Rethinking Presuppositions

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From Natural Ontology to Lexicon

By

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During my PhD, I had two complementary mentors: Professor Emilio Manzotti and Professor Michele Prandi. The former was like a microscope: he taught me the need for fine graded linguistic analysis. The latter was like a telescope: he taught me the need to unify apparently distant phenomena. So, in a way, I was in a Pascalian situation: in between the immensely small and the immensely large. Whether the result is theoretical schizophrenia or not, I leave the reader to decide.

Be that as it may, this work would have not been possible without them, and without the friendship and the teaching of Professors Gaston Gross and Georges Kleiber, who supported my research long after the completion of the PhD.

This book is dedicated to all of them.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Which are the presuppositions?

This book is about presuppositions. Presupposition is an idea that is either loved or hated. Some authors, like G. Frege, P. F. Strawson, J. L. Austin, P. & C. Kiparsky, Ch. Fillmore, O. Ducrot and R. Stalnaker, have been attracted by it and have attempted to highlight the distinction between posited and presupposed content. Some others, like B. Russell, D. Wilson, L. Karttunen and S. Peters, have been suspicious of it and have argued either that that distinction is artificial or that there is not a unitary phenomenon to place under the label *presupposition*. So, maybe, presupposition is a topic that reveals something about the personality of the people who are studying it.

Be that as it may, in this debate there is a question that is never asked, namely: *Which are the presuppositions?*

Of course, the specialised literature offers examples of presupposed contents: that someone beats his wife (*He stopped beating his wife*), that someone has children (*His children are bald*), that someone cheated (*She discovered that he cheated on her*), and so on. However, it would be pointless to make a list of these presuppositions.

The reason is that the previous contents, in themselves, are not presuppositions at all, but ordinary contingent facts. Any contingent fact can become a presupposition through some linguistic structure or manipulation. So, the specialised literature has not focused on presuppositions, but rather on the means to make presuppositions: the so-called "triggers". This, however, amounts to behaving like an art critic who is more interested in brushes and chisels than paintings and statues. In

other words, the very debate about presuppositions turns out to be built on an epistemological paradox: *presupposition* is not envisaged as a positive notion.

Indeed, all authors—those sympathetic to the intuition of presupposition and those who are not—have focused on contents working as consistency conditions of some utterance or, at best, as felicity conditions of some speech act. The tacit assumption is that this is the only kind of presupposition. The hypothesis defended here, on the contrary, is that besides contents which enjoy the status of presupposition for the time of an utterance or a speech act (and then come back to being ordinary facts), there are contents that enjoy the status of presupposition forever, and hence are *the* presuppositions par excellence. I call the former *contingent presuppositions* and the latter *ground presuppositions*. Ground presuppositions constitute the natural ontology that P. F. Strawson describes as:

> […] a massive central core of human thinking which has no history or none recorded in histories of thought; there are categories and concepts which, in their most fundamental character, change not at all. Obviously these are not the specialities of the most refined thinking. They are the commonplace of the least refined thinking; and they are yet the indispensable core of the conceptual equipment of the most sophisticated human beings. (Strawson 1959:10)

In my opinion, the distinction between contingent and ground presuppositions is crucial in order to understand both the development of the classic debate and the phenomenon of presupposition itself.

The opposition between contingent and ground presuppositions highlights the fact that the former have two sides. On the one hand, if one looks at a contingent presupposition when it works as a precondition for the consistency of some other utterance, one has the intuition that it is placed below the threshold of assertion, negation or question. On the other hand, if one looks at the content of a contingent presupposition in itself, that is, beyond its working as a presupposition, one may ascertain that it can be plainly asserted, negated or questioned. Now, the controversy about presuppositions can be seen as a pendulum swinging between these two alternatives. The pivot of this pendulum is that both the founding fathers

of the debate and their critics considered only contingent presuppositions. Hence, both of them are right in their own respect, and the result is that either the debate continues indefinitely or it is abandoned.

In the light of the opposition between contingent and ground presuppositions, moreover, the whole phenomenon turns out to be manifold, without giving up its unity. This phenomenon describes an ascending curve, ranging from fleeting discursive presuppositions, providing the ground for some lines of a dialogue, to stable ontological ones, providing the ground for our whole form of life. All the points on this curve share the same function of presupposition. The difference lies in the stability of this function. At the top of the curve, ground presuppositions behave necessarily as presuppositions, that is, *in se*, independently from any other action and without the need for any trigger or special attitude. At the bottom of the curve, discursive presuppositions behave as presuppositions contingently, that is, with regard to some discursive action and thanks to some trigger or attitude, without which they stop behaving as presuppositions.

In such a framework, the importance of both kinds of presupposition is emphasised. On the one hand, ground presuppositions acquire a central place because they turn out to be the prototypical presuppositions. In other words, discursive presuppositions are *presuppositions* insofar as they sometimes behave with regard to some utterances like ground presuppositions always behave with regard to our whole life. On the other hand, discursive presuppositions become interesting precisely insofar as they are not prototypical presuppositions, that is, because they highlight a variety of linguistic strategies in order to make presupposition content that, in itself, is not a presupposition.

1.2 Structure of the book

This book consists of three parts.

The first part (Chapters Two to Seven) puts forward the distinction between contingent and ground presuppositions.

Chapter Two introduces this idea through a functional conception of presupposition, while others defend it from two complementary points of view.

Chapters Three and Four, on the one hand, discuss some influential accounts. The distinction between contingent and ground presuppositions is firstly defended as the solution to an intrinsic indeterminacy affecting Ducrot's and Stalnaker's insights and, secondly, as the natural development of the cooperative principle.

Chapters Five and Six, on the other hand, focus on the very notion of presupposition. The former argues for the distinction between contingent and ground presuppositions on the basis of the core intuitions which reveal the phenomenon itself (such as the "survival under negation"). The second sketches a hierarchy, ranging from contingent presuppositions to ground ones, by means of three substantive criteria.

Chapter Seven ends the first part by offering a model which will orientate further discussion.

The second part of the book (Chapters Eight to Eleven) discusses some classical issues in the light of the distinction between contingent and ground presuppositions, namely:

posited *vs*. presupposed content (Chapter Eight);

presupposition *vs*. truth conditions (Chapter Nine);

presupposition *vs*. inference (Chapter Ten); and

presupposition *vs*. anaphor (Chapter Eleven).

The *leitmotiv* of this part is the separation between two souls of contingent presuppositions. On the one hand, they work as presuppositions in respect of some utterance presupposing them. On the other hand, unlike ground ones, in themselves they are contingent facts like any other. The problems raised by the aforementioned issues stem from a lack of distinguishing between these two aspects.

The third part (Chapters Twelve to Fifteen) is devoted to exploring and

exemplifying the study of ground presuppositions.

Chapters Twelve and Thirteen answer the question: *Is it possible to study ground presuppositions?* The former suggests that a ground presupposition can be seen as a category put on an entity through a practice, and that this category can be described by examining sentences' consistency conditions. The latter discusses Ryle's and Sommers' proposals concerning the study of ontological categories embedded in natural language, and focuses on the relationship between lexicon and ontology.

Chapter Fourteen answers the question: *How should we study ground presuppositions?* It puts forward an operative notion of *use of a predicate* in order to elucidate ground presuppositions through an extensive and systematic exploration of lexicon. Hence, the study of ground presuppositions takes the form of a "philosophical lexicography": a natural development of Strawson's descriptive metaphysics.

Chapter Fifteen offers some examples of such a philosophical lexicography. The result is a set of general propositions in the style of Moore's commonplaces. These propositions are instances of ground presuppositions; they can be consistently listed and they ground the consistency of both our practices as regards vegetables, animals or human beings, and a network of linguistic phenomena far beyond the utterances usually considered in the study of presuppositions.

Finally, Chapter Sixteen sums up the distinction between contingent and ground presuppositions and pleads for a genuine linguistic turn in philosophy. This turn consists of envisaging conceptual analysis as the redaction of a "philosophical dictionary": a dictionary of presuppositions providing the ground for the consistency of natural lexicons.

The title of this book reproduces the logical order of presuppositions: *from* ontological, prototypical ones *to* ephemeral, discursive ones. The sequence of chapters, instead, is intended to lead the reader from the latter to the former.

PART I

CONTINGENT *VS.* GROUND PRESUPPOSITIONS

CHAPTER 2

A STANDPOINT FOR PRESUPPOSITIONS

In the Introduction, I pictured the phenomenon of presuppositions as a curve ranging from ground presuppositions to contingent ones. This implies two things: a) that there is a *continuum* between natural ontology—the "central core of human concepts which has no history" (Strawson 1959:10)—and the predicate of a specific historical language; and b) that there is one consistent notion of presupposition capable of encompassing these extremes. This chapter is devoted to arguing for such a *continuum* and to putting forward such a notion of presupposition.

2.1 From free will to *stopping smoking*

Let us consider a classic moral philosophy problem, free will. Free will does not coincide with the whole concept of freedom, but only with a part of it. Indeed, as regards freedom, two notions can be distinguished (cf. Prandi 2004:330–333): an empirical notion and an ideal one. Free will coincides with the latter.

We use an empirical notion of freedom when we say, for instance, that there is little or no religious freedom, or when we say that human beings are not free because they are 'programmed' by their genetic code. In the first case, we can fight to achieve a higher degree of freedom; in the second, we must admit that human freedom is almost zero. Using the empirical notion of freedom means to measure our freedom with regard to external forces (socio-political, biological, physical laws) or to internal forces (our passions and desires). Using the ideal notion of freedom, on the other hand, simply means to state that human beings have free will because they are human beings, that is, the very concept of a human being is unthinkable without free will. Of course, this notion of freedom is a

tautology, but a tautology we cannot live without.

The ideal and the empirical notions of freedom distinguished above are not contradictory: the former is the condition with which we can measure the latter. Imagine a man chained to a chair. Surely, he cannot move and we can coherently say (1):

(1a) *That man is not free to stand up.*

(1b) *They prevented him from walking away.*

Now, imagine a statue of a man chained to a chair. Surely, the statue cannot move, but nobody would say (2):

(2a) ?*That statue is not free to stand up.*

(2b) ?*They prevented that statue from walking away.*

The difference between the person and the statue is not empirical, because in both cases something cannot happen according to a physical cause. The difference is ideal: for the human being, it makes sense to raise the question about his freedom; for the statue, by contrast, this question does not arise. The man has zero degree of empirical freedom because he is ideally free; the statue, by contrast, does not have zero degree of empirical freedom because it is not ideally free. In this sense, empirical freedom—a lot, a few, none of it—*presupposes* ideal freedom.

The conclusion is clear. On the one hand, it makes sense to negate, affirm and inquire into someone's empirical freedom because we take for granted that he is ideally free. On the other hand, it is meaningless to negate, affirm or inquire into a statue's empirical freedom because we do not take for granted that it is ideally free. Ideal freedom is the consistency condition to be empirically free or enslaved.

Now, consider the question (3):

(3) *Did George stop smoking?*

The problem of the empirical freedom of a statue does not arise, just as the question (3) does not arise if George never smoked. The problem of

the empirical freedom of a man does arise, just as question (3) arises if George did smoke. The presupposition which makes it coherent to raise (3) (namely, that George smoked) is a contingent fact devoid of any philosophical interest. The presupposition which makes it coherent to measure human freedom (namely, that human beings have free will) casts light on our moral ontology. Both of them, however, are presuppositions.

So, after all, there is a *continuum* starting from free will and ending in predicates like *to stop doing something*. This *continuum* is grounded not in their content, but in their function of consistency conditions.

2.2 A functional notion of presupposition

Prandi (2004:233–234) distinguishes between a functional notion of presupposition and an absolute one. As regards the absolute notion, the relevant question is: *Is this idea a presupposition or not?* As regards the functional notion, the relevant question is: *In relation to which practice does this idea work as a presupposition?* According to this second question, *presupposition* is a function, the function of a consistency condition carried out by an idea towards a practice.

The idea that George smoked works as a presupposition in relation to asking: *Did George stop smoking?* If that idea is false, this question is infelicitous, and this is all that happens. If someone casts doubt on that presupposition, he rejects the speaker's question and breaks a contingent communicative exchange. Instead, if someone casts doubt on the idea that people enjoy free will, he rejects our whole human way of life and nobody, not even a sceptic, is ready to live coherently with this refusal. Maybe a cynic would do so, but living in a barrel for the sake of being coherent with a philosophy is actually a practical confutation of that philosophy.

Be that as it may, the differences between these presuppositions do not lie in their working as such, but rather in the extension of the practice in relation to which they work. I name *contingent presuppositions* those ideas whose refusal only implies the breaking down of a contingent practice. I name *ground presuppositions* those ideas whose refusal would cause our

whole way of life to break down.

A functional notion of presupposition implies a direct relation between the generality of the grounded practice and the duration of the presupposition involved. If the practice is a contingent one, then its presupposition is a contingent fact: the smaller the practice, the less the presupposition will work as a presupposition. If the practice is a general one, then its presupposition is a stable and long-lasting idea: the larger the practice, the longer the presupposition will work as a presupposition. Therefore, contingent and ground presuppositions identify two poles. In between these two poles, there is a hierarchy of presuppositions. One can pass from a piece of gossip introduced as presupposition in the conversation (namely, the fact that a friend of ours stopped smoking), to the felicity condition presupposed by the act to sell something (namely, the fact that one must own what one sells), to the condition presupposed by our membership of a social or linguistic community (for instance, the notion of private property or the laws of syntax), to the horizon of consistency conditions presupposed by our belonging to the same form of life (for instance, the idea that stones do not feel pain and do not enjoy free will). *Ground presuppositions* constitute this horizon: they identify the upper limit of a hierarchy of presuppositions. This is the reason why Prandi (2017) names them *ultimate presuppositions*.

2.3 What are ground presuppositions?

Ground presuppositions are what Moore (1925) calls *commonplaces*; what Carnap (1959) refers to as *universal words*; what Wittgenstein (1969) calls *certitudes* and pictures as *the river bed of our form of life*; what Searle (1983) describes as *Background* and opposes to the *Net*; or what Collingwood (1998) explicitly calls *absolute presuppositions*.

Ground presuppositions are the basic ontological distinctions between humans, animals, vegetables, things, places, times and so on, organised in a net. They can be described by general propositions such as:

Humans have a body, feel pain, feel indignation…

Animals have a body, feel pain, but do not feel indignation…

Vegetables do not have a body, do not feel pain, but have diseases…

Ground presuppositions manifest themselves directly in superordinate or general nouns (Rosch 1976, Mahlberg 2005) and, indirectly, in selection restrictions (Prandi 2004, 2017).

Ground presuppositions are possibility conditions of experience. If, during a walk in the woods, a branch hits me, one can appropriately say that something has happened to me. But if someone slaps my face, it is misleading to say, simply, that something happened to me; in fact, I was a victim of aggression. If we cut the bark of a pine tree, one can appropriately say that we see resin coming out, but if we slap someone, it is misleading to say, simply, that we see him giving out ocular secretions; in fact, we see him crying. If I see someone pinching my wallet from my bag, what I see is not the fact that he has free will, but the fact that he is stealing my wallet. Free will is the condition to which I can see that I am being subjected to a theft and not simply losing my wallet. If I see someone crying, what I see is not the fact that he is a human being, but the fact that he is sad. The idea of being human is the condition to which I can interpret his tears as an expression of sadness and not simply ocular secretions. In this sense, ground presuppositions are not facts we form experiences from, but rather possibility conditions to which we can experience facts. We do not make experience of a thing such as free will, but we experience robberies, murders, petty and noble wishes, good or evil actions, loyal or deceitful people and so on, which presuppose it. We do not experience a thing such as the soul, but we experience expressions of joy or sorrow, courage or cowardice and so on, which presuppose it.

Ground presuppositions are possibility conditions of knowledge. If we see a friend of ours crying, we can ask:

(4)   *Why is she crying? Is she crying because she has been fired or because her boyfriend left her?*

These utterances concern things about which we can coherently ask questions, be wrong, doubt and look for evidence; they concern facts, that

is, objects of possible knowledge. The condition to which we can coherently make those utterances is that our friend is indeed a human being. For this very reason, however, this idea is not an object of knowledge. In fact, facing a friend crying, imagine stating:

(5a) ?*I think that she is crying because she is a human being.*

(5b) ?*Why is she a human being?*

Unless we suspend our common sense, these utterances sound odd. We can doubt whether a friend of ours is happy and try to find out why, because we presuppose that she is a human being. But, in everyday life, it would be odd both to doubt whether she is a human being or a thing, and to look for evidence of it. Of course, if forced by some philosophical question, we may say: *She is a human being because she can suffer and be cruel*. However, the contrary is true: we see someone suffering or acting deceitfully because we presuppose that she is a human being with free will. Analogously, we can say: *The sky is not a human being because it can neither cry nor suffer*. However, once again, the contrary is true: the sky cannot cry because we presuppose that it is not a human being. If we were to presuppose this, we would strain to interpret meteorological changes as expressions of feelings and thoughts. But we do not.

2.4 Consequences for the treatment of presuppositions

Kuroda (1989), Ducrot (1972), Thomason (1972), Cooper (1974), Chierchia and McConnell-Ginet (2000) and Kleiber (2012), among others, have remarked on the difference between some general and contingent presuppositions. To my knowledge, apart from Collingwood (1998) and Prandi (2004) who explicitly put forward the idea developed here, the author that presents it in the clearest way is Garcia-Murga (1998). This author distinguishes linguistic presuppositions from general ones. However, this distinction is usually made only to drop the general (ground) presuppositions and to focus on linguistic (contingent) ones. The alleged reason (Ducrot 1980) is that the former have no link to the structure of the

sentence, while the latter are tied to peculiar linguistic triggers[1].

The contribution of this book does not lie in acknowledging the existence of general presuppositions, but rather in considering them as prototypical ones. This overturning has two consequences for the treatment of presuppositions.

Firstly, the ordinary treatment turns out to be somehow misleading. On the one hand, the contents of contingent presuppositions are not immediately consistency conditions, but simply contingent facts that we assert, question, justify or argue for. Sometimes, thanks to some kind of trigger, these facts can be made to work as consistency conditions of an utterance in a specific text or discourse. By their nature, then, these contents fall into the scope of notions like inference, accommodation or updating. On the other hand, the contents of ground presuppositions are consistency conditions of very general practices: in everyday life, they are always already presupposed. As a consequence, they do not need any trigger and, basically, they are never communicated, asserted, questioned, justified and so on. By their nature, these other contents are placed beyond the scope of notions such as inference, accommodation or updating of a set of information. Now, holding that the prototypical presuppositions are the ground ones amounts to holding that contingent presuppositions are presuppositions only insofar as they behave like the latter. On this premise, the most well-known notions used to describe contingent presuppositions (namely, inference, accommodation, updating, etc.) do not really apply to them as presuppositions, but as contingent facts. This consequence will be developed in the second part of this book.

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[1] As is known, these triggers form a very heterogeneous group. Levinson (1983:188–193), for instance, enumerates thirteen types and he affirms that Karttunen arrived at thirty-one. Just to recall the most well-known examples, let me mention existential presuppositions carried by noun phrases in a referential position (Russell 1905, Strawson 1950); verbal presuppositions: verbs of judgement (Fillmore 1973), factive verbs (Kiparsky and Kiparsky 1973), implicative and aspectual verbs (Karttunen, 1973a), and informational manipulations (Sperber and Wilson 1979).

Secondly, if ground presuppositions are the presuppositions par excellence, then their ordinary treatment reveals just the top of the iceberg of the whole phenomenon. Studying presuppositions does not primarily mean to describe a set of triggers, but to discover our natural ontology in the track of Strawson's programme of descriptive metaphysics (Strawson 1959 and 1992). This is the submerged part of the phenomenon of presuppositions. This consequence will be developed in the third part of this book.

Both the aforementioned consequences, however, rely on the premise that ground presuppositions actually *are* prototypical presuppositions. The first part of this book is devoted to defending this idea.

CHAPTER 3

THE INDETERMINACY OF PRESUPPOSITIONS

In this chapter, I defend the distinction between contingent and ground presuppositions as a solution to an epistemological paradox. In the classic debate, the notion of presupposition is always construed as something else: a kind of illocution (Ducrot), a kind of propositional attitude (Stalnaker), a kind of implication and so on. These other notions, however, were originally designed to apply to contents that are not presuppositions. Hence, presupposition turns out to be affected by an intrinsic indeterminacy. Distinguishing between contingent and ground presuppositions dissolves this indeterminacy.

3.1 Presupposition as an *illocutionary act*

According to Ducrot (1972:77), both a presupposition and an illocutive act are *legal acts* (*actes juridiques*, Fr.), that is, acts that modify social roles among people. If we are at a bus stop, smoking in silence, we are doing nothing wrong, but if a friend walks towards us, says *Hello*, and we keep smoking in silence, our silence becomes a rude act. This means that our friend, by saying *Hello*, has assigned us the duty of addressing him back and opens the possibility for us to be rude by not doing so. Similarly, when a speaker asks a question, they assign the receiver the duty of answering (at worst, to answer that they do not know) and open up the possibility of being rude by refusing to answer. When a speaker gives an order, they assign to the receiver the duty to obey and open the possibility of disobedience. And so on.

Now, if presupposing is an illocutionary act and if an illocutionary act is a legal act, what obligations does it impose and on whom? Ducrot (1980:1097) answers that presupposing a content means to impose its

reception on the addressee as the condition for further dialogue.

Note that this idea brilliantly accounts for the rhetorical or communicative exploitation of presuppositions, but—paradoxically—it neglects its simplest functioning. In its simplest functioning, a presupposition is already accepted by all the participants to the communicative exchange. Hence, defining it as "to impose to accept certain information..." is pointless. Indeed, such a definition makes sense only if the presupposition is not already presupposed.

A similar objection can be raised against all the conceptions of presupposition focusing on its rhetorical exploitation. For instance, construing a presupposition as a kind of inference, or the updating of a common ground of knowledge, can make sense if the addressee does not share the presupposition yet. But if the addressee already accepts the presupposition, there is simply no inference to draw and no update to make. Indeed, all the rhetorical or informative uses of presuppositions are precisely based on the exploitation of something that, normally, does not need to be inferred or updated in a common ground of knowledge.

The same objection, moreover, affects the very notion of "trigger". Consider the utterance *George stopped smoking*. Is the predicate to *stop doing something* a presuppositional trigger? If the idea that George smoked needs to be triggered, then it was not a shared presupposition. If the idea that George smoked is already presupposed, then there is no sense in saying that *to stop smoking* triggers it. So, the very notion of "presuppositional trigger" turns out to be self-contradictory.

Be that as it may, let us come back to Ducrot's illocutionary conception of presupposition. As Strawson (1964) points out, in order to work, an illocutionary force must be disclosed, that is, recognised. Now, as Ducrot (1972:76) himself acknowledges, presupposition is an undisclosed illocutionary act. But then, how can it put an obligation on the addressee? Indeed, inducing someone to accept something as a condition for further dialogue does not look like an illocutionary act, but rather a perlocutionary one, like *forcing* someone. Let me develop this point briefly.

An illocutionary act is not a genuine communicative goal. Consider the following questions:

(1)   *How can I… construct a question / make an assertion / make a promise… in English?*

This is not the kind of question that an English speaker would ask himself during a conversation. The reason is clear: his grammar a priori codes explicit meaning in order to reach these goals. A perlocutionary act, on the contrary, is a genuine communicative goal. Consider (2):

(2) *How can I… convince / reassure / frighten… my listener?*

These questions are perfectly meaningful. This time, English grammar does not code specialised tools in order to reach these goals, but one has to use, in a creative and unpredictable way, assertions, promises and so on.

On this premise, let us consider the following question:

How can I induce my listener to take this information for granted?

It seems to me that this question is like (2) and not like (1). This question identifies a genuine discursive goal, something that one must be able to achieve by making use of illocutionary acts: that is to say, a perlocutionary act. Indeed, by uttering an assertion, the speaker makes the receiver swallow a pill; once the pill is ingested, once the receiver has accepted that assertion, they can can no more refuse its presuppositions. But, of course, the speaker must succeed in making the receiver swallow that presupposition.

If inducing someone to presuppose is a kind perlocutionary act, rather than an illocutionary one, we find an immediate explanation of why the verb *to presuppose* does not have an explicit performative form without the need to posit a parasitic illocutionary act constant through all different illocutionary acts. Moreover, we understand that, if one looks at grammar trying to list all the structures devoted to manipulating people by making them swallow some information, one reaches Soames's conclusion:

One of the most striking lessons of recent work is that there are many kinds

and sources of presuppositions; so many that there may be no single theory capable of incorporating them all. (Soames, 1989:602)

This is the same conclusion that one would reach after having looked at grammar and tried to list all the structures devoted to convince, frighten or reassure people.

Let us have a closer look at Ducrot's insight. Consider (3):

(3a) *I stopped smoking! / I promise I will stop smoking / Did he stop smoking?*

(3b) *I / he smoked*

According to Ducrot, by stating (3a), the speaker performs two layers of actions:

(a) a first layer of different actions consisting of *ordering*, *promising*, *asserting* and *asking* (in the same way as, in greeting someone by saying *Hello!*, he shows that he recognises the addressee);

(b) a second constant, meta-communicative action, consisting of obliging the receiver to take (4b) for granted (in the same way as, by saying *Hello!*, he obliges the addressee to answer).

The layer (b) identifies presupposition.

My point is that these layers cannot be consistently qualified as actions at the same time. Of course, in the abstract, *ordering*, *promising*, *asserting* or *asking* are all actions like *obliging*. However, in the linguistic exchange at stake, *ordering*, *promising* and so on in (a) count as discursively relevant actions or argumentative moves, while *obliging* in (b) does not. This difference is made implicitly, but clearly, by Ducrot himself, who observes the existence of a *linking* or *concatenation rule* (*loi d'enchainement*, Fr.). According to this rule, all argumentative connections take place at the level of (a) and not at the level of (b). That is to say, when actions (a) take part in the argumentative chain of discourse, 'action' (b) is banished below the threshold of discursive relevance. Consider, for instance, the following examples: