

# Translating Presuppositions

Paul Kroeger

SIL Intl. and Dallas Intl. University  
paul\_kroeger@diu.edu

## Abstract

Expressing S(ource) L(anguage) presuppositions as presuppositions in the R(eceptor) L(anguage) is sometimes impossible, due to linguistic differences between languages. In other cases it can cause problems of comprehension or naturalness for RL readers, especially when the “presupposition” constitutes new information to the reader. The most common solution to such problems is to express the presupposed content as a separate assertion. This strategy preserves the propositional content of the original but distorts the information packaging. Another strategy that may be useful in such cases is to render the problematic SL presupposition as a CONVENTIONAL IMPLICATURE, preserving the “backgrounded” status of the presupposed information without triggering an inference that this information is already known to the addressee.

## Keywords

Presupposition, accommodation, information packaging, conventional implicature,

## 1. Introduction

This article discusses some properties of linguistic presuppositions, and some of the issues that arise in translating presuppositions, with a particular focus on Bible translation. One major challenge in addressing this topic is the fact that the term PRESUPPOSITION is used in a broad variety of ways in common, everyday speech; and that many previous discussions of presuppositions in translation have also used the term in a very broad way.<sup>1</sup>

A linguistic presupposition, in the narrow technical sense of the word, is a piece of information which is linguistically indicated to be part of the common ground at the time of the utterance.<sup>2</sup> The term COMMON GROUND refers to everything that the speaker and hearer both know or believe, and are aware that they have in common. By saying that this information is “linguistically indicated” I mean that the speaker’s use of a specific

---

<sup>1</sup> Cui and Zhao (2014: 34), for example, state that “presupposition can be regarded as translators’ assumptions about the target context and the target readers, especially their needs and expectations.”

<sup>2</sup> This definition assumes a pragmatic approach in the tradition of Stalnaker (1974). Another approach to presuppositions, in the tradition of Frege (1892) and Strawson (1950), defines presupposition in semantic terms: something which must be true in order for the asserted sentence to have any truth value at all, true or false.

word or grammatical construction signals the shared status of the information. This word or grammatical construction is referred to as the presupposition TRIGGER.

For example, when Jesus says to the Samaritan woman (John 4.16) “Go, call your husband, and come here,” his use of the phrase *your husband* seems to indicate that she is married at the time of their conversation and that both Jesus and the woman are aware of this fact. Similarly, when Paul writes to the Corinthians “I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you” (2 Cor 2.1), he implies that he has made a previous painful visit to Corinth, and that the Corinthian Christians remember it. This presupposition is triggered by the word *another*.

Now in the first example, the presupposition turns out to be false, as the woman herself points out. (Jesus’ reply shows clearly that he knew this. Perhaps he was speaking politely or euphemistically to avoid shaming the woman, or perhaps he was using this strategy as a way of initiating a discussion about her personal life.) This is an instance of PRESUPPOSITION FAILURE.

Another type of presupposition failure occurs when the presupposed content is true but not actually part of the common ground at the time of the utterance. Typically this involves information that it is new to the addressee. Such cases are often referred to as INFORMATIVE PRESUPPOSITIONS (see §3 below). A classic example is Jesus’ statement to his disciples at the last supper, “Behold the hand of him who betrays me is with mine on the table” (Luke 22.21). The restrictive relative clause *him who betrays me* triggers a presupposition that one of the disciples will betray him; but this information was not previously known to them.

In responding to an unshared presupposition like this one, the addressee has two choices. If the presupposed content is uncontroversial, the addressee is likely to simply accept it as new information which can be added to the common ground. This process is known as ACCOMMODATION. If the presupposed content is controversial or difficult to accept, the addressee may object by saying something like: “Hey, wait a minute, I didn’t know that!” The disciples’ reaction in the example just cited, as recorded in the parallel passages in Matthew and Mark, is of the “Hey, wait a minute” variety. The appropriateness of this “Hey, wait a minute” response is in fact one of the key diagnostic tests for identifying linguistic presuppositions (Von Stechow 2004).

Presupposition is closely related to information packaging. Because presupposed content is treated as being part of the common ground, Potts (2015) describes it as being “backgrounded”, i.e., not part of the “at-issue” content of the utterance (the main point which is asserted in a statement or queried in a question). For this reason it seems intuitively desirable for presuppositions in the source text to be expressed as presuppositions in the target language; and this is explicitly argued for by some authors. However, this is not always possible due to linguistic differences across languages.

The present paper is organized as follows: section 2 discusses some types of expressions that commonly trigger presuppositions, and some of the standard diagnostic tests which are used to identify presuppositions. Section 3 discusses types of presuppositions in the source text which can cause difficulty for readers of a translated version. A common strategy for dealing with such cases is to restate the problematic presupposition as an assertion. While this strategy preserves the propositional content of the original, it changes the information packaging by changing content that is taken for granted in the original into “at-issue” content in the translation. Section 4 considers an

alternative strategy which involves restating the problematic presupposition as a CONVENTIONAL IMPLICATURE: content which is taken for granted by the speaker/author, but not implied to be already known by the addressee.

## 2. Presupposition triggers and diagnostics

### 2.1 Presupposition triggers

A partial listing of English presupposition triggers is presented below. Translation equivalents in many other languages appear to trigger similar presuppositions, but more detailed investigation of this issue is needed.

- a. **Definite descriptions:** the use of a definite singular noun phrase, such as Bertrand Russell's famous example *the King of France* or a possessive phrase like *your husband*, presupposes that there is a uniquely identifiable individual in the situation under discussion that fits that description. A restrictive relative clause within a definite NP presupposes the existence of an individual who can truly be described by the modifying clause. For example, *the stone that the builders rejected* (Psalm 118.22) presupposes that the builders rejected some stone.
- b. **Factive predicates** (e.g. *regret, aware, realize, know*) are predicates that presuppose the truth of their complement clauses.<sup>3</sup> For example, Mark 5.30a *At once Jesus realized that power had gone out from him* (NIV) presupposes that power had in fact gone out from him; this is not directly asserted in the text.
- c. **Implicative predicates:** *manage to* presupposes *try*; *forget to* presupposes *intend to*; etc.
- d. **Aspectual predicates:** *stop* and *continue* both presuppose that the event under discussion has been going on for some time; *resume* presupposes that the event was going on but then stopped for some period of time; *begin* presupposes that the event was not occurring before. "At that time they *began* to call upon the name of the LORD" (Genesis 4.26) presupposes that they had not called on God in this way before.
- e. **Temporal adverbial clauses** referring to past or concurrent events presuppose the truth of the subordinate clauses which they contain. The adverbial clause in Matthew 9.25, "*After the crowd had been put outside,*" presupposes that the crowd was put outside.
- f. **Cleft sentences** presuppose all of their content except the focused constituent. When Paul writes to the Philippians, "*It is God who is working in you...*" or, more literally, "*God is the One working in you*" (Philippians 2.13), he presupposes that someone is working in them in the manner that he goes on to describe. When Joseph says to his brothers, "*It was not you who sent me here*" (Genesis 45.8), he presupposes that someone had sent him to that place (Egypt). When Isaiah cries out, "Awake, awake, arm of the Lord... *Was it not you who dried up the sea...?*" (Isaiah 51.9-10), he presupposes that someone had dried up the sea.
- g. **Content questions** presuppose all of their content except the question word. The question word (*who, what, where, etc.*) is always the focus of the question; the

---

<sup>3</sup> Kiparsky and Kiparsky (1970).

remainder of the question is presupposed. When Jesus sends his disciples to ask a certain man, “*Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?*” (Mark 14.14), the question presupposes that there is such a room in the man’s house.<sup>4</sup>

Levinson and Annamalai (1992) show that for a significant number of English presupposition triggers, the Tamil translation equivalents trigger the same presuppositions, and they conjecture that this should be true across most if not all languages. Of course, if we consider only “perfect” translation equivalents, this should be true by definition. A perfect translation equivalent in the receptor language (RL) should match not only the entailed meaning but also the presupposed meaning of the source language (SL) form. If, however, we focus on “closest translation equivalent”, it is clearly not the case that the corresponding expressions in different languages will always trigger the same presuppositions.

Mother-tongue translators are not always aware of the presuppositional mismatches between SL and RL. Linda Neeley describes an experience she had while checking comprehension of a passage describing the betrayal of Jesus, in the Gikyode language of Ghana (Cahill & Neeley, 2011). She and her MTT coworkers were surprised to discover that Gikyode speakers consistently felt Judas to be doing a good thing, because Jesus was obviously guilty. After much discussion the team realized that the word they had used for ‘betray’ normally presupposes that the betrayer is exposing an actual wrongdoing. However, the MTTs on the team had never realized that anyone could interpret the story in that way.

SELECTIONAL RESTRICTIONS (semantic constraints on combinations of lexical items) are often analyzed as presuppositions.<sup>5</sup> The examples in (1-2) illustrate the odd effect which results from violating a selectional restriction. The fact that the same effect is observed in positive statements, negative statements, questions, and conditional clauses supports analyzing these as a type of presupposition (see §2.2).

- (1) a. #This sausage doesn’t appreciate Mozart.  
b. #Susan folded/perforated/caramelized her reputation.  
c. #Your exam results are sleeping.
- (2) a. #Did John drink his sandwich?  
b. #John didn’t drink his sandwich; maybe he doesn’t like liverwurst.  
c. #Are your exam results sleeping?

Selectional restrictions are a well-known source of problems in translation precisely because they are not uniform across languages. Many translators have encountered passages where a figurative sense of a word cannot be translated literally because of the selectional restrictions associated with the literal sense. For example, in the Guhu-Samane language of Papua New Guinea, Jesus’ warning to “Beware of the scribes, ... who *devour* widows’ houses” (Mark 12.38-40) was simply incomprehensible,

---

<sup>4</sup> Notice that this presupposition holds only for “real” questions, i.e., true requests for information. Rhetorical questions often block the presupposition. When Paul asks, rhetorically, “*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?*” (Romans 8.35), his whole point is that no one and nothing can do this.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Pap (1960), McCawley (1968), Keifer (1973), Cruse (1986), Magidor (2013), Loebner (2013), Asher (2014).

because houses are not a food item; and Jesus' statement that "there are some standing here who will not *taste* death" (Mark 9.21) gave the impression that he was referring to cannibalism (Richert 1963).

But even if we restrict our attention to the primary, literal senses of words, it is not uncommon for the closest RL translation equivalent of a particular SL term to carry different selectional restrictions. In a preliminary Kimaragang<sup>6</sup> version of the Christmas story, the mother-tongue translator used the word *paalansayad* to render the phrase which is expressed in the King James Bible as *great with child*. This word correctly expresses the idea that Mary was in a very advanced stage of pregnancy when she arrived in Bethlehem. The passage was checked and approved by a number of competent readers before someone pointed out a problem: *paalansayad* is normally used only for water buffalo and certain other kinds of livestock. (Another way of rendering the concept was found.)

## 2.2 Presupposition diagnostics

A common method for identifying presuppositions, and distinguishing them from entailments and implicatures, involves the "family of sentences" test.<sup>7</sup> All of the sentences in (3a-e) presuppose that Susan used to date an Albanian monk; only (3a) entails that she does not do so now. This preservation under negation, questioning, etc. is an important means of distinguishing presuppositions from entailments.

- (3) a. Susan has stopped dating that Albanian monk.
- b. Susan has not stopped dating that Albanian monk.
- c. Has Susan stopped dating that Albanian monk?
- d. If Susan has stopped dating that Albanian monk, I might introduce her to my cousin.
- e. Susan may have stopped dating that Albanian monk.

Another test for identifying presuppositions was described by von Stechow (2004). He pointed out that if a presupposition is triggered which is not in fact part of the common ground, the hearer can appropriately object by saying something like, "Wait a minute, I didn't know that!" This kind of challenge is not appropriate for information that is simply asserted, since speakers do not usually assert something which they believe that the hearer already knows. Von Stechow and Matthewson (2008) state, "The 'Hey, wait a minute!' test is the best way we know of to test for presuppositions in a fieldwork context." However, as discussed below, there is some evidence that this response may not be natural in all languages.

## 3. Presupposition failure and informative presuppositions

In translating a narrative text, the translator must attend to presuppositions on two levels: first, presuppositions triggered within quoted conversations, reflecting the common ground between the participants in the reported speech event; second, presuppositions

---

<sup>6</sup> An Austronesian language of northern Borneo.

<sup>7</sup> Chierchia and McConnell-Ginet (1990).

triggered by the words of the narrator, reflecting the common ground between author and reader.

Explicit rejection of a false presupposition, as in John 4.16, will only occur within quoted conversations. Another example is found in John 9.2, where the disciples ask Jesus, “*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*” This is a complex example: the result clause (*so that he was born blind*) presupposes that the man’s blindness was the result of sin; the alternative question *who sinned, this man or his parents?* presupposes that the sinner was either the man himself or his parents. Jesus’ reply in the following verse rejects both of these false presuppositions: “*Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God would be displayed in him.*”

Another striking example occurs in John 7.19-20:

(4) **Jesus:** Did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law.  
*Why do you seek to kill me?*

**Opponents:** You have a demon! Who is seeking to kill you?

Whereas John 4.16 and John 9.2-3 illustrated the rejection of a false presupposition, in John 7.19-20 we see a false rejection of a true presupposition. The presupposed content (‘you are trying to kill me’) is actually true, but the addressees respond as if it were false. John seems to highlight the absurdity of their denial just a few verses later by showing that the plot against Jesus was already common knowledge: *Some of the people of Jerusalem therefore said, “Is not this the man whom they seek to kill?”* (John 7.25-26).

The other type of presupposition failure, which involves presupposed content that is not actually part of the common ground, may occur either within quoted conversations (as in Luke 22.21) or in the words of the narrator. An example of the latter type occurs in Exodus 18.2-3a:

(5) Now Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, had taken Zippo’rah, Moses’ wife, *after he had sent her away*, and her two sons...

In this passage the temporal clause *after he had sent her away* presupposes that Moses had sent his wife and sons away; but this information has not been previously mentioned in the text. We might speculate that the original author had in mind an intended audience of his own time and nation, to whom this fact would have been familiar. But even if this could be shown to be true, it would be irrelevant to the needs of the modern reader, who may find it difficult to accommodate this unshared presupposition. I personally experience a fairly strong “Hey, wait a minute” response every time I read this passage.

Whether or not this particular fact was already familiar to the first readers of Exodus, there are clearly cases where a speaker or author does not assume that presupposed content is familiar to the intended audience. A speaker/author can choose to encode new information as a presupposition, treating it as part of the common ground and expecting the addressee to make the necessary accommodation. A simple example was cited by Stalnaker (1974, 202):

I am asked by someone who I have just met, “Are you going to lunch?” I reply, “No, I’ve got to pick up my sister.” Here I seem to presuppose that I have a sister even though I do not assume that the addressee knows this.

Prince (1978) discussed a pattern that is fairly common in written English, which she called the “Informative-presupposition cleft”. In this pattern, illustrated in (6), the speaker/writer uses the presupposition of a cleft sentence to encode information which is known in general (*Henry Ford gave us the weekend*), but is probably new to the hearer. The hearer is expected to acquiesce in treating this information as part of the common ground.

- (6) It was just about 50 years ago that Henry Ford gave us the weekend.  
[*Philadelphia Bulletin*, 3-Jan-76]

The term INFORMATIVE PRESUPPOSITION is used to describe information which the speaker/author encodes as a presupposition, as if it were part of the common ground, even though it is actually new to the addressee. While this is a common strategy for expressing uncontroversial content in everyday conversation, it is a potential source of confusion in translated material. We should be very cautious about assuming that informative presuppositions in the SL text will be readily accommodated by RL readers. Each instance needs to be carefully checked.

Consider again the example cited above from John 7.19-20. How is the reader supposed to know that the presupposed content of Jesus’ question (*you are trying to kill me*) is true, i.e., that the opponents’ denials are false? A sympathetic reader of John’s gospel may be inclined to give Jesus the benefit of the doubt, but the only explicit indication in the preceding text comes from a reference in John 5.17-18 which involves an informative presupposition:

- (7) But Jesus answered them, “My Father is working still, and I am working.” This was why *the Jews sought all the more to kill him*, ...

The words *all the more* trigger the presupposition that the Jewish leadership had already been trying to kill Jesus. Nothing in the preceding text indicates this, although verse 16 speaks of persecution. Some later Greek manuscripts add a clause to verse 16 which explicitly asserts the content that is presupposed in verse 18, suggesting that the informative presupposition in verse 18 may have been awkward or hard to accommodate even for readers of the original Greek. Compare the King James version, which includes this addition, to the NIV which (like all modern versions) leaves it out:

- (8) John 5.16  
[NIV] So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute him.  
[KJV] And therefore did the Jews persecute Jesus, *and sought to slay him*, because he had done these things on the sabbath day.

Another example of informative presupposition is found in the following passage, where the death of Eli’s daughter-in-law is first mentioned within a time adverbial (ESV, NASB, KJV: *about the time of her death*; NIV: *As she was dying*) and is thus presupposed rather than asserted. Like the example from Exodus 18 discussed above, I find this English rendering difficult to accommodate, or at least highly unnatural, because

the information is so significant and the reader is not adequately prepared for it. In contrast, the informative presupposition triggered by the definite NP *the women attending her* (namely that there were women attending her) is easily accommodated because it is entirely predictable.

- (9) And when she heard the news... she bowed and gave birth, for her pains came upon her. And *about the time of her death* the women attending her said to her, “Do not be afraid...” [1 Samuel 4.19-20, ESV]

If an informative presupposition in the SL text is not easily accommodated by RL readers, one option is to express the presupposed content as a separate assertion. Some modern English versions adopt this strategy in Exodus 18.2:

- (10) a. **NCV**: *Now Moses had sent his wife Zipporah to Jethro, his father-in-law, along with his two sons.*  
b. **NirV**: *Moses had sent his wife Zipporah to his father-in-law. So Jethro welcomed her...*  
c. **CEV**: *In the meantime, Moses had sent his wife Zipporah and her two sons to stay with Jethro, and he had welcomed them.*  
d. **NLT**: *Earlier, Moses had sent his wife, Zipporah, and his two sons back to Jethro, who had taken them in.*

Several of these versions make a similar adjustment in Luke 22.21:

- (11) a. **NCV**: *But one of you will turn against me, and his hand is with mine on the table.*  
b. **NirV**: *But someone here is going to hand me over to my enemies. His hand is with mine on the table.*  
c. **Worldwide English NT**: *There is a man who will give me over to my enemies. His hand is here at the table with me.*

The NLT adopts the same strategy in 1 Samuel 4.19-20. The NCV here preserves the original time adverbial, but strengthens the meaning of the preceding clause (*her pains came upon her*), which other versions take to mean simply that she went into labor. The result is to add an extra assertion which is implied but not stated in the original (*the mother had much trouble in giving birth*) as a way of preparing the reader for the bad news. The CEV adopts both measures, strengthening the preceding clause to *The birth was very hard* and changing the presupposed content to a separate assertion (*she was dying*).

- (12) a. **NLT**: *She died in childbirth, but before she passed away the midwives tried to encourage her. “Don’t be afraid,” they said. “You have a baby boy!”*  
b. **NCV**: *The child was born, but the mother had much trouble in giving birth. As she was dying, the women who helped her said, “Don’t worry! You’ve given birth to a son!”*  
c. **CEV**: *And soon after she heard that ... her baby came. The birth was very hard, and she was dying. But the women taking care of her said, “Don’t be afraid—it’s a boy!”*



The direct assertion strategy resolves the discomfort or confusion that readers may feel if they find it difficult to accommodate unshared presuppositions, but the strategy is not cost free. Stylistically, this kind of restructuring may result in a less vivid or interesting text. Perhaps more importantly, while this strategy preserves the information content of the original, it does not preserve the information packaging of the original. Content which was “backgrounded” in the source text (that is, taken for granted rather than being asserted) is rendered in the RL version as “at-issue” content, the main point of an assertion. Is this an acceptably accurate translation? We will return to this question in the following section.

Of course, much depends on the intended target audience. It is worth noting that the NCV, CEV, and NIrV are all intended for readers whose comprehension of written English is on a primary school level. Moreover, there may be considerable cross-linguistic variation in terms of how readily a particular language group can accommodate various types of unshared presuppositions, although I do not know of any research that directly addresses this question.

Another interesting way in which languages may differ with respect to presupposition failure is reported by Matthewson (2006). She shows that speakers of St’át’imcets (also known as Lillooet Salish) systematically lack the “Hey, wait a minute” response to informative presuppositions. Moreover, they do not normally challenge false presuppositions either, unless the presupposed content is totally absurd (e.g., implying that our earth has two suns). She presents a number of examples with the following explanation:<sup>8</sup>

The following sentences were all offered in ‘out of the blue’ contexts to St’át’imcets speakers. In all cases, the presuppositions failed and were not easily accommodatable. The B utterances in each case are the consultants’ spontaneous responses to A.

(13) Context: Interlocutors all know that Henry is not a millionaire.

A: ‘Henry won the lottery again.’

B: ‘Oh, good.’

(14) Context: B has just walked into A’s house and there had been no prior conversation apart from greetings.

A: ‘Would you like some more tea?’

B: ‘Yes.’

Matthewson argues that the difference between St’át’imcets and English in this regard is not (primarily) cultural but linguistic. She shows that St’át’imcets speakers do routinely challenge other kinds of problems, such as contradictory utterances or discourse-initial utterances with unclear pronoun reference. The contrast with English is specific to presuppositions. She concludes:

The data ... show that St’át’imcets speakers are willing and able to challenge infelicitous utterances of various kinds. I conclude from this that their failure to offer wait-a-minute challenges to failed presuppositions

---

<sup>8</sup> Only the English translations are provided here; see Matthewson (2006) for the St’át’imcets data.

does not result from a cultural prohibition against challenges in general. It must be something linguistic.

Matthewson suggests that, while presuppositions in both St'át'imcets and English are taken for granted (“backgrounded”) by the speaker, they are assumed to be part of the common ground in English but not in St'át'imcets, since the “Hey, wait a minute” challenge is specifically a challenge to the common ground status of the presupposed content. Matthewson argues that the St'át'imcets facts are compatible with the model of presupposition developed by Gauker (1998).

Alternatively, we might suggest that content which is presupposed in English is expressed in the corresponding St'át'imcets utterances as CONVENTIONAL IMPLICATURE, in the sense of Potts (2005, 2007). Potts defines conventional implicature (a term originally coined by Grice 1975) as content which is part of the conventional meaning of the expression (not a pragmatic inference), which is not part of the “at-issue” content of the utterance but is taken for granted (“backgrounded”) by the speaker, and so does not affect the truth conditions of the sentence. We will have more to say about conventional implicature in the following section.

## 4. Must presuppositions be preserved? Can they be?

Ayman El-Gamal (2001) argues at length that no translation can be considered accurate which does not present SL presuppositions as RL presuppositions and SL assertions as RL assertions. A few selected quotes provide a sense of his views on this issue:

To translate presuppositions as assertions, or vice versa, can distort the thematic meaning of the SL text and produce a text with a different information structure... The importance of preserving SL presuppositions in the [RL] text can hardly be exaggerated... Failure to observe the distribution of information in terms of presupposed, given, or new information would result in some loss of meaning and inconsistency with the intentions of the SL text author.

However, linguistic differences between languages can make it impossible to match certain kinds of SL presuppositions with RL presuppositions. One famous example, from Keenan (1973), concerns relative clause formation. Because Modern Hebrew makes use of the pronoun retention strategy, it is possible to form relative clauses in Modern Hebrew, like (15c), whose literal translation into standard English (15b) would be ungrammatical:<sup>9</sup>

- (15) a. English: *I know [the man who gave the woman a book].*  
b. English: \**This is the woman that I know [the man who gave \_\_\_ a book].*  
c. Hebrew: ‘This is the woman that I know [the man who gave her a book].’  
d. English: *I know a certain man who gave a woman a book, and this is the woman.*

---

<sup>9</sup> As a number of authors have pointed out, resumptive pronouns do occur in contexts like (15c) in informal standard English (as well as many non-standard varieties), but their use is not considered fully grammatical in formal standard English.

The closest equivalent to (15c) in grammatical standard English would be something like (15d). However, as Keenan points out, the speaker's knowledge of the man is asserted in (15d), but presupposed in (15c). The Hebrew sentence and its English translation convey the same propositional content, but the pattern of assertions and presuppositions is not the same. Thus (15d) fails to be an exact translation of (15c).

McCready (2014) mentions another familiar example, namely the presuppositions triggered by the definite article in languages like English. In at least some contexts, the presupposition associated with this article (existence of a uniquely identifiable referent) cannot be precisely expressed as a presupposition in languages like Japanese and Chinese, which lack a definite article.

We have seen two types of challenges which may cause a translator to render content that is presupposed in the SL as an assertion in the RL: (a) confusion or discomfort on the part of RL readers due to informative presuppositions which are not easily accommodated; and (b) linguistic differences which make it impossible to express certain SL presuppositions as RL presuppositions. At the same time, we have noted that changing a presupposition into an assertion distorts the information packaging of the original text, changing “backgrounded” material into “at-issue” content. Is there another solution?

In some cases, certainly not all, it may be possible to render the problematic SL presupposition as a Pottsian conventional implicature. Where it is possible, this approach is worth considering, since it preserves the “backgrounded” status of the information without triggering an inference that this information is already known to the addressee.

Some of the core examples of conventional implicature which Potts discusses include non-restrictive relative clauses, appositional phrases, and other parenthetical material. An example of how these constructions might be used to render an informative presupposition is found in the UBS handbook on *Exodus* (Osborn and Hatton 1999, 427-428). One of the alternative translation models suggested for Exodus 18.2 makes use of a non-restrictive relative clause, as seen in (16a). This rendering indicates that the author takes the information for granted, preserving the “backgrounded” nature of the information, but does not assume that it is familiar to the reader. The same strategy is adopted in the Indonesian *Terjemahan Baru* (‘New Translation’; 1974), which is generally a relatively formal translation.

(16) a. So Jethro came to Moses bringing with him Moses' wife Zipporah, *whom Moses had left behind*.

b. **Indonesian Terjemahan Baru:** Lalu Yitro, mertua Musa, membawa serta Zipora, isteri Musa—*yang dahulu disuruh Musa pulang*—  
‘Then Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought Zipporah, Moses' wife—*who had earlier been sent back/ordered to return by Moses*—’

As a second example I offer the following possible rendering of 1 Samuel 4.19-20, which moves the presupposed content into a parenthetical comment:

(17) The women attending her encouraged her, *for she was dying*, saying...

To my ear these renderings seem less jarring than the more literal wording of the ESV, NASB, etc. which preserve the informative presuppositions of the original. The suggested parenthetical material indicates that the speaker takes this content for granted

(i.e., it is background information rather than the main point of the assertion), but they do not imply that this information is already accessible to the reader.

## 5. Conclusion

Grammatical and lexical differences between languages can make it impossible to express certain SL presuppositions as RL presuppositions. Moreover, even when it is linguistically possible to achieve this goal, preserving the SL presuppositions may cause problems of comprehension or naturalness for RL readers. This is particularly the case with informative presuppositions, i.e., when the content that is encoded as a presupposition is not actually part of the common ground between author and reader at that point of the text.

When translators choose to make adjustments in such cases, the most common strategy is to express the presupposed content as a separate assertion. While this strategy preserves the propositional content of the original in a form that is easier for RL readers to process, it also distorts the information packaging of the original text, changing “backgrounded” material into “at-issue” content. Another strategy that may be useful for some informative presuppositions is to render the problematic SL presupposition as a conventional implicature, e.g., by expressing it as a non-restrictive relative clause or some other type of parenthetical. This approach, where it can be applied, preserves the “backgrounded” status of the presupposed information without triggering an inference that this information is already known to the addressee.

I am not saying that it is never appropriate to render content that is presupposed in the SL text as a separate assertion in the RL version. Translation always involves trade-offs, calculations of cost vs. benefit for various options in order to balance a variety of competing goals. I believe that there are contexts in which restating SL presupposition as RL assertion will turn out to be the best option, especially if the goal is to produce a translation which is reasonably comprehensible to the “average” RL reader. My purpose here is to raise awareness of the actual cost associated with that strategy, and to suggest another possible strategy that might be useful in some such cases.

## References

- Asher, Nicholas. 2014. “Selectional Restrictions, Types and Categories.” *Journal of Applied Logic* 12.1: 75-87.
- Ayman El-Gamal. 2001. “Presupposition, Perceptual Relativity and Translation Theory.” *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 14: 37-62.
- Cahill, Michael and Linda Neeley. 2011. What “other tongue translators” can contribute to Bible translation teams. Paper presented at the Bible Translation conference, Dallas TX, Oct. 2011.
- Cruse, Alan. 1986. *Lexical Semantics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cui, Ying and Yanli Zhao. 2014. “A Contextual Perspective on Presupposition, With Reference to Translation Studies.” *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics Plus* 43: 31-42.

- Frege, Gottlob. 1892. "Über Sinn und Bedeutung." Pages 56-78 in *Translations From the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*. Edited by Peter Geach and Max Black. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gauker, Christopher. 1998. "What is a Context of Utterance?" *Philosophical Studies* 91: 149-172.
- Grice, H. Paul. 1981. "Presupposition and conversational implicature." Pages 183–198 in *Radical pragmatics*. Edited by Peter Cole. New York: Academic Press.
- Keenan, Edward. 1973. "Logic and Language." *Dædalus* 102.185-94.
- Kiefer, Ferenc. 1973. "On Presuppositions." Pages 218-242 in *Generative Grammar in Europe*. Edited by Ferenc Kiefer and Nicolas Ruwet. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Levinson, Stephen. 1983. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge University Press.
- \_\_\_\_ and E. Annamalai. 1992. "Why Presuppositions Aren't Conventional." Pages 227-242 in *Language and Text: Studies in Honour of Ashok R. Kelkar*. Edited by R. N. Srivastava. Dehli: Kalinga Publications.
- Loebner, Sebastian. 2013. *Understanding Semantics*, 2nd Edition. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Magidor, Ofra. 2013. *Category Mistakes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Matthewson, Lisa. 2006. "Presupposition and Cross-linguistic Variation." *Proceedings of the 26th Meeting of the North-Eastern Linguistic Society*, 63-76.
- McCawley, James. 1968. "Concerning the Base Component of a Transformational Grammar." *Foundations of Language* 4: 243-269.
- McCready, Eric. 2014. "Expressives and expressivity." *Open Linguistics* 1: 53-70.
- Osborn, Noel and Howard Hatton. 1999. *A Handbook on Exodus*. New York: United Bible Societies.
- Pap, Arthur. 1960. "Types and meaninglessness." *Mind* 69(273): 41-54.
- Potts, Christopher. 2005. *The logic of conventional implicatures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- \_\_\_\_. 2007. "Conventional Implicatures, a Distinguished Class of Meanings." Pages 475-501 in *The Oxford Handbook of Linguistic Interfaces*. Edited by Gillian Ramchand and Charles Reiss. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- \_\_\_\_. 2015. "Presupposition and Implicature." Pages 168-202 in *Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Contemporary Semantics*, 2nd Edition. Edited by Shalom Lappin and Chris Fox. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Prince, Ellen. 1978. "A Comparison of WH-clefts and It-clefts in discourse." *Language* 54: 883-906.
- Richert, Ernest. 1963. "Native Reaction as a Guide to Meaningful Translation." *Notes on Translation* 1.7: 1-4.

Stalnaker, Robert. 1974. "Pragmatic Presuppositions." Pages 197-213 in *Semantics and Philosophy*. Edited by Milton Munitz and Peter Unger. New York: New York University Press.

Strawson, Peter. 1950. On Referring. *Mind* 59, 320-344.

von Stechow, Kai. 2004 "Would You Believe It? The King of France is Back! Presuppositions and Truth-value Intuitions." Pages 315-341 in *Descriptions and Beyond: An Interdisciplinary Collection of Essays on Definite and Indefinite Descriptions and Other Related Phenomena*. Edited by Anne Bezuidenhout and Marga Reimer. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_ and Lisa Matthewson. 2008. "Universals in Semantics." *The Linguistic Review* 25.139-201.