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Presuppositions and Assertions: A Case Study on Acquisition of Most Common Presupposition Triggers in Early Childhood

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to find out the acquisition of lexical presupposition triggers in early childhood. Children acquire semantic knowledge later than acquiring phonemes and uttering words. At what age the acquisition of lexical presupposition triggers is acquired is the question answered through this research. I also identify the incorrect and sensible usage along with the acquisitional challenge. In order to do so, Brown corpus is utilised. Out of three children Adam, Sara and Eve, Adam's speech is analysed for the presence of lexical presupposition triggers. Again, a lexical presupposition trigger occurred 189 times in Adam's speech. The methodology involved two phases. In the first phase, I sifted each utterance carrying again according to age, context, and the status of the utterance. The findings are presented in the form of a table. The next phase involves analysis of the instances collected. Examples are analysed in terms of mere repetitions, frequent use and acquiring a sensible usage of the lexical trigger again. I used comparison tool to analyse the examples further making clear distinction between the phenomenon of assertion and presupposition. The results show that the phenomenon of presupposition is acquired by the age of three and half years. By year four, Adam starts acquiring different syntactic structures involving the usage of the lexical trigger again and shows sensible usage by age five. The acquisitional challenge is the age and lack of interaction with the outer environment. The implications of this research would be that it will prompt to make further research on other children and other lexical triggers in future.

1. Introduction

This research investigates the acquisition of lexical presupposition trigger in early childhood. I first introduce the phenomenon of presupposition and assertion in English language. Next, I highlight the research questions addressed through this research. Next, I present the lexical presupposition triggers in the form of a table and establish difference between assertion and presupposition. Followed by literature review and elaborating my methodology, I present the data in the form of a table and specific instances are discussed for analysis. At last, the discussion concludes by answering the targeted research questions.

Communication requires language which is acquired at an early age. The process of language acquisition happens through an innate mental programming and our surroundings. We develop our relationships through communication and good communication and language skills conform good relationships. Linguists analyse the use of language scientifically for various reasons. They analyse language phonetically, syntactically, semantically, pragmatically, morphologically, philosophically or make comparative analysis. Being a student of linguistics my interest dwells more into the field of semantics and I keep exploring what is meant in between the lines. This prompted me to explore in areas which are yet to be explored. This essay quests the acquisition of presupposition trigger *again* in children.

Our conversations are speech acts which are done in cooperation. A sensible conversation follows some descent rules of communication. Generally, conversations are clear, straightforward, sincere and in correlation to what is said at that moment (Yule, 1996). In addition to that conversations should be grammatically, phonetically, semantically and pragmatically correct to both the speaker and the hearer. For the time being let us focus on the meaning of the conversations. The meaning of any utterance is termed as proposition. A proposition can be true or false depending on the context or common knowledge (Kroeger, 2019, p. 39).

Presuppositions (>>) are semantic propositions which are quite enigmatic. They are based on common grounds. By common grounds we mean that the speakers assume that the hear takes the proposition as said based on shared world knowledge, facts, pragmatics and semantics. The hearer sometimes refuses to accommodate presuppositions and raises questions. Presuppositions are triggered through certain vocabulary items (Kroeger, 2019: p. 40). (1) shows the phenomenon of presupposition:

(1) Statement: *The vice president regrets that he falsified his dental records* (Kroeger, 2019: p. 41).
(1) Presupposes that *there is a vice president who performed an act of falsifying his dental records and feels bad about it. The* and *regret* are lexical presupposition triggers.

We can analyse presupposition triggers through methodological tools. Preservation under negation, preservation under questioning, preservation under modal constructions and HWAM (*hey, wait a minute!)* test are standard tools to analyse the triggering mechanism of lexicons. Let us analyse (1) and see if the triggers are preserved under negation, questioning and HWAM (*hey, wait a minute*!) constructions (Matthewson, 2006).

(2) Negation: *The vice president doesn't regret that he falsified his dental records* (Kroeger, 2019: p. 41).
(3) Question: *Does the vice president regret that he falsified his dental records?* (Kroeger, 2019: p. 41).
(4) Manipulating context to derive HWAM response: *The vice president regrets that he falsified his dental records, but he has no teeth.*
(5) Modal construction: *The vice president must have regret that he falsified his dental records*

(2), (3), (4) and (5) all presuppose that *there is a vice president who performed an act of falsifying his dental records and feels bad about it.* Notice in (4) an additional clause *but he has no teeth* is added which makes the sentence odd to the hearer, yet *the* and *regret* retain their presuppositions. This proves that presupposition triggers remain constant under negation, questioning, modal constructions and HWAM test.

Assertion is a proposition that can be true or false and expands the possibilities in making a point of view during a speech act (Macfarlane, 2009: p. 18—19). Assertions are independent of the sentential constituents (Wilson, 2020: p. 5). Assertions are unique kind of performative acts which are different from other speech acts such as questions, requests, commands, promises, and apologies. Assertions are made to express an attitude, defined by its constitutive rules, adding information at common grounds during a conversation and showing a commitment (Macfarlane, 2009: p. 1—3). (6) and (7) are examples of assertions:

(6) *My neighbour is a bachelor* (Wilson, 2020: p. 3).

Assertion: *My neighbour is unmarried*.

(7) *Mary cleaned the room* (Wilson, 2020: p. 5).

Assertion: *Mary caused the room to become clean/The room became clean*.

2. Research Question

Presupposition is a diverse and complex phenomenon. The current research investigates the acquisition of presupposition trigger *again* in children. The aim is to identify at which age children acquire presuppositions. When is the right age they establish correct usage of presuppositions? Is the usage a mere imitation or can we identify clear understanding through their usage? What is the acquisitional challenge they face?

3. Background

3.1 Most Common Presupposition triggers in English

Our quest is to analyse the acquisition of presuppositions in children of English speakers. The most common presupposition triggers in English language are mentioned as under (Huang, 2014; Yule, 1996; Abrusan, 2011):

Category	English language lexical presupposition triggers
Existential presuppositions/ Definite descriptions	*The*
Factive predicates (Epistemic/Cognitive)	*Know* *See* *Believe* *Hear*
Factive predicates (Emotive)	*Regret* *Realize* *Be aware* *Odd* *Glad* *Discover*
Aspectual predicates	*Stop* *Start*
Iterative predicates	*Return* Again *Remarry*
Implicative predicates	*Manage*
Quantifiers	*All* Some
Temporal clauses	*After* *Before*
Verbs behaving as non-factive presupposition triggers	*Dream* *Imagine* *Pretend*
Achievement verbs	*win*
Additive predicates	*Also* *Too*
Pronouns with gender features	*His* *Her*

Table: (1) Lexical presupposition triggers in English (Abrusan 2011; Huang 2014; Yule 1996) with their Urdu equivalents.

Presupposition can further be divided into soft and hard triggers. Triggers which survive any context and cannot be suspended easily are termed as hard triggers otherwise soft triggers. (8) and (9) mention *stopped* and *regret* are hard presupposition triggers and survive any context (Yule: 1996).

8. *He stopped smoking* (Yule,1996: p. 28).

It presupposes that *he used to smoke*.

9. *We regret telling him* (Yule,1996: p. 29).

It presupposes that *we told him*.

3.2 **Establishing difference between Presupposition and Assertion**

Propositions such as assertions and presuppositions differ in their behaviour. Presuppositions withstand negation, questioning, conditionals, modal constructions, HWAM test and do not get suspended normally due to their sentential constituents. However; assertions show a different behaviour.

Assertions do not survive *hey, wait-a minute* test, as they are not part of common grounds. (1) assert that *the dental records are being falsified* but if this happened or not is not necessarily a part of shared knowledge between the speaker and the hearer. The truth value of the sentence may differ accordingly (Kroeger, 2019: p. 42).

An interesting account on presupposition and assertion is proposed by Wilson (2020: p. 11—12) where he utilises *bachelor* which presupposes the same propositions in different syntactic constituents but different assertions. Let us look at these examples to establish the difference between assertions and presuppositions in the form of a table:

	Sentence	Negation	Question	Conditional
	(10) *My neighbour is a bachelor*.	(11) *My neighbour is not a bachelor.*	(12) *Is my neighbour a bachelor?*	(13) *If my neighbour is a bachelor, he would be happy.*
Presupposition	Neighbour is human, adult and male.	Neighbour is human, adult and male.	Neighbour is human, adult and male.	Neighbour is human, adult and male.
Assertion	My neighbour is unmarried.	My neighbour is married.	Not sure if neighbour is bachelor or not.	Not sure if neighbour is married or not.

Table (2) Establishing difference between presupposition and assertions (Wilson, 2020: p. 11—12).

4. Literature Review

Conversations are speech acts and propositions are made while conversing. These propositions can either be assertions, implicatures, entailment or presuppositions (Kroeger, 2019). A detail account on the meaning of presupposition, lexical presupposition triggers, its kinds, meaning of entailment and its types in English is inspired by *Presupposition and Entailment* (Yule, 1996). For the study of presupposition phenomenon, a comprehensive knowledge about presupposition triggers is required which also helps to distinguish between soft and hard presupposition triggers (Matthewson, 2006) (Abrusa´n, 2016). Presupposition triggers have different categories which can be explained through various examples (Huang, 2014; Yule, 1996). Assertions are different kinds of speech acts (Macfarlane, 2009) and they are independent of the sentential constituents (Wilson, 2020). Assertions are made to express an attitude, defined by its constitutive rules, adding information at common grounds (not always) during a conversation and showing a commitment. They can either be true or false (Macfarlane, 2009). Assertions behave differently from presuppositions and can be tested and compared in different constituent environments (Wilson, 2020).

Children differ in their knowledge of world from that of adults which affects language and behaviour too. When child acquires language, he develops all the semantic features gradually. He gradually develops all semantic features and utilizes them properly at a certain age (Saxton, 2010: p. 17). With time, his semantic knowledge corresponds to the adult model. During the

development the child decides to use these partially developed features or categories according to his understanding and is bound to make referential errors (Clark, 2003). Non-occurring and occurring errors both are useful while doing analysis for child acquisition of a language. Frequently used features denote better understanding and mastery which help in proper analysis. Researchers should be cautious to identify using features as imitation or routine repetition and enough data should be utilised for the analysis (Stromswold, 1996). Data is collected from the *Brown corpus* and *Adam*'s speech is utilised for analysis (Brown, 1973).

5. Methodology

This section highlights child acquisition milestones along with details of the brown corpus which is utilized for analysing the presupposition trigger *again*. It also discusses why Adam's speech was preferred for analysis. It further discusses that why *again* was a plausible selection to analyse and how we planned to search data. The methodology involves two stages, organising the findings in the form of a table and then analysing the findings.

Children cover various milestones in the acquisition of language. Of which, understanding meaning, semantics, happens at quite a later stage as compared to acquiring phonemes, babbling and uttering single or double words (Saxton, 2010: p. 17). In order to analyse the acquisition of presupposition trigger in children I utilized the *Brown corpus*. The Brown corpus was created in 1973 by Roger Brown. It contains speech of three children *Adam*, *Sara* and *Eve* who were studied by Roger Brown and his students during 1962-1966.

My focus is on *Adam*'s speech for various reasons. *Adam* spoke standard American English and was quite a talkative and responsive child. Also, *Adam*'s speech provides ample data for analysis as compared to *Eve* and *Sara*.

My methodology involved two phases. First to organise the findings in the firm of a table and next to analyse the findings. In the first phase, presupposition triggers were searched in *Adam*'s speech. My focus is to analyse the acquisition of presupposition trigger *again.* I found ample number of utterances using *again* by *Adam*. Once established that *again* can be a plausible selection for analysis and discussion I highlighted and organised the data in the form of a table. The table provided in section 6 mentions the usage of *again* by Adam in each corpus file. It also signifies whether the usage is just a mere imitation or a proper usage of the presupposition trigger *again* in each file. The main criteria of organizing data were age versus number of times *again* used in that age. I then verified the usage of *again* considering the context. This helped me analysed if *again* is used as an imitation, repetition or Adam has acquired the presupposition trigger semantically.

Following the criteria for organization the data was analysed considering context. I utilized data in chunks at various ages when *Adam* used *again*. Since age matters in language acquisition, my purpose is to develop a strategic analysis where I can establish reasonably that children start acquiring presupposition triggers at a certain age. Verifying additionally, at which age the acquisition is mere imitation and routine or understanding of presupposition phenomenon.

6. Data

This section presents our findings, usage of *again* in *Adam*'s speech in the form of a table. The first column shows the number of *Adam*'s data files in *Brown Corpus*. The second column shows the file number sorted by age. The third column shows the line numbers in corpus where *again* has been used by *Adam*. The fourth column shows the number of times again used at a specific age and the last column shows the status of the usage considering the context. The highlighted blues indicate that these particular files are used for data analysis.

Serial number	File number	Lines of utterance 'Again'	Number of utterances (one in each)	Status
1	020918	1039	1	imitation
2	021002	1269	1	
3	021016	749	1	
4	021030	448	1	
5	021113	139-385-561	3 (1 in each)	
6	021128	1919-1971	2 (1 in each)	
7	030025	277-302-426-787-1047	5 (1 in each)	
8	030109	334-917-919- 1445-1501	5 (1 in each)	
9	030126	149-160-486- 1432	4 (1 in each)	

10	030209	57	1	
11	030221	435-655-1348	3 (1 in each)	
12	020603	520-806-1318	3 (1 in each)	
13	020701	355	1	
14	030304	1060-1316-1443 - 1566	4 (1 in each)	
15	030318	422	1	
16	030418	603-1175-1177- 1215-1459	1 (1 in each)	Little understanding of the presupposition trigger
17	030501	225-441-775-783- 784-785-953- 1043- 1178-1199-1201- 1322-1413-1692	14 (1 in each)	Relatively higher understanding of the presupposition trigger
18	030515	982-1106-1268	3 (1 in each)	
19	030529	204-283-365-384- 644-1472	6 (1 in each)	
20	030609	192-328-331	3 (1 in each)	
21	030707	78-177-191-222- 237-328-341-351- 364-370-376-390	12 (1 in each)	
22	030801	441-449-482	3 (1 in each)	
23	030814	131-1533	2 (1 in each)	
24	030826	29-419-421-663- 666-669-768	7 (1 in each)	
25	030916	451-473-564-905- 1028	5 (1 in each)	
26	031015	429	1	
27	040014	212-488	2 (1 in each)	
28	040115	170-173-205-461- 469-583-630-736- 764-772-1069- 1100- 1639	1(in each) (3 in 1069)	Advance understanding of the presupposition trigger
29	040217	396-1161	2 (1 in each)	
30	040309	183-455-634-790- 1052-1081	6 (1 in each)	
31	040401	204-1012-1192	3 (1 in each)	
32	040413	100-386-394-626- 937-981-1149- 1264- 1270-1417	10 (1 in each)	
33	040511	202-803-927- 1163	4 (1 in each)	
34	040624	107-204-232-273- 292-536-738-867- 868-869-870-871- 872-873-884	15 (1 in each)	
35	040701	451-847-865-872- 873-1331-1332- 1338-1413	9 (1 in each)	
36	040729	788-800-824	3 (1 in each)	
37	040902	491-493	2 (1 in each)	
39	041002	59-77-237-239- 624- 735-777- 1097-1098- 1099	10 (1 in each)	

40	041023	487-530-623- 1500	4 (1 in each)	
41	050212	468-678-863-963-972-1024-1252-1432-1434-1615-1616-1617-1618-1621	14 (1 in each)	Advance understanding of the presupposition trigger. Utilising the presupposition trigger in various speech acts.
42	020304	none	0	
43	020318	none	0	
44	020403	none	0	
45	020415	none	0	
46	020430	none	0	
47	020512	none	0	

Table (3) The usage of *again* by *Adam* in *Brown corpus* (Brown, 1973).

7. **Analysis**

Data is being collected from brown corpus (Brown, 1973) and the subject to the analysis is child *Adam.* The first phase of data collection shows that *Adam* does use *again* frequently. The next phase after data collection is the analysis which is proceeded as under.

(14)

1025 *MOT: I saw more than three.

1026 *MOT: okay (.) count again.

1038 *MOT: one (.) two (.) three (.) four (.) five.

1039 *CHI: again.

1040 *CHI: one.

(Brown, 1973: 2.09.18)

Adam uses *again* first time when he was 2 years, 9 months and 18 days. For convenience only the relevant lines instigating the use of *again* are mentioned here. We can see that *Adam*'s mother is playing with her son. She uses *again* in order to count the balls. *Adam* is counting balls and putting in his mom's lap. He misses the count and as mom used *again* to repeat the counting act and he imitates the word *again*.

Since, this is the first time he used *again* while learning to count during a play with his mother, it is pure imitation and we can establish that currently he does not understand the phenomenon of presupposition and triggers at this age.

Adam progressively uses *again* in different contexts when he is three years, four months and 18 days of his age. In 15, the context shows that *Adam*, the researcher *Ursula* and *Adams'* mother are reading a story book. *Adam* is excited while doing the reading task. When mom asks if he would like to *do it again*, he mentions *again* thrice in a row as he is enjoying the reading. He clearly understands the usage of *again*, which proposes that a task has been done before and he is eager to repeat it. At this stage, he understands what *again* asserts and responds logically.

(15)
775 *CHI: Mommy (.) will you do it again?
776 *MOT: what does he sell?
780 *CHI: I don't know.
782 *MOT: ice+cream for boys and girls.
783 *CHI: let's read dem again.
784 *CHI: let's read dem again.
785 *CHI: let's read dem again.
(Brown, 1973: 03.04.18)

In 16, the usage of *again* is quoted when *Adam* is four years, eleven months and five days. Until now *Adam* has developed frequent usage of *again*. The analysis of complete data shows that *Adam* has started using *again* in sentences with no previous context of the usage of *again* by mother or any other sibling/peer/researcher. This shows that until now he clearly understands the use of *again* which is not a mere imitation or repetition. In the current instance 16, *Adam* is playing with a top which stops. *Adam* asks mother that should he *wind it up again*. The concurrent usage of *again* appears when he misses winding up the top properly and says that he *missed it again*.

(16)
457 *CHI: better let go.
459 *CHI: see (.) I told you (.) now it [?] can't [?].
461 *CHI: do that again.
466 *CHI: Mommy +...
467 %act: tries to wind top
468 *URS: now hold on to the handle and pull hard.
469 *CHI: oh (.) missed it again.
470 *MOT: hold back a little further.
471 *MOT: good.
472 *CHI: I can't do it (.) Mommy.
474 *CHI: almost did it.
475 *MOT: yes (.) you did.
476 *CHI: I almost got a big boy.
477 *MOT: yes.

(Brown, 1973: 04.11.05)

Here, both the usage of lexical presupposition trigger *again* by *Adam* propose that *Adam missed performing previous actions and intends to repeat them*. He clearly understands the usage of presupposition trigger *again* and uses it correctly.

17 and 18 are quoted from the data when *Adam* is five years, two months and twelve days. 17 shows that *Adam* is playing with *Ursula* (the researcher) and meanwhile the telephone rings. *Adam* asks *Ursula* if she *wants to listen to it again*. *Ursula* proposes that his *mother must have answered it* already. *Adam* repeats the question and asks that if she *wants to listen to it again*. *Ursula* replies *yes*, *if it rings again* and *Adam* replies that it rings quite frequently, *two* to *eight* times a day.

(17)
1427 %com: telephone rings
1428 *CHI: I don't know.
1429 %com: telephone rings
1430 *CHI: now there's the garage.
1431 %com: telephone rings
1432 *CHI: wanna listen to it again?
1433 *URS: no (.) I think your Mother must have answered it.
1434 *CHI: you wanna listen to it again?
1435 *URS: if it rings again.
1436 *CHI: it does two every day.
1437 *CHI: it does eight.
1438 *CHI: and there's the garage.
1439 *CHI: look inside.

(Brown, 1973: 04.11.05)

Here assertion is made by *Adam* that *Ursula* wants to listen to the phone ringing. *Ursula* asserts that the phone must have been answered by *Adam*'s mom. The presupposition trigger *again* used by *Adam* proposes through the context that *there is a phone, which rang before and would ringing once more too*. In the next chunk, the presupposition triggered by *again* considering the context through *Ursula* is that *there is a phone, which rang before and it would ring again*. *Adam* understands what she meant and replies that the phone rings *two* to *eight* times a day. The conversation is smooth, logical and imparts clear sense of the usage of lexical presupposition trigger *again*.

In 18, the context shows that *Adam'*s mom is trying to memorise him previous and current home address. *Adam* gets confused with the numbers and asks the mom to say the address *again.* Mom understands what he is asking but still asks *Adam what she should do again*? *Adam* clearly tells his mom to *repeat the numbers again*, *say it again*! Interesting, he clearly knows what mom is doing and he clearly asserts that numbers are confusing him so mom should repeat the task and say the numbers *again*. Mom obliges and repeats the numbers again. The presupposition triggered by *again* considering the context through *Adam* is that *the numbers are mentioned before, and he expects and asks mom to repeat them once more.*

(18)
1612 *CHI: say forty-two Williams Street and Greenwich Park.
1613 *MOT: thirty-two Williams Street and Greenwich Park.
1615 *CHI: do it again.
1616 *CHI: do it again.
1617 *CHI: do it again.
1618 *CHI: do it again.
1619 *MOT: do what again?
1620 *CHI: say what you said.
1621 *CHI: say it again.
1622 *MOT: thirty-two Williams Street and Greenwich Park.
1623 *MOT: what's the number on Greenwich Park?
1624 *CHI: forty?

(Brown, 1973: 05.02.12)

Both, 17 and 18 establish that the use of presupposition trigger *again* by *Adam* is acquired completely. He uses it in complete sentences and utilises different syntactic structures. At one time he is using it for questioning and the other time he uses it as an order or request. The conversations are smooth, and he gets desired responses/acts in return.

8. Discussion

Our discussion remains focused to answer the research question. So far, we can establish through 14 that *Adam* uses the presupposition trigger *again* when he was less than three years old which was a mono word usage and he was repeating after his mother. 15 shows that he keeps acquiring *again* and shows a frequent use by the age of three and a half years. *Adam* continues mastering the usage progressively and by the time he is four and a half years he uses the presupposition trigger *again* in different syntactic environments with his researcher and mother. 18 shows that by the time Adam is five he shows his complete understanding of the presupposition trigger *again*.

We see that Adam was researched from the age of two years, three months and four days until he was five years, two months and twelve days. Out of the other presupposition triggers *Adam* utters *again* comparatively quite frequently. In total I found 189 utterances using *again* in Adam's speech. In the initial few months *Adam* did not show any utterances using *again*. He uttered *again* for the first time when he was two years, nine months and eighteen days. This utterance was mere imitation and repetition of his mother. Adam showed that by the age of three and a half year his use of lexical trigger *again* was quite frequent and sensible. After that, he acquired using the lexical trigger *again* in different syntactic environments. Through 15, 16, 17 and 18 we can see that the presuppositions are met in every usage. Since 14 shows mere repetition on Adam's part, we cannot say that he thoroughly understood the phenomenon. The data analysis shows that by the age of three and a half year and onwards *Adam* starts acquiring the proper usage of the lexical trigger *again* and keeps progressing. In terms of identifying the acquisitional challenge *Adam* is facing I can propose that his age is the barrier. We observe that with the passage of time his usage of *again* keeps improving. Also, he does not have many people to interact with. Once he is at school and have many children to hear and interact with, he would master the usage of all the lexical presupposition triggers in the coming years.

Since *Adam* is a talkative, responsive and intelligent child we could find clear instances of the acquisition of the lexical trigger *again*. Researching and analysing other children would be interesting and the results can show variations.

9. Conclusion

Thus, we can conclude that conversations carry meaning. These meanings are termed as propositions. Assertion and presupposition are different kinds of propositions. Children acquire language progressively and they take time in matching their mental picture with that of an adult. Acquisition of complex phenomenon presupposition is time taking. Children acquire its sensible usage by the age of five and can further develop usage while they grow up. This research meets the objective in finding that acquiring presuppositional triggers is age constraint. Indeed, more research is needed on various children with different personality profiles and it is mandatory to extend the research on the acquisition of other presupposition triggers too. That would firmly establish that how different children acquire various presupposition triggers and utilize them correctly in their respective speech. I suggest another research can be carried out utilizing *Sara* and *Eve'* s data comparing it to *Adam*'s. Analysing and comparing other presupposition triggers will also serve the purpose of establishing the frequency, fluency and age of acquisition among various personality profiles.

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