

Existential Presupposition in Religious Islamic Texts: Pragmatic Implications.

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Abstract

In modern Linguistics, pragmatics has come to be applied to the study of language from the point of view of the users, especially, of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication.

The main aim of pragmatic theory is to explain how successful communication is possible, and in particular, how utterances are understood. Understanding an utterance involves recovering the proposition it expresses and drawing certain inferences based on this proposition as premise. As regards the context, it is restricted to the mutual knowledge, beliefs and suppositions of speaker and hearer, where mutual knowledge is knowledge that is not only shared, and known to be known to be shared, and so on (Smith 1982: 61 and Kutz 1997:4).

Presupposition is a central topic in pragmatics. The interpretation of presupposed information is context- dependent. It describes any kind of background assumption against which an action, theory, expression or utterance makes sense or is rational (Levinson 1983: 168; Crystal 1991: 271; and Verschueren 1999: 27).

The term presupposition has been used to cover a very broad category of semantic and pragmatic phenomena that have an essential bearing on the understanding of utterances. More specifically, this term refers to propositions whose truth is taken for granted in an utterance and without which the utterance can not be assigned a truth- value, and that can generally be associated with a specific lexical item or grammatical features in the utterance.

However, since pragmatics is so important in identifying the boundaries of lexical and sentential meaning, it is necessary to establish how existential presupposition operates in English religious texts and how it can be identified. This is the task the present paper is undertaking.

The Concept of Presupposition

The concept of presupposition has a long history in pragmatics. Sometimes during the 1960s, linguists became interested in the concept and they gave it a lot of attention in subsequent years. This concept originated in the philosophy of logic, where it is used to denote a special type of implicit information. Information which is explicitly stated is referred to as a "claim" or an "assertion". All kinds of information can be derived from a sentence. Any text is a combination of explicit meanings- what is actually 'said'- and implicit meanings- what is left 'unsaid' but taken as given, as presupposed.

A significant literature on presupposition exists in both linguistics and philosophy. (Simons 2005:1-3). The philosophical interest in it, relates to debates about the nature of reference and referring expressions, while in linguistics, presupposition has played an important role in the

delimitation of semantics and pragmatics as different levels of analysis. More recently, pragmatics has focused on the function of presupposition in developing discourse and the use of presupposition to achieve certain effects in communication. (Thornborrow and Wareing 1998: 136 and Marmaridou 2000: 118).

Presupposition has been treated in a variety of semantic and pragmatic frameworks and has aroused serious debates.

In particular, semantic treatments of presuppositions have been concerned with the truth value of the propositions they express *vis a vis* the truth of the containing simple, complex or co-ordinate sentences. Moreover, pragmatic treatments are based on the inadequacy of truth-conditional semantics to account for a lot of presuppositional phenomena and have concentrated on identifying those pragmatic parameters that affect the survival or failure of presuppositions in specific contexts.

There is no conflict between semantic and pragmatic concepts of presuppositions: they are explications of related but different ideas. In general, any semantic presupposition of a proposition expressed in a given context will be a pragmatic presupposition of the people in that context, but the converse clearly does not hold (Davidson et al. 1972: 387).

The philosophical use of the term "presupposition" is founded in semantic discussion, and in many discussions. It is treated as a relationship between two propositions. (Crystal 1991: 276 and Yule 1996: 26). Presuppositions are constraints imposed by sentences on the context in which they are uttered.

Many words, phrases, and structures create presuppositions. Within pragmatics, some presuppositions are conventional properties of particular words or sentences. Pragmatic presuppositions are beliefs about the context that must be attributed to a speaker. It is standard to assume that semantic presuppositions of sentences become pragmatic presuppositions of speakers, as speakers should believe that contexts satisfy the conditions required to allow their utterances to be meaningful. It is presumed that semantic presuppositions are conventional properties of lexical items or constructions; and that all presuppositions which appear to be closely related to particular words or constructions are semantic presuppositions. (Simons 2006: 1-8). Thus, presuppositions are aspects of meaning that must be pre-supposed, understood, and taken for granted for an utterance to make sense. (Verschueren 1999: 27 and Fasold and Linton 2006: 158).

Finally, presuppositions are consistent, almost irrespective of context. They are the assumptions upon which the utterance in question relies for its relevance and truth. A text presupposition is important in the way in which positions its readers or listeners: how a text positions you is very much a matter of the common-sense assumptions it attributes to you. (Fairclough 1995: 107 and Jeffries 1998: 152).

Existential Presupposition

In the analysis of how assumptions are typically expressed, presupposition has been associated with the use of a large number of words, phrases, and structures. That is to say, that some presuppositions arise from the words used in the utterance.

It has been observed that using a name or a definite description to refer presupposes the existence of the named or described entity. The possessive construction in English is associated with a presupposition of existence. Existential presupposition is associated with referential expressions, arises simply because of an assumption that a person who uses such an expression intends to refer to something. All referential expressions give rise to existential presuppositions.

The existential presupposition is not only assumed to be present in possessive constructions (for example, "your car" presupposes that "you have a car") but more generally in any definite

noun phrase. By using any of the expressions in (1), the speaker or writer is assumed to be committed to the existence of the entities named.

(1) *The king of Sweden, the girl next door, the Counting Crows.*

(Yule 1996: 27).

Existential presuppositions have to be satisfied in order for the sentences in which they occur to be "meaningful".

Other types of presupposition are produced by particular words or constructions, which are called *presuppositions triggers*. Some of these triggers derive from syntactic structure, for example the cleft construction in (1) and the pseudo- cleft in (2) share the presupposition in (3):-

(1) *It was his behavior with frogs that disgusted me.*

(2) *What disgusted me was his behavior with frogs.*

(3) *Something disgusted me.*

Other forms of subordinate clauses may produce presuppositions, for example, time adverbial clauses and comparative clauses. e.g.

(1) *a- I'm riding motorcycles before you learned to walk.*

b- You learned to walk.

(2) *a- He's even more gullible than you are.*

b- You are gullible. (Saeed 1997: 97-8).

Many presuppositions are produced by the presence of certain words. Many of these lexical triggers are verbs. The presupposed information following a verb like "know" and "realize" can be treated as a fact, and is described as a *factive presupposition*. The verbs are called *factive verbs* because they presuppose the truth of their complement clause. e.g.

(1) *She didn't realize he was ill.*

- presuppose he was ill.

(2) *We regret telling him.*

- presuppose we told him.

A final example of lexical triggers is change of state verbs, like *start*, *begin*, *stop*, *end*. These verbs have a kind of switch presupposition: the new state is both described and is presupposed not to have held prior to the change; see for example (1) below, where (a) sentence presupposes (b) sentence:-

- (1) a- *Sara started smoking cigars.*
 b- *Sara used not to smoke cigars.*

Finally, the formation of presuppositions seems to cover a wide variety of linguistic material, including lexical items, grammatical constructions, or even verb tenses.

Islamic Religious Language

Human language is reasonably reliable when used to refer to the realm of finite existence. It is one medium by which the presence of activity of beings that are otherwise unavailable to the senses can be made presupposable, even compelling, in ways that are publically yet also subjectively available to people as members of social groups. However, no single set of formal or pragmatic features is diagnostic of religious as opposed to other marked uses of language, such as poetic or ceremonial speech. Rather, different religious practices seem to select from among the entire spectrum of linguistic possibilities. Religious language is deeply implicated with underlying assumptions about the human subject, divine beings, and the ways their capacities and agencies differ. A religious belief fosters a variety in which all aspects of structure are implicated. Many religious situations depend on linguistic stability and predictability for their identity.

It is essential to recognize that "*Islam*" and related terms are commonly used today in English and other Western languages. Islam describes the unique **spiritual state** of individual human souls totally devoted to God and unified with the divine will. It has a certain *language- shared- vocabulary* of inherited, historically accumulated symbols, myths, concepts and exemplary figures, potential human meanings and religious experience. The politics of Islam are expressed not only in a distinct vocabulary but a distinct language. The grammar and syntax of political discourse in Islam differ fundamentally from those of other political traditions, and have long complicated outside comprehension of Islam's inner dialogue.

Religious associations are particularly strong in relation to written language, because writing is an effective means of guarding and transmitting sacred knowledge. At the centre of all the world's main religions lies a body of sacred writing, revered by believers. (Crystal 2003: 371 and Crystal 2006: 471).

In religious texts, words are necessary. Words are nevertheless the only way we have of expressing our faith, sharing our spiritual experience, inspiring and teaching one another, and passing along our tradition to others.

But beyond these pragmatic considerations, *Islamic* religious language does not just describe our spiritual experience; in a very real sense it shapes that experience. (Gates 1999: 1).

The *Quranic* text in both its literary and oral forms bears a meaning to speakers/writers and audiences/ addressees. Moreover, the contextual nature of the speaker/addressee situation contains rules that govern the communication of meaningful

discourse, and that what we must attempt to discover are the rules that govern the various cultural contexts in which such communication takes place.

The Analytical Framework

The aim of this section is to explore the nature of existential presupposition and how it is responsible for the variety of linguistic expressions to yield specific communicative effects, establish international patterns and serve particular intentions.

The data is selected from two Islamic Texts. Text (1) is titled "Fruits of Belief" by Bediuzaman Said Nursi (2001). Text (2) has the title "Man and the Universe" by Bediuzaman Said Nursi (2001).

Existential Presupposition in Religious Texts:

Presupposition arises from the pragmatics of the sentence, that is, from world knowledge that interlocutors share. Existential presupposition is a basic kind of presupposition, which typically presupposes the existence of something or some ideas. It is usually triggered by definite descriptions which are formed by using proper names, definite article, demonstrative pronoun and possessives. (Li 2005: 49).

Thus, different items or concepts can represent existential presupposition in religious Islamic texts.

(1)- The use of definite article "*The*" asserts the existence of the following item or word as in:-

*Indeed, God is powerful over all things. Verily God has knowledge of all things. And He is **the** Mighty, **the** Wise, and he is Exalted in Might, Most Compassionate.*

(Text 1)

*"His is **the** sovereignty and to Him is due all praise; His is **the** Judgement and to Him will you all be brought back."*

(Text 2)

The use of "*the*" in the above examples, with the items "Mighty, Wise, Sovereignty, and judgment" presupposes that these items actually exist.

(2)- The use of possessives leads to presupposition of existence. For example:

*A man denied the light of the sun due to **his** diseased eye, **His** mouth denied the taste of water due to sickness.*

(Text 1)

Everyday he manifests himself in yet another way. A sovereign

doer of whatever He wills. He creates whatever he wishes. In whose hand is the dominion of all things. So look to the signs of God's mercy, how He restores the earth to life after its death.

(Text 2)

In the above examples, the use of possessives like "his" and "its" indicates the definite noun phrases and triggers the presupposition of existence.

(3)- The use of items or words indicating popular names of persons and places "refers" to the item under discussion, which has an already existing reference. Let us see the following examples:-

*In his Name, be he glorified! And there is nothing but it glorifies Him with praise.
May the peace and mercy and blessings of God be upon you!*

(Text 1)

Hence, he who rejects idols and believes in God has indeed taken hold of a support most unyielding, which shall never give way: for God is All- Hearing, All- Knowing.

(Text 2)

In the above examples, the use of referring expression "God" presupposes the existence of the named entity in the world.

It is significant to note that in religious texts there is an intention to capitalize words, such as "All- Hearing" and "All- Knowing", that have popular reference. The capitalization does not only indicate that these words are emphasized, but rather it indicates that these items have existential presupposition, so that it leads us to presuppose that these words have existential reference in the world. Accordingly, these popular concepts are capitalized and treated as popular names which have to be satisfied in order for the sentences in which they occur to be "meaningful".

The Results

Presupposition is a central topic in pragmatics. To presuppose a proposition in the pragmatic sense is to take its truth for granted, and to assume that others involved in the context do the same.

Existential presupposition is a type of presupposition. It is the assumption assumed to be committed to the existence of the entities named by the speaker or the writer and assumed to be present in a noun phrase. Islamic/ religious texts have 131 occurrences of existential presupposition.

The intensive use of proper nouns and names of persons is realized frequently in religious texts. It establishes a characteristic feature in this type of texts, which includes

84 occurrences of proper nouns and names of persons, representing 64.12% of the total number of types of existential presupposition.

The use of definite article "*the*" is also a type of existential presupposition. This type has the frequency of 37 occurrences in Islamic religious texts, representing 28.24% of the total number of existential presupposition.

Concerning the use of possessives, Islamic religious texts have 10 occurrences which constitute 7.63% of existential presupposition.

Conclusions

In this paper, it is attempted to show how existential presupposition operates in Islamic/religious texts.

The category in the analysis of the data is presupposition, which is significant in the development of discourse because it appears to be responsible for its dynamics by distributing social roles to speaker and addressee in a speech event. The formation of presuppositions seems to cover a wide variety of linguistic materials, including lexical items, grammatical constructions, or even verb tenses. Existential presupposition is one of the main types of presupposition. Different items or concepts can represent existential presupposition in Islamic/religious texts.

Existential presupposition is investigated through the use of proper nouns and the names of persons which operate as a distinctive feature due to the frequency of occurrence in Islamic/religious texts.

The use of the definite article is also a feature in Islamic texts, which is associated with the existence of the entities referred to.

Definite descriptions are determined by the possessives. Islamic/religious texts reflect a relatively low use of possessives.

It is observed that the use of a name or definite description gives rise to a presupposition of existence. The way definite descriptions work is to provide sufficient information to distinguish the referent from all other referents, that is, to render it unique.

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Appendices

Text (1)

_ They reflect on the creation of the heavens and earth, saying: ' O our Sustainer! Indeed You have not created this in vain; glory be unto You; and protect us from the torment of the Fire!' O our Sustainer! Avert from us the torment of Hell; indeed its torment is a grievous affliction, and evil it is as a resting- place and abode.

_ Indeed God is powerful over all things. Verily God has knowledge of all things. And He is the Mighty, the Wise. And He is Exalted in Might, Most compassionate.

_ For those who believe and do righteous deeds are gardens beneath which rivers flow; they will dwell there forever.

_ A man denied the light of the sun due to his diseased eye,
His mouth denied the taste of water due to sickness.

_ In His Name, be He glorified! And there is nothing but it glorifies Him with praise. May the peace and mercy and blessings of God be upon you!

Text (2)

- _ In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.
We did indeed offer the Trust to the heavens, and the earth, and the mountains; but they refused to undertake it being afraid thereof. But man assumed it; indeed, he is most unjust, most foolish.
- _ His is the sovereignty and to Him is due all praise;
His is the judgment and to Him will you all be brought back.
- _ Hence, he who rejects idols and believes in God has indeed taken hold of a support most unfailing, which shall never give way: for God is All-Hearing, All- Knowing.
- _ In the Name of God, the Merciful, the compassionate.
And yet, the unbelievers assert, ' Never will the Hour come upon us!' Say, Nay! But most surely, by my Sustainer, it will come upon you- by Him
Who knows the Unseen, - from Whom is not hidden the least little atom in the Heavens or on the earth, nor is there anything less than that, or greater, but it is in the Clear Book.
- _ In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.
In Whose hand is the dominion of all things. To Him belong the keys of the heavens and the earth.
And there is nothing but with Us are its treasures.
There is not a moving creature but He has grasp of Its forelock.
- _ Every day He manifests Himself in yet another way.
A sovereign doer of whatever He wills.
He creates whatever he wishes. In Whose hand is the dominion of all things. So look to the signs of God's mercy, how He restores the earth to life after its death.