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THE WORKPLACE
Just Presuppose . . .



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just presuppose...

by Steve Johnson

Steve Johnson has been a technical manager on and off for nearly two decades. At AT&T, he's best known for writing Yacc, Lint, and the Portable Compiler.



<scj@transmeta.com>

and Dusty White

Dusty White works as a management consultant in Silicon Valley, where she acts as a trainer, coach, and trouble-shooter for technical companies.



<dustywhite@earthlink.net>

Have you ever been asked by someone, in a joking tone, “Are you still driving that old lemon?” And experienced a moment of blankness as you realized that neither “yes” or “no” felt very good to you? There are many such questions (many people are familiar with the old question “Have you stopped beating your wife?”, which is of the same type). But few people take the time to analyze such sentences to understand why they are so difficult to deal with. That is our topic for this month.

All meaning is context dependent. A sentence such as “They are visiting relatives” can have several different meanings, depending not only on the linguistic context but also on nonverbal context such as a pointing finger. Frequently, however, in order to make any sense out of a sentence, we must accept that certain things are true in the context of that sentence. A sentence such as “I gave John a rose from my rosebush” requires you to accept that I have a rosebush and that the bush had a rose on it. Otherwise, you can't make sense of the sentence. These assumptions are called presuppositions, and they are a very powerful way of pulling the wool over someone's eyes. Note that it is much easier linguistically to dispute that I gave John a rose (“No you didn't!”) than that I have a rosebush (ahh, er, about that rosebush . . .).

So the question “Are you still driving that lemon?” has a significant presupposition – that the car in question is a lemon. To understand the sentence, you must accept the presupposition. And then it doesn't matter whether you answer yes or no – your car is still a lemon.

Understanding presuppositions is important for two reasons. One is that they are useful, especially in the persuasive arts. The second is that they may be used against you, and you need to know how to defend against them. You go to buy a car, and the car dealer winds up his pitch by asking “Would you like the red one or the blue one?” The presupposition is that you are already going to buy. Many people are swept along and into the manager's office without ever clearly having a moment when they decided to buy. The dealers love it that way.

Presuppositions can be exquisitely subtle. Consider this gem, collected by Tad James: “What's the one question that, when you ask it, will totally address all your objections and allow you to buy this car?” A careful reading will reveal that, if you accept the presuppositions, you will buy the car even if your question is never answered. In fact, even saying “I don't know, what?” presupposes that you will buy the car. Whew!

Presuppositions are also a frequent source of misunderstanding and confusion in both business and personal communication. A man who asks his wife “What are we having for dinner tonight?” may fail to realize the presuppositions – that it is his wife's job to decide what is for dinner, that it's OK for him not to know or care until the last minute. His wife may also not be aware of the presuppositions either, consciously, and just find herself growing irritated. The courts handle thousands of contract disputes a year because some presupposition was not written into a contract, and the two parties disagreed about how to deal with the resulting situation. Even in everyday business, being attentive to presuppositions is important. An employee was hired recently at a high tech company with the hiring managers and all the interviewers presupposing that he knew C, only to discover he was completely ignorant of it (he was a crack Lisp programmer, but they never asked and he never told).

So what can you do when you suspect that you are the victim of a presupposition apparition?

The first thing to do is to stop whatever you are doing, and set about slowly and methodically to analyze the statements, bringing the presuppositions out into the open. Check these with the other person – “It sounds like you are assuming that I will buy this car. Actually, I still have reservations about the price.” Sometimes people are very calculating with their presuppositions; other times people simply hear what they want to hear – the dealer may have genuinely believed that you said you would buy (yeah, right, we can hear you say. But it doesn’t hurt to assume the best and watch your back).

Often our old friend Chunking (see *login*: Vol. 25, No. 1, p. 64) can be used to get out of a double bind gracefully. By talking about the color of the car, the dealer is chunking down, getting more detailed. You can chunk up by saying things like “What other fuel efficient vehicles do you have on the lot?” or “Are your prices generally lower in the summer?” This also gives you a chance to dodge the presupposition without acknowledging its existence, a valuable skill when tact is called for.

You can also use presuppositions in your own communications. When the situation is a win/win, they can be a way of saving time, increasing motivation, and sending messages that might be awkward to send more explicitly. For example, a manager may ask an employee “What job in this company would you like to be in five years from now?” There are some major presuppositions in this sentence – that the company will still be in business in five years, that the employee will still be working for it in five years, and even a presupposition that the manager will still be with the company in five years and can do anything effective with the answer to the question.

By answering this question, the employee accepts these presuppositions, implying that their future lies with the company. Subtle? Yes. Ethical? Probably, since most employees are able to frame the discussion with an understanding that the future is unpredictable. And the biggest presupposition, that the manager is interested in fostering the employee’s career growth, may be the most important message of all.