SHAPING NARRATIVES: PRESUPPOSITIONS IN ONLINE NEWS DISCOURSE ON THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

Sayf Mohamed[i]
Cergy Paris University,
Paris, France

Abstract:

As an implicit assumption embedded within language, presupposition plays a critical role in shaping audience perceptions and framing narratives. In this paper, we study the use of presuppositions in online news discourse regarding the Syrian conflict in order to investigate the ideological stance reflected by the presupposed news. By employing a corpus of online news reports posted on France 24, a news website publishing in English, we use a discourse analytic approach to identify the voices expressed, the frequency and distribution of presuppositions and the presupposition triggers, and explain their resulting patterns related to ideological evaluations. The findings indicate that reporters presuppose certain outcomes and interpretations which align with the broader ideological biases. In this paper, we highlight the implicit, yet powerful ways in which news discourse can influence the audience in their coverage of social movements.

Keywords: presupposition, discourse, media, Syria, ideology

1. Introduction

The influence of digital media on how people view public matters and political views has been widely examined in different situations. The way news organisations use language can be a useful way to understand how the media can shape public opinion about specific political and social topics. Journalists often use language techniques to present information and affect how readers understand political events. One such technique is presupposition, which refers to an assumed truth that is not directly stated. This method has been shown to be a powerful tool in shaping narratives and a relevant hidden technique in journalistic texts. By including presuppositions in their reports, journalists can present stories in a way that aligns with specific political views while looking neutral. This is particularly relevant when covering political events. In our case, we have chosen to shed light on the Syrian conflict, which began in 2011 and lasted until 2024. This political event did not receive more attention from the world press as compared to the

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[i] Correspondence: email seyfmac@hotmail.com

other Arab world democratic revolutions. Additionally, the news coverage of this conflict can offer a good example of how presuppositions may operate in online news discussions. The complexity and ongoing developments of the conflict have led different global media to focus on various political and cultural angles. Some news sources support the Syrian opposition, while others promote the government's position. Studying presuppositions within these narratives can offer deeper insight into the political values behind journalistic language. In the case of the Syrian conflict, the presuppositions about the opposition's legitimacy or the regime's collapse may show underlying political leanings. Examining these linguistic choices can be important in order to understand how news stories are developed and diffused. This study seeks to explore the types and roles of presuppositions in online news articles covering the Syrian conflict and the fall of the regime in 2024, and eventually to evaluate how presuppositions function in promoting the overall ideology of news organizations.

2. Presupposition: Theoretical Underpinnings

Presupposition is a type of pragmatic and linguistic property that allows a certain discourse to bear implicit meanings other than those which appear in the surface structure. Such implicit meanings may outweigh those which are clearly stated and put in the surface structure of a certain discourse. According to the International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences, presupposition »concerns the way in which propositions already presumed in a discourse context are usually not stated or questioned but encoded in a more background way« (ESBS, 2024). The initial motivation behind our interest in presuppositions emanates from Van Dijk's claims that we should closely look at the propositions which, in turn, suggest some other propositions to be true (1995). In discourse, a presupposition takes the form of a taken-for-granted thing; it can be described as a background belief that needs the presence of common assumptions on the interlocutors' part. The felicity or the lack thereof is connected, even in part, with the character of triggers used in a certain sentence (Capone et al., 2013). These triggers comprise, among others, verbs such as *say, know, feel, believe,* etc., and adverbs such as *too* and *still*. To illustrate this further, the following examples are mentioned, paying attention to the truth-value condition of each:

[1] X thinks that my house is spacious.
'My house' is a trigger that presupposes that I have a house. The verb ›thinks‹ can assign such a presupposition a true value.

[2] X said that my house is spacious.
Again, my ›house‹ is a trigger that presupposes that I have a house, while the verb ›said‹ can be assumed to be used by the speaker to misinform. Thus, it can be assigned a false value.

The aforementioned examples simply suggest that the character of a trigger could affect the truth-value condition of a presupposition, thereby rendering such a presupposition felicitous or infelicitous. In an argument, the speaker may be aware of the fact that a trigger such as ›say‹ could undermine the whole course of argumentation if it misinforms or is seen as such. Notwithstanding this possibility of refutation, a speaker can still use such a trigger, albeit with caution. A speaker can simply do so by resorting to quotations as a tactic for his/her presupposition to pass without much challenge. In other words, a speaker may attempt to safeguard against being criticised as misinforming by means of quoting other people's words and comments, especially when reference is made to experts and officials. To project up or pass up a presupposition requires the presence or absence of some elements that could render that presupposition felicitous or infelicitous within a sentence.

Another aspect of controlling the use of presupposition is anaphora. A certain trigger is anaphoric if it does not accommodate a presupposition, while it becomes non-anaphoric if it does, i.e., if it can accommodate a presupposition. For example:

[3] X went to London, too.
'too', as used in this example, works as an anaphoric trigger that never accommodates a presupposition, even if the sentence is negated. According to sufficient weight to the same foregoing issue of accommodation, Kripke (2009: 368), provides a list of different kinds of presupposition as follows:

(In these examples, (P) is short for presupposition)

[4] Bill regrets lying to his parents (Factive)
P: Bill has lied to his parents

[5] Ivan has stopped beating his wife. (Aspectual)
P Ivan has beaten his wife.

6] Andy met with the PLO again today (Iterative)
P Andy met with the PLO before.

[7] It was in August that we left Connecticut. (Cleft)
P We left Connecticut.

[8] What John destroyed was his typewriter (Pseudo cleft)
P John destroyed something

[9] Billy is guilty, too
P Someone other than Billy is guilty

[10] All of John's children are asleep (Certain quantifiers)
P John has children.

[10] The king of France is in hiding (Referential)
P There is a king of France.

The foregoing examples represent a standard list, which includes factive, aspectual, iterative, cleft, pseudo-cleft, certain quantifiers, and referential presuppositions. The variety of examples reflects a similar variety of the types of presupposition, anaphoric and non-anaphoric. Additionally, Stubbs (1996, p. 118) argues that »some presuppositions are conveyed by tense forms of the verb«, whether individual or non-individual verbs. Some examples are:

[11] It has been driving Mr D mad for a long time (Presupposition: Mr. D has been mad/annoyed for a long time, and is still mad/annoyed)

[12] Had he [Mr D] been aggravated as he put it? (Presupposition: Mr. D had said he was aggravated) (Stubbs, 1996: 118).

These examples, as put forward by Stubbs and confirmed by Domaneschi et al. (2013), show that a presupposition can be initiated and conveyed on different levels and tenses of verbs. This aspect of presupposition may give interlocutors the chance to build on prediction by means of utilising a verb in the future tense (Allan & Jaszczolt, 2012). In so doing, interlocutors may seek to assert something that has not taken place yet. However, as discussed earlier, the anaphoric and non-accommodated triggers of such a kind of presuppositions require that hearers/readers agree to what is presupposed. In other words, such presuppositions can be said to be receiver-dependent-based and cannot stand on their own right. Furthermore, a misleading conclusion may be one of the outcomes of such a kind of presupposition.

3. Combining Qualitative and Corpus-Based Methods

3.1 Presupposition Analysis
In this research, the focus is on analysing presuppositions in online news discourse using a qualitative approach and corpus linguistics for organising the insights provided by such analysis. The qualitative component facilitates a detailed exploration of linguistic characteristics and their ideological ramifications, whereas the corpus-based method guarantees consistent recognition of recurring patterns and trends within the dataset. This study's dataset comprises online news stories that focus on the Syrian war, with a particular emphasis on reports about the regime's collapse. Our corpus of analysis covers a period of one year from January 2024 to December 2024. A period when the Syrian conflict witnessed major military and political changes. Only reports that include

keywords related to the Syrian conflict were included in our corpus. In total, 521 news reports were compiled from the France 24 English website. The dataset was analysed by a secondary coder who annotated parts of it independently to maintain consistency. This procedure improved inter-coder reliability and reduced subjective bias in the identification of presuppositions and their ideological implications. This approach provides a robust framework for exploring presupposition as heuristic tool in shaping news accounts, despite its limitations, and can also expose the ideological underpinnings of discourse within journalists.

3.2 Classifying Presuppositions

We have used a set of presupposition detection rules to detect the existence of presuppositions. The classification follows a set of guidance rules using details about the input sentences extracted from the corpus, such as part-of-speech categories (e.g., wh-pronoun), and complex syntactic subtrees (such as a quantification clause, followed by a noun phrase). There is a need for a systematic way to identify and quantify the presuppositions in our corpus. Each article is divided into separate sentences. Each sentence receives a score of 1 if it includes any pragmatic presupposition that the reader is not anticipated to be aware of. If there are no such presuppositions, the sentence is assigned a score of 0. Following the assessment of all the separate sentences, the overall score of the article is determined as the average of all the individual sentence scores. Presupposition types were extracted following certain triggers; these triggers can lead to different types of presupposition. Specific linguistic markers in the corpus can help categorise the types of presupposition used in the corpus. For instance, the terms "how often", "regularly" and "frequently" or similar adverbs (ADV) may imply the existence of a repeated action or a habit linked to the verb (V). Similarly, wh-prompts like "how many" or "where is" may presuppose the existence of a particular entity, such as an object, state, or person. Indexicals like "this, that, these, those" and "such a(n)" establish a common referent or establish shared understanding (NP). They depend on a contextual awareness between the speaker and listener to determine the referent. Regarding possession, possessive pronouns or constructions using an apostrophe (e.g., "NP's") usually presuppose ownership or association with the noun phrase (NP). There are exceptions, however, especially with names, ages, or other inherently assumed information. Other abstract notions can be encompassed within presuppositions. For instance, the use of "why" followed by a sentence presupposes a certain state of affairs or assertion; »why« coupled with a verb phrase (VP) or noun phrase (NP) suggests an intention or goal. Similarly, using the marker »who« before a verb phrase indicates the presence of an agent (a person performing the action). Additionally, certain wh-questions, such as »how much« and »how many« presuppose knowledge regarding quantities or possession. The presupposition detector identifies the presence of a presupposition type (e.g., a repetitive act or a habit), which can help us identify detection errors. For example, given the question »How old is your dad?«, the presupposition

detector would detect the possessive pronoun »your«, and therefore points to the trigger »dad«, presupposing that the addressee has a dad.

3.3 Frequencies of Presupposition Triggers in France 24 Reports

Out of 521 reports compiled for analysis from the France 24 website, 154 contain presuppositions, accounting for 33,8% of the total. The current study, however, is interested in investigating the use of presuppositions depending on the chronological phase. On average, nearly one-third of the reports employ presuppositions. This proves that the use of presuppositions is quite an important strategy for reporters to achieve their goals. As to the specific types of presupposition triggers in the reports, Table 1 presents the frequencies of twelve types of presupposition triggers in the reports containing presuppositions. According to the analysis, the definite descriptions are the most frequently used presupposition trigger, accounting for 21.4% of the total number of triggers. The iteratives and factive verbs take up more than one-third of the total triggers. Thus, there is a predominance (over 30%) of these two types of presupposition triggers in the reports.

Table 1: Distribution of presupposition triggers

Presupposition triggers	Cases	Percentage (%)
Definite descriptions	33	21,43%
Iteratives	26	16,88%
Factive verbs	22	14,29%
Implicative words	19	12,34%
Temporal clauses	15	9,74%
Change of state verbs	14	9,09%
Cleft sentences	10	6,49%
Implicit clefts	6	3,90%
Verbs of judging	6	3,90%
Non-restrictive clauses	2	1,30%
Implicit words	1	0,65%
Words of comparison and contrast	0	0,00%
Total	**154**	**100%**

4. Ideological Implications: Categorising and Mapping Presuppositions

Our results show that presuppositions served an essential role of legitimising the protesters and creating a positive image of the anti-regime demonstrations. The Syrian government, however, is portrayed negatively and frequently accused of inhumane acts and torture. As for the protesters, the results revealed that there was a clear use of objective presuppositions when it comes to demands of freedom and democracy. Among the twelve types of presupposition triggers, the definite descriptions, iteratives, and factive verbs can do the job best. Most of these presupposition triggers were used to describe the events and participants with clear definitions (protestors, riot police, attack…). The presupposition triggers extracted in the analysis reveal significant

assumptions about the different actors in Syria before and after the collapse of the regime. That is why the presuppositions triggers are listed following a chronological order, before and after the regime collapse on December 8th, 2024 and the fleeing of the former president Bashar Al Assad. These triggers assume that before December 8th, 2024, there were hopes of reconstruction and social reconciliation, and that the current government was still valid. These assumptions place the government on the positive side: it is the source of social harmony and the country's turmoil is almost over, while the protestors are positioned on the opposite side: they are linked to the Islamist State and may disrupt the efforts made by the international community and challenge the up till then legitimate government. The term valid is particularly used to imply that the protests are invalid as they oppose the government, and these protests are portrayed as 'antinational unity and antisocial harmony'. Presuppositions and implications function together when ideology is involved (Cotter, 2023). The analysis of presupposition triggers indicates that the protestors are depicted as terrorists and outlaws. The term 'outlaws' refers to those who oppose validity – it is assumed that any action not aligned with the interests of a united Syria is unpatriotic and therefore illegal. Assumptions are also used to positively portray the government and its official agencies. Reports that express official viewpoints condemn and threaten those who cast doubts on the efforts and impartiality of the police and aim to distort the national achievement. The reader's attention is directed towards those who challenge the positive accomplishments, so the legitimacy of what the official claims as an achievement is not disputed. These assumptions enhance the image of both the government police and the regime. One way to transform an idea or concept from merely being a personal or group ideology into common knowledge that is accepted without question is through its repeated use as a presupposition. Therefore, what was once contested and debated becomes an institutionalised rule or possibly a law that leads to any opposition being tried, sentenced, and imprisoned.

Right after the regime fell, various categories of presupposition triggers were employed more often. Change-of-state verbs were prevalent, and the preference for these forms is also linked to the continuity of news coverage. Additionally, the unexpected evolution of events required these types of triggers. Although there are fewer instances of presupposition in the data compared to the initial phase, the examples present are meaningful and relevant to the theme of exclusion. Presupposition triggers were used to portray the protestors as heroes, exclude and highlight the brutality of the old regime, with cleft sentences used to report incidents of police brutality and the corruption involving the regime. The use of iteratives like 'as usual' suggests that police violence is a consistent behaviour of the group. Conversely, the interim government was shown in a positive manner; a frequent presupposition was the 'new Syria' as opposed to the old regime, which presupposes hopes for a certain degree of freedom of expression and democracy. Although these presuppositions were presented indirectly through reporting other voices, they reveal a change of tone when it comes to the news outlet's position toward the antagonists. At the beginning of the Syrian war, when it was not yet clear how intensive and decisive the demonstrations would be, a presupposition was made through

sourcing; that is, France 24 reported on opposition voices that used presuppositions presenting the government negatively. Later, presuppositions were more explicit using the authorial voice. It is important to point out, though, that there was no dividing point in the Revolution where *France 24* started making presuppositions in the authorial voice rather than through sourcing. The generalisation that can be made, however, is that presupposition through reporting other voices tended to be more towards the outset of the uprising, and authorial voice presupposition was more towards the end. Nonetheless, France 24 was persistent in employing presuppositions in its coverage before December 8th, whether through reporting or in the authorial voice, to present the protesters' propositions.

5. Conclusion

The linguistic analysis of the online news discourse demonstrates that the employment of presuppositions is a significant tactic for reporters to achieve their objectives. It has been determined that the primary role of presupposition before December 8th was to somehow legitimise the Assad regime using affirmative language while negatively portraying the protests; the protestors were allegedly accused of fulfilling terrorism plans and engaging in violence. However, there were instances of objective presuppositions regarding the legitimacy of the demands. The paper emphasises the critical role that presuppositions play in shaping the narrative and achieving journalistic objectives. France 24's changing stance is evident through the deliberate use of presupposition triggers; this highlights the subtle role of presuppositions as a mechanism for both narrative development and ideological positioning in media discourse.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author
Sayf Mohamed is a lecturer of English linguistics at the University of Cergy Paris in France, University Institute of Technology and affiliated to the AGORA research lab, with

a PhD in English Linguistics (University of Lille). He is a former SUSI scholar at the Ohio University, and his research interests lie in discourse analysis, cognitive linguistics, conceptual metaphors and news representation.
Orcid ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8387-6865

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