

# On the status of ‘Maximize Presupposition’

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## Abstract

Heim (1991) postulated the principle Maximize Presupposition (MP), which has proven useful in explanations of a range of phenomena that involve competition between two forms that differ in their semantic presuppositions. But what kind of principle is MP? Is it a normative constraint on language use, akin to a rule in a game? Or is it similar, as Heim’s original postulation suggests, to Grice (1975)’s MAXIMS OF CONVERSATION, which capture defeasible tendencies in behavior motivated by general considerations about cooperative communication? The first view is favored by the observation that obvious violations of MP lead to infelicity, the second is favored by the observation that there are cases where MP appears to be obviated. This talk resolves this tension and argues that inferences triggered by MP can in fact be analyzed as Gricean pragmatic inferences, provided MP is construed as a ‘linguistic preference’—a (selfish) preference between linguistic expressions that speakers happen to have. In this view, MP is neither a normative rule nor a maxim motivated by general considerations of cooperative behaviour, but it functions like, and interacts with, such maxims in pragmatic reasoning.

Heim (1991) postulated the principle *Maximize Presupposition* (MP), which has proven useful in explanations of a range of phenomena that involve competition between two forms that differ in their semantic presuppositions (Sauerland 2008, Percus 2006, Chemla 2008, Singh 2011, Leahy 2011, a.o.). On an informal level, MP requires speakers to ‘presuppose as much as possible’—i.e. to opt for an expression with stronger (semantic) presuppositions if these presuppositions are (known to be) satisfied in context. But what kind of principle is MP? Is it a normative constraint on language use, akin to a rule in a game? Or is it similar, as Heim’s original postulation suggests, to Grice’s (1975) MAXIMS OF CONVERSATION, which capture defeasible tendencies in behavior motivated by general considerations about cooperative communication? Two basic observations create a tension between these two options:

**Infelicities.** One of the reasons Heim originally postulated MP was to help explain infelicities like the following.

- (1) a. #A sun is shining.  
*does not presuppose:* There is at most one sun.
- b. The sun is shining  
*presupposes:* There is at most one sun.

(1a) is supposedly infelicitous because, in normal contexts, it will always be common ground that there is exactly one sun. Consequently, the speaker of (1a) fails to obey MP.

If MP is a normative principle of language use, then it stands to reason that violating it directly leads to infelicity. But if MP instead is more like a Gricean maxim, it is not obvious why infelicity should result from a violation of the principle. Obvious violations of Gricean maxims may make the speaker appear uncooperative, but it is not clear why they should lead to the utterance to be deemed deviant.

**Obviations.** On the other hand, there are clear cases where MP appears to be obviated—that is, cases where a speaker can felicitously use a non-presupposing form rather than its presupposing alternative, even though it is part of the common ground that the additional presupposition of the alternative is true. (2) is an example.

- (2) [Context: The constitution of Phantasia stipulates: “A son of the king has to be present at the opening of the parliament”. It is known to everyone that the current king has exactly one son, who is in attendance. Running through the regulations during the opening ceremony, the speaker of parliament declares:] As the constitution demands, all MPs have pledged their allegiance to the king, a son of the king is present, ...

Intuitively, what makes (2) okay, despite the apparent violation of MP, is that the speaker’s use of the indefinite parallels the statement of the rules.

If MP is a normative constraint on language use, which is strong enough to explain infelicities like (1a), then it is difficult to see how such obviations can be accommodated (except by adding *ad hoc* exception clauses to the formulation of the principle). But if MP instead is more like a Gricean maxim, then it stands to reason that it interacts with other pragmatic concerns, and hence can be obviated in certain contexts.

**Non-Gricean features of previous accounts** When MP does not trigger infelicities (and is not obviated), it gives rise implicature-like inferences—so-called ‘anti-presuppositions’—to the effect that the presupposition of the stronger alternative is not true (or, minimally, that the speaker is not certain that the presupposition is true, Chemla 2008), as in (3).

- (3) a. Mary knows that Bill has a new boyfriend.  
*presupposes*: Bill has a new boyfriend.
- b. Mary believes that Bill has a new boyfriend.  
*does not presuppose*: Bill has a new boyfriend.  
*hence (?) implicates*: Speaker is not certain that Bill has a new boyfriend.  
*hence may implicate*: Bill does not have a new boyfriend.

On a Gricean conception, this makes it tempting to assume that what makes (1a) odd is not the obvious violation of MP *per se*, but rather the fact that the speaker implicates something that is mutually known to be false. This tack sets up a new tension, however, as Gricean implicatures are generally taken to be *optional*, and hence expected to be absent when they are incompatible with the context.

In addition, recent formulations and applications of the principle have introduced more non-Gricean features. Percus (2006) formulated MP as in (4), using the notions of *lexical alternatives* and *Alternative-Family* as in (5). His formulation not only suggests an understanding of MP as a normative rule, but also (indirectly, through the definition of lexical alternatives) makes the principle sensitive to *lexical presuppositions*. As Singh (2011) points out, it is quite unclear why a general principle of cooperative behavior should make reference to lexical properties of expressions.

- (4) **MP-prohibition** (Percus 2006)  
 Do not use  $\phi$  if a member of its Alternative-Family  $\psi$  is felicitous and contextually equivalent to  $\phi$ .
- (5) a. **Lexical Alternatives**: Lexical items  $i$  are associated with a set of lexical alternatives that are presuppositionally stronger than  $i$ .
- b. **Alternative-Family**: The Alternative-Family of a sentence  $\phi$  is the set of sentences obtained by replacing a lexical item in  $\phi$  with one of its lexical alternatives.

In part to avoid this reference to lexical presuppositions, Schlenker (2012) and Singh (2011) proposed that MP is checked not (or not only) ‘globally’ for the whole utterance, but that it must be satisfied in embedded positions (‘local contexts’). This is squarely at odds with the general conception of Gricean reasoning as a ‘global’ process that is blind to the grammatical structure of the utterance. Of course, there has been a lively debate recently that certain implicatures arise in embedded positions, but it is largely agreed that, if these inferences truly arise in embedded positions, then they cannot be considered Gricean implicatures. Defenders of Gricean accounts of these inferences have hence sought to show that they only *appear* to arise in embedded positions. Consequently, if MP indeed has to be checked in embedded positions, this makes it necessary to consider the principle a *bona fide* grammatical constraint, rather than a Gricean principle of conversation.

**MP as a ‘linguistic preference’** I argue that we can maintain that the effects of MP arise in a truly Gricean manner—as global, pragmatic implications of utterances driven by general reasoning about how (boundedly) rational agents behave in cooperative settings. In order to do so, we need to construe the principle neither as a normative rule, nor as a maxim that arises from general considerations of cooperative behavior. Instead, we need to conceive of it as a preference between linguistic forms that speakers happen to have (and that addressees know they have)—a ‘linguistic preference’.

I advocate a return to Percus’ formulation in terms of *lexical alternatives*. As such, the principle is not really a principle that enjoins the speaker to prefer sentences with certain *contents*. Rather, it is a principle that enjoins speakers to prefer certain *lexical items* over others (where the items in question happen to be identified by reference to a semantic feature of the lexical entries—*viz.* their lexical presuppositions). To make its nature as a *speaker preference* (rather than a normative rule) transparent, I propose to recast Percus’ formulation as follows:

(6) **MP-preference**

Other things being equal, the members of  $\phi$ ’s Alternative-Family are preferred to  $\phi$ .

**MP-preference generates ‘Need A Reason’ implicatures** Even though it is not a normative constraint, a preference like (6) can be used to explain infelicities like (1a). As Lauer (2013) shows, *ceteris paribus* preferences between forms generate robust Gricean inferences that will lead to infelicity if they are known to be false. In a nutshell, given a context-independent preference that favors one form  $\psi$  over another  $\phi$ , on any occasion where  $\phi$  is uttered, the speaker must have a reason to refrain from uttering the otherwise-preferred  $\psi$ . Crucially, if no such reason can be inferred or accommodated,  $\phi$  will be infelicitous, as the addressee cannot make sense of the speaker’s utterance choice.

This will frequently happen if the presupposition of the stronger alternative is commonly known to be true (which, of course, is particularly likely if the presupposition is part of entrenched world knowledge, as in (1))—for in that case, the speaker cannot have an information-related ‘reason’. It cannot be that he avoided the stronger alternative because he did not know, or did not want to reveal, that the presupposition is satisfied.

This kind of account is crucially different from one that construes MP as a normative principle of behavior, in that it effortlessly deals with obviation as in (2)—while there cannot be an information-related reason in this case (as the presupposition that the king has a unique son is common knowledge), there *is* a non-information-based reason why the speaker did not use the otherwise-preferred form (*viz.* a preference for parallelism with the text of the law).

**Conclusion.** The existence of obviation of MAXIMIZE PRESUPPOSITION strongly suggests an understanding of the inferences triggered by the principle in Gricean terms. This talk argues that such an understanding is feasible, but only if we (a) return to a Percusian formulation of MP in terms of lexical presuppositions and (b) reconstrue it as a *ceteris paribus* preference between forms. Once we do, antipresuppositions turn out to be a species of the ‘Need a Reason’ implicatures of Lauer (2013), which, as Lauer shows, are predicted by the majority of current formal accounts of Gricean reasoning.

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