Presupposition, disagreement, and predicates of taste[*]

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Abstract: I offer a simple-minded analysis of presupposition in which if a sentence has a presupposition, then both that sentence and its negation logically entail the presupposition; and in which sentence with failed presuppositions are neither true nor false. This account naturally generates an analysis of what it takes to disagree and what it takes to be at fault in a disagreement. A simple generalisation gives rise to the possibility of disagreements in which no party is at fault, as is required by leading theories on predicates of taste.

0. Outline of this paper

Predicates of taste – "is delicious", "is funny", and the like – are often thought to give rise to a distinctive linguistic phenomenon of *no-fault disagreement*. If one person who likes salt licorice says "Salt licorice is delicious" and another, who doesn't, says "No, salt licorice is not delicious", then they are disagreeing; but, so runs this view, neither is "wrong" in some sense. A number of analyses of predicates of taste have been put forward to explain this phenomenon, with, it may be said, mixed success. These analyses tend to run into trouble in one of three ways. Either: 1. they end up saying that in these cases there is no disagreement at all (and thus no fault); or 2. they end up saying that in these cases is there a double-fault disagreement – that both parties are "wrong" in some respect and thus fault doesn't lie more on one side than the other; or 3. they allow for genuine no fault disagreement only by analysing "disagreement" in an ad hoc way – by choosing an account of disagreement that happens to predict that no fault disagreements occur in the case in question, but without explaining what these cases have in common with normal cases of disagreement.

I aim to give an analysis of predicates of taste that escapes all these pitfalls. My analysis is based on presuppositionalism about taste – the view that predicates of taste have distinctive "presuppositions of commonality".[1] I start by presenting a analysis of the concept of "presupposition" (section 1); using this, I motivate analyses of "disagreement" and of being "at fault" that are motivated by everyday cases of presupposition, thus avoiding pitfall 3 (section 2); I then apply this analysis to the case of predicates of taste (section 3). On its own, presuppositionalism falls into pitfall 2; but a simple generalisation of the theory of presupposition to allow for what I call "antisuppositions" removes this problem (section 4).

1. Presupposition

Some familiar (and some less familiar) examples of semantic presupposition:

(1) "The king of France is bald"[2]

    implies   (1a) "Whoever is king of France is bald"

    presupposes   (1b) "There is exactly one king of France"

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[1] For a well-developed account of presuppositionalism, see Lopez de Sa (2008).

[2] On the assumption that we accept a Strawsonian (1950) view of definite descriptions, rather than a Russellian one.

(2) "Josh has stopped blackmailing the vice-chancellor"

    implies   (2a) "Josh is not blackmailing the vice-chancellor"

    presupposes (2b) "Josh was blackmailing the vice-chancellor"

(3) "Karl is Boche"[3]

    implies   (3a) "Karl is German"

    presupposes (3b) "All Germans are cruel"

The mark of presuppposition is that denying a sentence, or asserting its negation, carries the same presupposition as asserting it. Someone who says that the king of France is not bald, that Josh has not stopped blackmailing the vice-chancellor, or that Karl is not Boche, has committed themselves to there being exactly one king of France, that Josh was blackmailing the vice-chancellor, or that all Germans are cruel, respectively. Also, when a sentence's presupposition is false, there is a temptation to say that the sentence is neither true nor false, for to say of a sentence that it is false is to presuppose that its presupposition is true.[4]

I've used a few examples here and I could multiply them still further: "Hannah is a New Zealander, but she's a big rugby fan!" presupposes that there is some contrast between being a New Zealander and a rugby fan; "Tom realised that he was missing the lecture" presupposes that Tom was missing the lecture; "It was Josh who ate all the Christmas cake" presupposes that someone ate all the Christmas cake. Presupposition is a philosophically controversial concept, and I don't want to claim that all these example are alike,[5] or that all are even clear cut examples of presupposition. I just want to have enough examples that some one of them will appeal to anyone who believes that there is such a phenomenon as presupposition at all. So please take it for the sake of argument that my examples (1)-(3) are cases of presupposition.

There are many ways of understanding the phenomenon of presupposition. I am interested in one that takes it particularly literally. On this view, presuppposition is a species of entailment; φ presupposes ψ iff both φ and its negation entail ψ. Also, we will yield to Strawsonian temptation and say that if a sentence's presupposition is false, then that sentence is neither true nor false. This is obviously going to require a revision to the classical logic and semantics of negation and falsehood. But such a revision is not too hard; there is a natural and simple semantics used widely in relevant logics that will give us what we want.[6] The key is to allow the truth and falsity conditions of a sentence to be somewhat independent – for example:

"The king of France is bald"

    is *true* iff there is exactly one king of France and every king of France is bald

    is *false* iff there is exactly one king of France and some king of France is not bald

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3   "Boche" here is a now thankfully outdated derogatory term for a German person. Readers will no doubt be able to think of more live examples for themselves. This example is due to Dummett (1981, 454–455). Note that Dummett has a quite different, but very interesting, inferentialist treatment of derogatory language from the one being discussed here.

4   For a broad discussion of the many varieties of presupposition and theories thereof, see Karttunen (1973). By presupposition here I mean what is usually called "semantic presupposition" or, in Grice's terminology "conventional implicature". However, on the theory I am interested in sentences with false presuppositions are neither-true-nor-false (unlike in Grice, for whom a true sentence may have a false implicature). That's why I use the word "presupposition" rather than "implicature".

5   One respect in which they clearly differ is that in some cases it seems a fair straightforward schema could be given by which the presupposition of the sentence is generated: e.g. "x stops being F" presupposes "x was F". In other cases this is harder. It might take some empirical linguistic work to work out just what the derogatory connotations of "Boche" were; or exactly what sort of contrast is presupposed by the use of the word "but".

6   This is the Dunn semantics for the logic FDE. For both a formal and a scholarly discussion of the technique, see Priest (2008, chap. 8). The idea of modelling Strawson's concept of presupposition using non-classical semantics is due to van Fraasen (1968), though he uses supervaluational semantics, not FDE.

"Josh has stopped blackmailing the vice-chancellor"

> is *true* iff Josh was blackmailing the VC and now he is not
>
> is *false* iff Josh was blackmailing the VC and he still is

"Karl is Boche"

> is *true* iff Karl is German and all Germans are cruel
>
> is *false* iff Karl is not German and all Germans are cruel

In this semantics, the extensional logical connectives work like this:

⌜φ and ψ⌝ (φ ∧ ψ)

> is *true* iff φ is true and ψ is true
>
> is *false* iff φ is false or ψ is false

⌜φ or ψ⌝ (φ ∨ ψ)

> is *true* iff φ is true or ψ is true
>
> is *false* iff φ is false and ψ is false

⌜It is not the case that φ⌝ (¬ φ)

> is *true* iff φ is false
>
> is *false* iff φ is true

And entailment is truth-preservation: φ *entails* ψ iff it cannot be that φ is true and ψ is untrue. (Note that untruth is different from falsity: we are allowing that some sentences are neither-true-nor-false – these sentences are untrue, but not false.) Presupposition is just what we said above: φ *presupposes* ψ iff φ entails ψ and ¬φ entails ψ; or equivalently, iff it cannot be that φ is either true or false and ψ is untrue. Since on this view, presupposition is a species of entailment, it will be useful to have a term for the other species: let us say that φ *implies* ψ iff φ entails but does not presuppose ψ.

Observe what this means for our examples. (1) entails both (1a) and (1b), because it cannot be that its truth condition be satisfied and (1a) and (1b) not be true. Consider the negation of (1), whose truth and falsity conditions (according the the rule for negation given above) are as shown below:

(¬1) "It is not the case that the king of France is bald"

> is *true* iff there is exactly one king of France and some king of France is not bald
>
> is *false* iff there is exactly one king of France and every king of France is bald

(¬1) is true iff there is exactly one king of France and that person is not bald, so it entails (1b) but not (1a); so (1) presupposes (1b) but not (1a); (1) implies (1a) but not (1b).

Suppose there is no king of France. Then (1)'s truth condition is not satisfied, and nor is its falsity condition, so (1) is neither true nor false, vindicating Strawsonian intuitions about the truth-value of sentences with failed presuppositions. Also, (¬1)'s truth-condition and falsity-condition – which are (1)'s falsity- and truth-conditions, respectively – are not satisfied, so (¬1) is neither true nor false. The same, of course, goes for our other examples, (2) and (3).

2. Disagreement and fault

Suppose that two English jingoists are arguing about whether Karl is Boche:

Kitchener: "Karl is Boche"

Fanshawe: "Karl is jolly well not Boche!"

Both Kitchener and Fanshawe are sincere, so they each believe that what they are saying is true, so they both believe that all Germans are cruel. They are mistaken about this, however – in fact Karl is German and Karl is not cruel. So both Kitchener's and Fanshawe's utterances are neither true nor false.

Kitchener and Fanshawe are disagreeing, and moreover, they are disagreeing in a specially narrow sense: both are saying something that entails that what the other said is false. Call this a normal disagreement – neither is objecting to the presuppositions of what the other said, just to the implications. Let us say that two sentences φ and ψ *express a normal disagreement* iff φ entails that ψ is false and ψ entails that φ is false. Two people *normally disagree* with each other iff they sincerely utter sentences that express a normal disagreement.

When two people normally disagree, one or both of them may be at fault. Speaking falsely in a normal disagreement is sufficient for being at fault in that disagreement; but not necessary, because in the disagreement between Kitchener and Fanshawe, Fanshawe at least is at fault, and he is not speaking falsely, but neither-true-nor-falsely. So we should say that to be *at fault* in a normal disagreement is to speak untruly is that disagreement. By that standard, both Fanshawe and Kitchener are at fault in the disagreement over Karl's status. That seems right, as both are mistaken in holding that all Germans are cruel.

The same should hold in disagreements over whether or not the king of France is bald, or Josh has stopped blackmailing the vice-chancellor. Suppose Josh has never blackmailed the vice-chancellor; then if Ursula says that he has stopped, while Martin maintains that he has not, both are in a normal disagreement, and both are at fault. Suppose on, the other hand, that Josh has been and is continuing to blackmail the vice-chancellor; then Ursula and Martin are in a normal disagreement and Ursula but not Martin is at fault.

3. Predicates of taste

The idea of presupposition is sometimes used to explain some of the peculiarities of predicates of taste. Consider a sentence like (4), below:

(4) "Salt licorice is delicious"

All that seems to be required for (4) to be assertable is that the speaker like salt licorice – it's not as if there were a non-natural property of objective to-be-enjoyedness that (4) attributes to salt licorice – and if there was, how would anyone know that salt licorice had that property?

So it's tempting to accept *subjectivism* about deliciousness: to hold that an utterance of (4) is true iff the speaker of that utterance likes salt licorice. The trouble with that, famously, is that it doesn't make sense of disagreement over deliciousness. Suppose that Josh likes salt licorice and Hannah doesn't.

Josh: "Salt licorice is delicious!"

Hannah: "Yuck! Salt licorice is not delicious, it's revolting!"

If subjectivism were right, Josh and Hannah would not be disagreeing – both would be speaking truly, since Josh likes salt licorice and Hannah doesn't. But obviously they are disagreeing (runs the usual argument) so subjectivism about deliciousness is false.

Presupposition may be able to help here. Perhaps "Salt licorice is delicious" *implies* that the speaker likes salt licorice, but *presupposes* that everyone will agree. Call this view *presuppositionalism* about deliciousness. Here's a way of implementing it within our theory of presupposition:

"Salt licorice is delicious" (as uttered in conversational context *c*)

> is *true* iff everyone in *c* likes salt licorice
>
> is *false* iff everyone in *c* does not like salt licorice

Further tinkering is possible with this type of view: we could make the domain of "everyone" in the truth and falsity conditions a bit narrower (excluding people with abberant tastes) or broader (including some contextually salient people who are not parties to the conversation). These details won't make any difference for our purpose.

The point about this view is that it seems to do justice to the motivation for subjectivism – it gets talk of deliciousness to be just about who likes what; it gets Josh's utterance to not be false, but merely to have a false presupposition (that either everyone likes, or everyone does not like, salt licorice). But it also gets Josh and Hannah to be normally disagreeing, as they should be.

The only trouble is that it leaves both parties to this disagreement at fault. In the example above, Josh and Hannah are like Fanshawe and Kitchener; both are asserting a sentence with a false presupposition, and so both are at fault. However, part of the motivation for subjectivism was that *neither* should be at fault, and indeed subjectivism delivers that result; at the cost of removing the disagreement. There is a now a large literature on predicates of taste and no-fault disagreements.[7] Leading views, as well as subjectivism and presuppositionalism, include versions of *expressivism* (according to which sentences like "Salt licorice is delicious" have no truth-conditional meaning, but serve merely to express an attitude), *relativism* (according to which these may be true for one person and false for another), and *error theory* (according to which deliciousness is indeed a non-natural property of to-be-enjoyedness, which in fact nothing ever has). Controversy surrounds which if any of these options genuinely offer no fault disagreements. I would like to add one more option, which seems to me to be no more radical than relativism, but which fits the no-fault intuition much more clearly.

4. Antisupposition

φ presupposes ψ, we said, iff both φ and its negation entail ψ. Let us now pay attention to the converse entailment. To coin a phrase, say that φ *antisupposes* ψ iff both φ and its negation are entailed by ψ. Within our truth-conditional semantics, antisupposition behaves in a parallel way to presupposition. If a sentence has a false presupposition, then it is neither true nor false; if a sentence has a true antisupposition, then it is both true and false. Sentences whose truth- and falsity-conditions do not exhaust the possible states of the world between them are capable of being neither true nor false; they have (non-trivial) presuppositions. Sentences whose truth- and falsity-conditions overlap are capable of being both true and false; they have (consistent) antisuppositions.

Let's look at an example. Suppose that the truth- and falsity condition of (4) are as shown below:

"Salt licorice is delicious" (as uttered in conversational context *c*)

> is *true* iff someone in *c* likes salt licorice
>
> is *false* iff someone in *c* does not like salt licorice

Now consider the conversation between Josh and Hannah. Since someone in that conversation likes salt licorice, and someone else doesn't, both Josh and Hannah are speaking truly, and so neither are at fault. But Josh and Hannah are in a normal disagreement, because if what Josh says is true, then what Hannah says is false (and vice versa) as can be seen from the truth- and falsity-conditions of

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7   I will not attempt to survey that literature here. However, for a state of the art presentation of the relativist option, which I regard as the leading alternative to the view described here, see Lasersohn (2005).

Hannah's utterance, which can be derived from the rule for the truth- and falsity- conditions of negation given above:

"It is not the case that salt licorice is delicious" (as uttered in conversational context *c*)

is *true* iff someone in *c* does not like salt licorice

is *false* iff someone in *c* likes salt licorice

So Josh and Hannah are normally disagreeing, and neither is at fault. My proposal here is a variant on presuppositionalism, which we may call *antisuppositionalism*. "Salt licorice is delicious" does not presuppose that there is agreement over a liking for salt licorice – that either everyone likes or everyone does not like salt licorice – instead it antisupposes that there is disagreement – that someone likes and someone else does not like salt licorice.

Both presuppositions and antisuppositions contribute background information to a conversation (in the case of antisupposition, the background information is that the antisupposition is false). Having a true antisupposition is a kind of failure analogous to having a false presupposition – with the exception that someone who utters a sentence with a true antisupposition speaks truly. It's useful to think of presuppositions in relation to questions – if someone asks "Has Josh stopped blackmailing the vice-chancellor?" and Josh has never blackmailed anyone, then the question is pointless because no answer can be correct. In parallel fashion, if someone asks "Is salt licorice delicious?" and some parties like it while others don't, then the question is pointless because any answer would be correct. We try to avoid false or controversial presuppositions in conversations and we try to avoid true or controversial antisuppositions. More could be said about the role of antisupposition in conversational dynamics, but I leave that to another paper. My point here is only to open an unjustly neglected option for understanding predicates of taste and allowing for no-fault disagreements.[8]

I anticipate two objections.

1. A *dialethion* is a sentence that is both true and false (or a true sentence whose negation is also true). On this view, sentences involving predicates of taste may be dialetheia. The proposal that there are such sentences sometimes excites stares of incredulity from certain philosophers. I have three replies to any such stare. First: this proposal involves a very tame form of dialetheism. We are only supposing that certain special sentences of natural language may be both true and false, and we can explain what that amounts to in a meta-language that contains no dialethia. Second: the leading rival explanation of the same phenomena, namely truth-relativism, is not any less weird or controversial than dialetheism. Third: it's easy to devise a non-dialethic variation of the same theory. Simply rename what I called "falsehood" with some neologism – say, "antitruth" – and rename what I called "untruth" as "falsehood". Now the theory involves neither truth-gaps, nor dialethia.

2. If uttering a sentence with a true antisupposition is a kind of "conversational failure", why is someone who does so not "at fault"? I reply: there is a difference between being "at fault" or being mistaken, in the sense of speaking untruly; and producing a conversational failure, or "dead end". Disagreements have to produce a conversational dead ends or they wouldn't count as disagreements; if I say "Salt licorice is delicious" and you say "No it's not" one or both of us to going to have to back down in order to get the conversation flowing normally again (and if that wasn't the case, what we said wouldn't count as a disagreement). So any account of no-fault disagreement needs to draw a distinction between being "at fault" and saying something that gives rise to a dead end.

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8   The view is not completely neglected. In a paper that deserves to be more widely read, Beall (2006) also proposes that predicates of personal taste give rise to dialethia, and no-fault disagreements are disagreements over the truth of a dialethion. But he does not draw the connection with presupposition that I have here.

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