The way ‘presupposition *p* comes into existence at *t*’ is by its being added to the common ground as an indirect assertion, perhaps of background or uncontroversial material. (Thanks to Anne Bezuidenhout for pointing this out.)

anything incorrect; (iii) there is nothing inappropriate in it, exactly in the way that there is nothing such in all those analogous examples of indirection we have just mentioned.²² As Karttunen (1974: 412) puts it, '[t]his is one way in which we communicate indirectly, convey matters without discussing them.' Stalnaker (1974: 51–2; compare 1973: 451) also accounts for these cases essentially in this way: 'In such a case, a speaker tells his auditor something in part by pretending that his auditor already knows it.' But I have argued that there are serious objections to his claim that such a 'pretending' can be accounted for if there is no 'mysterious relation X', that is, that Stalnaker cannot stick to his quoted diagnosis consistently with his reductionist leanings.

In the foregoing sketch of an account, I have been assuming that Grice's model for conversational implicatures can be extended to account for indirect speech acts in general. To do that, we should make two revisions. Firstly, the derivation of the indirect act starts with the conventional semantic meaning of the utterance. This includes not just what is traditionally regarded as semantic content (or perhaps merely constraints on content, to be contextually elaborated), but also information about the type of speech act indicated by the mood, and semantic presuppositions. The speaker may or may not make a speech act with a force and a content fitting this semantically conveyed information; in a rhetorical question or an ironical remark, he will not. Secondly, Grice's maxims, particularly those of quality, were formulated aiming to account for discourses consisting of utterances in the declarative mood and conveying assertions. Consider, instead, the case of a rhetorical question, such as an ordinary utterance, 'Who on Earth wants to read this book?'. Here, no adequate derivation can depart from the premise that (say) the speaker said something untrue or for which he did not have sufficient evidence, because the speaker was using a conventional expression for asking, as opposed to saying anything properly evaluable as true or otherwise. Consider alternatively a case in which, by placing a token of 'Thanks for not browsing our journals' at a newsstand, the speaker conveys the request not to browse the journals. Here, for analogous reasons, the derivation cannot conclude by finding a proposition to the truth of which the speaker can be understood to be committing himself.²³

Simons (*ms.*) has recently provided an eliminativist account alternative to Stalnaker's. On her account, the basic concept is *utterance presupposition*; it is used to define both *speaker presupposition* and an etiolated notion of *sentence presupposition* along the lines of Stalnaker's. Simons defines *utterance U presupposes p* as follows:

²² This is, I take it, the picture presented by von Fintel (2008: 151).

²³ A full account of those cases should proceed from a theory of the nature of the speech acts involved (the question/expression of gratitude, in the previous examples), and develop from it alternative maxims corresponding to Grice's. For the case of implicatures conveying questions, or conveyed with sentences semantically expressing questions, Braun (2011) develops an interesting proposal.

(i) it is not part of the speaker's primary communicative intention to convey *p*, and
(ii) the interpreter of U must take the speaker of U to accept *p* in order to make sense of U. Now, *prima facie* informative presuppositions—especially those in which the intuitively primary point of the speaker is to convey the presupposition, as in the notorious exchange: 'The new boss is attractive—yes, his wife thinks so too'²⁴—constitute a counterexample to this proposal. Simons deals with this by explaining that she does not mean 'primary' in any intuitive sense, but in a technical one: on her view, in such cases 'the speaker is being intentionally indirect, and is exploiting the presuppositional requirements of the utterance...when a speaker produces an utterance with the specific intention of communicating what is presupposed, this intention must be viewed as a secondary intention. This is why the definition above refers to the speaker's *primary* communicative intention' (Simons, *ms.*: 20–1).

Now, on the sort of semantic proposal I have been making, Simons' *primary intention* is not at all difficult to cash out: it is just the intention of conveying the conventional/semantic content of the utterance, and the previous Gricean account elaborates in which ways the speaker is being indirect in conveying, as a secondary intention, the informative presupposition.²⁵ In other words, such a semantically based account has the resources for non-circularly explaining the crucial notion that Simons appeals to, that of *exploiting the presuppositional requirements of the utterance*. But she does not explain how the same result can be obtained given her eliminativist stance. The problem is how to establish, without the semantic assumption, that conveying that the new boss has a wife is not part of the 'speaker's primary communicative intention', in her technical sense. It is not, she says, because it is part of the 'presupposition requirements' of the utterance; but where do such requirements come from, if they are supposed to consist merely of psychological attitudes of the speakers and their interpreters? Once again, we are confronted with an eliminativist proposal that appears to beg the main question at stake.

²⁴ Alan Ryan's review of *John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand* ('The Passionate Hero, Then and Now', *New York Review of Books*, 2011: 19, 60) contains the following quotation from the book with a nice real life example; it refers to Mill's first encounter with Harriet Taylor, who would become his very special friend for twenty years until the death of her husband, and then his wife: 'In many ways, it was not a surprising match. Harriet Taylor was intelligent, pretty, vivacious, progressive, open-minded and poetic. But his admiration was shared by others—not least by her two children, and her husband'. I assume that this is the first indication in the book that Harriet was married and had two children.

²⁵ From the point of view of the present account, Simons' use of 'primary' and 'secondary' may be a little confusing; on Searle's (1975) well-known account of indirect speech acts, the act conventionally indicated (the means) is the secondary one, and the one indirectly made (the ultimate goal) the primary one. (Thanks to Anna Bezuidenhout here.)