

A Literature Review on Pragmatic Presupposition and Multimodal Translation

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ABSTRACT

The interdisciplinary study of pragmatic presupposition and multimodal translation is a relatively emerging research topic in recent years, holding significant research value and potential. Through a review of relevant studies both domestically and internationally, the following research shortcomings in this field are identified: (1) interdisciplinary research integrating pragmatic presupposition with multimodal translation remains significantly lacking; (2) theoretical innovation and localization remain insufficient; (3) the scope of applied research is relatively narrow. Accordingly, this paper proposes corresponding suggestions for improvement: (1) exploring the interconnections between pragmatic presupposition, multimodality, and translation; (2) advancing localized development and theoretical innovation in presupposition theory; and (3) broadening applied research to examine the role of presupposition in non-applied texts and other scenarios from a multimodal perspective.

Keywords- Literature Review, Pragmatic Presupposition, Multimodal Translation.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Foreign Research

The concept of presupposition was first introduced by the renowned 19th-century logician and philosopher Frege in *Sense and Reference*, where it originated as a philosophical concept. It was subsequently developed and refined through the continuous critical thinking and logical analysis of philosophers such as B. Russell and P.F. Strawson. The initial introduction of the concept of presupposition into the field of linguistics is attributed to P.F. Strawson, who argued that a statement or proposition serves as the premise for the truth or falsehood of another statement or proposition, a relationship he termed "presupposition." He further considered this a special type of pragmatic inference, distinct from logical meaning or entailment, derived instead from the conventions governing the use of referential expressions (Strawson, 1950). Another pivotal work that propelled the study of presupposition from philosophy and logic toward linguistics was *Studies in Linguistic Semantics*, edited and published by Charles J. Fillmore and D. Terence Langendoen in 1971. This volume collected several classic papers frequently cited in the history of presupposition research. Among them was Keenan's (1971) *Two Kinds of Presupposition in Natural Language*, in which Keenan proposed that "The pragmatic notion of presupposition [is] defined on the relation between the utterance of a sentence and the context in which it is uttered." Subsequently, related scholars further advanced the in-depth development of presupposition research. Yule is another authoritative figure in the

field of presupposition studies. In his 1996 monograph, *Pragmatics*, he systematically organized and integrated theories of presupposition. Yule (1996) posits that "A presupposition is something the speaker assumes to be the case prior to making an utterance".

1.2 Domestic research

In China, research on presupposition roughly began in the 1980s, first introduced by Hu Zhuanglin (Wang, 2012:130). While introducing Keenan's (1971) views on pragmatics, he addressed the definition of presupposition, stating that "the presupposition of pragmatics reflects the relationship between the discourse and the context of the utterance" (Hu, 1980:7). Shen Jiaxuan is another authoritative scholar dedicated to introducing and researching presupposition. His work in this area began with translating Western studies on presupposition with his earliest achievement being the article *One of the Topics in Pragmatics: Presupposition*, published in *Contemporary Linguistics*. This article was a translation of Chapter 4, *Presupposition*, from S.C. Levinson's book *Pragmatics*. Later, Shen summarized his efforts in introducing Western research on presupposition and proposed a definition of presupposition in his 1990 paper titled *The Boundary Between Pragmatics and Semantics*: "The commonly referred-to presupposition means that when a speaker utters a sentence, they presuppose a proposition that is naturally assumed to be true. Its characteristic is that it remains even after the sentence is negated." (Shen, 1990: 29) In addition, many other researchers in China have also provided definitions of presupposition. Among the more authoritative ones is Zeng (2006), who believes that "presupposition, also known as pre-supposition or antecedent assumption, refers to a kind of latent known information or background knowledge mutually accepted by the participants in communication." Mo (2010) points out: "'Presupposition' is a proposition mutually accepted by both parties in the communication process and is the condition for the establishment of a sentence or proposition."

II. CLASSIFICATION OF PRESUPPOSITION

Regarding the classification of presuppositions, different scholars have proposed various categorizations based on different criteria. However, throughout the history of research on the concept of presupposition, an unavoidable issue in this field is the definition and exploration of "semantic presupposition" and "pragmatic presupposition." Keenan (1971) proposed that natural language contains two fundamentally different types of presupposition: semantic presupposition and pragmatic presupposition. Stalnaker (1974) clearly distinguished between "semantic presupposition" (concerning the truth value of sentences) and "pragmatic presupposition" (concerning the speaker's beliefs and context). Mo (2010) classified presuppositions into three categories: 1) From a linguistic perspective, they can be divided into "pragmatic presupposition" and "semantic presupposition"; 2) In terms of their form of presentation, they can be divided into "absolute presupposition" and "relative presupposition"; 3) From other perspectives, they can be divided into "existential presupposition", "factual presupposition", and "categorical presupposition".

III. FEATURES OF PRESUPPOSITION

Regarding the characteristics of presupposition, different scholars, while offering varying summaries, also share overlapping perspectives. Peter Fawcett (2001) categorized the characteristics of presupposition into three types : constant undernegation, defeasible and tied to particular aspects of the surface structure of an utterance. Mo (2010) categorized the characteristics of presupposition into four types : First, presupposition is closely related to a specific word or structure within an utterance. Second, when an utterance is negated, its presupposition still remains. Third, presupposition is highly context-dependent. Fourth, contextual assumptions themselves do not possess inherent truth or accuracy; instead, they exhibit cancellability.

IV. MAIN RESEARCH ON PRAGMATIC PRESUPPOSITION AND MULTIMODAL TRANSLATION

4.1 Foreign Research

The concept of presupposition initially belonged solely to the domain of philosophical and logical and later linguistic discussion, but gradually expanded into the field of translation studies, a transition resulting from the collective participation of numerous scholars. Leo Hickey is a key figure in promoting the introduction of presupposition into the field of translation studies. His work, *The Pragmatics of Translation*, published in 1998, is a pivotal achievement in integrating pragmatics and translation studies. The publication of this book marked the beginning of the systematic application of pragmatics (including presupposition theory) to translation research. Notably, this volume includes Peter Fawcett's paper *Presupposition and Translation*, which has been widely cited by subsequent researchers and stands as one of the early important works specifically exploring this topic. This paper focuses on the linguistic attributes of presupposition and its practical challenges and solutions in translation, criticizing the view that limits presupposition to the category of logical semantics and emphasizing the core significance of the pragmatic perspective (including context, culture, and world

knowledge) for translation (Fawcett, 1998). In the same year, El-Gamal (1998) explored the intrinsic connection between presupposition and perceptual relativity, demonstrating the central position of presupposition in translation theory and practice. He pointed out that improper handling of presupposition could distort the thematic meaning of the source text, and that cross-cultural differences in presupposition constitute a major obstacle in translation. Subsequently, Şerban (2004) adopted a corpus-based approach, analyzing data from Romanian novels and short stories translated into English, to investigate the transfer of existential presuppositions. This study identified a trend of "distancing" in the translations, whereby target language readers are placed in the position of a "distant observer," rather than the "informed insider" position occupied by readers of the original text.

Integrating presupposition with multimodal translation represents a relatively cutting-edge and highly promising interdisciplinary field, yet research outcomes in this area remain relatively scarce. The most significant theoretical contribution to this field comes from Sara Dicerto. Her 2018 book, *Multimodal Pragmatics and Translation: A New Model for Source Text Analysis*, provides a theoretical foundation for research in this area. In this work, although Dicerto does not treat presupposition as an independent research object, her core discussions contain a substantial amount of content highly consistent with the underlying logic of presupposition. This is beneficial for providing inspiration to other researchers seeking to further advance the study of presupposition and multimodal translation. For instance, when constructing a three-dimensional model for the analysis of multimodal source texts oriented toward translation, Dicerto proposes that the first layer of the model is based on a pragmatic perspective, with the primary theoretical tool being Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory. Dicerto posits that the core objective of multimodal translation is to achieve "optimal interpretive resemblance" between the target text and the source text. The realization of this objective presupposes that "target language readers will also interpret the text based on the presumption of optimal relevance." The translator must presuppose the cognitive environment of the target language readers, ensuring that the adjusted combination of modes still allows readers to obtain meaning consistent with the source text (Dicerto, 2018).

Regarding the expansion of empirical and applied research on presupposition and multimodal translation, in recent years, relevant scholars have conducted a relatively rich body of research indirectly related to this field, but literature with this as its core research object is virtually non-existent. Gupta et al. (2023) attempted to enable machines to mimic this human ability for multimodal understanding through pre-trained model technology. Their framework design solved the technical problem of "how visual information functions in translation", and the corresponding cognitive linguistics issue underlying this is precisely "how vision provides contextual presupposition". Fantinuoli (2025) proposed the concept of "Vision-Grounded Interpreting" (VGI). His research results indicate that incorporating visual information can provide crucial pragmatic presuppositions, thereby assisting machines in making more accurate lexical choices. This approach is beneficial for improving the accuracy of machine interpreting.

4.2 Domestic Research

In China, there is currently no monograph that systematically constructs a framework with presupposition and multimodal translation as its dual cores. However, in recent years, domestic scholars have conducted in-depth research on the theme of presupposition and multimodal translation from various perspectives. Among these, Shu (2016), using real estate advertisements from the *Xiaoxiang Morning Herald* and online sources in 2015 as data, explored the deceptiveness of pragmatic presupposition in Chinese real estate advertisements from a multimodal perspective. The study found that advertisers employ linguistic devices such as homophones, wealth-flaunting terms, exaggeration, and semantic ambiguity, coordinated with multimodal images, to cater to consumer psychology, thereby misleading and deceiving consumers. Wang & Luo (2017), starting from the perspective of cultural presupposition and employing qualitative and case study methods, conducted a multi-dimensional analysis of the English translation of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*. They proposed that the international dissemination of Chinese mythology cannot rely solely on interlingual translation. The study advocates for combining intralingual translation, intertextual rewriting, and intersemiotic translation within a multimodal narrative system to construct a dynamic intertextual space, thereby promoting the polymorphic reconstruction and overseas dissemination of Chinese mythology. Zhu (2022), using quantitative and qualitative methods, conducted a statistical analysis of pragmatic presuppositions in multimodal television advertising discourse. The study found that all samples utilized multimodal means, and the majority employed more than two types of cooperating pragmatic presuppositions. The synergistic use of multiple pragmatic presuppositions can effectively increase the information load, strengthen audience cognition, and enhance the attractiveness and expressive effect of advertisements, thereby skillfully promoting commodities.

V. SUMMARY AND PROSPECTS

Through a review of the literature on pragmatic presupposition and multimodal translation, I find that research in this area mainly exhibits the following shortcomings: First, interdisciplinary research integrating pragmatic presupposition with multimodal translation remains significantly lacking. Whether from the perspective of theoretical research or applied research, contributions in this interdisciplinary area remain scarce. Most existing interdisciplinary studies focus on only some of the elements involved, such as combining pragmatic presupposition with multimodality or combining pragmatic presupposition with translation, but few studies closely integrate pragmatic presupposition, multimodality, and translation

together. Second, theoretical innovation and localization remain insufficient. The theory exhibits the characteristic of "theoretical travel" from the West to China. Like most theories, presupposition theory is rooted in Western scholarship and has been disseminated to China through "theoretical travel". A review of relevant literature reveals that the application of this theory in domestic research still lacks local characteristics, and theoretical innovation and expansion remain relatively scarce. Third, the scope of applied research is relatively narrow. With respect to interdisciplinary research combining pragmatic presupposition and multimodal translation, studies both domestically and internationally show a tendency toward a single research focus. Recent international research has mainly concentrated on the role of presupposition in facilitating machine interpretation, while domestic research has primarily focused on the effects of presupposition in the application of pragmatic texts.

Based on the current characteristics and shortcomings of research in this field, the academic community can focus on the following aspects in the future to improve the research landscape: First, concentrate research efforts on the connections among pragmatic presupposition, multimodality, and translation, thereby enriching research outcomes and filling research gaps. Second, promote the localized development of presupposition theory and commit to theoretical innovation. Third, broaden the scope of applied research by advancing the study of the effects of presupposition in non-applied texts and other scenarios from a multimodal perspective.

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