

# Pragmatic Functions of Presupposition in Arabic

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The article investigates pragmatic functions of presupposition in Arabic. Analyzing data collected from different sources and following other researchers (for examples, see References), the researcher finds that presupposition in Arabic is utilized to achieve 12 pragmatic functions; some of these are arrived at by other researchers in other languages; other functions are particular to Arabic. Language particular functions are caring, self-revelation, advising, knowledge sharing, inferencing, and skill developing.

*Keywords:* presupposition, Arabic, pragmatics, functions

## Introduction

For an intelligible communication or conversation to occur, interlocutors hold assumptions towards each other. The speaker (S) assumes that the listener (L) can grasp what the former is saying and the L also assumes that the S provides enough information enabling him to get the message intended. In the related literature, this aspect of communication is referred to as presupposition (P) and entailment. The former is the focus of this present paper.

A presupposition is what the *S* assumes that the *L* knows about the topic of the conversation. In this domain, Lyons (1977, p. 509) maintained that a *P* indicates expressions which give information the speaker presents as given or unstressed; it can, thus, be recovered from the context. Also, “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). A presupposition is part of the meaning that should be seriously given due account to by the listener so as to get the meaning of the utterance (Verschuere, 1999, p. 27). For example, the utterance:

(1) *The man cultivated the land.*

Presuppose the existence of a person, *the man*, who did some act, cultivating the land. This presupposition is the *S*’s assumptions that assert a proposition which can, in terms of truth conditions, be true or false. Rooji (2010) stated that a speaker’s *P* need not be true since it is “based on an assumption that later turns to be false” (pp. 5-6). He thus suggested relating a *P* to common belief rather than to common knowledge. Therefore, one should give due account to context so that one becomes familiar with common belief and knowledge in order to grasp a *P*. In this regard, WANG Ying-fang (2007) maintained that a *P* is the common knowledge known by the *S* and *L* “or at least the information that can be inferred according to context” (p. 56).

To understand *P*’s, Geurts (2010, p. 135) proposed a binding theory of *P*’s. The theory dictates that a listener can relate or bind a *P* to an appropriate antecedent or referent if an utterance has a presupposition trigger like definite noun phrases and certain verbs. Thus, if a *P* is not bound, “it will be inserted in some

accessible discourse representation structure” (Geurts, 2010, p. 135). Consequently, both the *S* and *L* should worry about binders so that communication keeps flowing.

The truth value does not, however, change if an utterance is negated as in (2):

(2) *The man did not cultivate the land.*

Yule (1996, p. 26) called this characteristic of presuppositions “constancy under negation”, which means that the presupposition of a statement will remain constant (i.e., still true) even when that statement is negated. Similarly, Stubbs (1983, pp. 203-204) maintained that a *P* is a pre-condition for the truth value of a sentence. Thus, *P* remains the same whether a sentence is negative, interrogative, or affirmative. He further stated that if an existential presupposition is not achieved, “then the original presupposition has no truth value” (p. 204). The *S*’s assumptions or presuppositions are indicated by means of a variety of linguistic devices, verbs or predicates, phrases, and constructions.

Knowing *P*’s expressed in utterances or sentences implies knowing what linguistic mechanisms or devices are employed by the *S*. It goes without saying that analysts present classes of devices which are solely intended to familiarize hearers with what is going on in a communicative act, be it an oral or written discourse. For example, Beaver (2010, pp. 65-100) gave a number of verbs with examples showing how “factive verbs interact with implicatures”. Illustrative verbs include *aware*, *know*, *find out*, *notice*, and the like.

Two types of *P* exist in literature: semantic and pragmatic. The former looks upon *P*’s from a logic and semantic perspective; the latter studies *P*’s from a pragmatic viewpoint (WANG, 2007, p. 55). The semantic *P* is demonstrated by the grammatical features of the language; this type entails studying the form of sentences and can be considered as a formal *P*. On the other hand, the pragmatic *P* investigates utterances since pragmatics studies the relationship between language utterances, contexts and parties involved in an interaction in the outside world. Givon (1979, p. 50) defined pragmatic presupposition as “assumptions the speaker makes about what the hearer is likely to accept without challenge”. Consequently, *P*’s clearly reflect our understanding of the *S*’s and *L*’s assumptions and shared knowledge about the outside world. In the present paper, focus is mainly on the pragmatic type. This coheres with Abusch’s (2010) idea that *P*’s have a pragmatic load and function.

The present paper will discuss the pragmatic functions of Arabic presuppositions. Pragmatic presupposition is meant to achieve certain functions like economy, persuasion, and euphemism. Thus, pragmatic presupposition shows the relationship between language and the world.

### Related Literature

The phenomenon of presupposition has attracted the attention of linguists who have researched it resulting in a wave of studies. In what follows, a review of the available relevant studies is looked upon.

Polyzou (2015) dealt with presupposition in relation to critical discourse analysis or societal pragmatics. He stated that *P* reveals ideologies expressed in discourse, identifying discursal functions. This researcher says that *P* should be investigated in terms of lexically triggered presuppositions, discourse *P*’s, and presupposed pragmatic competence. As a matter of fact, this sort of investigation is necessary for understanding the participants’ views and their world.

GE (2011) presented a historical and theoretical background of *P* and its pragmatic functions in English advertisements. He stated that *P* expresses eight functions: conciseness, interestingness, enlargement, emphasis, euphemism, concealment, persuasion, and self-protection. These functions demonstrate that presuppositions are

mainly meant to produce the maximal advertising effects on consumers. The present paper will attempt to see whether Arabic presupposition has these functions.

Lam (2009) looked upon the functions of presupposition in food advertisements and how and what ads reflect in the Hong Kong culture. Such presupposition fulfills three functions: implicit competitions to avoid breaking the law, making readers give due account and pay attention to the existence of products, and making ads brief and memorable. Furthermore, presuppositions in advertising reveal Hong Kong cultural values and traditions.

WANG Ying-fang (2007) investigated pragmatic presupposition and its functions in advertising. He claimed that ad writers use presuppositions as strategies to achieve the following functions: economy, conciseness, objectivity, euphemism, concealment, information sharing, distance-shortening, and inferencing. These strategies are meant to provide clients with desired information which may influence them to make sound decisions and buy products.

Schmid (2001) studied syntactic structures of the type “The thing is that... or The problem was that... (N-be-that-constructions)”. The analysis of data manifests that speakers, using such constructions having nouns like problem, trouble, idea, and truth, can deceive listeners or hearers into the unfounded or ungrounded belief that some information does not need contemplation, consideration, or attention. Thus, Schmid concluded that “presuppositions can be a bluff”.

### **Methodology**

The following methods are employed by the researcher to fulfill the ultimate goal of the current research which is an analysis of pragmatic functions of presupposition in Arabic.

#### **Data Collection**

The researcher has gathered data necessary for the purpose of the study from the following sources like newspapers, books, magazines, and utterances and sentences given by native speakers of Arabic. The variation in sources has a significant source yielding a pretty large number of presuppositional instances.

#### **Data Analysis**

The collected data are analyzed as follows in terms of ideas and categories presented by Lyons (1997), Yule (1996), Schmid (2001), Ying-fang (2007), Beaver (2001; 2010), GE (2011), and among others.

The researcher has identified presuppositions and categorized them as to their pragmatic functions. Pragmatic functions are classified as to their meanings and the assumptions of the speaker. Twelve functions are sorted out.

Finally, the Arabic presupposition data are transcribed and/or transliterated by means of phonetic symbols well-known in the field.

### **Significance of the Study**

The present research is significant. This linguistic phenomenon, presupposition in Arabic, has not been so far investigated pragmatically. The researcher could not get any research examining it in related literature. Therefore, it will be informative in the sense that it will broaden other researchers' knowledge of this significant aspect of language. Moreover, the paper will motivate other linguists to further look upon presupposition in Arabic.

### Pragmatic Functions of Presupposition in Arabic

To use language effectively and to fulfil pragmatic functions, Arabic speakers use or resort to presupposition among other devices. They make use of presupposition to make language convey a lot of information to listeners but assumed by speakers. The following discussion sheds light upon presupposition functions in Arabic.

#### (A) Concealment

Speakers sometimes utilize *P* to conceal or hide certain information to achieve a certain effect on listeners.

An instance illustrating this function is the following:

- (1) Khatim ?az-zawaj      hal ?aSbaHa      shay?an      min      ?al-maDi  
 Ring the- wedding      does become      thing      from      the-past

“Does the wedding ring become a past thing?” (Zahrat Al-Khaleej, Sep. 10, 2016, p. 44)

The example provides a hidden message that a person with this ring is married and should not be tempted. That is, single people should not try to seduce or lead astray a married person for the ring is a manifestation of a strong and sacred bond between a couple.

Yet, another possible proposition expressed here is that some married people put on this ring, but they are unfortunately disloyal to each other. In this regard, GE (2011, p. 155) maintained that advertisers sometimes use concealment to achieve a certain effect.

#### (B) Conciseness

A concise language means using very few words or expressions which exclude unnecessary or superfluous information. Speakers tend to use this strategy to make propositions more effective. For example, the expression

- (2) Da9      li      ?ishara  
 Put      to+me      signal

“Tag me!” (Sayidaty, Sep. 17, 2016, p. 63)

The proposition made by the speaker or writer is that people using electronic media like Facebook and Twitter can utilize slogans or signals of their own to communicate with others more concisely. As a matter of fact, an expression like (2) is more effective than (3):

- (3) ?anta      ?ib9aTH      li      ?ishara  
 You      send      to+ me      signal

Thus, messages like this one make linguistic triggers and propositions more economical, expressive, and impressive.

#### (C) Sharing knowledge

Using presupposition, speakers sometimes want to share knowledge or assumptions with listeners or hearers. Consider (4)

#### (4) Khala Hanan

“Aunt/Auntie Hanan” (Sayidaty, Sep. 17, 2016, p. 100)

The presupposition made by the speaker or writer is that Auntie Hanan invites females to inform her of their problems. Hanan welcomes them and is willing to discuss them and present them with an immediate response and solution. The context makes this presupposition clear. WANG Ying-fang (2007, p. 57) named this function information-sharing: When people express or talk about themselves or their affairs, they share information with others.

## (D) Inferencing

Presupposed details help listeners to make inferences about a given state of affairs. In (5) below, the speaker or writer infers that a woman's age is equal to the number of her oocytes.

(5) mu9adala 9ilmiyya : makhzun ?al- buwayDat = 9umr ?al-mar?a

Equation scientific : number the- oocytes = age the-woman

“Scientific Equation : Number of oocytes = a woman's age” (Sayidaty, Sep. 17, 2016, p. 165)

It is very evident that *P* is related to inferencing.

Another example showing inferencing is (6):

(6) nu:n ?an- niswa ... nu:n ?al-?insan

N the- women ... N the- human being

“Both women and men have the common letter N” (Zahrat Al-Khaleej, Sep. 10, 2016, p. 54)

The assumed proposition is that some men think that women should stay indoors and should not be allowed to work outside the house. This viewpoint constitutes a very strong challenge to women who have eventually proven themselves as very successful and talented in different domains like government positions, research centers, international positions and universities. Thus, we infer the fact that both men and women are equal in terms of humanity and rights and the society cannot advance without both respecting, cooperating, and taking care of each other. This presupposed inference is explicitly marked by the letter “n” of both names women and men.

## (E) Emphasizing

Writers or speakers often front or topicalize some information to emphasize it. In (7):

(7) majallatak ?al-9alamiyya bi-lughatak ?al-9arabiyya

Journal + your the- international in- language + your the- Arabic

?iqra?ha wa9ish tajrubataha

Read+it and + live experience+its

“Your international journal in Arabic; read it and live by its experience” (Zahrat Al-Khaleej, Sep. 10, 2016, p. 59).

The writer or speaker highlights the national geographic journal by proposing or topicalizing “majallatuka ?al- 9alamiyya” to achieve a very maximal effect on the listener or reader. Also, the proposition here is that this journal paves the way for the listener or reader to experience past events that he had not witnessed.

## (F) Skill developing

Presuppositions are often used to help people develop skills like analytical thinking, objectivity, and creativity. This function is expressed in (8):

(8) fakkiri bi-?ibda9

Think+you with-creativity

“Think creatively” (Zahrat Al-Khaleej, Sep. 10, 2016, p. 79)

Creative thinking is presupposed to play a very significant role in a changing world to achieve excellence, modernization, and development. This proposition entails getting rid of traditional prescientific thinking, participation, cooperation, and caring for and respecting others.

## (G) Interest arousing

GE (2011, p. 154) called this function “interestingness” in advertising. He said that “lively, vivid, and

aesthetic advertising language constituents are a main factor for arousing readers' interest". Similarly, Arabic has presuppositions that arouse people's interest. This is explicated in (9):

- (9) faltatakallam      ?al-mouD  
Talk                      the fashion

"Let the fashion talk" (Sayidaty, Sep. 17, 2016, p. 80)

The proposition in (9) is that words and slogans of various types have recently appeared in men's fashion stores. These devices have made men's fashion appeal to modernity and globalization, which are solely intended to hold the youth's attention and arouse their interest.

#### (H) Euphemism

Euphemism means the language user's pleasant or inoffensive words to protect others' feelings and face. Speakers and writers very often use this strategy to avoid offence and losing or threatening one's face. This function is exemplified in (10):

- (10) qara?tu      Adultery      li bawlou      koilu  
Read+I      Adultery      by Paulo      Koilu

"I read Paulo Koilu's novel, Adultery" (Zahrat Al-Khaleej, Sep. 10, 2016, p. 158)

According to the writer, the novel deals with adultery practiced by a married woman with a man other than her husband. The writer does not use the Arabic equivalent word to adultery in her critique and discussion of that novel. Instead, she has used "illegal relation" or "conflict between guilt and sin". Therefore, presupposition is a strategy associated with euphemism. Both WANG Ying-fang (2007, p. 59) and GE (2011, p. 155) found out that advertisers employ presupposition to avoid embarrassing and offending customers.

#### (I) Self-revelation

This function means a language user uses presupposition to make secret or unknown or hidden information "known". This strategy is illustrated in (11):

- (11) Zahra tanshur      ?i9tirafat      jadida fi      9awdit      ?almuTriba      ?al-kuwaytiyya  
Zahra publish      confessions      new about      return      the+singer      the-Kuwati  
?al-munaqqaba      lissaHa      ?al-fanniyya  
The-veiled      to+the+stage      the- artistic

"Zahrat Al-Khaleej discloses new confessions about the return of the Kuwaiti female veiled singer to art" (Zahrat Al-Khaleej, Sep. 10, 2016, p. 160).

The proposition manifests that the singer concerned is trying to eradicate accusations associated with her problem, status, and profession. We can, thus, conclude that presupposition can be a means for making the "unknown" "known".

#### (J) Advising

Presupposition is related to advising. It is a way of giving advice to others so that they can overcome worries. This device is illustrated in (12):

- (12) ?afkar      mubtakara      litakhalluS      min      ?al-fawaDa      fi      jami:9ghuraf      ?al- manzil  
Ideas      creative      for+getting      rid from      the-chaos      in      all rooms      The-house

"Novel ideas for getting rid of the chaos at home" (Zahrat Al-Khaleej, Sep. 10, 2016, p. 126)

The presupposition is that house dwellers suffer from confusion, noise, and chaos at home. Dwellers are actually in need of calmness, comfort, and rest, states which can be readily achieved by presupposition, a means of advice-giving.

## (K) Self-protection

Presupposition can be a device for protecting one's self from wrong doings. An illustrative example is (13):

(13) limatha natazawwaj

Why getting married

"Why do we get married?" (Zahrat Al-Khaleej, Sep. 10, 2016, p. 68)

The speaker raises this question and assumes that marriage is the best and only means of protecting an individual against sins like adultery. The proposition is that marriage can establish trust and honesty between a man and a woman who will definitely live a happy life. This presupposition is also meant to persuade people to get married in order to constitute a happy family.

## (L) Caring

The speaker or writer assumes that the hearer shares his knowledge that his assumption is intended to care for one's good health and well-being. This function is manifested in (14-15):

(14) fawa?id wamaDar ?al-?ayskri:m

Advantages and+disadvantages the-ice cream

"Advantages and disadvantages of the ice-cream" (Zahrat Al-Khaleej, Sep. 10, 2016, p. 142)

(15) Tabi:b ?al- 9a?ila

Doctor the-family

"The family doctor" (Zahrat Al-Khaleej, Sep. 10, 2016, p. 142)

It is evident that presuppositions expressed in examples like (14-15) are meant to hold people's attention to the significance of caring for their health. The proposition is that there exist problems or diseases that could be taken care of by skillful and specialized physicians.

To sum up, Arabic presupposition can express a variety of pragmatic functions. Some of these functions like conciseness, enlargement, emphasis, self-protection, euphemism, and economy are mentioned by other researchers (WANG, 2007; GE, 2011). Other functions like caring, self-revelation, advising, sharing knowledge, inferencing, and skill developing are true of or specific to presuppositions in Arabic.

## Conclusion

The foregoing presentation looks upon presupposition in Arabic from a pragmatic perspective. It manifests that presupposition in Arabic is employed to fulfill several pragmatic functions: concealment, conciseness, sharing knowledge, inferencing, emphasizing, skill developing, arousing interest, euphemism, self-revelation, advising, self-protection, and caring. The functions of conciseness, enlargement, emphasis, arousing interest, euphemism, and economy are given by GE (2011) and WANG Ying-fang (2007). Others, inferencing, developing skills, advising, caring, self-revelation and protection, are limited to Arabic. In this regard, the researcher invites other scholars to verify those functions.

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