

Articles

“The Gilmore Linguistics”: An analysis of speech acts and presuppositions in the television series ‘Gilmore Girls’

“The Gilmore Linguistics”: Uma análise de atos de fala e pressuposições na série de televisão ‘Gilmore Girls’

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Abstract

This paper aims at analyzing, through concepts from the areas of semantics and pragmatics, a script from the American television show, *Gilmore Girls* (2000). The contents selected as a tool for analysis were retrieved from the books *Semantics* (Hurford, Heasley & Smith, 2007), and *Pragmatics* (Yule, 1996), and they consist of ‘Speech Acts’ and ‘Presupposition and Entailment’, themes which converse with each other throughout this analysis. One of the main ideas taken from this paper is that mainstream culture does not need to be excluded from academic contexts, but rather could be used as a gripping object of analysis.

Keywords: Pragmatics; Semantics; Presupposition; Speech acts

Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo é a análise, por meio de conceitos retirados das áreas da semântica e da pragmática, de um script retirado da série televisiva americana, *Gilmore Girls* (2000). Os conteúdos selecionados para servirem como ferramenta de análise foram extraídos dos livros *Semantics* (Hurford, Heasley & Smith, 2007), e *Pragmatics* (Yule, 1996), e consistem, respectivamente, nos tópicos de ‘Atos de fala’ e de ‘Pressuposições e Vinculações’, os quais conversam entre si durante essa análise. Uma das principais conclusões tiradas desse trabalho é quanto cultura mainstream, a qual não precisa ser excluída de contextos acadêmicos, mas pode ser usada como um cativante objeto de análise.

Palavras-chave: Pragmática; Semântica; Pressuposição; Atos de fala

1 INTRODUCTION

In 'An Introduction to English Semantics and Pragmatics' (2006) the linguist Patrick Griffiths introduces his work by saying that

"Semantics is the study of the relationship between units of language and their meaning. **Pragmatics** is concerned with how we use language in communication, and so it involves the interactions of semantic knowledge with our knowledge of the world, including the contexts in which we say things" (Griffiths, 2006, p. 1).

Therefore, this paper intends to report an analysis through concepts taken from both the areas Griffiths depicts in the excerpt, more specifically "Speech Acts" and "Presupposition and Entailment" (Yule, 1996). In the case of this study, the focus lies on the usage of a dialogue taken from a television series from over twenty years ago to serve as an object of examination through the lenses of the Linguistic theories employed here.

The choice of the *corpus* preceded the selection of the theories which would be used as a basis for the analysis. Thus, popular scenes were examined in order to find which categories and concepts would be emerge in order to be analyzed in this paper. This excerpt was retrieved from the streaming platform Netflix and after it was transcribed. It is pertinent to note that the selection of this specific *corpus* was not made haphazardly, but rather considering my own perspective about the show, being an interesting material for analysis in the Linguistics.

Before developing the theory of speech acts, the linguist J. L. Austin (1962) proposed – and later refines it – a theory where utterances would be distinguished between the performative and constative. According to Austin (1962, p. 5), "the uttering of the [performative] sentence is, or is part of, the doing of an action, which again would not normally be described as saying something". When someone utters "I apologize for my behavior", they are not only describing, but also carrying out the action of apologizing. However, if the situation was paraphrased through the utterance "He is apologizing for his behavior", there is no action being carried out anymore, only an assertion of a specific situation. In this case, the sentence is now constative. Verbs

such as 'promise', 'assume' and 'give up' are called performative verbs, once when used in the present tense by a first-person pronoun, they instantly perform the action they describe. J. L. Austin later revised his own work and concluded that "we shall avoid distinguishing these precisely because the distinction is not on point" (Austin, 1962, p. 11), yet his theories are still influent in the field.

"Pragmatics" (Yule, 1996) defines speech acts as the occasions when an utterance has the power of performing actions. One of those actions is the act of asserting, that is, when through an utterance the speaker assumes responsibility with the hearer that a certain situation is real. For instance, if someone says "The dinner is ready", they are assuring their hearer of the reality of a dinner and that this dinner is ready to be eaten. Conversing with the given situation, the theme of presupposition could also be pointed out: by simply uttering "the dinner", the existence of a dinner is presumed. This concept will be further developed later.

As mentioned previously, certain speeches may carry out information that is assumed by the hearer instead of actually verbalized on it. Presupposition, on the other hand, according to Yule (1996), are the things expected by the speaker to be true or shared knowledge with the hearer. The different logical interpretations of their speech are the possible entailments of it. In producing the utterance "Her cat is so chubby", some presuppositions are that a) there is a specific 'her', probably a shared knowledge between speaker and hearer, b) this 'her' has a cat and even could be assumed that c) she has only one cat, once there are no specifications such as 'this cat of hers'. This relation can also be represented as a mathematical formula, where random letters are attributed to a sentence: "Her cat is so chubby" (=p); "She has a cat" (=q); so $p \gg q$ (p presupposes q).

Yule indicates the existence of six different types of presupposition in his work "Pragmatics" (1996). One of the most common potential presuppositions is the existential. As it suggests, by mentioning something or someone, it is assumed that they exist: "the chubby cat" \gg a cat exists. Similarly, the factive presupposition (Yule, 1996) presumes that something is a fact because of a specific verb, such as 'realize',

'regret' or 'know'. On the other hand, when a state of affairs is considered not to be true because of a verb - 'pretend', 'dream' - a non-factive presupposition (Yule, 1996) is created. Lexical presupposition (Yule, 1996) refers to the use of verbs that assert an action - "they stopped at the red light" - while presupposing another - they were moving. This differs from the concepts of factual and non-factive because it does not only presume something is true, but that there is additional unstated information. Counterfactual presuppositions are utterances that indicate that something is not true due to its structure, for example in conditionals sentences: "if I were rich" >> I am not rich. In addition, there are structural presuppositions, assuming something is true because of, for instance, the use of a WH-question. For example, the sentence "Where did you go?" brings up the notion that someone went somewhere.

With these concepts in mind, a *corpus* where they could be identified was selected. From that, an analysis was carried out in order to elucidate examples of these ideas in the real world.

2 METHOD

2.1 Context/universe of investigation

The *corpus* consists of a scene retrieved from an American comedy-drama television series called "Gilmore Girls". Starting in the year of 2000, the show discloses the lives and conflicts between three generations of women: the grandmother, Emily Gilmore; her daughter, Lorelai Gilmore; and her granddaughter, Rory Gilmore (The Guardian, 2016). It is set in a fictional town named Stars Hollow, in the state of Connecticut.

2.2 Corpus

The scene selected (see APPENDIX 1) is from the fifth episode, "Rory's Birthday", of the first season. The excerpt is from minutes 27:32 to 29:35 and it shows an argument

between Lorelai and Emily. The fight started because of a Sweet 16 party thrown by Emily to her granddaughter (Rory), in which she takes the liberty of inviting Rory's schoolmates, assuming they are her friends. An argument springs between the two of them and it is later discussed by Lorelai and Emily. This moment takes place after the party, in the Gilmore's house.

2.3 Procedures and categories of analysis

As for the analysis to be carried out in the next part of this paper, two different approaches were taken for each of the concepts chosen. Firstly, the analysis of the speech acts in the "Gilmore Girls" scene had more of a qualitative approach. In other words, due to a lower number of occurrences of speech acts, some examples were selected and better depicted for their rules and exceptions. On the other hand, a quantitative analysis seemed far more fitted for analysis of presuppositions.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Speech Acts

In the selected *corpus*, speech acts were found through most of what is stated, once the dialogue did not only have the objective of describing occurrences, but causing a specific feeling or response in the other person. In fact, the *corpus* showed no descriptive fallacy, meaning is said between Lorelai and Emily aims to describe some situation.

For instance, when Lorelai states "Your granddaughter invited you to her birthday party" (l. 4), her speech act could be only of notifying Emily of that. Nevertheless, by the context of the scene added to her completing the speech with "Please, come", it is noticeable that she is actually asking her to change her mind and come to the party. Similarly, shortly after, when Lorelai says "You invited all these Chilton kids without even asking her" (l. 10), she is, again, not describing something Emily herself did, but putting blame on her for not asking Rory before inviting those people to her party.

In relation to performative and constative acts (Hurford et al., 2007), it was noted that the occurrences of performative acts were considerably lower when compared to the constative acts. Besides a lot of use of performative verbs, the utterances in which they are present are not organized in a way they could perform an action somehow. For example, the utterance already presented before "Your granddaughter invited you to her birthday party" (l. 4) has the verb "to invite", considered a performative verb. However, the third person object and the past tense simply preclude the utterance of performing the act of inviting. The same occurs with the utterance "She needs you to accept her apology and come to her party" (l. 40) that, while presenting a performative verb (accept), does not perform the said verb. Nonetheless, both of these examples can be classified as constative acts and their analysis is going to be better explored further in this paper.

When, near the end of the discussion, Lorelai declares "I give up" (l. 53), she is describing and performing the action of giving up. Besides the performative verb which indicates that, it also follows the rules aforementioned regarding the object being in the first person - at least most of the times - and its tense being the simple present. The other performative act occurs at the beginning of the scene, where Emily utters "I assume they are her friends". Again, she is describing and performing the act of assuming something.

The constative acts, on the other hand, are far more common in the scene than the performative ones. "I've already been to a party for my granddaughter" (l. 6) describes the action of being at some place, but it does not carry out any type of performance. Similarly, "You're doing the same thing to her that you always did to me" (l. 20) illustrates the same fact, where clearly there is only the description of an act, not its execution.

3.2 Presuppositions

For the analysis of presuppositions in this paper, a quantitative focus was approached. Presuppositions were searched throughout the *corpus* and after classified according to their six categories (Yule, 1996).

Table 1 – Presuppositions recurrence along the *corpus*

Type of Presupposition	Occurrences
Existential	17
Structural	7
Lexical	4
Non-factive	2
Counterfactual	1
Factive	1

Source: devised by the author

3.2.1 Existential Presuppositions

Existential presuppositions are the most recurrent category in the *corpus*. It is important to point out that the counting process considered not all mentions of specific people, but rather the number of people mentioned. For example, the character Rory Gilmore was referenced as “the granddaughter”, “your daughter”, “Rory”, “crushed kid” and simply “she”; yet all of them were considered only one presupposition, as the several mentions do not change the fact that only one person exists. With this in mind, the existential presuppositions on the scene are:

“Mom” (l. 1) >> There is a mom (Emily Gilmore).

“The party” (l. 1) >> There is a party.

“Those” (l. 2) >> There is an unidentified utensil.

“Your granddaughter” (l. 4) >> There is a granddaughter.

“All of my friends” (l. 7) >> There is more than one friend.

“The cheeses” (l. 8) >> There are cheeses.

“These Chilton kids” (l. 10) >> There are children from Chilton.

“They” (l. 13) >> There are people that say something.

“Your accusations” (l. 23) >> Accusations are made.

“All your insults” (l. 26) >> There is more than one insult.

"The car" (l. 28) >> There is a car.

"The whole pudding thing" (l. 31) >> There is a 'pudding thing'.

"The rules" (l. 32) >> There are rules

"The linen" (l. 37) >> There is linen at the party.

"The music" (l. 37) >> There is music at the party.

"Her apology" (l. 39) >> There is an apology.

"The entire cleaning process" (l. 50) >> There is a cleaning in process.

As the results show, most of the presuppositions are triggered by definite descriptions. In other words, nouns, as in (a), articles, as in (b), and possessive pronouns, like in (d), were common triggers of existential presuppositions. The low occurrences of proper names in the dialogue can be explained and justified because of the familial relationship between the characters.

Besides definite description being the most present, quantifiers can also be seen as triggers. Utterances (e) and (j) contain the expression "all", suggesting the existence of something plural.

3.2.2 Factive Presupposition

Perhaps because the dialogue consists of a heated argument, in which the two women are more attacking each other than stating facts, the number of factive presuppositions is considerably low. The nuances of their speech make it harder to consider something as simply true. For that reason, only one example was found to illustrate this category:

"I had to invite them" (l. 14) >> She invited them.

3.2.3 Non-Factive Presupposition

Similar to factive presuppositions, non-factive ones had less significance in the *corpus*. As stated in the Introduction, these two categories differ from each other since

one states a fact and the other, something that is not true or is ambiguous regarding its reality. Some examples of non-factive predicates are 'wish', 'think' and 'believe'. In the *corpus*, two examples were found.

"I assume they are her friends" (l. 12) >> She's not sure about them being her friends.

"I guess the whole pudding thing was a fluke" (l. 31) >> Again, she's not stating a fact, but rather tackling a possibility.

3.2.4. Counter-Factive Presupposition

When we make the use of conditional statements, we are most certainly creating a counter-factive presupposition. Here, the lack of truthfulness is not enough to explain the term, but it is the contrary of what is being said.

"If I had a dollar for every time you gave up-" (l. 54) >> She doesn't have it.

This example is not as simple as it seems though. Here Emily is making use of a known idiomatic phrase often used to express that someone does something repeatedly. Even if the structure fits the idea of what a counter-factive presupposition is, it does not present the same results as, for example, "if I were rich". However, inserted in a context where this idiom is recognized by the hearer, the idea that the speaker does not have a dollar for every time that the specific situation happens is accepted. Therefore, even not being related to the literal meaning of the sentence, the relation of presupposing the contrary of that it is uttered is still maintained. So, *verbatim* or not, it is still a counter-factive presupposition.

3.2.5. Lexical Presupposition

Distancing the analysis of what is being said, the lexical presupposition takes the role of analyzing a process. When a verb brings up the idea that something necessarily happened before, it is considered a lexical predicate. The examples extracted are as follows:

"I have already been to a party" (l. 6) >> It is not the first time she's at the party.

"I have no desire to relieve that experience" (l. 7) >> She already lived it.

"Easing up on the rules" (l. 32) >> She was strict on the rules.

"I give up" (l. 53) >> She was trying.

All of these utterances suggest that, for them to be true, something happened in the past.

3.2.6. Structural Presupposition

The last category proposed by Yule (1996) displays the assumption that it can be made through analyzing the structure of a sentence. A common trigger for this kind of presupposition is the 'wh-questions', as they are known in English, such as 'what', 'how', and 'why'. By the use of these words, it can be quickly assumed that the speaker is only trying to know more about an already stated situation. In the *corpus*, these presuppositions are the following:

"What do they say?" (l. 14) >> Something is said by them.

"What do you want me to say?" (l. 29) >> She wants her to say something.

"That's not what she needs." (l. 39) >> She needs something.

"How dare you?" (l. 42) >> She dared her somehow.

"Why does Lorelai do that?" (l. 49) >> There is a reason for her doing it.

"What am I then?" (l. 50) >> She is something (or somehow).

"What do I have to do to get you to put the damn cheese in individual bags?" (l. 53) >> She has to do something for them to meet her wishes.

Besides most utterances being questions (rhetorical or not), structural presupposition is not limited to it, as it can be observed on (c). "That is not what she needs.", not being a question, the predicate "what" presupposes that something is needed on her part.

4 CONCLUSION

A significant method for exposing a content is through an analysis of real-life examples, and that was the focus of this entire study. While the theoretical framework was of extreme importance for the comprehension of the concepts, a practical analysis that goes out of the books' pages permits an even better grasp of these theories.

Having the liberty of choosing an object of analysis is always something interesting. Not only because it increases the interest in the production of a work, but especially for its infinite world of choices that brings something unexpected to the academic context. Perhaps, upon first view, there are subjects not worth bringing to the academical field, but their presence can be capable of change. Most of the academic world is still disengaged with real world matters, and often this can interfere the reality inside classrooms. Not rarely, students are faced with subjects being odd and extremely distant from their reality. By changing not only the language, but the means of getting it (television, internet), several changes could spring from it.

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APPENDIX 1

LORELAI

Mom, come to the party tomorrow.

EMILY

I can't. I'm busy (*to catering staff*). Throw those out, we won't need them.

LORELAI

Mom, your granddaughter invited you to her birthday party. Please, come.

EMILY

I've already been to a party for my granddaughter and she humiliated me in front of all of my friends. I have no desire to relive that experience. *(to catering staff)* The cheeses must be put in individual bags, please.

LORELAI

Oh come on, give her a break. You invited all these Chilton kids without even asking her.

EMILY

They're her schoolmates. I assume they are her friends

LORELAI

You know what they say when people assume things.

EMILY

No, what do they say?

LORELAI

That -- you shouldn't.

EMILY

Very clever.

LORELAI

Mom, she didn't want them here. She doesn't like them.

EMILY

Well I had to invite them. That's just good manners, something that your daughter is sorely lacking.

LORELAI

God, you know, you're doing the same thing to her that you always did to me. You're trying to control her and when that doesn't work you just shut her out.

EMILY

I'm too tired for your accusations right now. Can we do this tomorrow?

LORELAI

I'm just –

EMILY

Here, I'll find you a pen so you can write down all your insults so that you won't forget them.

LORELAI:

Mom, this is not funny. I have a crushed kid out in the car.

EMILY:

What do you want me to say? Everything's fine, it's forgotten. There, I'll see you next week.

LORELAI:

So I guess the whole pudding thing was just a fluke, huh? Trying to get to know us, easing up on the rules, smudging that bottom line of yours. It was just some weird phase. What, you were on cold medicine last week or something?

EMILY:

Oh, so I'm a villain now, is that it? I spent a fortune on this party. I spent days planning it, making sure that every little detail was perfect -- the food, the linen, the

music. And I did all this for Rory.

LORELAI:

Well that's not what she needs. She needs you to accept her apology and come to her party. That's what she needs. You don't care what she needs.

EMILY:

How dare you!

LORELAI:

You don't even know what she needs because you don't know her. You've never tried to know her just like you never knew me.

EMILY:

Oh I know you.

LORELAI

Oh, please. You don't know anything about me.

EMILY:

Oh, you'd like to think that, wouldn't you? That you're just some huge mystery to me. 'Why does Lorelai do that?' 'I don't know, she's a mystery to me.' Well you're not so mysterious, Lorelai.

LORELAI:

No! No! What am I then?

EMILY:

Well right now you're very loud and disruptive to the entire cleaning process. *(to catering staff)* For God's sake! What do I have to do to get you to put the damn cheese in individual bags?

LORELAI:

Fine, I give up.

EMILY:

Oh, you give up? If I had a dollar for every time you gave up –

LORELAI:

Then you could pay for this party, couldn't you?