A Study of Pragmatic Presupposition in the Third Season of Desperate Housewives

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Abstract: This research explores the complex landscape of pragmatic presupposition within the third season of the widely acclaimed television series Desperate Housewives. Pragmatic presupposition, a fundamental concept in linguistic analysis, encompasses the implicit assumptions and implications inherent in utterances, guiding the process of interpretation. The third season of Desperate Housewives is selected as an ideal subject for investigating pragmatic presupposition due to its diverse array of characters and intricately woven plotlines. Through a meticulous and systematic analysis encompassing conversations, interactions, and character behaviors, this study endeavors to unveil the underlying presuppositions shaping communication dynamics within the series. A particular emphasis is placed on discerning triggers and interpretation of pragmatic presuppositions. This research aims to shed light on the nuanced functioning of pragmatic presupposition as a subtle yet potent instrument for conveying meaning and molding interpersonal communication dynamics. Additionally, the findings of this study significantly contribute to broadening the understanding of pragmatic presupposition within the domain of media discourse and narrative analysis. Ultimately, this study not only offers an intricate analysis of pragmatic presupposition within the context of Desperate Housewives but also provides valuable insights into the broader implications of pragmatic presupposition in real-life communication contexts, enriching our understanding of how language shapes and influences human interactions.

1. Introduction

The concept of presupposition was originally introduced by the German mathematician and philosopher Frege in his 1982 paper *Sense and Reference*, which quickly sparked the interest of linguists. Since its inception, presupposition has been studied in the field of semantics in the 1960s, making significant contributions to enriching this theory. Then, Stalnaker first noticed the close connection between presupposition and context, which brought the study of presupposition into the view of scholars from a pragmatic perspective[1]. Stalnaker pointed out that in specific contexts, a speaker makes a pragmatic presupposition *P*, assuming or believing that *P* is true, and the listener also believes so. In his research, he further explained that pragmatic presupposition is associated with the speaker rather than the sentence. When a speaker makes a statement, he assumes it to be true, thus achieving communication goals through pragmatic presupposition. Meanwhile, both the speaker and the listener should be aware of the background information of the communication[2].

Besides Western scholars, many Chinese academics have offered their insightful perspectives and opinions regarding the concept of presupposition, providing valuable insights into the subject. He Ziran and Yan Chensong argue that pragmatic presupposition refers to the connection between pragmatic reasoning and linguistic structure, but it is more closely related to context.

In the current era, the Chinese film market has witnessed a significant influx of numerous foreign movies and television series, primarily stemming from the United States and the United Kingdom, which have gained widespread popularity and influence. The introduction of such foreign media products, exemplified by the hit show *Desperate Housewives,* has offered Chinese viewers an intimate glimpse into the culture, customs, and lifestyles of other nations, particularly those in the Western hemisphere.

In recent years, the popularity of *Desperate Housewives* has garnered significant attention from scholars. Several studies have delved into the show's linguistic aspects, utilizing theories such as the cooperative principle and the distinctive characteristics of female language. Notably, presupposition, a fascinating linguistic phenomenon, has been examined and discussed in the linguistic community, leading to a wealth of research in diverse areas. Nevertheless, according to the current research findings, only a limited number of studies have focused on the pragmatic presupposition employed in *Desperate Housewives.*

This thesis endeavors to analyze the pragmatic presupposition utilized by the characters in *Desperate Housewives.* This analysis not only aims to enhance people's understanding of American sitcoms and culture but also deepens their comprehension of pragmatic presupposition. By examining the pragmatic presupposition triggers in the show, this thesis holds significance in two primary aspects. Firstly, it contributes to the evolution of pragmatic presupposition theory and facilitates a more nuanced understanding of this linguistic concept. Secondly, it aids the audience in apprehending the individual characteristics of the speakers and the intricate plot details within this sitcom. Furthermore, this thesis is instrumental in elevating the audience's appreciation for English sitcoms and deepening English learners' comprehension of American culture.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Previous Studies on *Desperate Housewives* at Abroad and Home

Desperate Housewives is a captivating American drama series that explores the complexities of suburban life. Centered in the fictional town of Wisteria Lane, it follows the lives of four diverse housewives, Susan, Bree, Lynette, and Gabrielle, who face challenges in their marriages, families, and friendships. The show explores themes of loyalty, betrayal, and the pursuit of happiness within the confines of middle-class expectations. Through its compelling characters and intricate storylines, *Desperate Housewives* offers a unique perspective on the challenges faced by modern women. With its engaging characters, surprising plot twists, and poignant commentary on modern society, this show remains a timeless classic.

The research of domestic scholars on *Desperate Housewives* is mostly focused on translation research. For example, Shi uses the functional equivalence theoretical to study the subtitle translation of *Desperate Housewives*[3]; Liao's research focuses on the translation of culturally-loaded terms in the series *Desperate Housewives* through the lens of adaptation theory[4].

Concurrently, other scholars have delved into this popular show from linguistic viewpoints. Wang for instance, explored the pragmatic analysis of English euphemisms in *Desperate Housewives* grounded in adaptation theory[5]. Additionally, Wang and Pang scrutinized conversational meanings that breach the cooperative principle within the show[6], while Li investigated the linguistic traits unique to the female characters' conversa*n*ion in *Desperate Housewives*[7].

Foreign scholars such as Busch analyzes *Desperate Housewives* from a gender perspective[8]. He

analyzes a brief history of the postfeminist heroine. The author posits that these series blame feminism for women's discontent, reflecting sentiments among American women. They introduce the concept of the "feminist mystique," a framework that has superseded the "feminine mystique" and established new standards that hinder women's self-actualization.

Moreover, Hagmayer and Osman, another two foreign scholars, employ the popular television series *Desperate Housewives* to demonstrate how causal Bayes networks elucidate inferences within social contexts[9]. Meanwhile, Richardson Niall delves into their political analysis of camp, particularly in the context of gender roles and sex portrayed in *Desperate Housewives*[10].

2.2. Previous Studies on Presupposition at Abroad and Home

With the rapid development of linguistics, presupposition has attracted research interests from numerous scholars at home and abroad, who have embarked on exploring it within the linguistic field. The following content will review previous studies on presupposition.

In pragmatics, Peccei argues that presupposition is a background belief relation associated with a sentence, which must be mutually understood or assumed by the speaker and the hearer for the sentence to be considered appropriate in a specific context. This assumption is often necessary, regardless of whether the sentence is expressed in the form of an assertion, negation, or a question, and it is typically linked to specific lexical items or presupposition triggers within the sentence[11]. According to Fasold, "presupposition refers to a relationship between what is actually said (or might be said) and what must be in place for what is said to be meaningful"[12]. Linguists such as Keenan, Lakoff, Katz, Karttunen, Leech, Lyons, Gazdar, and many others have concurred in classifying presupposition into two types: semantic presupposition and pragmatic presupposition.

According to Levinson, semantic presupposition emerges as a prerequisite for a sentence's veracity, characterized by its specificity and syntactic underpinnings [13]. Notably, this form of presupposition remains unaffected by the subjective beliefs of the speaker or listener, as well as the contextual backdrop. However, it is evident that semantic presupposition, though fundamental, possesses inherent constraints and limitations. Given the dynamic evolution of presupposition theory, pragmatic presupposition was introduced as a complementary framework, aiming to address the shortcomings of semantic presupposition.

In their book Key Concepts in Pragmatics, Verschueren and Ostman delineate the distinction between semantic and pragmatic presupposition, highlighting the merits of the latter. They contend that pragmatic presupposition exhibits two salient characteristics that semantic presupposition theories fail to fully capture: its potential for cancellation and its non-alignment with overall sentence presuppositions in complex sentences, thereby necessitating the emergence of pragmatic presupposition. They further assert that pragmatic presupposition adheres to a Gricean approach, designed to circumvent logical-semantic intricacies[14]. As such, pragmatic presupposition offers a more comprehensive framework compared to semantic presupposition.

In China, the exploration of presupposition is firmly grounded in the theoretical frameworks established by foreign linguists. Despite its inception and initial scrutiny in 1892 by foreign academics, the Chinese research landscape for presupposition is yet in its fledgling phase, with domestic scholars actively engaged in its definition and categorization.

Chinese scholars exhibit diverse perspectives on the conceptualization of presupposition, with the primary divergence revolving around its semantic or pragmatic nature. For instance, Li delved into the differences between presupposition and entailment, maintaining that presupposition serves as a prerequisite for sentences containing either presuppositions or their negations, albeit confining his analysis to the semantic realm[15]. In contrast, scholars like Xu and Jiang view presupposition as a hybrid concept, straddling both the semantic and pragmatic domains. Xu argues that presupposition

falls under the semantic umbrella in a narrower sense, yet assumes a pragmatic character in a broader context[16]. Similarly, while Jiang defines presupposition as a semantic construct representing the logical relationship between sentences, he acknowledges that it can be contextually revoked[17].

Many domestic scholars have advocated for the pragmatic nature of presupposition. He posits that pragmatic presupposition encompasses those assumptions linked to contextual factors, speakers' beliefs, attitudes, and intentions, rendering it particularly apt for speech analysis, especially in debate settings[18]. In 1999, He further delved into pragmatic presupposition, outlining three approaches for comprehension. As pragmatic theory evolves, an increasing number of scholars are inclined to consider presupposition as a pragmatic construct. Notably, Wei classified presuppositions into six types: factual, state, belief, behavioral, cultural, and joking presuppositions[19].

In essence, presuppositions are predominantly encountered in speech. Compared to semantic presupposition, pragmatic presupposition offers a more comprehensive framework for analyzing speech acts. Consequently, this paper primarily directs its focus towards pragmatic presupposition.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. The Definitions and Classifications of Pragmatic Presupposition

It is German philosopher Frege who first put forward the concept of presupposition. According to Frege, if anything is asserted there is always an obvious presupposition that the simple or compound proper names used have a reference. If one therefore asserts "Kepler died in misery", there is a presupposition that the name "Kepler" designates something[20].

It is Stalnaker who first gives the definition of presupposition from the perspective of pragmatics. "Speaker presupposes that P at a given moment in a conversation just in case he is disposed to act, in his linguistic behavior, as if he takes the truth of P for granted, and as if he assumes that his audience recognizes that he is doing so"[21].

Some Chinese scholars also have their own opinions of presupposition. He Ziran puts forward three definitions of pragmatic presupposition. The first one is that pragmatic presupposition is a kind of assumption between speakers in their conversation; the second is that pragmatic presupposition refers to the appropriate condition for performing speech acts; The third one is that pragmatic presupposition refers to the mutual knowledge or common ground[22].

Overall, despite variations in definitions from various perspectives, presupposition inherently incorporates contextual factors and underscores the mutual understanding shared between speakers and listeners.

3.2. The Properties of Pragmatic Presupposition

The fundamental attributes of pragmatic presupposition encompass mutual knowledge, which signifies the information mutually comprehended by both interlocutors and serves as their shared foundation of background understanding in communication. The second property of presupposition is appropriateness, indicating that pragmatic presupposition should be closely integrated with the context, reflecting a relationship between utterances and their context. The third is unidirectionality, referring to the unilateral transmission of information by the speaker, such as information transmission in advertisements. The last one is subjectivity, which denotes that the speaker's assumptions about the context are assertive, and this subjectivity does not necessarily possess authenticity. Implicitness indicates that the preset is implicit, and information is usually not conveyed by the speaker in the form of discourse, but rather hidden within the preset. Non conventionality indicates that pragmatic presupposition is not formed through rules or conventions, but based on the context and speaker's assumptions.

The pragmatic presupposition plays a pivotal role in linguistic communication, as it not only reduces the redundancy of exchanges but also enhances the efficiency of communication. Specifically, the functions of pragmatic presupposition are primarily manifested in the following aspects: Establishing the truth value of sentences; Expressing the speaker's attitude and emotions; Enhancing the conciseness of linguistic expression; Highlighting the speaker's intent and emphasis; Constructing the shared knowledge of the interlocutors. In conclusion, pragmatic presupposition possesses diverse functions in linguistic communication, enhancing communication efficiency and accuracy while fostering emotional connections and constructing shared knowledge between interlocutors.

3.3. The Triggers of Pragmatic Presupposition

Generally speaking, presuppositions are linked to specific words or surface structures, and these linguistic elements that elicit presuppositions are referred to as pragmatic presupposition triggers. Consequently, numerous scholars have undertaken the classification of various types of these triggers.

To give some examples, Yule divides presupposition into the following six types: existential presupposition, lexical presupposition, structural presupposition, factive presupposition, non-factive presupposition, and counter-factual presupposition[23].

Karttunen collects thirty-one kinds of the triggers[24]. Levinson gives a general category consisting of thirteen types of the triggers by making a number of simplifications based on Karttunen's point of view. He lists thirteen types of presupposition triggers, they can be divided into three groups: 1) Lexical Presupposition Triggers: definite description, factive verbs, change-of-state verbs, iterative verbs, implicative verbs, judging verbs; 2) Syntactic Presupposition Triggers: counterfactual conditions, temporal clauses, non-restrictive attributive clauses, cleft sentences, questions, comparison and contrast; 3) Phonetic Presupposition Triggers[13].

In this thesis, the author will adopt Levinson's classification of presupposition triggers to analyze the collected data because it is more detailed than other classifications.

4. Analysis of Pragmatic Presupposition in Desperate Housewives

Pragmatic presupposition triggers are instrumental in eliciting presuppositions, and in this section, the author undertakes a scrutiny of their utilization in the show *Desperate Housewives*. The objective is to delve into how the characters articulate their intentions and meanings through the employment of pragmatic presuppositions.

4.1. Analysis of Presupposition Triggers at Phonetic Level

Presupposed information can be conveyed by implicit clefts with stressed constituents. Levinson says, "The particular presuppositions that seem to arise from the two cleft constructions seem also be triggered simply by heavy stress on a constituent" [13]. The speaker deliberately stresses a certain word or phrase to attract the attention of the listeners.

For instance:

Psychiatrist: How's your love life?

Susan: Can you imagine? I mean, finding out that two men you trusted bet you in a poker game. How demeaning is that?

(Episode 20, Season 3)

This is a conversation between Susan and the psychiatrist. The reason why Susan goes to see a psychologist is because her parking space is taken by another man while she was waiting for it, which leads to a conflict between her and the man. She threatens the man that she would decapitate his head, and is finally taken away by the police. The court document indicates that she has "anger issues". The

psychologist asks Susan about the reason for her emotional outbursts, and she answers angrily while crying with the question mentioned above.

Susan says this with a raised voice, which is a presupposition trigger, due to her anger, thus conveying the idea that the two great men, Ian and Mike, who love her deeply and ask her to marry them, are playing poker to decide who will marry Susan. Compared to the other three main characters in Desperate Housewives, the domestic audience generally holds a negative opinion of Susan. Susan's character is complex and multifaceted. She is a woman who married and has a child at a young age, experiences divorce, and raises her daughter Julie alone. She is innocent, kind, sincere, and eager for love, yet she is also impractical, emotional, and avoids reality.

Her threats to break someone's head over a parking space and her tendency to raise her voice while crying and answering questions are indications of her emotional and impractical nature. The presupposition in this conversation reveals that Ian and Mike's attempt to decide who should marry Susan through a poker game has caused her to feel hurt and betrayed. This conversation prompts Susan to examine her inner feelings, make a choice between Ian and Mike instead of abandoning both, thus driving the development of the plot.

4.2. Analysis of Presupposition Triggers at Lexical Level

With the aid of specific lexical items, presupposition triggers can be employed to generate pragmatic presuppositions. As a powerful linguistic tool, this strategy is often utilized to convey presupposed meanings. By analyzing the triggers used by characters, one can gain insights into how pragmatic presuppositions are created and how characters conceal the communicated information. To achieve a concise yet diverse analysis of presupposition triggers, the author has selected representative examples of each type and provided detailed descriptions of them.

For example:

Mary Alice: Lynnette Scavo had a dream that night. It was one she'd had many times before.

(Episode 7, Season 3)

The story of *Desperate Housewives* begins with the suicide of Mary Alice Yong, whose voiceover at the start of each episode guides the audience into Wisteria Lane, a suburban town in the United States. The conclusion of each episode is summarized by her insightful and philosophical words. This is the voiceover content that introduces the seventh episode.

The word "before" presupposes that Lynnette often has this kind of dream, that is, she keeps dreaming about the last time she meets Mary Alice. This time, however, the dream is different. Lynette is the last person to meet Mary Alice and she senses that Alice is depressed, after greeting her with concern and receiving a reply that she is fine, Lynnette hesitates to continue asking, but in the end she chooses to give up. It makes her regret that she has not given Alice enough care to save her life. But in this episode, Lynnette indirectly saves many lives, including herself, from being taken hostage by the madwoman. She herself rescues herself from remorse and at the same time proves herself to be a warm-hearted and caring neighbor.

Mike: I just keep thinking about that night at Monique's place. How you made sure I left with my wrench, the one with her blood on it.

Orson: Well, it was your wrench. Why are you rehashing this?

(Episode 16, Season 3)

"Rehashing" is a verb that inherently implies the prior mention of a topic, and it is precisely this repetition that infuses a narrative with a sense of urgency and intrigue. In the context of the show *Desperate Housewives*, Mike's recurring accusation as a murderer, and Orson's enduring portrayal as an ominous character, illustrate this concept perfectly.

The strategic use of presupposition in their conversation not only leaves the audience with a

plethora of unresolved questions but also heightens the urge to delve deeper into the complexities of the show. Furthermore, these conversational presuppositions contribute significantly to the intricate character sketches of Orson and Mike.

Orson's character, for instance, is often shrouded in mystery and malice. His eerie demeanor and frightening actions consistently set the tone for a dark and suspenseful narrative. On the other hand, Mike's perpetual entanglement in murder allegations adds to his troubled and enigmatic persona, leaving the audience to ponder his true intentions and motivations.

By employing presupposition in their conversation, the show's writers effectively manipulate the audience's emotions and curiosity, drawing them into a web of intrigue and suspense that is difficult to resist. The result is a captivating narrative that keeps viewers glued to their screens, eagerly anticipating the next reveal in the complex lives of these desperate housewives.

4.3. Analysis of Presupposition Triggers at Syntactic Level

In this section, the analysis involves the syntactic level, which includes the counterfactual conditional sentences, cleft-sentences, all kinds of questions, non-restrictive relative clauses as well as comparative and contrastive constructions[[13]

For example:

Orson: Where did you get this?

Bree: Carolyn.

Orson: Of course, who else? If she paid this much attention to her own marriage, maybe Harvey wouldn't have cheated on her.

(Episode 7, Season 3)

The conversation between Orson and Bree unfolds with an underlying presumption that Carolyn does not prioritize her own marriage and that Harvey, her husband, has cheated on her. Specifically, the use of the phrases "if" and "wouldn't have cheated" implies that Carolyn's lack of attention to her marriage has led to Harvey's infidelity. However, the reality is starkly different from Orson's perception. Carolyn actually desires to have children but has been unable to do so due to Harvey's aversion to fat women and her own fear of postpartum obesity. To maintain her weight and please Harvey, Carolyn leads a rigorous lifestyle, running four kilometers daily, maintaining a strict diet, and abstaining from eating a sweet biscuit for six years.

This presupposition not only misrepresents the true nature of Carolyn's situation but also reveals a deeply ingrained gender bias. It demonstrates a strong male mindset that tends to blame women for male infidelity, overlooking the complexities of relationships and personal choices. By attributing Harvey's possible cheating solely to Carolyn's lack of attention to her marriage, Orson's argument fails to acknowledge the multifaceted reasons that could lead to such behavior and the role that Harvey himself may have played in the situation. This conversation highlights the need for a more balanced and nuanced understanding of relationships and gender roles and promote the development of the plot.

Rex: The place hasn't changed much since I left, as tasteful and tidy as ever. Everything perfect…at least on the surface. My family was the same way.

(Episode 16, Season 3)

In the sixteenth episode, the voiceover is taken over by Bree's husband, Rex. These sentences is part of Rex's voiceover content. "Since I left" is a temporal clause that presupposes Rex has left and "as tasteful and tidy as" shows comparison, which presupposes Rex and Bree's house is tasteful and tidy.

Bree is a principled, caring, and responsible individual, who is also a quintessential perfectionist with a strong desire for control. Her perfectionism and controlling nature have subjected her to

immense pressure, yet they have also made her the pillar and center of her family. Her compassion and sense of duty have rendered her a trustworthy and respectable figure. However, her vulnerabilities and desires also necessitate a deeper understanding and support. In the show *Desperate Housewives,* Bree's character development is exceptionally robust, with her personality traits and experiences leaving a profound impression on viewers.

Despite the death of Rex, Bree maintains her habits and keeps her house clean and tidy. Whether it is the shock of her former husband's death or her marriage to Orson, Bree has not changed her character or her approach to life, she has always been herself and is the perfect housewife to others.

Rex: Like my son Andrew, to look at him you'd never know he spent six months on the streets, supporting himself with panhandling and light prostitution. Or my daughter Danielle, does she look like the kind of girl who'd seduce her middle-aged history teacher?

(Episode 16, Season 3)

In the context of Rex's voiceover content, this particular example serves a dual purpose. Firstly, the question presupposes that Danielle, through some form of seduction, had developed an inappropriate relationship with her middle-aged history teacher. Secondly, know is a factive verb presupposing that Andrew had a period in his life where he spent four months on the streets, resorting to ignoble means to sustain himself.

These presuppositions are strategically employed to enrich the narrative and convey crucial information to the audience. In a show with numerous characters spanning multiple seasons and episodes, it is inevitable that some viewers may lose track of previous storylines or character arcs. However, by incorporating presuppositions into the voiceover, Rex effectively reminds viewers of crucial details, bridging gaps in their comprehension and enhancing the overall viewing experience. The presuppositions not only provide contextual background but also add depth and intrigue to the narrative, engaging viewers and keeping them hooked to the story.

5. Conclusion

Through an examination of pragmatic presupposition in the third season of *Desperate Housewives*, this paper unveils the intricate and nuanced dynamics of interpersonal communication and plot development among the characters. Pragmatic presupposition, as an indispensable aspect of linguistic communication, not only assists the characters in framing their conversation but also propels the plot forward, while simultaneously deepening the portrayal of their personalities and relationships.

This paper explores the role of pragmatic presupposition in shaping character personalities and revealing their psychological states. Through the selection and utilization of presupposed information, characters exhibit their unique personality traits and psychological landscapes, allowing viewers to gain a deeper understanding of them. Simultaneously, pragmatic presupposition unveils the power relations and status differences between characters, making the plot more authentic and credible.

This paper argues that the successful employment of pragmatic presupposition in the third season of *Desperate Housewives* not only demonstrates the writers' profound understanding and mastery of linguistic communication but also showcases the vital role of pragmatic presupposition in television drama creation.

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