

Why Be Articulate?

Two ways to look at the Transparency Theory¹

Emiel Krahmer
Tilburg University²

Introduction

In his interesting paper, Schlenker proposes “a pragmatic theory of presupposition projection” (which he calls Transparency Theory), based on two simple principles. One of these is the well-known Gricean maxim of manner *Be Brief*, the other is a new principle, dubbed *Be Articulate*. In a thoughtful and detailed analysis, Schlenker shows that the interplay between these two principles can account for a wide range of traditional presupposition projection phenomena. There are two ways in which this new theory can be appreciated; one way to look at it is as a principled derivation of Heim's (1983) influential theory of presupposition projection, the other as a new theory of projection phenomena in natural language. In the remainder of this short note I want to discuss and comment on both of them.

One way

Schlenker shows that the incremental Transparency Theory makes essentially the same predictions as Heim's (1983) approach. The main difference is that while the Transparency Theory is based solely on the relative ranking of two simple principles, Heim's approach requires the definition of an entirely new semantics. According to Schlenker, Heim's semantic approach lacks “explanatory depth” since it crucially relies on the somewhat arbitrary dynamic interpretations of the various logical connectives. This makes the incremental version of the Transparency Theory an interesting addition to the (substantial) literature on presupposition projection, which may be likened to a common practice in mathematics, where mathematicians happily publish new proofs of established theorems, simply because the new proof is simpler, more elegant or offers some new insight. In this case, Schlenker proves that the predictions that fall out of Heim's Context Change Potentials can (in essence) also be derived from his two “axioms”.

Naturally, the strength of this result rests on how convincing the “axioms” are. One of these (*Be Brief*) is convincing enough (although the actual formulation might have surprised Grice), but the other one (*Be Articulate*) raises a number of basic questions. First of all, what is the status of this principle? Schlenker takes it as primitive for now, but suggests that it may actually be derived from Grice's *Be Orderly*. However, no suggestions are offered on how this derivation could be achieved, and it is difficult to imagine what such a derivation might look like. Second, while there is clear independent evidence for *Be Brief*, it is unclear whether such independent evidence exists for *Be Articulate*, or, for that matter, for the claim that it should be ranked lower than *Be Brief*. Arguably, a theory invoking a new maxim solely to account for

¹ Thanks are due to Bart Geurts for useful discussions and comments.

² Contact: Faculty of Humanities, Tilburg University, Tilburg, The Netherlands, e.j.krahmer@uvt.nl.

presupposition projection has some issues with “explanatory depth” as well. Third, and somewhat related to the previous point, to what extent is *Be Articulate* like other maxims? For instance, does a violation trigger an implicature, just like flouting one of Grice's maxims does? It is well known that violations of *Be Brief* as in, say, the following example from Levinson (1983: 112), do indeed trigger such implications (in this case that Miss Singer actually sings pretty bad).

(1) Miss Singer produced a series of sounds corresponding closely to the score of an aria from *Rigoletto*.

It is unclear whether the same would hold for a violation of *Be Articulate*.

Clearly, Schlenker's position would be considerably strengthened if independent evidence for *Be Articulate* and for its relative ranking would be provided, and if *Be Articulate* could indeed be shown to be a real maxim or could be derived from existing ones. In any case, even though it will be interesting to see where this will go, these are comparative details, and do not diminish the general attractiveness of the incremental Transparency Theory. If Stalnaker's account has “the ring and simplicity of truth”, the same applies to Schlenker's.

The other way

There is also another way to look at Schlenker's theory, namely as a new account of presupposition projection phenomena in natural language. Such a theory should first and foremost be judged on its predictions, much as is the case with theories in most other fields of science. A theory may have the ring and simplicity of truth, but if it makes incorrect predictions it is in serious trouble. Even though I take the previous sentence to be self-evident, there are difficulties in applying this truism to the theoretical study of meaning, and others (e.g., Stokhof 2002) have far more interesting things to say about this than I. Below, I merely want to discuss how this perspective applies to Schlenker's Transparency Theory, and here things get slightly complicated. To begin with, Schlenker does not merely propose a new theory of presupposition projection, he actually proposes two. As we have seen, the first (Incremental Transparency) is proven to be (essentially) identical to Heim's theory, and thus makes (essentially) the same predictions concerning presupposition projection. At first the reader might think that there are subtle differences between the two theories, opening the space for an empirical comparison. But it turns out that the differences have to do with technical details. The second theory (Symmetric Transparency) does make different prediction than Heim's theory; in many cases, these predictions appear to be worse than those of Heim's, while in some other cases they seem to be better. The natural question is: which theory is the best one? Schlenker's preferred solution is to adopt both theories, but with different strengths. His basic idea is that a sentence is “less sharply excluded” when it violates the symmetric version of *Be Brief* than when it violates both the symmetric and the incremental versions.

With this proposal Schlenker's proposal joins a long list of what we might call “overgenerate-and-rank” theories of presupposition. Van der Sandt (1992)'s theory of presuppositions-as-anaphors is a prime example. According to van der Sandt, a

presupposition-trigger can be “resolved” in a number of different ways (this is the overgeneration part). Some of the possible resolutions may be ruled out on independent grounds (e.g., because the result would violate a consistency or an informativity constraint), and the resulting potential resolutions are ranked based on principles such as “prefer binding over accommodation” and “prefer nearby bindings over longer distance ones”. The proposal in Beaver & Krahmer (2001) is another example, albeit in a completely different setting: after showing that no single set of partial logical connectives can account for the basic projection data, they propose to associate each sentence with an ordered set of logical representations, filtered by similar consistency and informativity constraints.

There are two general problems that these kinds of theories have to face. First of all, it is generally difficult to falsify them. An alleged counter-example can always be ruled out by invoking some new independent requirement that was not taken into account so far. Thus, it is important to be fully explicit about the theory and its predictions, before these predictions can be tested against real, natural language data. Which brings us to a second, more general and arguably more serious problem: what are the data exactly? In this particular case, the data are acceptability judgements about example sentences with presuppositions that may or may not be projected. These examples are typically constructed to show why one theory might be better or worse than another, so it is only natural that the resulting sentences tend to be complex and occasionally slightly odd. Schlenker turns out to have rather delicate intuitions about his examples; concerning one sentence he writes “I don't find it entirely impossible to understand the examples (...) without a presupposition”, elsewhere a sentence is judged as “slightly more acceptable” than another.

Of course, this is not a new problem, nor one that only applies to the Transparency Theory; subtle judgements are rife in all areas of theoretical linguistics. Yet, the status of such judgments can be unclear. It is well-known, for instance, that syntacticians' intuitions about the grammaticality of example sentences constructed to support their own theory, or to falsify someone else's, need not coincide with the judgements of other language users (e.g., Manning & Schütze 1999:10). Which does not mean that I disagree with Schlenker's intuitions (sometimes I do, sometimes I don't, but that is besides the point). It does mean that there is no general, validated body of data against which to evaluate different theories, so that it is ultimately difficult to evaluate the Transparency Theory as a theory of natural language presupposition projection. The fact that the theory makes graded predictions (sentence A “less sharply excluded” than sentence B) is a serious, additional complication, since such intuitions are likely to be generally less clear cut.

What next?

There are by now many theories of presupposition projection, and many solid, well-argued for intuitions about what these theories should predict (albeit sometimes incompatible ones). However, it is a somewhat surprising fact that there is so little actual data. With a few notable exceptions (e.g., Chemla 2007), there are no corpus studies looking for naturally occurring examples, no judgment studies validating different intuitions, no on line measurements (e.g., eye tracking, ERP or reaction time measurements) to test predictions about how language users process sentences with presuppositions. In fact, even for what is arguably one of the most basic issues in the

entire presupposition literature (do false presuppositions in simple sentences lead to falsity, in line with Russell 1905, or to some kind of undefinedness, as Strawson 1950 would claim) there have been no such studies. There has been a lively debate, to be sure, with strong rhetorical advocates for the various positions, but it is highly unlikely that such a debate can be settled through argumentation and intuitions. As an aside, it is interesting to note that Heim (1983) and Schlenker's incremental Transparency Theory seem to make slightly different predictions about examples with false presuppositions such as Schlenker's (2).

(2) The king of Moldavia is powerful.

Heim's theory predicts it is semantically marked, due to presupposition failure, while the Transparency Theory predicts it is semantically false and pragmatically marked (due to a violation of *Be Articulate*). It seems that these are predictions that are experimentally testable. In general, it will be difficult to distill testable predictions from the various theories of presupposition projection, but for the advancement of the field it seems essential to combine theory building with careful experimentation. The first step, experimental judgement studies (where selected sentences are rated on acceptability by a group of participants), should be easy to set-up, and can offer valuable input for both further theory development and experimental studies.

Conclusion

Schlenker's Transparency Theory can be looked at in two different ways. On the one hand, the incremental Transparency Theory offers what is arguably a simpler and more principled counterpart to Heim's (1983) dynamic semantic theory, only invoking two basic principles: *Be Brief* and *Be Articulate*. The latter principle does raise a number of questions (what is the status of this new principle? is there any independent evidence for it? how does it relate to the well-known Gricean maxims?) and it will be interesting to see how Schlenker addresses these. On the other hand, Schlenker, in the second part of his paper, also proposes a new theory of presupposition projection in natural language, which combines both the incremental and symmetric Transparency Theories and yields subtle, graded predictions. Evaluating this perspective is more difficult, primarily due to a lack of empirical data. For the advancement of the field, it seems important that theory development and empirical data collection should go hand in hand. As things stand, the field is strong in the former and weak in latter area, and this is a situation that ultimately is undesirable. With a little care, it should be perfectly possible to obtain relevant empirical data and Schlenker's rich paper offers various concrete starting points for such empirical investigations.

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