

# When presupposing becomes dangerous : how the procedure of presuppositional accommodation can be exploited in manipulative discourses

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## SHORT COMMUNICATION

SARA GRECO\*

### WHEN PRESUPPOSING BECOMES DANGEROUS HOW THE PROCEDURE OF PRESUPPOSITIONAL ACCOMMODATION CAN BE EXPLOITED IN MANIPULATIVE DISCOURSES

This paper, expounding one of the focal issues of my dissertation, concerns some communicative dynamics that are bound to discourse and dialogue common ground, i.e. to the set of common knowledge, beliefs and values shared by the interlocutors as individuals and members of a certain community and building an important component of community's identity. The common ground evolves and increases in communicative interaction in two distinct ways: through all the factual material explicitly manifested in communication, and through accommodation, i.e. through an adjustment of the common ground imposed by the presuppositions of what has been said. From the theoretical point of view, this paper deals with the problem of presupposition and with the functioning of this dimension in verbal communication. From the empirical point of view, the main concern is the risk of manipulation implied by various practices of accommodation.

*Key words:* accommodation, common ground, manipulation, presupposition, congruity.

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\*\* See Greco (2002).

## 1. Introduction

In 1892 Gottlob Frege's text «Über Sinn und Bedeutung»<sup>1</sup> gave way to the studies on presupposition in modern times<sup>2</sup>, also showing the communicative strength proper of this phenomenon. In particular, Frege considered in his analysis the danger potentially involved in sentences containing false presuppositions that have not been previously accepted by the interlocutors. He examined an expression whose manipulative effects became evident later, during the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century: 'Der Wille des Volkes' (*the will of the people*). The expression "the will of the people" takes the existence of a unique will of the people for granted, whereas its *Bedeutung*<sup>3</sup> does not actually exist in reality, or, at least, as Frege suggests, cannot be univocally identified. This is, of course, a source of possible mistakes or demagogical abuses:

“Man warnt in den Logiken vor der Vieldeutigkeit der Ausdrücke als einer Quelle von logischen Fehlern. Für mindestens ebenso angebracht halte ich die Warnung vor scheinbaren Eigennamen, die keine Bedeutung haben. Die Geschichte der Mathematik weiß von Irrtümern zu erzählen, die daraus entstanden sind. Der demagogische Mißbrauch liegt hierbei ebenso nahe, vielleicht näher als bei vieldeutigen Wörtern. „Der Wille des Volkes“ kann als Beispiel dazu dienen; denn daß es wenigstens keine allgemein angenommene Bedeutung dieses Ausdrucks gibt, wird leicht festzustellen sein”<sup>4</sup>.

In fact, since what is taken for granted at a certain point in a conversation is not at issue at that moment, it cannot be checked and discussed, if the

<sup>1</sup> See Frege (1892).

<sup>2</sup> The term *praesuppositio* was first introduced by Thomas Aquinas. He did not give a direct definition of presupposition, instead he analyzed the functioning of this phenomenon. What is particularly worth noticing in his account is that it is strictly bound with ontology: Thomas notices that it is the structure of the reality itself that implies presuppositions. Some actions or states of things require presuppositions. For instance: “Generatio autem est motus in vitam, et non praesupponit vitam, sed privationem eius” (Super Sent., lib. 4 d. 12 q. 2 a. 2 qc. 2 ad 2). Before Thomas, some interesting insights on this topic can be found in Aristotle's works, although he never used a term equivalent to presupposition. For instance, Aristotle discusses an application of categorial presupposition, noticing that a property cannot be attributed to every being. One cannot say, for instance, that a *musician* begins to turn white. In fact, he begins to turn white from being *not white*; he does not begin to turn white from being a musician. Cf. Aristotle (Fisica, p. 30-31).

<sup>3</sup> Frege defines the *Bedeutung* as follows (1892 : 44): „Die Bedeutung eines Eigennamens ist der Gegenstand selbst, den wir damit bezeichnen“. Thus, the *Bedeutung* of a proper name (a name or of a denotative expression) is the object itself that we designate by its means.

<sup>4</sup> See (Frege 1892 : 56).

conversation is proceeding normally. Therefore, being somehow out of our control, what is taken for granted could be false.

## 2. The notion of presuppositional accommodation

A focus on the notion of presupposition and on its functioning in verbal communication is necessary for a deeper understanding of the problem that Frege shed light on. In defining presupposition, we refer to the approach named ‘Congruity Theory’<sup>5</sup>, and in particular to Rigotti & Rocci (2001). According to these authors, the communicative text at a semantic level can be represented “as a hierarchy of predicate-argument relations”, where each predicate selects its own arguments on the basis of the **congruity** criterion<sup>6</sup>. This is true for simple predicates that have a lexical representation, such as “to read”, “green”, up to logical connectives and pragmatic predicates at the top of the hierarchy, such as illocutionary forces and connective predicates. In Congruity Theory connective predicates are the relational speech acts that make up the structure of a text as a coherent communicative action<sup>7</sup>. In this framework, **presuppositions are the conditions each predicate imposes on its argument places and which should be respected**. In other words, presuppositions must be respected for a text to be congruous<sup>8</sup>. In the following diagrams, which

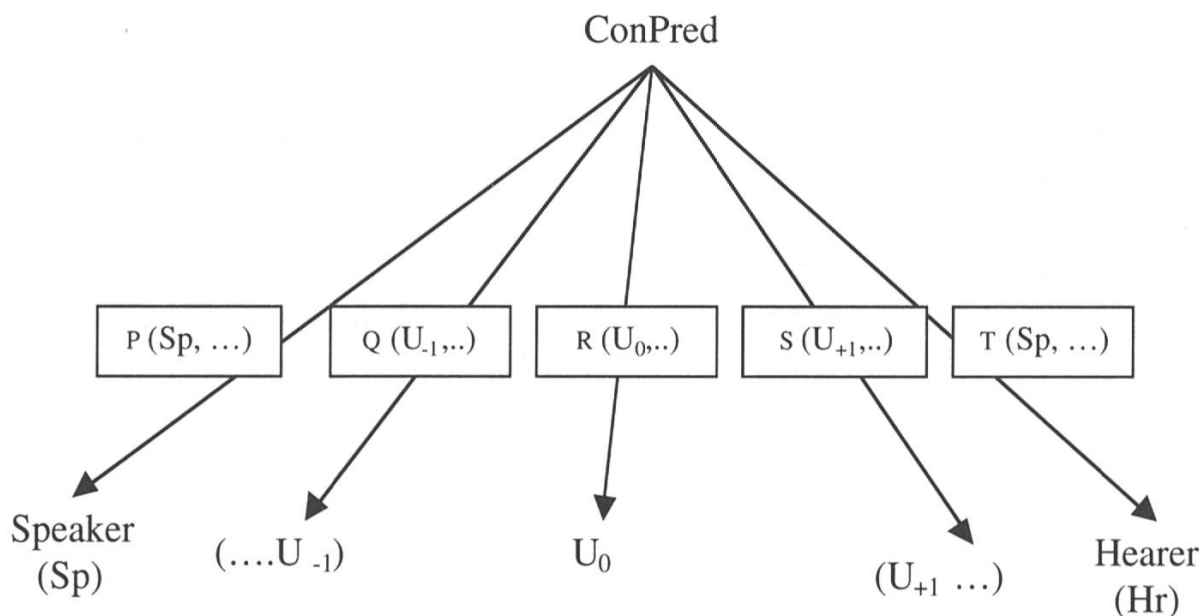
<sup>5</sup> See Rigotti (1993), Rigotti (1994), Rigotti & Rocci (2001), Rigotti & Rocci (2003), Rigotti & Rocci (in press), Rocci (to appear).

<sup>6</sup> Congruity is defined as the logical correspondence between a predicate and its places.

<sup>7</sup> See Rigotti & Rocci (2001).

<sup>8</sup> See Rigotti & Rocci (2001 : 65): “On fera l’hypothèse que toutes les présuppositions sont à traiter en termes de congruité, comme imposés par un prédicat à une de ses places argumentales”. See also Rocci (to appear): “In Congruity Theory, the conditions imposed by the predicates are treated as *presuppositions*. The presuppositional nature of the conditions that the predicates impose on arguments can be highlighted by the application of a variant of the test normally used in linguistic literature to recognize presuppositions: the conditions remain if the utterance is negated, and those examples that violate the condition remain unacceptable in their negative form”. Some other authors have partly anticipated the hypothesis that presuppositions can be treated as conditions bound to the predicates. See for instance Fillmore (1971 : 265): “By the presuppositional aspects of a speech communication situation, I mean those conditions which must be satisfied in order for a particular illocutionary act to be effectively performed in saying particular sentences”. See also Seuren (2000 : 277): “Most predicates have two kind of satisfaction conditions, the preconditions and the update conditions. The preconditions generate presuppositional entailments (presuppositions). The update conditions generate classical semantic entailments”. The presuppositional nature of the feature preliminarily imposed by a predicate onto its argument places seems to suggest that the term condition is generic and potentially misleading, since one could speak of conditions also in relation to the entailments that take place when the predicate is activated.

shows the general structure of a connective predicate, presuppositions are represented in the rectangular boxes:



*Fig. 1: Presuppositions of the connective predicates*

Normally, what is presupposed is already part of the common ground of the interlocutors, i.e. of the set of knowledge and beliefs they share<sup>9</sup>. The enlargement of the common ground takes place in communication. Generally speaking, the increment is due to *assertive* acts, which, if they are accepted by the hearers, enlarge the amount of shared knowledge between the interlocutors<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, there are cases in which the common ground is enlarged by a particular process that Lewis (1979) called **presuppositional accommodation**<sup>11</sup>. In these cases, the presupposed con-

<sup>9</sup> See Stalnaker (2002 : 701): “To presuppose something is to take it for granted, or at least to act as if one takes it for granted, as background information – as *common ground* among the participants in the conversation”.

<sup>10</sup> The study of the normal process of common ground enlargement was initially due to Lauri Karttunen, and Robert Stalnaker. Karttunen presented his account on discourse referents at the International Conference on Computational Linguistics of Sãnga-Sãby in 1969. His paper was published some years later: see Karttunen (1976). Stalnaker published his works on presupposition and assertion in the 70s. See Stalnaker (1973); Stalnaker (1978). Later, this research field found two development branches that are similar but independent: Discourse Representation Theory (see Kamp 1981) and File Change Semantics (see Heim 1982).

<sup>11</sup> See Lewis (1979 : 416-417): “I said that presupposition evolves in a more or less rule-governed way during a conversation. Now we can formulate one important governing rule: call it the *rule of accommodation for presupposition*. If at time  $t$  something is said that requires presupposition  $P$  to be acceptable and if  $P$  is not presupposed just before  $t$ , then – ceteris paribus and within certain limits – presupposition  $P$  comes into existence at  $P$ ”.

tent is directly introduced into the common ground together with the asserted content, while the truth of presuppositions and the interlocutors' awareness of it are simply taken for granted by the speaker<sup>12</sup>.

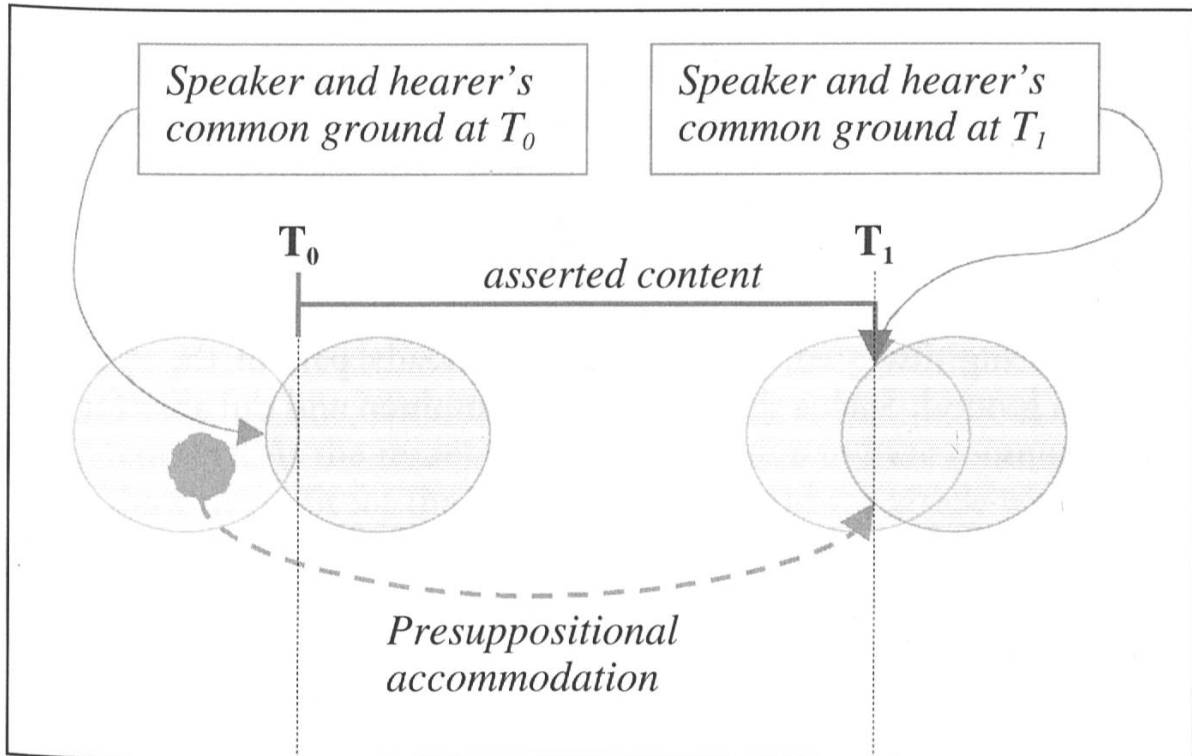


Fig. 2: *Presuppositional accommodation*

### 3. How accommodation works in normal conversation

Although presuppositions can be exploited for manipulative purposes, they are surely not manipulative in themselves; their use in everyday conversations appears to be rather essential for human communication. In fact, speakers need to take something for granted at each stage of a conversation, so that the conversation itself may proceed. Otherwise, if they constantly questioned what is already known, nothing new could be communicated<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> This does not necessarily mean that the hearer is also going to accept the presuppositional accommodation. As Rocci (to appear) points out: "There are a number of aspects of accommodation that need to be elucidated if we don't want to limit our account to the rather sterile assertion that manipulation happens by accommodating presupposed material that was not part of the common ground of the interlocutors. Consider, first of all, that to accommodate does not mean automatically to believe or to accept. A skeptical addressee can always provisionally accommodate presuppositions for the sake of text understanding, without actually believing them".

<sup>13</sup> On the essential role of presuppositions in text building see: Frank (1973 : 37): "Die

Rigotti observes that presuppositions are both logically and psychologically essential.

From a logical point of view, discussing what is presupposed would block the text construction. From a psychological point of view, what is presupposed is what is shared by the interlocutors and constitutes the basis of their relationship; therefore it must not be discussed<sup>14</sup>. Presuppositions are also essential for the developing of culture<sup>15</sup> and science.

Presuppositional accommodation can be seen as a device used to let the conversation proceed when the presupposed material can be accepted without being discussed, even if it is not already part of the speakers' common ground. Such a situation is quite common and can arise for various reasons.

I will sketch some possible cases, trying to place them on a scale, which goes from minimum to maximum audacity, and therefore from maximum to minimum acceptability.

Präsuppositionen sind die das 'universe of discourse' determinierenden, bereits in den Text eingeführten Propositionen; sie konstituieren jeweils den als bekannt und akzeptiert unterstellten kommunikativen Hintergrund"; Gauker (1999 : 21): "Life is short. There is not enough time to explain everything. As speakers, or writers, we are forced to make assumptions. [...] Often, especially given limitations of time for speaking or space for writing, one is forced to take much for granted"; Lewis (1979 : 416): "At any stage in a well-run conversation, a certain amount is presupposed"; Stalnaker (1974 : 49): "The more common ground we can take for granted, the more efficient our communication will be. And unless we could reasonably treat some facts in this way, we probably could not communicate at all"; Stalnaker (2001 : 705): "[accommodation] is like the phenomenon of *conversational implicature* in that it is an inevitable feature of any practice the point of which is to mean things"; Seuren (2000 : 280): "The fact that they [presuppositions] are structurally (compositionally) derivable from their carrier sentence allows for their rapid post hoc incrementation (usually called 'accommodation') without it being necessary to spend time and effort over their explicit formulation and further linguistic processing. PRESUPPOSITION THUS CONSTITUTES AN EXTREMELY POWERFUL DEVICE FOR SAVING TIME AND ENERGY IN LINGUISTIC COMMUNICATION".

<sup>14</sup> See Rigotti (1998 : 118): "Il presupposto è ciò che è necessario condividere e sul quale è vietato tornare perché non è più un problema. Il divieto ha un risvolto logico e un risvolto psicologico. Dal punto di vista logico si impone come esigenza di andare avanti, di non bloccare il testo in una perpetua, infeconda decostruzione e ricostruzione del punto di partenza. Il valore psicologico del rifiuto sta invece nella necessità di non mettere in discussione ciò che sta all'origine del testo, ciò che è condiviso e la cui condivisione è costitutiva del rapporto fra gli interlocutori".

<sup>15</sup> On this point see also Tardini (2003).

- i. There are situations in which the accommodated material is accepted simply because it is not very important to know whether it is true or false<sup>16</sup>.

Here I quote the title of an article taken from a women's magazine, which contained some advice to get fit for the summer: "Torna amica del tuo corpo!"<sup>17</sup> (Roughly: "be a friend of your body again!"). Here there is certain amount of accommodated presuppositions:

- *body* can be an argument of the predicate *amico* (friend);
- the reader had been a friend of her body in the past; then she somehow stopped to be a friend of her body.

An honest reader will admit that these presuppositions are at least doubtful; nevertheless, they can be easily accommodated in such a context. As the reader probably just wants to have some advice on how to get fit for the summer, she can read the article without discussing the title. Obviously, such an indulgent accommodation process would be inappropriate in the context of a scientific paper.

- ii. In other cases, accommodation may serve the purpose of synthetically updating the listeners' database of knowledge, and therefore is accepted.

If I say to a new colleague: "People here use to have lunch at 12:00 at the restaurant on the second floor", he would not probably answer "You should have told me there was a restaurant on the second floor before!" Obviously, I am at the same time informing him about our practice of having lunch at 12:00 (assertion) and about the existence and the location of the restaurant (accommodated presuppositions).

- iii. Quite often, the hearer accommodates the speakers' presuppositions because he has no direct knowledge about them and he trusts the speaker or considers him an expert on that subject<sup>18</sup>.

The doctor may tell me: "As you suffer from asthma, you cannot

<sup>16</sup> Von Fintel analyzes some possible reasons for accommodating. With regard to case (1), see von Fintel (2000 : 11): "The listeners may not want to challenge the speaker about the presupposed proposition, because it is irrelevant to their concern and because the smoothness of the conversation is important enough to them to warrant a little leeway".

<sup>17</sup> The example is taken from the Italian magazine "Starbene", May 2002, p. 201.

<sup>18</sup> See von Fintel (2000 : 11): "The listeners may be genuinely agnostic as to the truth of the relevant proposition, assume that the speaker knows about its truth and trust the speaker not to speak inappropriately or falsely".



take this medicine, because it contains acetylsalicylic acid". I do not normally answer: "I did not know that acetylsalicylic acid was dangerous for asthmatics. I cannot accept this theory, unless you give me an evidence-based proof". Such an answer would be rather odd. I am not expected to have any scientific knowledge on the collateral effects of medicines, whereas the doctor is: so I should better trust his advice.

- iv. A particular kind of accommodation is the one deliberately exploited by the speaker as a stylistic device. For instance, in "*The Lord of the Rings*", J.R.R. Tolkien, makes a fascinating and innocent use of accommodation. At the beginning of the story, as Tolkien is describing Bilbo Baggins' relationships with his relatives, he notices:

"But so far trouble had not come; and as Mr. Baggins was generous with his money, most people were willing to forgive him his oddities and his good fortune. He remained on visiting terms with his relatives (except, of course, the Sackville-Bagginses), and he had many devoted admirers among the hobbits of poor and unimportant families"<sup>19</sup>.

*Of course* means "as the reader can easily infer from previous information". As readers, we actually have no idea about the reason why Bilbo should have bad relationships with the Sackville Bagginses. In this sense *of course* is typically a case of accommodation. By means of this device, Tolkien gains the opportunity both to make the readers' curiosity arise about how the story will proceed, and to directly introduce them into the world of the Middle Earth.

In Chapter IX and X of "*I Promessi Sposi*" (The betrothed) Lucia and Agnese find refuge in a convent near Monza, where the Signora takes them under her protection. Alessandro Manzoni describes the story of the Signora, Gertrude, who was forced to become a nun by her father and was never really satisfied of her life in the monastery. In Chapter X Manzoni explains how Gertrude met Egidio, a man who will lead her to commit terrible crimes:

"Among other privileges and distinctions accorded to her as a compensation for her not being abbess, was the special grant of a bed-chamber in a separate part

<sup>19</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien (1995).

of the monastery. This side of the building adjoined a house inhabited by a young man of professedly abandoned character; one of the many who, in those days, by the help of their retinues of braves, and by combinations with other villains, were enabled, up to a certain point, to set at defiance public force, and the authority of the laws. Our manuscript merely gives him the name of Egidio. This man, having, from a little window which overlooked the court-yard, seen Gertrude occasionally passing, or idly loitering there, and allured, rather than intimidated, by the dangers and impiety of the act, ventured one day to address her. **The miserable girl replied**<sup>20</sup>.

As far as the readers know, Gertrude is not yet miserable, but Manzoni anticipates in this passage the future events that she is going to experience – “a career of abomination and bloodshed”<sup>21</sup>. By means of an accommodation, the author ideally links Gertrude’s future crimes with their cause; he focuses on the moment when she generates her own ruin.

#### 4. Accommodation in the manipulative discourse

There are cases, in which accommodation is used to unduly introduce false presuppositions into the hearer’s common ground, so that manipulative events arise. Now, I will consider a few examples of manipulative accommodations, in order to detect their functioning within communication.

According to Rigotti (2002), “a message is manipulative if it twists the vision of the world (physical as well as social - or human - actual as well as virtual) in the mind of the addressee, who is so prevented from a healthy attitude towards decision (i.e. an attitude responding to his/her very interest), and pursues the manipulator’s goal in the illusion of pursuing her/his own goal”<sup>22</sup>. One of the manipulative events that may occur is due to a misusing of presupposition - what we may call a “bad use” of the accommodation device. This manipulative process “is grounded in the introduction of false information into discourse structures requiring true and shared information”<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Manzoni (The betrothed, Chapter X).

<sup>21</sup> Manzoni (The betrothed, Chapter XX).

<sup>22</sup> See Rigotti (to appear : 7).

<sup>23</sup> See Rigotti (to appear : 10).

Frege's "der Wille des Volkes" was precisely a case of the bad use of accommodation. The German word *Wille* is an abstract name deriving from the verb *wollen*, and has two meanings: it indicates both a faculty of the human mind (men are endowed with intelligence and will) and a preference aiming to a particular event. In the first sense, the term *Wille* can be referred only to a single person, since there exists no collective mind; in the second sense, collective subjects (groups, communities, peoples...) can *wollen* something, so far as the majority of the electors, or at least of their representatives, deliberates on a certain subject, and the therefore all the collectivity is supposed to respect that decision. Even in this case, however, one could not speak of *will of the people* if not in a rather improper sense and with a certain degree of mystification. Frege had focused on the vagueness of the referent of this expression, for which it is also difficult to image even a single reasonable use. Therefore, when this expression is used, the existence of a unique will of the people is unduly introduced into the interlocutors' common ground by means of a violent accommodation. More precisely, the accommodation takes place because using a name (or a denotative expression) suggests the existence of the entity that the name refers to<sup>24</sup>. What is accommodated here is thus a false existential presupposition.

Frege's example is based on an undue use of a denotative expression. This is not however the only possibility of a bad use of accommodation. The *fallacy of many-questions or fallacy of complex question*<sup>25</sup>, which has been known for centuries in the ancient rhetorical tradition, is actually an instance of the general type of the undue accommodation<sup>26</sup>. This fallacy "occurs in a kind of case where a complex question – that is, a question having several parts, is asked in such a way that, if the respondent answers it directly, he is trapped into conceding something that would cause him

<sup>24</sup> Cigada (1999 : 168) observes that using a name one implicitly says – or presupposes – that its referent exists in reality: "Si tratta di quel carattere, messo a tema nella denominazione del nome come *sostantivo*, per cui con il denominare qualcosa diciamo implicitamente (o meglio presupponiamo) che quel qualcosa cosiffatto esiste, ha una sua consistenza di realtà".

<sup>25</sup> See Walton (1999) for an explanation of the functioning of this fallacy.

<sup>26</sup> See Rigotti (to appear): "A fallacy we have already mentioned under the name of 'many questions' is based on the same manipulative device, which has a far wider application. This device is grounded in the introduction of false information into discourse structures requiring true and shared information".

to lose the argument, or otherwise be unfavorable to his side” (see Walton 1999 : 379). As Walton points out, a complex question is not necessarily manipulative; it turns out to be manipulative when it accommodates a false presupposition<sup>27</sup>.

Take as an example a political candidate who is asked by a journalist during a television debate: “Do you regret having been unfair to your political opponents?”. “To regret”, in the sense of “being sorry of”, is a predicate with two argument places<sup>28</sup>:

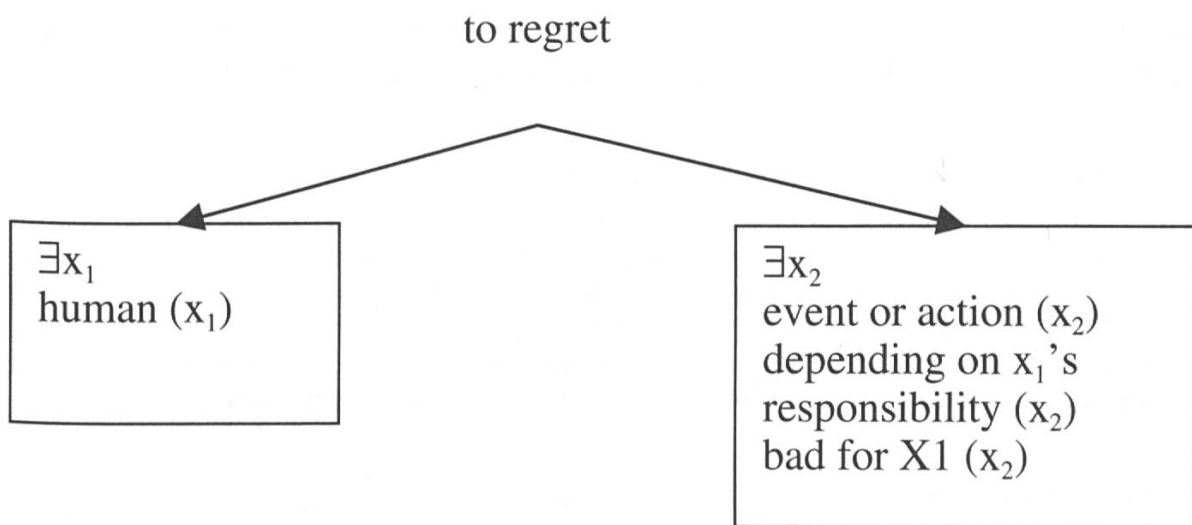


Fig. 3: “to regret”

In this case, the journalist is presupposing that there exists such an action as X2, which is bad, and which depends on X1’s will. In other words, the journalist is taking for granted that the politician has been unfair to his political opponents. If the politician answered the question directly, he would admit his unfairness – he would *accommodate* it. Otherwise, he should challenge the question itself – for instance, by saying: “But I have never been unfair to my opponents!” – and that would stop the accommodation process. As Walton notices, challenging the presuppositions is always possible in cases of normal conversations. But there are cases in

<sup>27</sup> See Walton (1999 : 381): “We conclude, then, that there’s nothing inherently fallacious about complex questions”. On this point, see also Rigotti (to appear): “A complex question is not fallacious if the information it contains as presupposed is truly presupposed, i.e. shared by the speakers”.

<sup>28</sup> The following diagram represents the semantics of the verb to regret in terms of Congruity Theory. For an explanation see Rigotti & Rocci (2001).

which “the wrecking of reputation merely by the raising of the question is a powerful form of attack”<sup>29</sup>.

There are many other possible cases, in which the use of accommodation may turn out to be manipulative. This is often context-dependent, as one cannot evaluate the persuasive or manipulative effect of a single expression without considering the whole text: who the speaker and hearers are, which speech acts<sup>30</sup> are performed by means of that text, etc<sup>31</sup>. Consider the following sentence: “**Given my modest financial situation**, I could never afford great holidays”. Here, the speaker’s financial situation is assumed to be modest; the hearers would surely not accept the accommodated material, if they knew the speaker was notoriously rich.

Consider now the following passage:

“Das neue Ensemble der Karl-Marx Universität ist Ausdruck der Macht der Arbeiterklasse und ihrer Verbündeten, der beispielhaften Entwicklung der Wissenschaft zu einer Hauptproduktivkraft und einer im Herzen des Volkes verankerten Stätte der Forschung, Lehre, Aus- und Weiterbildung, und des gesellschaftlich-geistigen Fortschritts, **wie sie einzig und allein unter sozialistischen Gesellschaftsbedingungen möglich sind**”<sup>32</sup>.

Such a statement requires the accommodation of the presupposition that gaining a certain level of progress (*Macht der Arbeiterklasse und ihrer Ver-*

<sup>29</sup> See Walton (1999).

<sup>30</sup> For the fundamentals of the Speech act Theory see Austin (1962) and Searle (1969).

<sup>31</sup> Within the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation, manipulative moves such as fallacies are evaluated with regard to the broader framework of the pragmatic context of the discussion. On this point, see van Eemeren & Grootendorst (1992 : 103-104): “In our opinion, in dealing with the fallacies it is important not to exaggerate the role of logic, even if the absolute certainty that a purely logical approach appears to offer is thereby sacrificed. The practical significance of ‘logical’ errors in comparison with other fallacious moves can only be properly assessed if it is first clear what place the argumentation or other speech act in which they occur, occupies in the wider context of a critical discussion”. Such an approach also “allows us to explain the potentially *persuasive character* of the fallacies”. See van Eemeren & Houtlosser (2003 : 291).

<sup>32</sup> This passage is taken from the speech given by Walter Kresse, major of Leipzig, at the 15<sup>th</sup> conference of the city council on May, 23<sup>rd</sup> 1968. The same speech was published in a special edition of the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, pp. 1-2, May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1958. The speech is available at: [www.paulinerkirche.de](http://www.paulinerkirche.de). A rough translation of this passage may be the following: “The new ensemble of the Karl-Marx University is the expression of the power of the working class and of its allies; the expression of how science exemplary develops into a main productive force and into a place, tied in the heart of the people, of research, education and training; the expression of the socio-spiritual progress; **as they are possible only in a socialist society**”.

*bündeten... beispielhafte Entwicklung der Wissenschaft... gesellschaftlich-geistiger Fortschritt*) is only possible in a socialist society, which can obviously be accommodated only by hearers who already share the socialist ideology. As this passage is taken from a speech given by the major of a city in East-Germany on 1968, the speaker assumes his hearers will accept this presupposition. The same sentence would be perceived as undemonstrated and lacking evidence to a hearer who does not believe in the socialist ideological system.

An undue use of accommodation can also arise from the value of conjunctions. As an example of this, I will consider a sequence taken from the Italian movie “La vita è bella” (Life is beautiful), by Roberto Benigni (1997). The movie is set in Arezzo, Tuscany, and the story begins around 1939. Guido Orefici, played by Benigni himself, is walking in the city centre with his young son, Giosué. It is Giosué’s birthday, and the boy wants his father to buy him a piece of cake in a bakery. Guido, who has Jewish origins, realizes he cannot enter the shop, because a big sign on the window is warning: “VIETATO L’INGRESSO A EBREI E CANI” (Entry forbidden to Jews **and** dogs).

The conjunction *and* imposes some categorial presuppositions on its argument places. First of all, its argument must not belong to the same paradigm<sup>33</sup>. One cannot say:

“This restaurant is open and closed”

“He is a bachelor and his wife is quite young”.

In fact, when the two arguments of *and* belong to the same paradigm, a logical incongruity (a contradiction) is generated. Secondly, the paradigms of the two arguments must themselves belong to a paradigm of higher level. For instance:

“She has a long experience as a teacher and she understands children very well” (paradigm of professional skills of a teacher)

“Traveling by train is comfortable and quick” (Paradigm of travel comfort)

If the paradigm of higher level cannot be identified, an incongruity arises, as in the following cases:

<sup>33</sup> On the presuppositions imposed by the Italian conjunction “e” see Rigotti (1996 : 114-117).

“She has a beautiful smile and she plays tennis”

“He won the lottery and he likes eating vegetables”

In the above-mentioned example taken from ‘La vita è bella’, the categories of dogs and Jews do not belong to a higher paradigm<sup>34</sup>. To understand the sentence “Entry forbidden to Jews and dogs” as meaningful, one must figure out a possible common paradigm, and accommodate a false premise, such as: “Jews and dogs are both animals”. Here the accommodation of a false premise clearly leads to manipulative effects.

## 5. Conclusions

Presuppositions are essential components of each communicative act. Accommodation, the process by which new presuppositions are introduced into the speakers’ common ground, is a useful device in everyday communication, as briefly illustrated in the first part of this paper. Nevertheless, some manipulative applications are possible in cases of accommodation. Starting from an historical milestone in the history of presupposition, Gottlob Frege, this paper aimed to produce some examples of undue use of accommodation, in order to explain the possible danger involved in this phenomenon.

<sup>34</sup> In the following scene of the movie, Guido explains his son they can also prohibit two hateful categories from entering their little library, by putting a big sign on the window: “Entry forbidden to *spiders* and *Visigoths*”. Here, the odd choice of the arguments accentuates the inhomogeneous nature of these categories.

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