

COMMENTS ON KAI VON FINTEL'S PAPER<sup>1</sup>

Zoltán Gendler Szabó  
Yale University

**1. Presupposition**

The standard theory of presupposition has three main tenets:

- (i) The main result of a felicitous utterance of a sentence is the update of the context with the proposition the sentence expresses.
- (ii) The main precondition of a felicitous utterance of a sentence is that the sentence's presuppositions be satisfied by the context.
- (iii) Presuppositions are conventional – they do not arise out of general conversational principles but are part of the conventional meanings of sentences.

Following Stalnaker, we can think of the context of a conversation as the common ground between the interlocutors and represent it as a set of possible worlds: the set of those worlds that are compatible with what is mutually assumed to be taken for granted. Presuppositions are propositions<sup>2</sup> and a proposition can also be seen as a set of possible worlds: the set of worlds where the proposition is true. (Whether contexts and propositions *are* sets of possible worlds or should simply be *represented* as such for certain purposes is immaterial here. I will speak as if they really were sets of worlds.) A proposition  $p$  is satisfied by a context  $C$  iff  $C \subseteq p$ ; the update of  $C$  with  $p$  is  $C \cap p$ .

The notion of presupposition employed in Kai's paper is often called *pragmatic*. Pragmatic presuppositions of a sentence constrain the conditions under which the sentence can be used to make an assertion, but they do not necessarily constrain the conditions under which it is interpretable. Nonetheless, as (iii) shows, there is a sense in

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a slightly corrected version of the original handout. Thanks to Chris Gauker for calling my attention to an imprecision. I also added a reaction to Kai's response at the Workshop. My reaction grew out of a conversation with a number of people at the workshop and a subsequent e-mail exchange with Kai.

<sup>2</sup> Sentences sometimes have presuppositions relative to the context. For example, 'I have to pick up my sister at the airport' presupposes in context  $C$  that  $x$  has a sister, where  $x$  is the speaker of the sentence in  $C$ .

which this notion of presupposition is *semantic*: presuppositions are part of conventional meaning, and are presumed to be determined compositionally.

## 2. Two notions of accommodation

As stated, both (i) and (ii) are imprecise: they do not specify how the context in question relates to the utterance event. The usual way to understand these claims is that they concern the context in which the utterance event took place. The alternative way to understand them is that the context in question is the one immediately after the utterance has taken place and its effects had been absorbed.

Assuming the usual understanding (championed by Lewis), we will view accommodation – “the process whereby the context is adjusted quietly and without fuss to accept the utterance of a sentence” – as a *repair strategy*. The utterance is infelicitous relative to the context in which it was actually made, so the context is repaired to ensure that relative to the new context the same utterance counts as felicitous. This conception lends itself to talk of pretense. It *does* sound a bit like magic – we end up evaluating the utterance of a sentence as if it had been made in a different context.

The alternative understanding promises a new perspective. In his paper ‘On Representing Context’, Stalnaker writes:<sup>3</sup>

Lewis distinguished context changes by accommodation from the simpler kind of change that takes place when “something conspicuous happens at the scene of a conversation, and straightaway it is presupposed that it happened,” but I do not think there is a distinction to be made here, or a reason to hypothesize a special rule of mechanism of accommodation. An utterance event is something conspicuous that happens at the scene of the conversation, and the presupposition that such an event occurred is the source of any accommodation.

When a cat walks into a room where a conversation is taking place, she becomes salient in the context and immediate consequences of the fact that *this* cat walked in become part

---

<sup>3</sup> *Context and Content*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 103.

of the common ground. What the immediate consequences are depends on the context – for example, if it already was common ground beforehand that everything in the house belongs to Phoebe, now it is common ground that Phoebe has a cat. When a sentence is uttered, the utterance itself becomes salient in the context and immediate consequences of the fact that *this* sentence was uttered become part of the common ground. Since, we can assume, it is common ground that the speaker's aim is to update the context and that this cannot be done unless the presupposition of the sentence uttered is accommodated, one of these immediate consequences is that the presuppositions are accommodated.

Lewis and Stalnaker agree on the following schema of contextual update. Suppose the sentence *S* is uttered and the *context of utterance* is *C*. The context change happens in two steps. First, we move via accommodation to the *context of update* *C'*, which includes those worlds from *C* where all the presuppositions of *S* are true. Second, we move via update to *the resulting context* *C''* which includes those worlds from *C'* where the proposition expressed by *S* is true. They differ in what they think about step 1. According to Lewis, it is a change in context brought about in response to the infelicity of *S* relative to *C*; according to Stalnaker it is an almost automatically occurring change in response to the plain fact that a certain sentence has been uttered.

Kai urges us to accept Stalnaker's way of thinking about accommodation and I agree with him. By insisting that accommodation is not a repair strategy we can make it look a good deal less magical. But I have some lingering doubts, as I will explain below.

### **3. Why is accommodation sometimes hard?**

There is an obvious constraint on accommodation which is simply a corollary of a more general constraint on update:

*The basic constraint on update:* propositions that are incompatible with the context cannot be used to update it.

The rationale behind the constraint is obvious: the aim of the conversation (or at least the kind of conversation we are most concerned with here) is to obtain information, which corresponds to eliminating as many worlds as possible from the context without eliminating the actual world itself. If an update results in the empty set, it is certain not to advance us towards this goal. The corollary for accommodation is this:

*The basic constraint on accommodation:* presuppositions that are incompatible with the context cannot be accommodated.

The basic constraint is useful but it fails to do what we most need: to distinguish between what can be asserted and what can be accommodated. It is a fundamental intuition that surprising things are better said than presupposed. How can we account for this?

I don't see anything in the framework that can do the job. At one point Stalnaker suggests otherwise – he points out that the hearer may not be willing to accommodate a presupposition simply on the grounds of recognizing that this is what the speaker expects.<sup>4</sup> True enough. But the hearer may also not be willing to accept an assertion simply on the grounds of recognizing that this is what the speaker expects. So I don't think there is an asymmetry here.

One might be tempted to fall back on Lewis's notion of accommodation at this point. If accommodation is repair strategy it should perhaps not be surprising that it takes more cognitive effort than normal update. But I don't think this would do any useful explanatory work either. If we assume that accommodation takes more effort than assertion, we should expect a general preference for the latter – at least when the competing forms of expression are roughly the same length and complexity. But this is not what we find: there is no real difference in acceptability between (1) and (2):

- (1) I couldn't be at the funeral yesterday and I deeply regret it.
- (2) I regret that I could not be at the funeral yesterday.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Context and Content*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 104.

Something is amiss from the framework, something that would explain our preference for assertion over accommodation when it comes to surprising or controversial information, and lack of preference when it comes to unsurprising and uncontroversial information.

#### 4. Why is accommodation sometimes impossible?

It isn't merely that accommodation is occasionally harder than we would expect, it is sometimes outright impossible. A good example is Kripke's famous (3):

(3) John is having dinner in New York too.

Kai follows a suggestion Beaver and Zeevat make in their handbook article 'Accommodation'<sup>5</sup> in claiming that these cases are explainable on the basis of the basic constraint on accommodation. The distinctive feature of the presupposition trigger 'too' is that it induces a presupposition *about the context*. (3) presupposes that the context entails a proposition about a salient individual other than John to the effect that he or she is having dinner in New York tonight. Since we imagine (3) to be uttered in a context which does not entail such a proposition, and since contexts are transparent (and hence, if  $p$  is not entailed by the context then the proposition that the context doesn't entail  $p$  is) accommodation here is ruled out by the basic constraint.

This seems like a promising thought. It yields the intuitively correct predictions for presupposition triggers such as 'again', 'indeed', 'former', etc. But I think it also points at an underlying difficulty with Stalnaker's view of accommodation. Consider another example Kai discusses. (4) is uttered in the usual context where the audience does not know whether the speaker has a daughter.

(4) Since we all know that I have a daughter, you should pay attention to my opinion.

---

<sup>5</sup> Forthcoming in G. Ramchand and C. Reiss eds., *Oxford Handbook of Linguistic Interfaces*.

The utterance of the sentence is infelicitous, which needs explaining. Kai writes:

Shouldn't the hearers just start accepting that I have a daughter, in which case it will be true that we all know that I have a daughter? No, that won't be enough. What is required is that at the time of utterance (because of the present tense), we all know that I have a daughter. And that is simply not so. The fact that somewhat later we might all know that I have a daughter doesn't satisfy the presupposition.

The problem is supposed to be that the presupposition induced by 'since' in (4) is incompatible with the context, and hence it cannot be accommodated without violating the basic constraint. But if this is indeed the source of infelicity, we should be able to eliminate it by getting rid of the presupposition trigger. Alas, this is not true:

(5) We all know that I have a daughter, so you should pay attention to my opinion.

It looks like the source of the trouble with (4) and (5) is that (6) cannot be used to update the context at all, no matter whether we try to accommodate it or assert it.

(6) We all know that I have a daughter.

That there is anything wrong with (6) is surprising. There should be no obstacle to accommodating the presupposition that the speaker has a daughter and then asserting that this is something the speaker and everyone addressed knows.

One might suggest that the source of the infelicity is that (6) is trivial from the perspective of the interlocutors. In normal cases, they all assume that the things they take for granted are true, and in fact mutually known. An addressee of the utterance could reply to the utterance of (6) by saying: "*Of course*, we all know that you have a daughter – you just let us in on this with your own utterance!" But this is not a natural reaction. What an addressee would say instead is something like this: "*No*, I didn't know this at all!" The addressee would assume that the speaker is mistaken – that he thinks the fact that he has a daughter was common knowledge before he said anything.

I think an utterance of (6) is infelicitous because the proposition the sentence expresses is incompatible with the context *as it was before accommodation*. If this is right, it casts doubt on the Stalnaker's conception of accommodation. If accommodation is not a repair mechanism but simply a more or less automatic consequence of the fact that a salient change (i.e. an utterance of a sentence) occurred then it is odd that the update process cares about incompatibility with the context before accommodation.

*Addendum:*

In his response, Kai contested my claim that the infelicity of (6) is a problem for Stalnaker's timing account of accommodation. As I understand his view, the idea is that the proposition expressed by (6) is incompatible not only with the common ground *before* accommodation but also with the common ground *after* accommodation, and so there is really no need for the kind of backtracking I objected to. But why is there a conflict between the proposition expressed by (6) and the common ground after accommodation? Because it is common ground after accommodation that before accommodation the hearer did not know that the speaker has a daughter. But the truth of the proposition expressed by (6) requires that at the time of utterance – i.e. before accommodation – the hearer knows that the speaker has a daughter.

I still have a worry. The worry concerns the claim that the present tense in (6) picks out a time before accommodation. In section 2, Kai cites Stalnaker saying that “the prior context 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.” I take it that the context Stalnaker is talking about is the context *after* accommodation. The context before accommodation is the context as it was just before the utterance took place, and so it is part of that context that the speaker (or more precisely the person who is about to speak) isn't speaking (yet). But if the reference of 'I' is settled by the context after accommodation, doesn't that mean that 'I' refers to the speaker of the context after accommodation? And if that is so, shouldn't we also say that the reference of 'now' is also settled by the context after accommodation, and hence that

'now' refers to the time of the context after accommodation? And if that is so, should we also say that the time the present tense picks out is a time after accommodation?