

# Literature Review of Presupposition in Advertising Language

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**Abstract.** The study of the functions of presupposition in the designing of advertising language is significant in providing certain possible theoretical guidance to the advertising practitioners to design successful advertising texts. This paper intends to have a general review of the principal theories on presupposition. It also examines the relevant studies on advertising language from the viewpoint of presupposition.

**Keywords:** Literature review; presupposition; advertising language.

## 1. Introduction

Advertisements are designed to attract consumers' attention, arouse their interests, stimulate their desires, create conviction and finally persuade them to take purchase action. To a certain extent, the success of an advertisement depends greatly on the success of the designing of advertising language. In order to convey their intentions of persuasion by performing such activities as suggesting, advising, inviting, and tickling, the advertisers often try to transfer heavily-loaded information with fewer words and less space. Hence various linguistic means are employed to communicate messages as much as possible to potential consumers with economy. Taking advantage of presupposition is an effective way among different language devices employing linguistic means to create successful advertisements in English.

This paper intends to have a general review of the principal theories on presupposition. It will also examine the relevant studies on advertising language from the viewpoint of presupposition.

## 2. Theories on Presupposition

In this part, the historical origin and general development of theories on presupposition will be traced, different types of presupposition and its unique properties will also be discussed.

### 2.1 The Notion of Presupposition

Presupposition is a topic that is widely discussed by many linguists, and there is more literature on presupposition than on almost any other topic in pragmatics (excepting perhaps speech acts) (Levinson, 1997, p.167). However, this widely-studied subject in linguistics has originated with debates in philosophy, especially debates about the nature of reference and referring expressions. The phenomenon of presupposition was first expounded on by a German philosopher and logician, Gottlob Frege (1892) with such an account:

If anything is asserted there is always an obvious presupposition that the simple or compound proper names used have a reference. If one therefore asserts "Kepler died in misery," there is a presupposition that the name 'Kepler' designates something (see Levinson, 1997, p.169).

Later Frege found that the same presupposition could be obtained in the corresponding negative sentence, then he added,

That the name "Kepler" designates something is just as much a presupposition of the assertion "Kepler died in misery," as for the contrary [i.e. negative] assertion." (ibid.)

Frege sketched a theory of presupposition with the following propositions:

(i) Referring phrases and temporal clauses carry presuppositions to the effect that they do in fact refer.

(ii) A sentence and its negative counterpart share the same set of presuppositions.

(iii) In order for an assertion or a sentence to be either true or false, its presuppositions must be true or satisfied (ibid.).

In 1905, the British philosopher Bertrand Russell proposed his famous Theory of descriptions, thinking that Frege's views are simply wrong. In a series of lectures entitled the "Philosophy of Logical Atomism" delivered in London in 1918, Russell thought example (1) corresponded to conjunctions of propositions (1986 [1918], p.219):

(1) The present king of France is bald.

(2) There exists a present king of France.

The proposition can be false because there is no king in France today and France is a republic. Russell held that if one of the propositions in conjunctions of propositions was false then the whole utterance with conjunctions of propositions was false. Russell's theory was dominant in the field of presupposition study for 45 years and did not meet any challenges.

In 1950, P. E. Strawson proposed a quite different approach, thus pushing the study of the presupposition into a new stage and making it less imperfect. Strawson gave a 3-value logic to example (1). Besides "true" and "false", there was a third possibility to the proposition. In his opinion, the sentence does not have the problem of being true or false, and only the statement made through the sentence does. For instance:

(3) The king of France is wise.

Such a statement might be true in 1670, and false in 1770, while in 1970 it was pointless to talk about it as being true or false in that there did not exist a French king.

Strawson also enlarged the scope of presuppositional phenomena. Besides definite descriptions and proper names, qualification noun phrases, some other parts of an utterance like temporal clause and change-of-state words were included.

### 2.1.1 Two Theoretical Approaches to Presupposition

There are two theoretical approaches to presupposition: semantic and pragmatic. In the 1960s and 70s, with the development of semantics, presupposition gradually drew the attention from semanticists who studied it as a kind of semantic relation.

Semantic presupposition is defined as a relation between something that is actually said (or could be said) and something else which has to be the case in order for the thing said to make any sense at all (Fasold, 2000, p.166). In accordance with the philosophical tradition, sentences are treated as external objects whereas meaning is considered as an attribute of sentences rather than something constructed by the participants. Presuppositions are originally described in semantic terms as the propositions associated with such linguistic objects as words or sentences.

From 1973 onwards it became increasingly clear that there were so many problems with the notion of semantic presupposition that a theory of language (and specifically semantics) would do better without it. Many works at that time show that presuppositions are too sensitive to contextual factors (Levinson, 1997, p.177). Presuppositions are not inherent in particular lexical items or constructions, but properties of utterances together with a context. Semantics and semantic theories of presuppositions are theoretically inadequate to explain some language phenomena. Therefore, studies on presupposition from the pragmatic perspective have been emerged.

Pragmatic presupposition is defined by different linguists with different focuses and in different dictions:

Presupposition is treated as inferences about what is assumed to be true in the utterance rather than directly asserted to be true (Peccei, 2000, p.19).

Presuppositions are aspects of meaning that must be presupposed, understood, taken for granted for an utterance to make sense (Verschueren, 2000, p.27).

Pragmatic presuppositions are best described as a relation between a speaker and the appropriateness of a sentence in a context (Levinson, 1997, p.177).

A presupposition is something the speaker assumes to be the case prior to making an utterance. Speakers, not sentences, have presuppositions (Yule, 1996, p.25).

However, all these definitions agree that there are considerable differences between semantic presupposition and pragmatic presupposition. In other words, pragmatic presupposition is closely connected with the utterance whereas semantic presupposition is associated with the sentence or the proposition of the sentence. In brief, from the pragmatic perspective, speakers have presuppositions; from the semantic perspective, presupposition is part of the meaning of the sentence.

### 2.1.2 Types of Presupposition

Yule introduces the concept of potential presuppositions, which can only become actual presuppositions in contexts with speakers. He says that in the analysis of how speakers' assumptions are typically expressed, presupposition has been associated with the use of a large number of words, phrases, and structures (1996, p.27). Such linguistic forms are considered as indicators of potential presuppositions, which are also defined as presupposition-triggers by other linguists.

Yule presents different types of presuppositions: existential, factive, non- factive, lexical, structural, and counterfactual.

### 2.1.3 Properties or Characteristics of Presupposition

Speakers, not sentences, have presuppositions (Yule, 1996, p.25). Therefore, presupposition possesses some unique properties as being one-sided and subjective. Presupposition is the common ground, background information or mutual knowledge between communicators. Peccei treats presuppositions as inferences that are very closely linked to the words and grammatical structures actually used in the utterance, but they come from our knowledge about the way language users conventionally interpret these words and structures and, because of this, presuppositions can be quite "sneaky" (2000, p.19).

Another interesting property of presupposition is that the presupposition of a statement will remain constant (i.e. still true) even when that statement is negated. This is called constancy under negation, or the survival of negation.

presupposition is something the speaker assumes to be the case according to his attitude, belief or intention before he makes an utterance. Presupposition can survive the negation of the main sentence, and can also be cancelled according to the speaker's purpose and intention. All these properties make presupposition be subjective, sneaky, deceptive and misleading. That is why it is often employed in the courtroom and in advertising to enhance the persuasion of the language.

### 2.1.4 Presupposition-triggers

Presuppositions are described as inferences closely linked to the words and grammatical structures used in the utterance. Such words and grammatical structures have been isolated by linguists as sources of presuppositions, called presupposition-triggers.

## 2.2 Presupposition and Speech Acts in Advertising Language

Advertisers do not only produce utterances containing grammatical structures and words but also perform action via those utterances in their advertisements.

Actions performed via utterances are generally called speech acts and, in English, are commonly given more specific labels, such as apology, complaint, compliment, invitation, promise, or request (Yule, 1996, p.48). On any occasion, the action performed by producing an utterance will consist of three related acts: locution, illocution, and perlocution. Advertising language is a kind of persuasive language. The goal of advertisements is to inform the consumers of the advertised products or services, and persuade them to take purchase action. How can the advertisers be sure to make the potential readers understand their advertisements correctly and make their advertisements perform the illocutionary and perlocutionary act? The answer to this question goes to pragmatic presuppositions. In designing the advertisement, advertisers have made some presuppositions beforehand. They tactfully employ presuppositions to help their advertisements to perform the illocutionary and perlocutionary act. The advertisers assume something to be case prior to making

the utterance, which makes background information and language context for the advertisement. Presuppositions relate to the linguistic items that make up the sentence of the advertisements, to the content of situation, to the cultural knowledge and to the discourse elements. Therefore, presuppositions make the readers to think more about the intended meanings than the linguistic item. For example, the advertisers often presuppose that they know the customers' needs and wants, therefore, such sentence structures as "Why not... (do something)" or "Try...(something)" occur in high frequency. Such utterances offer some suggestions or invite the advertisement recipients to do something (the illocutionary act). Once the recipients accept the advertised information and follow their words, the perlocutionary effects are realized.

### **3. Previous Studies on Presupposition in Print Advertising Language**

The wording of advertisements is carefully crafted to meet particular ends. Sometimes it is intended to inform, but more often, and more importantly, to persuade and influence. Many studies on advertising language are approached from the perspective of linguistics. However, studies on presuppositions in the advertising language are comparatively few.

In *The Language of Advertising* (1998), Goddard points out briefly that presuppositions play an important role in English advertisements. Peccei argues in her *Pragmatics* that presupposition has a great deal of importance in persuasive language, particularly in the courtroom and in advertising. Advertisers are not allowed to directly assert claims about their products or their competitors' for which they have no evidence. However, they can generally get away with making indirect assertions via presupposition (2000, p.21). Peccei only reveals the close relationship between the presuppositions and advertising language, without a thorough description of how presupposition functions in helping advertising achieve its goal. Leo Hickey (2015) tries to explore the positive function of the presupposition in conveying new information on the basis of old information. However, his study only analyzes part of the functions of presupposition from the angle of communication strategy of advertising language.

A Chinese scholar, Chen Xinren (1998) gives an account of the pragmatic presupposition in Chinese advertisements. Chen describes certain types of presuppositions and has carried out an investigation on the distribution and the occurrence frequency of different presuppositions in print advertisements. The result shows that state presupposition occurs in highest frequency, almost accounting for half of all the presuppositions. Such high frequency is not a coincidence but a reflection of the knowledge and manipulation of consumers' psychology by advertisers. However, Chen does not give a systematical and comprehensive analysis of the functions of presupposition in print advertising language. Cui Ying (2008) mainly explores reasons behind the flexibility and creativity in the translation of advertising discourse by revealing the working of presuppositions. Different from the concept of presupposition in linguistics, the notion of presupposition in her study is viewed from the angle of context. Based on the prototype theory and construction grammar of cognitive linguistics, Wei Zaijiang (2011) analyzes the pragmatic presuppositions of the real estate advertisements in Chinese, his study provides a new perspective for the understanding of the pragmatic presuppositions. In *Study of Presupposition in Chinese and English Advertising Texts* (2015), Zeng Bihao classifies the presuppositions hidden in the advertising texts into four categories, that is, semantic presupposition, pragmatic presupposition, cultural presupposition and cognitive presupposition due to the special characteristics of advertising languages and based on the previous researches on the presupposition theory. His study has updated the research paradigm, especially the systematic research on the cultural presupposition has deepened people's understanding of the cultural connotation.

## Summary

The above sections have examined the principal theories on presupposition and the previous studies on advertising language from the linguistic point of view. Scholars both abroad and at home have paid high attentions to presupposition in advertising language from diverse perspectives. Their studies are significant in providing certain possible theoretical guidance to the advertising practitioners to obtain a better understanding of how presuppositions work in making advertising language more attractive, persuasive and motivating and thus consciously employ such a linguistic strategy.

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