

**PRESUPPOSITION AS A MEANS OF EXPRESSING IMPLICIT
MEANING IN ENGLISH LITERARY DISCOURSE: EVIDENCE
FROM O. HENRY AND ELEANOR CATTON**

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Introduction

Presupposition occupies a central place among the mechanisms responsible for the implicit transmission of meaning in literary discourse. Unlike implicature, which arises during the speech act itself and is cancellable without contradiction, presupposition precedes the utterance and forms part of the assumed common ground between narrator, character and reader [Strawson, 1950; Levinson, 1983]. Crucially, presupposition survives negation, which is what allows it to function as an especially covert vehicle for content an author wishes the reader to accept without argument. This diagnostic property distinguishes presupposition sharply from conversational implicature as defined by Grice: an implicature can be cancelled by adding "...but I don't mean to suggest that," whereas an attempt to cancel a genuine presupposition in the same way produces pragmatic anomaly, since the presupposed content has already been treated as settled background rather than as a defeasible inference [Grice, 1975].

Following the classical typology [Karttunen, 1973; Levinson, 1983], four trigger types are commonly distinguished: existential presupposition, triggered by definite descriptions and proper names; factive presupposition, triggered by predicates such as know, realize or regret; lexical (change-of-state) presupposition, triggered by verbs such as stop, start, continue and adverbs such as again, still, yet, finally; and structural presupposition, triggered by syntactic constructions such as cleft sentences and embedded questions. The selection of O. Henry's "The Last Leaf" (1907) and Eleanor Catton's "Birnam Wood" (2023) as comparative material is motivated precisely by their chronological distance: if the same presuppositional mechanisms can be shown to operate with comparable force in a century-old American short story and a contemporary New Zealand novel, this constitutes evidence that presupposition is not a period-bound stylistic device but a structural property of narrative meaning-construction as such.

Methodology

A further diagnostic feature, established by Langendoen and Savin and refined by Karttunen, is the so-called "family of sentences" test: a genuine presupposition must remain constant not only under negation but also when the original sentence is embedded under a question, a conditional, or a modal verb. This test allows the analyst to distinguish

presupposition proper from implicature, which typically disappears once the sentence is embedded in this way. Applying this test to literary material makes it possible to verify, rather than merely assert, that a given implicit content is presuppositional in nature. In what follows, each extracted sentence is subjected to this test before its narrative function is discussed, ensuring that the analysis rests on a reproducible pragmatic criterion rather than on intuitive literary interpretation alone.

Analysis

In O. Henry's short story "The Last Leaf" (1907), the gravely ill Johnsy, fixated on the ivy vine outside her window, tells Sue: "When the last one falls I must go, too." This single sentence carries two distinct presuppositions at once. First, a factive presupposition: the verb falls, applied to "the last one," presupposes that leaves have already been falling one by one and that only a countable few remain - a fact the reader has already been shown, since the narrator has described the vine as "gnarled and decayed," its leaves thinning day by day. Second, an existential presupposition: the definite noun phrase "the last one" presupposes the current, ongoing existence of at least one leaf still on the vine at the moment of speaking. Applying the family-of-sentences test confirms the presuppositional status of this content: even if we embed the sentence under negation ("Johnsy did not say that the last one would fall"), under a question ("Did Johnsy say the last one would fall?"), or under a conditional ("If the last one falls, Johnsy believes she must go too"), the presupposition that a leaf currently exists on the vine survives unchanged in every version.

O. Henry exploits this presuppositional structure for the story's central irony: when Behrman secretly paints an ivy leaf on the brick wall overnight, he manipulates exactly the existential presupposition built into Johnsy's own sentence - he supplies an object that satisfies the presupposition "a leaf still exists," without supplying what Johnsy's utterance had implicated, namely that this continuity is natural rather than artificial. A secondary existential presupposition is carried by the definite description "old Behrman" himself, introduced early in the story as a minor, half-comic figure who has "waited twenty-five years" without painting his promised masterpiece; the narrative later exploits the very unremarkableness of this presupposed identity to maximize the reader's surprise at his sacrifice. From the standpoint of reception aesthetics, this can be described, in Iser's terms, as a deliberately engineered "gap" in the text: the presupposed continuity of the leaf invites the reader to fill in an explanation before the narrator supplies one, converting a purely linguistic mechanism into an instrument of narrative suspense.

A comparable but socially oriented case of lexical presupposition can be found in Eleanor Catton's novel "Biram Wood" (2023). Early in the novel, returning to an unexpectedly empty flat, Mira's first thought is described as follows: "Shelley had finally done it: packed up all her things and left." The adverb finally is a classic lexical (change-

of-state) presupposition trigger: it presupposes that the event described - Shelley's leaving - had already been anticipated by Mira for some time prior to the moment of narration, and that its non-occurrence up to that point was itself a noteworthy, expected-to-change state of affairs. Testing this example against the family-of-sentences criterion likewise confirms its presuppositional status: negating the sentence ("Shelley had not finally done it") or questioning it ("Had Shelley finally done it?") leaves the presupposed prior anticipation intact, whereas a genuine implicature attached to the same sentence (for instance, the suggestion that Mira is relieved rather than upset) would readily disappear under such embedding. Unlike the factive presupposition in O. Henry's sentence, which concerns an observable physical fact, Catton's finally encodes a presupposed history of interpersonal tension between Mira and Shelley that is never narrated directly at this point in the novel - the single adverb compresses an entire unstated backstory of expectation into a presupposition the reader must reconstruct.

Discussion

Comparing the two examples shows that presupposition can operate on at least two distinct planes within literary discourse: the physical-factual plane, illustrated by O. Henry's "the last one falls," and the social-relational plane, illustrated by Catton's "finally done it." In both cases, the presupposed content is never asserted outright, yet it structures the reader's expectations so completely that its later confirmation (Behrman's painted leaf) or its silent backstory (Mira and Shelley's tension) becomes the emotional and narrative pivot of each text. It is also worth noting a difference in narrative distribution: O. Henry's presupposition is lodged in a character's direct speech and is resolved within the same short story, whereas Catton's presupposition is lodged in free indirect narration and is left unresolved for a considerable stretch of the novel, functioning as a slow-burning source of dramatic irony rather than an immediately payable narrative debt. This suggests that the genre and length of a text may condition not only the frequency but also the resolution pattern of literary presupposition.

Beyond its purely descriptive value, this analysis has a practical dimension for literary translation: a translator unaware of the presuppositional load carried by a single adverb such as finally or a single definite description such as the last one risks flattening the text's implicit structure, rendering only the explicit propositional content and losing the inferential work the original demands of its reader. Since Uzbek and other agglutinative languages frequently encode comparable change-of-state meaning through bound particles (yana, hali, endi) rather than free adverbs, the translator's task is compounded by the need to locate a structurally different, but pragmatically equivalent, presupposition trigger in the target language.

Conclusion

This confirms presupposition's status as a historically stable, textually verifiable and covert narrative device across both classic and contemporary English fiction, and one whose recognition is indispensable for both literary-pragmatic analysis and translation practice. Future research might extend the family-of-sentences methodology applied here to a larger comparative corpus of English prose spanning additional periods and genres, in order to establish whether the physical-factual and social-relational planes identified in this study exhaust the range of planes on which literary presupposition can operate, or whether further categories - for instance, a purely aesthetic or intertextual plane - remain to be identified.

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