Limits for Accommodation for Presupposition: Mutual Assumptions, Mutual Knowledge and Politeness

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Presuppositions

• The usages of some linguistic forms are constrained such that certain contextual conditions must be present at the time of usage.

• The conditions are requirements on speaker’s presupposition (Stalnaker 1999).

Cf. The conditions are requirements on the common ground (von Fintel 2008).
Presuppositions

• What happens if a speaker uses a presupposition-trigger when its condition is not satisfied?
Accommodation for presupposition

• What is presupposed will be inferred by the hearer.

• Lewis (1979) calls this phenomenon ‘accommodation for presupposition:

  “If at time t something is said that requires presupposition P to be acceptable, and if P is not presupposed just before t, then –ceteris paribus and within certain limits– presupposition P comes into existence at t.” (1979: 340)
Accommodation for presupposition

Questions: What are the certain limits? What will happen when what is presupposed, but not satisfied by the context, is beyond certain limits?
Accommodation for presuppositions

Example (1): I am sorry that I am late. I had to take my daughter to the doctor.

(from von Fintel 2008, my underline)

• If the hearer does not know that the speaker has a daughter, what will happen?
• Will it be accommodated if the speaker is, for example, a middle school student?
What “my daughter” presupposes

Q: What is the condition required in order for the speaker to use the expression “my daughter”?

• The speaker does not have to assume that the hearer knows that the speaker has a daughter.

• The speaker needs only to assume that the hearer can go along with a referent referred by “my daughter.”
Why can’t most middle school students use the “my daughter” excuse with the hope that the hearer will accommodate?

- The hearer most likely cannot go along with a referent referred to by “my daughter.”
- The speaker has to assume that the hearer can go along with a referent referred to by “my daughter.”
  - The middle-school-student speaker cannot assume that the hearer can go along with a referent referred to by “my daughter.”
Accommodation for presuppositions

(2) I can’t come to the meeting—I have to pick up my cat at the veterinarian.

(from Stalnaker 1999, my underline)

(3) ?? I can’t come to the meeting—my snails are sick.

• Even when the hearer does not know that the speaker has a cat, it is most likely accommodated. Can we expect the same for “my snails”? 
Presupposition and mutually shared knowledge

- While some presuppositional conditions are merely shared assumptions, some other conditions consist of more complex layers of information.

- The usages of some linguistic forms are constrained such that presuppositional conditions are requirements on mutually shared knowledge.
An examples of presupposition manipulation

The recent usages of the Japanese *yoroshi-katta-deshou-ka* construction

- The presupposition of *yoroshi-katta-deshou-ka* in some recent usages is not satisfied.

- Many hearers find it annoying. Some of them describe on Internet blogs and bulletin board writings how “wrong” the usages were and what can be acceptable.
Yoroshi-katta-deshou-ka

yoroshii: adjective ‘good’ ‘OK’ ‘desirable’ (for the individual to make a decision)
-katta: usually past, but not telic in these usages
-deshou: speculative
-ka: interrogative

“Was it OK with you?”

cf. yoroshii-deshou-ka (“Is it OK with you?”)
Yoroshi-katta-deshou-ka: traditional usages

(4) [A customer orders a multiple-course meal including dessert and coffee. When the customer finishes his dinner, the waiter comes to confirm his after-meal beverage.]

Shokugo no onomimono wa koojii de yoroshi-katta-deshou-ka?

“As for your after-meal beverage, was coffee OK?” (=You asked for coffee. Is that correct?)

H (=the customer) has previously indicated that he wants coffee.
(5) [At the reception desk of a hotel, an arriving guest declares that he has a reservation. The receptionist finds his name on the computer screen.]

Otomari wa nihaku de yoroshi-katta-deshou-ka?

“Was a stay for two nights good?” (=You have reserved for two nights. Is that correct?)

H (=the guest) has previously indicated that he wishes to stay for two nights.
Yoroshi-katta-deshou-ka: New usages

(6a) [Upon greeting a customer entering a restaurant]

Waiter: Kinenseki de yoroshi-katta-deshou-ka.

“Was a non-smoking seat OK?”

There has been no prior exchange that indicates H wants a non-smoking seat.

Cf. (6b) Kinenseki de yoroshii-deshou-ka. “Is a non-smoking seat OK?”
Yoroshi-katta-deshou-ka: New usages

(7a) [A customer in a restaurant orders a pancake set with coffee. Then, the waitress repeats the order and asks:]


“I will repeat your order. A pancake set and a cup of coffee. Was this OK?”

The prior exchange indicates H wants x, but the waitress’s confirmation indicates that the exchange occurred some time ago.

Cf. (7b) … Ijou de yoroshii-deshou-ka. “Is this OK?”
Reconstructing the presupposition for *yoroshi-katta-deshou-ka*

- What is (are) the condition(s) that traditional usages like (4) and (5) satisfy, but new usages like (6a) and (7a) do not satisfy?

Shudo 2007, Shudo and Harada 2009a, 2009b
Contextual constraints on the traditional usage of *yoroshi-katta-deshou-ka*

The context must satisfy the following two conditions:

1. [Shared knowledge of H’s desire of x]
   - H has previously let it be known that H wants x.

2. [Rationality for S’s reconfirmation]
   - There is a rationale behind S’s reconfirming H’s desire.

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**Diagram:**

- H expresses desire of x
- S uses yoroshikatta deshouka
The context of new usage of *yoroshi-katta-deshou-ka* (type I in like (6a))

The context satisfies only the following condition:

1. [Shared knowledge of H’s desire of x]
   - H has previously let it be known that H wants x.

2. [Rationality for S’s reconfirmation]
   - There is a rationale behind S’s reconfirming H’s desire.
The context of new usage of *yoroshi-katta-deshou-ka* (type II like (7a))

The context satisfies only the following condition:

1. [Shared knowledge of H’s desire of x]
   - H has previously let it be known that H wants x.

2. [Rationality for S’s reconfirmation]
   - There is a rationale behind S’s reconfirming H’s desire.

H expresses desire of x  |  S uses yoroshikatta deshouka
Presupposition manipulation and politeness

Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987)

• Presupposition manipulation can be positive-face redress. S may speak as if something were assumed when it is not really mutually assumed so that S will claim common ground for positive politeness.
Politeness strategy: 
Presuppose knowledge of H’s wants 
(Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987)

(8) Wouldn’t you like a drink?
(9) Don’t you want some dinner now?

(8) and (9) indicate that S knows H’s wants and thus redress the imposition of face threatening acts.
New usages and politeness

- New usages of *yoroshi-katta-deshouka* presuppose that S knows H’s wants and thus should claim common ground.

- What happens when a presupposition-trigger is used when the context does not satisfy its constraint?
Can Manipulating the presupposition of *yoroshi-katta-deshou-ka* be a successful politeness strategy?

- Are there successful (=not annoying) usages which do not satisfy the presupposition of yoroshi-katta-deshou-ka?
  
  - [Shared knowledge of H’s desire of x] H has previously let it be known that H wants x.
  
  - [Rationality for S’s reconfirmation] There is a rationale behind S’s reconfirming H’s desire.
Successful usages with presupposition manipulation

(10) [There needs an emergency meeting in a workplace. A subordinate was not able to get in touch with his boss for some time and thus scheduled a meeting without his approval. When he finally gets hold of his boss, the subordinate confirms the scheduled time is OK.]


“For the time being, I made an arrangement for a 9:30 meeting. Was it OK?”

🌟 If the supervisor thinks 9:30 is good, the subordinate had assumed right when he made the arrangement and thus indicates that S knew H’s desire.

🌟 If the supervisor does not think 9:30 is good, it is easier for the supervisor to express his desire to change the time.
Successful usages with presupposition manipulation

(11) [Speaker is a door-to-door salesman]

Salesman: Totsuzen ojamashimashita ga, gotsugou wa yoshoshi-katta-deshou-ka.

“I came suddenly (=without an appointment), but was this OK?”

The salesman did not know that it was going to be a good time for the home-owner (or even may have thought that it was most likely not going to be a good time for her).

But coming to someone’s house without thinking it is a good time is more face-threatening.
Successful usages with presupposition manipulation

• In (10) and (11), presupposed information contributes to redress FTAs.

• The hearers of (10) and (11) know very well that the presupposition is not satisfied.

• The hearers of (10) and (11) see the speakers’ intention of presupposition manipulation for politeness.

• In (6a) and (7a), presupposed information does not contribute to redress FTAs.
Presupposition manipulation

- Presupposition may be manipulated. Speakers may use a linguistic form that requires a certain contextual condition when the condition is not present.
Conclusive remarks

- Presuppositions for mutual assumptions are accommodated as long as the hearer can go along with the assumption.
- Presuppositions for mutual knowledge cannot be accommodated (or are unhappily accommodated).
- To speak as if something were assumed when it is not really mutually assumed may be face-threatening unless there is a politeness-driven reason. (Requiring excessive accommodation for presupposition is face-threatening.)
- Presupposition manipulation is effective when what is falsely assumed serves positive or negative politeness.
Additional remarks

• The politeness meaning in yoroshi-katta-deshou-ka may be on the way to grammaticalization. But its politeness paradox may counteract this process.
References


Thank you for your attention!

I will welcome your comments.
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