

PRESUPPOSITION: A MEANING-MAKING STRATEGY IN KOFI AWOONOR'S *THIS EARTH, MY BROTHER...AND COMES THE VOYAGER AT LAST*

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Abstract

*Presupposition is a meaning-making process that makes allowance for background knowledge. It is about the information that is accommodated by the addressee as part of a non controversial background necessary for the addressors' utterance to still be sensible. This concept is found to be inherent in Kofi Awoonor's two novels which have relatively been underexplored in terms of systematic studies. This study thus, investigates how meaning-making is brought about in the texts through presuppositions. Awoonor's two novels *This Earth, My Brother...* and *Comes the Voyager at Last* were investigated to determine aspects of preposition as a meaning-making process in the texts and how meaning is construed and understood in the texts. The study adopted the pragmatic approach to prepositions from Jacob Mey's perspective. The study accentuates that presupposition, as a meaning-making process, is an integral part of meaning and the understanding of texts. Presuppositions, as shared assumptions, were identified to be held by both parties in interactive encounters that need not be explicitly spelt out but that both parties draw from to make and understand utterances. An understanding of the main tenets of presupposition is essential for the proper understanding of the study texts and meaning generally.*

Keywords: Presupposition, speech acts, pragmatics, meaning-making, texts.

Introduction

Presupposition, in the study of contextual meaning, simply talks about accommodating shared background knowledge as necessary for utterances to be sensible. Sometimes these accommodations are brought about by particular grammatical structures or lexical items, while sometimes their recovery requires pragmatic reason. Conventionally, shared accommodated beliefs in communicative encounters that make sense are known as semantic presuppositions, while accommodations that are needed for the utterance made to be appropriate are known as pragmatic presuppositions. In works on pragmatics, *presupposition* is generally defined as “something the speaker assumes to be the case prior to making an utterance” (Yule, 1996: 25). In speech situations, speakers presuppose two types of information: *shared* (given) and *non-shared* (new). For instance, in the sentence '*He did it again*'. The speaker knew already what the person in question *did*. He also assumed that the addressee knows the same thing. Thus, the fact of what the person *did* is known to both the speaker and the addressee. On the other hand, the speaker also assumed that the addressee did not know that the person had done it again. This suggests that we have two types of information: *shared* and *non-shared*.

The notion of presupposition and its applications in human communicative encounters is not in doubt. What, however, requires clarification is the extent to which this principle is deployed and understood in the two novels of Kofi Awoonor: *This Earth, My Brother...* and *Comes the Voyager at Last* so as to determine how meaning is encoded and decoded in the text from the basis of shared background knowledge.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate presupposition as a concept and its application in encoding and decoding meaning in Kofi Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother...* and *Comes the Voyager at Last* with the objective of;

- i. identifying instances of meaning in texts that are dependent on the principles of presupposition, and to
- ii. ascertaining how the meanings conveyed and understood in the context of use are shared or new information in the research texts.

Overview of Existing Literature

Presupposition is the implicit assumption about the world or background belief relating to an utterance whose truth is taken for granted in discourse situations. A presupposition must therefore, be mutually known or assumed by the speaker and addressee for the utterance to be considered appropriate in context. It will generally remain a necessary assumption whether the utterance is placed in the form of an assertion, denial, or question, and can be associated with a specific lexical item or grammatical feature in an utterance, which is termed presupposition trigger. It is worthy of note that negation of an expression does not change its presuppositions. For instance, in the statements: '*I want to do it again*' and '*I don't want to do it again*'. *The two statements* both presuppose that the subject has done it already one or more times before. Presupposition is however, distinguished from entailment and implicature; for example, '*The President was assassinated*' entails that *The President is dead*, but if the expression is negated, the entailment is not necessarily true. Presupposition as a meaning-making strategy in pragmatics implies that a simple natural language sentence and the natural interpretation of its simple negation is the primary quality that

qualifies an inference as a presupposition. The evaluation of inferences is called the negation test. Presuppositions are generated from lexical and syntactic contexts. Those contexts which pass the negation test can be termed presuppositional triggers.

Presupposition as a concept has received so much scholarly attention with the concept seen as part of the information conveyed by an utterance given that the utterance was made cooperatively in the sense of Grice's maxims of cooperative conversation (Grice, 1975). Probably the most significant philosophical work of presupposition is that by Stalnaker (1972, 1973, 1974), and later clarified in Stalnaker (1998). Stalnaker suggests that a pragmatic notion of presupposition is needed, so that the proper object of philosophical study is not what words or sentences presuppose, but what people presuppose when they are speaking. A pragmatic presupposition associated with a sentence is a condition that a speaker would normally expect to hold in the common ground between discourse participants when that sentence is uttered.

For the purposes of this study the most important knowledge source is the lexicon. It is here that some of the knowledge about language use is stored. Other linguistic knowledge, such as Grice's maxims, have been placed in the general inference procedure. What information is to be stored in the lexicon and in what form has been the focus of this study into the phenomenon called presupposition. Previously, the standard "solution" to the projection problem has been one of three kinds: a set of rules that take the presuppositions of the clauses and remove the undesirable presuppositions as the sentence meaning is being composed (Karttunen, 1973, Karttunen, 1974, Karttunen and Peters, 1979, Soames, 1979); a set of rules, invoked after the sentence has been fully interpreted, that cancel the unwanted presuppositions from a complete set

of potential presuppositions (Gazdar, 1979); or a set of rules that embody both of these methods [Soames, 1982]. Previous methods and the new one agree that the information concerning the presuppositions associated with words is located in the lexicon. Where they differ is what form this information takes. This representation has important ramifications on the kinds of knowledge needed outside the lexicon. More specifically, previous methods put extensional knowledge in the lexicon, that is, the knowledge of a particular lexical item is designated as presuppositional and non-presuppositional (or what has been termed "what is said"). So in the case of '*bachelor*', '*unmarried*' would be designated as non-presuppositional; '*male*' and '*adult*', presuppositional.

Methodology

The data used for this study were obtained from primary and secondary sources. The primary data were drawn from Kofi Awoonor's novels *This Earth, My Brother...* (*TEMB*) and *Comes the Voyager at Last* (*CTVAL*). A critical and close reading of the novels brought out the socio-cultural conventions that are of pragmatic value, particularly with reference to presupposition. Overall, the study extracted thirty-two (32) and eighteen (18) aspects that reflect presupposition in *TEMB* and *CTVAL* respectively and subjected to pragma-linguistic analysis. Secondary data were from extant literature to establish gaps.

Data Analysis

The basis for analysis is premised on the fact that presupposition entails making allowance for background knowledge. It is about the information that is accommodated by the addressee as part of a non controversial background necessary for the addressors' utterance to still be sensible. These are shared assumptions held by both parties in an

interactive encounter that need not be explicitly spelt out but that both parties draw from to make and understand utterances. This concept is found to be inherent in the researched text. These instances as found in the texts being investigated are exemplified in the following excerpts:

Excerpt 1.

He took his khaki trousers and the army bush shirt he wore everyday.... The bush shirt was now gray with age and parts of the thread were coming out... the shirt must be preserved. Kodzo Dzide now claimed that he himself was in the war. He talked after long bouts of palm wine at wake keepings of how he was on his way to Dahomey to consult fetish at Abomey; there they have the best fetish in the whole land; how he was arrested and beaten by the German governor... He didn't go to the war front anyway...

TEMB pg. 13

From the foregoing, **excerpt 1** presents an instance of presupposition as found in the researched text. In the excerpt, we observe how Kodzo took his khaki trousers and the army bush shirt which it is said, 'he wore every day'. This, it is gathered, was the uniform worn by the military. Conventionally, we know that army uniforms are mainly owned and worn by military personnel in active service. However, there are instances whereby retired officers of the force still retain and wear some of their military regalia even though in unofficial situations. Thus, when one is seen in or with military attire, the assumption is that such a one is a military officer, serving or retired. In the excerpt, Kodzo owns a pair of army uniform; it is gathered that he bought the uniform from someone who fought in the German war, with

strict instructions to preserve the dress. In the text it is also gathered that Kodzo did a good job of preserving the uniform in spite of its old age. The assumption that came from this was that everyone that saw him in the uniform assumed him to be an ex-soldier and he did not hesitate to tell stories of his experience at some point in his life when he attended to soldiers as though he truly was in the army, the excerpt reads in part: “Kodzo Dzide now claimed that he himself was in the war. He talked after long bouts of palm wine at wake keepings of how he was on his way to Dahomey to consult fetish at Abomey; there they have the best fetish in the whole land; how he was arrested and beaten by the German governor... He didn't go to the war front anyway”. The basic assumption from this scenario is that army uniforms are an exclusive preserve of military officers serving or sometimes retired, hence the presupposition got from Kodzo's use of the bush shirt is that he was an ex-military man.

Excerpt 2

He arrived at his door about three. His watchman was standing near the milkbush, praying to Allah. He had a god. He inserted his key, entered his hall. There was the smell of cooking long done still lingering. The table was laid for one. He paused to look at the table... He entered the bedroom quietly. He didn't put on the light lest he wake her up.... He slipped into the bed besides her. He knew she wasn't asleep. After about five minutes, she spoke. Where do you come from? He never answered that question. It was a question that tore through his very soul each time she asked.

TEMB pg. 102-103

Excerpt 2 also presents another instance of presupposition in the researched text. It states that “He arrived at his door about three. His watchman was standing near the milk bush, praying to Allah. He had a god. He inserted his key, entered his hall. There was the smell of cooking long done still lingering. The table was laid for one. He paused to look at the table... He entered the bedroom quietly. He didn't put on the light lest he wake her up... he slipped into the bed beside her. He knew she wasn't asleep. After about five minutes, she spoke. Where do you come from? He never answered that question. It was a question that tore through his very soul each time she asked.” We observe from the excerpt that a man sneaks into his house late at night and tries to creep into bed and is confronted by the wife on his whereabouts. It is obvious from the underlined portion of the excerpt that the issue at stake is not new as the man declines to answer the question of where he was coming from at that time of the night as he has always declined to answer that question before. The fact that it is not the first time he is declining to answer presupposes that the issue in question is not new and known to both parties in the interaction. It is apparent by the man's incessant late nights that he is having an illicit affair with another woman out of wedlock. So whenever he returns at such unwholesome times and is confronted by the wife as observed in the text, he keeps mute. The basic assumption which is mutually shared by the couple is not just the late nights but the reason for it is because of a woman somewhere. That illicit affair thus, becomes the presupposition in the context of the excerpt.

Excerpt 3

My father had died so that I might be saved.
How ironic? I who never cared much for him,
who considered him a proud bullying silent
intruder, the man who had been in my way all

the days of my life? How was it possible for me to dwell in a new body through his death, to become someone else destined for great journeys beyond his wildest imaginings? Indeed, there was a bond that tied us together and I was the one who never knew it. But he knew. Always. And he planned it all for me. I was the one he loved and cared about the most. I was the one of whom he focused his being, his hopes for collective salvation.

CTVAL pg. 22

In another instance, **excerpt 3** presents a presupposition of parental love for offspring. The excerpt reads: “My father had died so that I might be saved. How ironic? I who never cared much for him, who considered him a proud bullying silent intruder, the man who had been in my way all the days of my life? How was it possible for me to dwell in a new body through his death, to become someone else destined for great journeys beyond his wildest imaginings? Indeed, there was a bond that tied us together and I was the one who never knew it. But he knew. Always. And he planned it all for me. I was the one he loved and cared about the most. I was the one of whom he focused his being, his hopes for collective salvation.” In this context we observe that it is common for parents to go the extra mile to show love, care and affection towards their offspring. It is also often the desire of parents that their children have better and enhanced quality of life than they the parents have had. Sometimes however, how this gesture is expressed and received could be misconceived. In the text, a parent's love for the child was greatly misconstrued; all the child could see and feel was too much of interference in his privacy and bullying instead of love and affection. In the excerpt however, after the demise of the father and some bit of

life experiences, it dawns on the child that what the father actually was showing him was love; and perhaps that was the best way the father knew of or thought of expressing his love. The main thing however, is that parental love for children is sacrosanct as the underlying assumption in this context. This fact is buttressed by the young man's realization of the father's intentions as indicated in the underlined portion that his father intentionally, all along, had a deep and sincere love for him. This is imbedded in the presupposition of parental love for children.

Excerpt 4

He was a well-developed lad with a barrel chest out of which rolled the deepest voice I've ever heard. He was not very tall, but carried a lot of strength and vitality in his medium-sized frame. There was a restlessness about him, a melancholic refusal to accept his fate as an orphan. His mother died young in childbirth, and his father was brought home from the sawmill on the edge of town completely smashed up by some monstrous machine a year later. Duke was about eight. He ran away from the county orphanage and hitch-hiked to North Carolina.... When he returned from his travels to the south seven years later, he was already a man of the world at fifteen. He knew about survival, sex and the ethics upon which Babylon was built. So he became our neighbourhood hero and leader.

CTVAL pg. 32

Similarly, **excerpt 4** presents the presupposition that hard-work and determination pay off in life. In the text Duke P. Smith is said to be an orphan, having lost both parents early in

life. The excerpt states that “He was a well-developed lad with a barrel chest out of which rolled the deepest voice I've ever heard. He was not very tall, but carried a lot of strength and vitality in his medium-sized frame. There was restlessness about him, a melancholic refusal to accept his fate as an orphan. His mother died young in childbirth, and his father was brought home from the sawmill on the edge of town completely smashed up by some monstrous machine a year later. Duke was about eight. He ran away from the county orphanage and hitch-hiked to North Carolina.... When he returned from his travels to the south seven years later, he was already a man of the world at fifteen. He knew about survival, sex and the ethics upon which Babylon was built. So he became our neighbourhood hero and leader.” The researched text reveals that through sheer determination and hard-work, Duke rose to become the pride of most of his contemporaries, who looked up to him for leadership. Hence, while talking about how he became a hero in the excerpt, it is understood by all how his sheer determination and hard-work brought him to a remarkable feat.

Excerpt 5

Mel was the first white man I saw at close quarters, and I was astonished. At first I exhibited towards that confused temerity that marks the life of most black southern youth. Our world and that of white folks never actually met. We sensed the already existing barriers when we were barely old enough to look after ourselves. They were demonstrated to us in our parents' oblique references to white folks and the need for us children to watch our steps and trust in the Lord. We were vaguely aware of the powerful forces that defined us and them.

CTVAL pg. 37

Another presupposition is exemplified in **excerpt 5** it presumes that the world of white folks and black folks has no meeting point. “Mel was the first white man I saw at close quarters, and I was astonished. At first I exhibited towards that confused temerity that marks the life of most black southern youth. Our world and that of white folks never actually met. We sensed the already existing barriers when we were barely old enough to look after ourselves. They were demonstrated to us in our parents' oblique references to white folks and the need for us children to watch our steps and trust in the Lord. We were vaguely aware of the powerful forces that defined us and them.” Whereas white folks were portrayed more-or-less as superior beings, the blacks were tagged as subservient beings. This is evidenced in the excerpt as folks of black heritage drum this reality down the subconscious of their children from the time they are old enough to be aware of themselves. They did this also by making oblique references to white folks and the need for their children to watch their steps and trust in God or they would be squashed by the whites. This presupposition of superiority and inferiority complex presents itself as a glaring assumption in the text.

Conclusion

Overall, this study illustrates that presupposition as a pragmatic principle is manifested in the researched texts investigated in this study. It suggests that in human interactions there are basic assumptions that though not overtly stated in utterances, participants in a discourse could draw from such assumptions and fill in the gaps, such that meaning and intentions in utterances are not lost. A Presupposition, it was established, must be mutually known or assumed by speakers and addressees for the utterance to be considered appropriate in context. It generally remains a

necessary assumption whether the utterance is placed in the form of an assertion, denial, or question, and can be associated with specific lexical items or grammatical features which are referred to as presupposition triggers in utterances.

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