Presupposition, assertion and the evidential marking of untrue information in political discourse

Viviana Masia
University of Roma Tre
viviana.masia@gmail.com

The interplay of Information Structure (IS) and evidentiality is an emerging thread of investigation in theoretical and typological linguistics (Faller 2002, Masia 2017). The talk describes the results of a corpus-based analysis on the evidential function of presupposition and assertion in political discourse when potentially deceptive information is conveyed. Taking presupposition as taken for granted information and assertion as information updating the receiver's common ground (Stalnaker 1973, 1978), it is suggested that the presupposition-assertion dichotomy marks two different epistemic stances in conversation, namely a factual and a personal experience stance, respectively (Mushin 2001). These two stances modulate the speaker's commitment to the truth of a proposition. So, in codifying a personal experience stance, assertion increases the speaker's commitment to truth, whereas the factual stance encoded by presupposition weakens the speaker's commitment to a proposition. Data collected from a corpus of political speeches taken from U.S., French and Italian electoral campaigns show that politicians' use of presuppositive and assertive strategies is remarkably sensitive to the type of content negotiated. Notably, sentence units involving dubitable or untrue contents (cf. Lee & Xu 2011, Dayter 2014) are often encoded as presupposition (i.e. from a factual epistemic stance) thus entailing a weaker commitment on the part of the speaker. Contents conveying more objective information, such as statistical data or agenda announcements, instead, are more often packaged as assertion, i.e. with a stronger committal attitude of the speaker.

This first-step reflection on evidential uses of IS within the purview of political discourse, together with the methodology put to test for the analysis, wishes to provide a useful groundwork to extend the proposed research to other domains of language use (e.g. advertising, etc.) in which the need of regulating commitments to truth may have important repercussions on the information packaging of linguistic messages.

References: • Faller, M. 2002. *Semantics and pragmatics of evidentials in Cuzco Quechua.* PhD dissertation. • Masia, V. 2017. On the evidential status of presupposition and assertion. *International Journal of Linguistics* 9(4). 134–153. • Stalnaker, R. C. 1973. Presuppositions. *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 2. 447–457. • Mushin, I. 2001. *Discourse analysis: Evidentiality and epistemological stance. Narrative retelling.* Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins. • Dayter, D. 2014. Self-praise in microblogging. *Journal of Pragmatics* 61. 91–102.