

## Presupposition and miscommunication in the movie *While You Were Sleeping* (1995) by Jon Turteltaub

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### Abstract

The effectiveness of communication is influenced by the assumptions held by speakers, which called presuppositions. Presupposition contained in an utterance must be accompanied by common ground. Common ground is the similarity of assumptions had by the speakers. The use of presupposition is founded in characters utterances in the movie *While You Were Sleeping*. This research aims to identify and interpret presuppositions in the characters utterances in the movie *While You Were Sleeping*, and additionally to describe its contextual meanings. The data was analyzed using the referent and pragmatic method. George Yule's theory was used to analyze the presuppositions found in this research. Thirty-six data were found in this research. Thirty data of presupposition utterances are not accompanied by common ground between the speakers. Misunderstandings often arise in the movie *While You Were Sleeping* due to the absence of shared knowledge among the characters. Misunderstandings cause ineffective communication.

**Keywords:** *Common ground; context; miscommunication; presupposition.*

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### Introduction

The assumptions held by a speaker shape the effectiveness of communication. The assumptions held by the speaker are called presupposition. According to (Abrusan, 2022), presupposition can be defined as an underlying assumption made by the speaker that conveys meaning within a specific contextual. Presupposition is common knowledge between the speakers that makes the communication effective (Setiawati & Arista, 2018). With these assumptions, the speaker expects the hearer will be able to comprehend the intended message. Meanwhile, (Huang, 2017) states that the presupposition in a speaker's utterance is assumed to represent something that actually exists.

Yule in (Arfianti, 2020; Kurniawan, 2025) classified presupposition into 6 types. Utterances that express the existence, entity, or possessivity are included in existensial presupposition. Factive presupposition, the assumption in this presupposition states a fact or the truth is true. Lexical presupposition, in this presupposition, the meaning of the utterances differs

from what the speaker says. Structural presupposition, the assumption in this presupposition is believed as a truth by the speakers. Structural presupposition is indicated by the use of interrogative sentences. Non-factive presupposition, the assumption in this presupposition is asserted as an incorrect fact or not true. Counter-factual presupposition, in addition to stating the incorrect fact, the assumption in this presupposition is also stating something that is opposite to the fact. This presupposition is indicated by the use of if-clause.

The hearer's understanding is influenced by the level of shared knowledge, or common ground, with the speaker. In making effective communication, there must be common ground. If the speakers have similar knowledge, the possibility of misunderstandings can be minimized. Misunderstandings can cause ineffective communication and possibly cause conflict between the speakers (Nanlohy & Siahaan, 2021).

Presupposition is effective if the speaker and the hearer share the same knowledge or common ground. Stalnaker in (Miller et al., 2017) states that a common ground represents a collective belief that is accepted and acknowledge by a community. Common ground refers to the shared assumptions or knowledge possessed by the

speakers. These assumptions give the context for the conversation (Ibiley, 2017).

Context is essential in interpreting an utterance's meaning and minimizing the possibility of misunderstanding (Song & Zang, 2023). Beyond common ground, context also encompasses the setting, conditions, the speakers, and the relationship between the speakers. The relationship between the speakers determines the meaning of the utterance (Saifudin, 2018; Maujud & Sultan, 2019). Nevertheless, in actual conversation, presuppositions often occur without the presence of common ground. In such cases, the absence of shared knowledge hinders accurate interpretation, thereby increasing miscommunication. With the presence of common ground and appropriate contextual background, communication can be conducted effectively (Hussain & Juma'a, 2023).

The use of presupposition can be found in narrative and dialogue in a movie. However, not all presuppositions in a movie are accompanied by common ground. The use of presupposition has been highlighted in some previous research (Zuryatina et al., 2020; Dwi Nur & Zakrimal, 2020; Kristy et al., 2020; Solehah et al., 2022). In the movie *While You Were Sleeping*, which is the data for this study, there are presuppositions that are not accompanied by common ground. *While You Were Sleeping* was chosen as data for this study because in the characters' utterances were found the use of presupposition both with and without common ground. Without common ground, the characters in the movie *While You Were Sleeping* experience misinterpreted meaning, misunderstanding, and even ongoing conflict. Therefore, the aim of this study is to identify the presuppositions made by the characters in the movie *While You Were Sleeping*, clarify what is presupposed, and explain the context of the presupposition in characters' utterances.

## Methods

This study was conducted using qualitative methods. Uninvolved observation and note-taking techniques were employed in this study. Denzin & Lincoln state in (Iswahyudi et al., 2023) that qualitative method is descriptive since the subject of study is uses textual or narrative data. The primary data in this study consists of presuppositions identified in character's utterances in the movie *While You Were Sleeping*. This movie can be accessed on the Disney streaming platform, while

the transcript was obtained from (scripts.com, 2018).

The data was analyzed using the referent and pragmatic method. The referent method allows researchers to examine and interpret the context and meaning of an utterance (Muhammad, 2016). In this study, it was applied to identify and explain the context of an utterance as well as the meaning of the presuppositions in the character's utterance in the movie *While You Were Sleeping*. On the other hand, a pragmatic method serves to analyze the hearer's responses to the speaker's utterances (Muhammad, 2016). In this study, a pragmatic method was utilized to explain the common ground between the speakers in connection with the context of their utterances.

The findings are presented through the informal method. According to (Muhammad, 2016) the informal method constitutes a technique of data presentation that employs linguistics units such as words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. In this study, the results of the analysis are organized into descriptive paragraphs, which elaborate on the contextual background of the utterances, the presuppositions contained in the characters' utterances, and the common ground established among the characters in the film *While You Were Sleeping*.

## Findings and discussion

In the movie *While You Were Sleeping*, the characters' utterances exhibit presuppositions, some of which are grounded in shared common ground while others are not. The absence of such common ground hinders the accurate transmission of assumptions from one character to another. Consequently, divergent assumptions among the characters lead to instances in which the intended meaning of an utterance is misinterpreted by other characters. Following the writing of the dialogue data, the following format will be applied in each data analysis: *Characters utterances >> presupposition*. For example: *Don't wake Lucy >> Lucy is sleeping*.

In this format, the sentence on the left (in the example, "*Don't wake Lucy*") is a character's utterance that contains a presupposition.

Meanwhile, the sentence on the right (in the example, “*Lucy is sleeping*”) explains what is implied in the characters’s utterances. The use of the “>>” symbol is derived from George Yule’s presuppositions theory, as stated in (Betti, 2022). According to George Yule’s theory, the symbol “>>” is used to analyze and explain the presupposition in an utterance.

In the film, Jerry and Lucy, who encountered each other during their commute to work, engaged in a conversation. Jerry is Lucy’s supervisor. He presented Lucy with the Employee of the Month award. However, Lucy doesn’t have any knowledge of the award. The award itself had been specifically created and conferred as a strategic means to encourage Lucy to agree to work during the upcoming holiday.

(8) Jerry : “***I am recommending you for Employee of the Month.***”

(9) Lucy : “*Really? I didn’t know there was an Employee of the Month.*”

(10) Jerry : “*Oh yeah. Supervisor Jerry Wallace nominates Lucy Moderatz for Employee of the Month. Lucy is never tardy, always works holidays, even if she has worked the previous holiday. Just because she worked Thanksgiving, Lucy is willing to work Christmas, too.*” (00:06:22 – 00:06:47)

*I am recommending you for Employee of the Month >> there is an employee, an employee is given a merit, there is an Employee of the Month, Lucy is the Employee of the Month*

Utterance (8) presupposes that there is an employee, an employee is given a merit, there is an Employee of the Month, Lucy is the Employee of the Month. This utterance represents both existential and factive presuppositions. The presence of a person and an object (an award) indicates the existential presupposition. While the factive presupposition asserts the truth that Lucy is given a merit.

In this conversation, Jerry expects Lucy to have knowledge about Employee of the Month and that she is an employee who is given an award based on Jerry’s recommendation. However, Lucy’s lack of

knowledge of an award created uncertainty, as she didn’t share the same knowledge as Jerry. Before Jerry explained that the award was made to get Lucy to agree to work on Christmas Day, there was a brief misunderstanding caused by their different knowledge.

Following Jerry’s announcement that Lucy had been designated Employee of the Month and was therefore expected to work on Christmas Day, Lucy refused to work on her day off. The subsequent exchange between Lucy and Jerry reflects Jerry’s attempt to persuade Lucy to reconsider her refusal.

(11) Jerry : “*Look, Violet is sick and Celeste can’t switch because she’s got some big family thing. And I promised my kids I’d be there for them this year.*”

(12) Lucy : “*It stinks, Jerry.*”

(13) Jerry : “*I know it isn’t fair, and I can’t make you do it. **But, Lucy, you’re the only one ...***”

(14) Lucy : “*Without family.*”

(00:07:05 – 00:07:21)

*But, Lucy, you’re the only one ... >> Lucy lived alone, Lucy had no family*

Utterance (13) presupposes that Lucy has no family and lived alone. This constitutes a factive presupposition, as it conveys the truth about Lucy, who is living without a family. Since Lucy lived alone and didn’t have to celebrate Christmas, Jerry expressed his expectation that Lucy would be more amenable to his request to work on Christmas Day. In this context, Lucy and Jerry share the same knowledge that Lucy had no family, which enables Jerry to confidently ask Lucy to work on Christmas Day. The presence of this common ground also allows Lucy to interpret Jerry’s utterance that she truly lived alone and without family.

Following Peter’s accident, Peter’s family visited the hospital where he was receiving treatment. When Peter’s family arrived, they found Peter in an unconscious state. Unaware of what happened to Peter, the doctor needs to explain to Peter’s family that Peter has had an accident and is currently in a coma.

- (18) Ox : “What happened? What’s going on?”  
(19) Doctor : “**He’s in a coma.**”  
(20) Midge : “On Christmas day?”  
(21) Doctor : “His vital signs are strong, his brain waves are good. I think he’s going to get through this.”  
(22) Saul : “Are you a specialist?”  
(23) Midge : “**How did this happen?**”  
(24) Lucy : “He was pushed from the platform at the train station.”  
(00:11:56 – 00:12:12)

*He’s in a coma >> Peter had an accident, Peter is in coma*

*How did this happen? >> Peter is in coma*

Utterances (19) and (23) presupposes that Peter had an accident and is in a coma. Utterance (19), produced by a doctor who treated Peter, reflects a factive presupposition as it states the truth that Peter experienced an accident and is in a coma. Then, the utterance (23) was expressed by Peter’s mother after hearing the doctor’s statement that Peter was in a coma. This utterance contains the structural presupposition. Structural presuppositions are encoded in interrogative constructions and are considered to have the genuine meaning.

In this context, the doctor knew that Peter had been in an accident. Peter’s family doesn’t have knowledge about Peter’s accident. Consequently, Lucy had to clarify that Peter had fallen from the train platform, in response to Peter’s mother wondering the cause of his coma.

The conversation below occurs when Jack misinterpreted the relationship between Lucy and her neighbor, Joe Fusco. Jack had previously met Joe Fusco at Lucy’s apartment. Joe Fusco admitted to dating Lucy when Jack asked him about Lucy. Given that Jack had only recently met Lucy and was unfamiliar with Joe Fusco, believed that Joe Fusco was telling the truth.

- (52) Jack : “That’s right. Mr. Joe Fusco, Jr. He said you were intimate.”  
(53) Lucy : “Well, he also said he invented aluminum foil. **He’s delusional.**”

- (54) Jack : “He was very lucid when I talked to him.”  
(00:39:47 – 00:39:54)

*He’s delusional >> Joe Fusco Jr. is a liar*

Utterance (53) presupposes that Joe Fusco is a liar and often exaggerates. This utterance represents a lexical presupposition, as Lucy’s intended meaning diverges from her utterance. Lucy also stated that Joe Fusco believes he invented aluminum foil. This statement proves that Joe Fusco frequently talks without considering the facts, and it could be asserted that his claims about his relationship with Lucy are false. In this context, Jack doesn’t have any knowledge about Joe Fusco. In the absence of this knowledge results in misinterpretation leading Jack to believe that Lucy was actually dating Joe Fusco.

This conversation happened between Lucy and Jerry after Jack accompanied Lucy to her apartment late at night. Lucy always tells Jerry about her relationship with Peter. As Peter’s fake fiancée, Lucy often received advice from Jerry concerning how she could act as Peter’s fiancée. However, during Peter’s coma, Lucy spent a lot of time with Jack and had feelings for him.

- (66) Lucy : “**I’m having an affair. I like Jack.**”  
(67) Jerry : “Who’s Jack?”  
(68) Lucy : “Peter’s brother.”  
(00:53:54 – 00:54:00)

*I’m having an affair >> Lucy is engaged to Peter*

*I like Jack >> there is someone named Jack, Lucy is in love with Jack*

Utterance (66) presupposes that Lucy is engaged to Peter, there is someone named Jack, and Lucy is in love with Jack. This utterance contains non-factive presuppositions because Lucy is not Peter’s fiancée. It also contains existential and factive presuppositions because it indicates the existence of someone named Jack, and a truth that Lucy is in love with Jack.

In producing this utterance, Lucy expected Jerry to understand her intended meaning and who Jack was. In this context, Jerry has the same knowledge as Lucy about her status as Peter's fake fiancée, but doesn't have knowledge about Peter. Without the same knowledge, Lucy needs to explain to Jerry that Jack is Peter's brother.

After telling Jerry that she had feelings for Jack, Lucy asked his advice regarding how she should proceed. Jerry then advised her to admit her deception. However, Lucy didn't want to admit her deception. If she told the truth, she would be cut off from Jack and Peter's family.

(69) Lucy : ***“If I tell Jack that I lied to his family, he will never speak to me again. And Ox and Midge and Mary and Saul.”***

(70) Jerry : *“Saul? Who's Saul?”*

(71) Lucy : *“He's the next-door neighbor.”*

(00:54:12 – 00:54:25)

*If I tell Jack that I lied to his family, he will never speak to me again >> Lucy lied to Jack's family, Lucy hasn't told Jack that she is not Peter fiancée*

*And Ox and Midge and Mary and Saul >> there is someone named Saul in Jack's family*

Utterance (69) presupposes that Lucy has deceived Jack's family by claiming to be Peter's fiancée and that she has not disclosed the truth to Jack. It also presupposes the existence of someone named Saul in Jack's family. This utterance involves a counterfactual presupposition, as it stated something that contradicts the facts. Additionally, it contains an existential presupposition, since it assumes Saul's existence.

Within this interaction, Lucy anticipates that Jerry will understand both her deception regarding her status with Jack's family and the existence of Saul. While Jerry had knowledge about Lucy's deception, he doesn't have knowledge about Jack's family due to his unfamiliarity with them. Consequently, Lucy must clarify by explaining that Saul is Jack and Peter's godfather.

The conversation below occurred after Jack mentioned that Lucy is pregnant at Celeste's party.

Although Jack realizes that Lucy was not Peter's type, he still believed that Lucy and Peter were a suitable match. However, Lucy rejected Jack's excuse, as he had already ruined her New Year's Eve by mentioning that she was pregnant. Consequently, Lucy redirected the conversation by highlighting the issues between Jack and his family.

(92) Lucy : *“What do you want from me, Jack?”*

(93) Jack : *“I want you not to be unhappy.”*

(94) Lucy : ***“And what are you, the happiness guru, Jack? Are you happy? I don't remember you having had a conversation with your father. You wanna leave the business, don't you? Is this just another miscommunication that we are having here?”***

(95) Jack : *“What do you know about my family? Spending a week with them does not make you an expert.”*

(01:05:40 – 01:05:59)

*I don't remember you having had a conversation with your father >> Jack never talks with his family about his dream*

*You wanna leave the business, don't you? >> Jack didn't want to continue his family business*

Utterance (94) presupposes that Jack never talks with his family about his dream, and Jack didn't want to continue his family business. The presupposition in this utterance is factive and structural presupposition. In addition to expressing the fact that Jack never communicated his dreams, Lucy also made it clear that Jack didn't intend to continue his father's business.

In this context, Lucy and Jack have the same knowledge that Jack doesn't want to continue his father's business. Lucy has this knowledge because she saw Jack's products when she went to Peter's residence. Nevertheless, Jack reacted defensively to Lucy's statement, asserting that she lacked sufficient understanding of his family circumstances.

The conversation below happened when Lucy handed her supervisor, Jerry, the wedding invitation for her marriage to Peter. Despite being aware of

Lucy's love for Peter's brother, Jerry questioned her decision to proceed with the marriage. Previously, Lucy had admitted to Jerry that she had developed feelings for Jack, Lucy was prompted by Jerry to explain what had transpired between her and Jack

(126) Jerry : “*What happened with the other guy?*”

(127) Lucy : “*He didn't want me.*”  
(01:30:57 – 01:31:03)

*What happened with the other guy >> there is another man, Lucy is in love with another man*

Utterance (126) presupposes that there is a man and Lucy is in love with another man. The presupposition in this utterance is structural presupposition because it implies that the utterance's meaning is true. In this context, Lucy and Jerry have the same knowledge that Lucy is in love with Jack. With this same knowledge, Lucy understood what Jerry means by ‘the other guy’. However, Jerry doesn't have any knowledge about what happened with Jack, so he wondered why Lucy would marry Peter when she's in love with Jack.

The findings showed that character's utterances in movie *While You Were Sleeping* predominantly contain presuppositions without shared knowledge. Of the 36 data identified, 30 data involved presuppositions without shared knowledge between the characters, while only 6 data reflected presuppositions with shared knowledge. In this study, there are several contexts where the hearer is unable to accurately interpret the meaning of the speaker's utterance due to the absence of a common ground. There are several contexts in this study where the speakers lack common ground, making it difficult for the hearer to interpret the meaning of the speaker's utterances. As a result, characters in the movie *While You Were Sleeping* frequently misinterpreted one another's utterances, leading to recurrent misunderstandings and ongoing conflict amongst characters.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, presuppositions within an utterance must be supported by common ground. The relationships among characters have a big impact in shaping the common ground. When speakers share the same knowledge, they are able to

interpret the meaning of an utterance with greater accuracy, thereby ensuring effective communication. On the other hand, presupposition without common ground often causes misunderstandings, misinterpretation, and even conflict. As a result, this can cause ineffective communication.

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