Presupposition Trigger-A Comparative Analysis of Broadcast News Discourse

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Abstract

Presupposition has long been used as a property of language to mold the audience's ideology. Using presupposition triggers, surprisingly the author or speaker impinges on readers or listeners' interpretation of facts and events, establishing either a favorable or unfavorable bias throughout the text. The role of presupposition in mass media's use of language is of paramount importance in that media writers attempt consciously or unconsciously to influence the audience understanding of news events. The present paper is aimed at pinpointing the oral discourse structure of two English news channels i.e. PressTV and CNN as varieties of Persian and American English respectively, in terms of presupposition triggers, employed to share non-asserted meaning. Accordingly, 40 transcripts (20 selected from PressTV and another 20 from CNN) were analyzed in terms of presupposition triggers, namely existential, factive, lexical, non-factive, structural, counter-factual, adverbial, and

relative. Analysis of the transcripts revealed that the most frequently used presupposition trigger in both varieties of oral discourse was Existential.

Keywords: CDA, Presupposition, Presupposition trigger

1. Introduction

Critical Discourse Analysis which Fairclough (1995) defines as discourse analysis aiming "to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes", is considered an attempt to reveal hidden meanings consciously or unconsciously embedded in an utterance. In other words, CDA attempts to disclose the ideological values of text writers reflected in the discourse. Widdowson (2000) describes CDA as "the uncovering of implicit ideologies in texts". He also asserts that CDA "unveils the underlying Ideological prejudice" existing in discourse and therefore it studies "the exercise of power in texts" (Widdowson, 2000). Investigating "how … practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power" is mentioned as the major function of CDA. (Fairclough, 1995: 132)

Presupposition as one of the properties of language which impinges on readers or listeners' understanding of facts and events through using subtle linguistic devices and constructions is considered an argumentative concept in CDA. Levinson (2001) defines presupposition as "the common ground" embedded in an utterance which is taken for granted by all the participants i.e. speaker & listener, or writer & reader. In another description, Richardson (2007) delineates it as "implicit claims inherent in the explicit meaning of a text or utterance which are taken for granted" (p, 63). Put another way, presupposition refers to the non-asserted information triggered by certain linguistic constructions which is irrefutably credited as gospel truth by participants in an utterance in a specific context.

Werth (1993) cites Frege who enumerates basic properties of presupposition as 1) being embedded in referring phrases and temporal clauses, 2) being constant even in their negated counterparts, and 3) determining the accuracy of the assumption of a sentence. That is, the assumption of a sentence is true only when the presupposition is true. Moreover, Dryer (1996) cites Chierchia and McConnell-Ginet (1990) who include "Being back-grounded and taken for granted" as the main empirical properties of presupposition. Presuppositions are usually analyzed by using constancy under negation as a rule of thumb. Constancy under negation which determines the actuality of presuppositions, stresses that the presupposed information should remain true even after the statement is negated. An example can clarify the point:

a) Everybody knows that John has got married.

b) >> John has got married.

c) Everybody doesn't know that John has got married.

d) >> John has got married.

(From Yule, 2010: 27)

As the example clarifies, sentence (a) and its negated counterpart (c) both presuppose the same meaning (b) and (d).

Generally, there are two approaches to studying presupposition which scholars can take, i.e. semantic and pragmatic, based on which it is analyzed from the aspect of logic and pragmatics respectively. Schmid (2001) notes that semantic presuppositions hinge on the meaning of the words used to trigger information. While, pragmatic presuppositions as Caffi (1993) asserts, do not exist in the meaning of words, or in something that is already known; instead, they exist in something which is given as information by the speaker, or in something which is assumed as such (Cited in Schmid, 2001: 153). As a matter of fact, pragmatic presuppositions share the meaning that more information is to follow. An example can clear up the distinction:

E.g: "The thing is that he needs a lot of loving."

>> There is a thing. [Semantic Presupposition]

>> There is a thing (and I am going to tell you what it is). [Pragmatic Presupposition]

(From Schmid, 2001: 153)

As mentioned earlier, presuppositions can be tested by using the constancy under negation principle. It's interesting to note that only semantic presuppositions remain true after negation. As Verschueren (1978) asserts, there are some pragmatic presuppositions that do not remain constant under negation. In other words, pragmatic presuppositions and their negated counterparts do not presuppose the same meaning.

2. Presupposition Trigger

There are some linguistic constructions at writers or speakers' disposal described as presupposition triggers which enable them to communicate intended information without stating them. Yule (2010) categorizes presupposition triggers or types into 6 groups, including existential, factive, lexical, structural, non-factive, and counter-factual. Relative and adverbial presuppositions are additionally briefly introduced. Examples are taken from the presuppositions detected in the transcripts.

1) Existential: Presupposition by means of possessive constructions or any definite noun phrase is called existential. As a matter of fact, by using these linguistic forms the speaker or writer seems committed to the existence of mentioned entities.

E.g. *the deadline* for Iranians >> there is a deadline

E.g. *Iran's Guardian Council* >> Iran has Guardian Council

2) Factive: A piece of information following verbs like know, realize, regret and phrases like "It's odd that …" is considered factive presupposition.

E.g. *It's sad that* the Occupations have started out >> the Occupations have started out

3) Lexical: As Yule (2010) states, in lexical presuppositions the use of some forms with their stated meanings is interpreted as the presentation of some non-asserted meanings.

E.g. The European Union plans to impose *new sanctions* against Tehran >> previously there have been sanctions

4) Structural: In this type, some interrogative forms are used as tools of triggering presupposed information.

E.g. *Why not add one more to the table* >> one more should be added to the table.

5) Non-Factive: Some verbs like dream, imagine, pretend, and allege are assumed to presuppose information which is not true.

E.g. an *imagined move* by China >> the move is not real

6) Counter-Factual: Conditional forms in subjunctive mood are considered to trigger "contrary to fact" presuppositions.

E.g. *if there was a situation 100% that these people were* >> there is not such a situation

7) , 8) Relative and adverbial: Relative and Adverbial clauses are also found to presuppose information.

E.g. the incident occurred in a region *where there is a large Kurdish population >>* there is a large Kurdish population [Relative]

E.g. it started *when Tehran's vice president this week warned >>* this week Tehran's vice president warned [Adverbial]

The point regarding presupposition types in discourse is that as Yule (2010) notes these linguistic forms should be considered "potential presuppositions", which can only become actual in contexts with speakers who intend to communicate a piece of non-asserted information. In other words, statements do not possess presuppositions; rather it is speakers or writers who presuppose intended meaning. (Yule, 2010, p.27)

Among writers and speakers there is an appeal to the notion of presupposition in that certain pieces of information already assumed to be known by readers and listeners are not required to be stated. Suppose a subject-predicate structure in which the intended meaning is placed in the subject part rather than in the predicate. Usually information in the subject part is considered old information which is accepted as truth while information presented in the predicate is considered new and listeners or readers rarely credit it as fact. By so doing, the author or speaker consciously or unconsciously impinges on readers or listeners' interpretation of the presented information, establishing a favorable or unfavorable bias throughout the text. That's why studying presupposition in media's use of language is of paramount importance. This notion provides the grounds for this study which is aimed at broadcast news discourse.

In an earlier study, Bonyadi & Samuel (2011) investigated the linguistic nature of presupposition in English editorials considered as written discourse. Surprisingly, the results of his study reveal that editorial writers use some specific linguistic constructions to communicate certain unstated information. Even though, it is not clear whether they do this

consciously or unconsciously, the tip in point is that presupposition is considered one of the properties of editorials. With this background, this paper aims to investigate whether presupposition is employed in news transcripts broadcasted in oral form by two satellite news channels i.e. PressTV and CNN as two samples of Persian and American English news channels. As a matter of fact, this study is twofold. First it is to reveal whether presupposition is used in oral discourse of news transcripts. Additionally, it is aimed to investigate if there is any difference between Persian and American varieties of English in their use of presupposition. If so, what are the linguistic constructions or more specifically presupposition triggers which are frequently used in them?

3. Methodology

3.1 Procedure

To perform this inquiry, PressTV and CNN were chosen as two samples of news channels, with PressTV representing a Persian variety of oral English and CNN representing an American variety. Then a clustered sampling of 40 transcripts of news stories taken from their websites at www.presstv.com and www.cnn.com was done. These transcripts which include 20 from PressTV and 20 from CNN news channels were singled out without taking into consideration the principle of random selection. Afterwards, they were subjected to discourse analysis in terms of utilized presupposition categories. Based on the presupposition trigger classification put forward by Yule (2010), the frequency and percent of the occurrence of presupposition triggers were enumerated and tabulated. It's worth mentioning that presupposition triggers spotted in the transcripts were tested by using constancy under negation rule. Ultimately, the most and the least frequently utilized presupposition triggers in the discourse of the two were identified and compared.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Results

As mentioned earlier, following Yule's (2010) proposal, this paper classifies the presupposition triggers detected in the transcripts under the rubrics of existential, factive, lexical, structural, non-factive, counter-factual, adverbial, and relative, with adverbial and relative categories added to the main classification. Tables 1, and 2 show the occurrence frequency of each presupposition trigger in the transcripts.

Table 1. Presupposition triggers identified in PressTV's transcripts

Transcript	Existential	Factive	Lexical	Structural	Non-Factive	Counter-Factual	Adverbial	Relative
1.	15	-	5	-	-	-	1	5
2.	20	1	2	-	1	-	2	5
3.	19	3	6	-	-	-	-	6
4.	20	2	5	-	2	-	-	12
5.	15	5	7	-	1	-	1	6
6.	15	3	1	-	1	-	-	2
7.	25	2	2	-	1	-	-	7
8.	11	-	6	-	1	-	-	-
9.	10	2	7	-	-	-	4	6
10.	23	2	3	-	-	-	3	8
11.	7	3	6	-	-	-	2	1
12.	9	4	4	-	3	-	-	4
13.	10	2	4	3	1	-	1	2
14.	12	1	5	-	-	-	1	1
15.	17	1	9	-	-	-	3	6
16.	23	-	5	-	1	-	3	4
17.	21	2	10	-	5	-	2	-
18.	11	1	4	-	1	-	2	3
19.	10	-	3	-	-	-	1	3
20.	11	3	-	-	1	-	-	3
Sum	**304**	**37**	**94**	**3**	**19**	**-**	**26**	**84**

As indicated by the table, existential (N=304) or presupposition through nominalization and possessive construction is the most frequently used linguistic construction to spark off intended meaning in PressTV's transcripts. Using existential presupposition, as Yule (2010) maintains, the speaker and hearer are committed to the existence of entities. Lexical (N=94) and relative (N=84) are the next favored tools of triggering presupposed proposition. Lexical presupposition might be thought of as one of the best ways to express implicit proposition. Due to its non-assertive function, lexical construction can best trigger meaning. Factive (N=37), adverbial (N=26), and non-factive (N=19) linguistic devices have also been employed to presuppose listeners' minds toward certain intended meaning. It's quite interesting to note that structural construction has been put into service only three times in 20 transcripts. Structural or structurally-based constructions are "subtle ways of expressing information that the speaker believes to be what the listener should believe", as Yule (2010) puts it (p, 29). Accordingly, using them can serve the purpose of making the listener believe what the speaker is putting in a wh-format statement. To the surprise of the author, counter-factual has not been employed in PressTV's transcripts.

Table 2. Presupposition triggers identified in CNN's transcripts

Transcript	Existential	Factive	Lexical	Structural	Non-Factive	Counter-Factual	Adverbial	Relative
	14	-	2	-	-	-	3	4
	19	-	4	-	-	1	1	9
	19	5	9	-	-	-	1	5
	8	1	-	-	-	-	-	3
	15	1	2	-	-	-	-	4
	10	12	3	-	2	-	1	7
	9	5	3	-	-	-	2	7
	6	1	-	-	-	-	3	5
	13	2	3	-	-	-	5	5
	8	1	1	-	-	-	1	2
	4	2	1	-	6	-	-	5
	5	1	2	-	3	-	-	2
	15	-	1	-	2	-	6	3
	18	3	4	-	-	-	-	8
	6	2	5	-	-	-	3	6
	10	3	3	1	-	-	2	7
	8	1	5	-	-	-	2	4
	11	2	1	-	-	-	4	6
	10	2	6	-	-	-	1	6
	11	-	-	1	2	-	1	7
Sum	**219**	**44**	**55**	**2**	**15**	**1**	**36**	**105**

As table 2 indicates, existential construction (N=219) is the most frequently occurring category of presupposition in CNN's transcripts. Relative (N=105), lexical (N=55), and factive constructions (N=44) are also preferred in sparking off unstated meaning. Furthermore, adverbial clauses (N=36) are among frequently employed presupposition triggers. The least frequently used presupposition triggers include non-factive, structural, and counter-factual categories with frequencies of 15, 2, and 1 respectively.

Table 3. Comparison of presupposition triggers identified in PressTV and CNN's transcripts

-	Existential	Factive	Lexical	Structural	Non-Factive	Counter-Factual	Adverbial	Relative
PressTV	304	37	94	3	19	-	26	84
CNN	219	44	55	2	15	1	36	105

As table 3 shows, the analysis of PressTV and CNN's transcripts does not show drastic difference in Persian and American English use of presupposition triggers. Surprisingly they share the same properties with slight variations in their frequency. Existential trigger, as the table reveals, is the most frequently used presupposition in the transcripts of both varieties. Moreover, it should be noted that PressTV writers are more predisposed to use lexical presuppositions while CNN writers are inclined to employ relative clauses. The least frequently used presuppositions are reported to be the same in both varieties of oral English.

Concerning existential trigger, it can be concluded that existential presupposition, due to its simple structure, is the easiest tool at writers' disposal to give information readily credited for by the listeners. Moreover, it seems that there is an appeal among the writers to prefer factive to non-factive presuppositions. As a matter of fact, news discourse writers tend to give a sense of certainty to the propositions instead of presupposing information which is not true.

In addition, their use of certain words and phrases for triggering non-asserted information described as lexical presupposition is of high frequency which can be attributed to their intention not to mention every piece of information. The frequency of adverbial and relative presuppositions also indicates their importance in oral discourse. In fact, adverbial and relative clauses can be considered sound textual devices in that they enable the writer to make listener believe what s/he asserts.

4.2 Discussion

Analysis of the chosen transcripts from the two English news channels reveals that both varieties of oral English, namely American and Persian, do put into service presupposition triggers. Using these linguistic constructions, their authors impinge on listeners' interpretation of facts and events. Schmid (2001) notes that discourse writers share their views by presenting them disguised as truths in presuppositions.

Further inquiry shows that existential presupposition being the most frequently used category is a constant property of news discourse. With its simple structure composed of possessive constructions or definite noun phrases, existential presupposition is considered the most readily credited for presupposition. Schmid (2001) also asserts that "people are more likely to object to the propositional content of that-clause that is represented as necessarily true than to the attitudinal meaning of the noun" (p, 154). As a matter of fact, existential presupposition is stronger or more difficult to detect in comparison to other categories. This can be ascribed to its ability in diverting attention to other parts of the sentence. Schmid and Caffi are among the scholars who strongly stress that existential presupposition is one of the least refutable presuppositions ever used. Interestingly, in an earlier study of written news discourse, Bonyadi & Samuel (2011) concluded that existential or presupposition through nominalization is among the most frequently used presupposition triggers.

Another important result the study yields is the writers' predisposition to use more factive triggers than non-factive ones. As table 3 indicates, in both groups of transcripts factive presuppositions are more frequently used than non-factive ones. By so doing, writers add a sense of certainty to the propositions. On the contrary, Bonyadi & Samuel (2011) concluded that written news discourse enjoys the use of non-factive presuppositions more than factive ones. Accordingly, it can be concluded that factive and non-factive presuppositions are respectively preferred by oral and written news discourse writers.

Compared to the results of the study by Bonyadi & Samuel (2011), this study also concludes that lexical presupposition is more frequent in oral news discourse than in written form of news. As a matter of fact presupposing unasserted proposition does not seem to intrigue scriptwriters of written news genre.

In sum, as Levinson (1983) notes, the detected presupposition triggers confirm the idea that propositions are triggered by parallel linguistic structures in different languages or varieties of languages. However, some difference might be witnessed in their frequency of use which can be attributed to writers' different attitudes toward certain linguistic constructions.

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