
Cleft Sentences and Counterfactual Conditionals: Students' Common Ground Enhancing Presuppositional Interpretation

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ABSTRACT: *The paper explores the use of presupposition in cleft sentences and counterfactual conditionals triggers. It attempts to determine which kind of presupposition strategies that Iraqi EFL university students follow in doing so. A diagnostic test (which consists of six items, each 3 items have a certain type of the presupposition triggers) is administered to a sample of 50 4th year students. An extended model includes Geurts' (1999) presupposition triggers and Domaneschi's (2016) presupposition strategies is used to elicit strategies that are employed by EFL students in order to approach the pragmatic interpretations of presupposition for cleft sentences and counterfactual conditionals triggers. The data are analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. The paper infers that Iraqi EFL university students are familiar with the presuppositions of counterfactual conditionals more than the cleft sentence triggers. Relationally, resolution strategy is preferred to the accommodation and rejection strategies.*

KEYWORDS: cleft sentences, counterfactual conditionals, students' common ground, interpretation

INTRODUCTION

When people communicate between each other, they exchange the information in many different ways. An addresser may introduce information known for the addressee to accept, accommodate or reject. At the same time, the addressee introduces other information which is "taken for granted". This information is typically not known to be communicated. The former class of information is considered "foregrounded and the later "background". The notion 'presupposition' seems to be related to specific words or aspects of the surface structure of the sentence in general. These presupposition-generating items are called presupposition triggers (e.g. cleft sentences and counterfactual conditionals triggers). According to Keenan (1971, p.78), the act of speaking, as well as location, time, and an event, are all referenced by the utterance of a sentence. An utterance's context includes the people present in its environmental and cultural contexts. He proceeds to say that in order for that sentence to be understood, a certain culturally determined conditions or contexts must be met. These conditions are called presuppositions of the sentences and if they are not satisfied then the utterance will not be understood or it is understood in nonliteral way or insult or a just for example more precisely these conditions include:

- a. Status and kind of the relation among the participants nominated.
- b. Age, sex and generation relation between participants mentioned in the sentence.

Presupposition, Common Ground and Accommodation

Presuppositions are sometimes defined as linguistic devices to transport contextual information, which requires very little cognitive determination to be deduced (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, p.706). For Karttunen (1974, p.191), whenever a presupposition is conveyed by a speaker, "the listener is entitled and expected to extend (the context) as required". A presupposition is an assumption "whose truth is taken for granted" to maintain the felicity of the utterance—regarded as part of the common ground, and is conventionally associated with a particular linguistic expression (Culpeper & Haugh, 2014, p.55; Haugh, 2017, p. 85). A presupposition must be met in its local situation, otherwise, it has to be accommodated. Traditionally, accommodation is defined as an inferential procedure that permits addressees to integrate information-given as mutual ground into their collection of preceding principles. In other words, accommodation occurs in the setting of a presupposition letdown, i.e. whenever a speaker conveys some background information, via a presupposition triggers which is not shared by the listeners. In the definition of pragmatic presuppositions, the term of common ground is a fundamental term. Scholars, together with Stalnaker, (1972, p. 441) define presupposition as a "proposition that the addressee takes for granted to be part of the common ground to interpret the utterance produced by the speaker".

According to Asudeh (2008, pp. 4-5) presupposition must be viewed as part of the common ground or shared assumptions between speakers. Nonetheless, even it is new information, presupposition can be put up or founded, i.e. "added to the common ground". Asudeh (ibid) claims that the addresser presumes the receiver of an utterance of "*The king of Buganda is in town*" indicates no impression where "Buganda is or whether it has monarchy, based on the general Gricean assumption that the speaker is truthful, the addressee will then accommodate the presupposition that there is a king of Buganda". She (2008, p.5) states that the addressee will not accommodate a presupposition that disagrees with the idea that his/her background knowledge is unsteady. She uses the statement of "*The king of France is in town*" which would not be lodged by others.

Moreover, she (ibid) argues that presuppositions that differ from addressees' "background knowledge would be accommodated if the speaker of the utterance" is regarded as authoritative. Consider the following scenario: someone says, "*Sarah has quit smoking*". There are two conceivable effects from employing a presupposing utterance: The presumption that Sarah smoked is considered to be satisfied if it is already a widely held belief. Failure, on the other hand, is caused by an unknown or contentious premise. Failure can be remedied in this scenario by accommodation, which is the act of accepting the presumption that Sara used to smoke in order to make sense of the speech (Lewis 1979, p.340).

Presupposition triggers

Presuppositions are pieces of information associated with certain lexical items and syntactic constructions. There are many such as ‘presupposition triggers’; they are so called. The following covers some details concerning these triggers.

Cleft sentences

One of the linguistic triggers that can express presupposition is *cleft sentences*. Levinson (1983, p.184) comes up with definition that they are those sentences which are designated to display a contextual belief between “the speaker and the hearer with regards to their relation”, as shown in the instance below:

-It was John who broke it. (John broke it)

The presupposition of a cleft sentence, according to Levinson (1983: 206), can be recognized by a proposition formed by taking the material following the relative clause marker (who, that, etc.) and inserting a variable or indefinite existential expression, such as "someone or something that agrees in number, gender, or other relevant attributes with the item in focus position".

He adds that both constructions, i.e., *it-cleft* and *wh-cleft* constructions share approximately the same presuppositions (1983, p.183). Moreover, Biber et al (1999, p. 155) argue that a clause can be divided into two parts, each with its own verb. According to them, there are two types of cleft sentences:

1) It-clefts: they consist of:

- *the pronoun it,*
- *a form of the verb be,*
- *the focused elements, with the following types such as a noun phrase, a prepositional phrase, and adverb phrase, or an adverbial clause and*
 - *a relative – like dependent clause introduced by that, who, which or zero.* (Biber et al, 1999, p. 959)

Consider the following example:

a. It wasn't a book that John gave to Bill

b. John didn't give Bill a book. (Levinson, 1983, p. 206)

In the above example, the occurrence of *It-cleft* trigger in (a) presupposes that the book is not a thing given to Bill, perhaps another thing as in (b).

b) Wh-clefts

Wh-cleft trigger consists of:

- a clause introduced by a wh-word, usually what,
- a form of verb to be, and
- the especially focused element such as a noun phrase, an infinitive clause, or a finite clause (Biber et al, 1999, p. 959).

Consider the following example

a. *What John lost is his wallet.*

b. *John lost something.* (Levinson, 1983, p. 183)

In the above example, the occurrence of *It-cleft* trigger in (a) presupposes that "*John lost something*". A point of focus to something in the utterance is shown by the word *what*.

Counterfactual conditionals

There are many definitions for the conditionals, yet they all agree that it is "something that has to be fulfilled before something else can happen". If, commonly suggests that as long as, is typically followed by then. If ... then is not explicit, it is implied: "If X happens (then) Y follows" (Alexander, 1988, p. 273). A conditional sentence has two main clauses: the condition clause and the subsequent clause, each of which depends on the other. The word "If" is used to introduce the majority of these statements. A conditional clause is a type of adverbial clause that denotes an immediate condition (Graver, 1986, p. 89).

According to Roese and Epstude (2017, p. 3), the term "counterfactual" refers to a proposition that is in conflict with reality and was first coined by philosophers because it describes an event or scenario that does not take place. You can think of counterfactuals as instantiations of conditional proposals because they have an antecedent (if) and a consequence (then). The expression of a causal conclusion is also provided by this conditional phrase, as in "*If only he had studied, he would have passed the exam*" (i.e. studying is necessary to achieve better examination performance). It is common to formulate a causal conclusion using this conditional pattern. Since neither the preceding action nor the ensuing result occurred in this case, the counterfactual satisfies the definition of being opposed to the facts.

Semantically, it is important to know that the semantics of some examples of conditionals seem to be accounted for by the pragmatic theory of relevance. This theory shows the interpretation of some examples and explains the unifying effect of this principle of relevance to accounting for all the examples of conditionals. The difficulty of expressing conditional sentences lies in the dependency of one situation on another's occurrence (Norris, 2003, p. 1). In logic, conditionals (if-sentences) are described in terms of the conditions of truth: "if p then q" implies that both p and q are real, or p and q both are false, or q is true and p is false.

Pragmatically, counterfactual conditionals are those "conditionals which are not only untrue but also contrary to facts expressed through conditional structures", for instance:

- *If I were you, I would see a doctor.* » I am not you.

Grundy (2000, p.124) describes that *counterfactual conditionals* presuppose that affirmative propositions contained in the *if-clause* did not occur, but negative propositions in the *if-clause* did occur. For example:

a. *If you had send me a Christmas card last year, I would have sent you one this year.*

b. *You did not send me a Christmas card last year*(Grundy, 2000, p.125)

The example brings the contrary to the fact that the utterance presupposes the contrast meaning. Yule (1996, p.29) confirms that this conditional structure of the trigger generally presupposes that the information in the *if-clause* is not true at the time of utterance.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The total number of the participants is 50 students involved in this study. All the participants are taken from Dept. of English/College of Arts/Mustansiriyah University during the academic year 2021-2022. They are native speakers of Arabic having the same EFL background. Fourth-year learners are chosen because they are supposed to receive and gain good knowledge concerning English language and pragmatics, particularly presupposition.

Data Collection Instrument

The students are asked to participate in a diagnostic test. The test consists of ten items, each three items have a certain type of presupposition triggers based on Geurts' (1999) classification. The learners are required to give more than one presupposition for each sentence if possible. While the first three sentences represent clefts type, the other three sentences represent counterfactual conditionals type.

Procedures of Data Collection

The data of the present study are sentences containing presupposition of clefts and counterfactual conditionals triggers. The data represent six items that have been collected from pragmatic books and articles concerned with presupposition. The study employs a mixed research method to collect the required data as both qualitative and quantitative approaches are applied to describe and analyze the responses of the students.

Model of Analysis

The study adopts two sub-models: Geurts (1999, p.89) account of presuppositions triggers followed by Domaneschi's (2016) strategies will be utilized to account for the students' interpretations of presupposition.

Geurts' presupposition triggers

Cleft Construction

Geurts (1999, p.89) expounds that a clause can be "divided into two parts, each with its own verb". He adds that clefting is used to bring particular elements into focus. He classifies cleft constructions into two major types:

It-Clefts

The it-cleft construction includes the pronoun (it) followed by a form of the verb be and by "the specially focused element, which may be of the following parts: a noun phrase, a prepositional phrase, and adverb phrase, or an adverbial clause and a

relative-like dependent clause introduced by that, who, which, or zero" (Geurts (1999,p.89) e.g.:

a- *It was his voice that held me.*

Hence, sentence (a) clarifies the *it-cleft construction* and the expression 'his voice' is the specific focused element which is of the type noun phrase. The presence of such constructions triggers a presupposition. Thus sentence (a) presupposes the following:
b- *Something held me.*

Wh-Clefts

The wh-cleft construction consists of a clause introduced by a wh-word, usually (what), a form of verb to be, and the especially focused element: a noun phrase, an infinitive clause, or a finite nominal clause (Geurts, 1999, p.89) e.g.

- *What I really need is another credit card.*

This sentence exhibits the wh-cleft construction and it presupposes the following:

- *I need something.*

Geurts (ibid) states that both triggers, i.e., *it-cleft* and the *wh-cleft* constructions share approximately the presuppositions.

Counter factual Conditionals

A conditional structure of the type shown in the following examples, generally, presupposes that the information in the if-clause is not true at the time of utterance.

a. *If you were my friend, you would have helped me.*

b. *You are not my friend.*

a. *If Hannibal had only twelve more elephants, the Romance languages would not exist this day.*

b. *Hannibal didn't have twelve more elephants.* (Geurts, 1999, p.94)

Domaneschi's Presupposition's Strategies

Based on Domaneschi (2016, p.102), when a hearer interprets and encounters utterances with presupposition triggers, s/he will follow one or more of the three strategies:

a. Resolution: indicates the proposition in an utterance as common ground.

b. Accommodation: means accepting presupposition as the proposition that is demanded by the trigger but is not common ground. Drawing upon the work of Stalnaker (1976), the term *accommodation* is used to describe the process whereby an utterance felicitously presupposes information that is not taken for granted in the context. Accommodation may repair misalignment between the speaker and the hearer that is due to the fact that the hearer does not possess information that is known to the speaker and relevant to the current discourse.

c. Rejection: In the third strategy, the hearer rejects the trigger and therefore does not regard what is common ground as presupposition of the trigger. In other words, the third strategy is to ignore the trigger. Hearers often manage to adopt resolution first, since it is a default strategy. When hearers cannot adopt the resolution strategy, they

select accommodation or rejection. This means that resolution is the basic strategy and others are secondary ones.

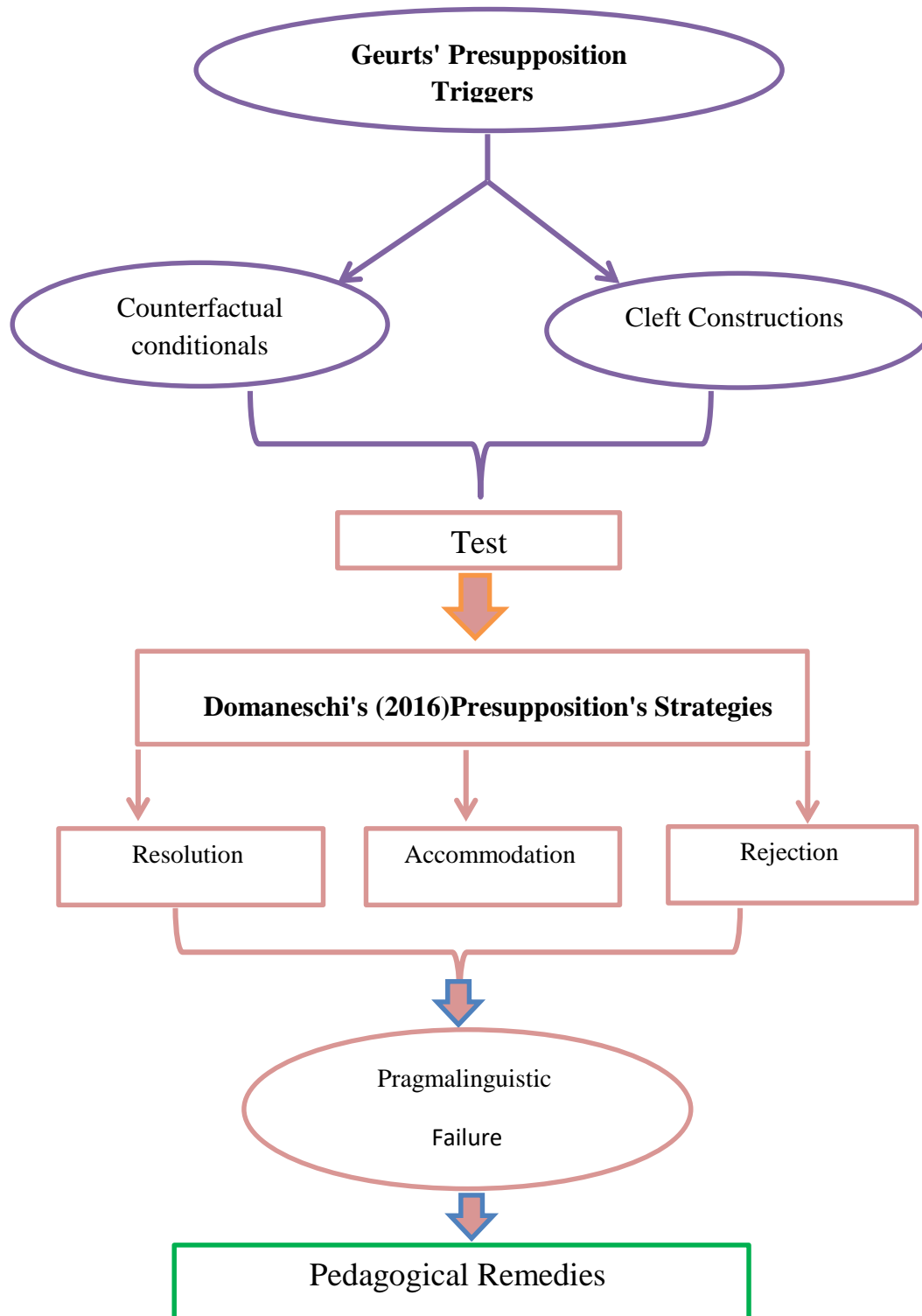


Figure (1) model of Analysis

Data Analysis

This section describes the subjects' responses to the given (6) items of the test, as they attempt to give suitable presuppositions through utilizing various pragmatic strategies. The presupposition of the cleft sentences followed by the counterfactual conditionals triggers is identified. Each type of these triggers is composed of three various utterances which are presented in the following analysis.

Cleft Sentences

Item 1: It was not John who travelled to Spain.

Pragmatically, this item presupposes that "*someone travelled to Spain*" and "*John did not travel to Spain*", or "*anyone other than John travelled to Spain*". Table (1) reveals that 42(84%) of the students are able to give appropriate presuppositions. Through eliciting presupposition, students utilize various strategies. 22 (44%) of them choose the resolution strategy, 14(28%) of them choose the accommodation strategy, whereas 6 (12%) choose the rejection strategy.

Item 2: What Ali lost was his watch.

Regarding the second item's interpretation, the utterance presupposes that "*Ali's watch is missing*" and "*Ali lost something*". Table (1) reports that only 35 (70%) of students are able to give appropriate presuppositions. The results of the analysis for this item show that students have preference for choosing the resolution strategy, where 19(38%) of the subjects employ it. 11(22%) of the students employ the accommodation and 5(10%) choose the rejection strategy.

Item 3: What I really need is another credit card.

Concerning this item, the sentence presupposes that "*I need something*" and "*I have no money*". Table (1) reports that 38(76%) of the students have the ability to give appropriate presuppositions. Pragmatically, 15(30%) of the respondents follow the resolution strategy, 16(32%) choose to follow accommodation, while 7(14%) tend to apply the rejection.

DISCUSSION OF CLEFT SENTENCES

As table (1) below illustrates, the total percentage of the students' responses of trigger (1) *Cleft Sentences* amounts to (76.6%) which indicates that (23.3%) of the students cannot produce the appropriate interpretation of presupposition. The *it-cleft* is a type of cleft constructions which activate the structure of presuppositions as in item (1). The *it-cleft* triggers include the pronoun (*it*) followed by a form of verb (*to be*) and by a noun phrase or an adverbial clause, Item (1) exhibits this kind of triggers when the *it-cleft* is followed by a relative clause(who). The *wh-cleft* structures include a clause introduced by *wh-* word, (usually *what*), and a focused entity noun phrase or a pronoun as in (2) and (3).

In these items, the realization refers to structural presupposition since the lexical *what* is a point to focus on something in the sentence. Item (3) presupposes that the *credit card* is the focus thing. Most of EFL students give interpretations which confirm the

default resolution strategy when they first realize the presupposition trigger (*Cleft Sentences*), focus items, and item expressing new knowledge. Here are some of the students' correct responses that employ the resolution strategy. For example, for item (1), "*Someone traveled to Spain but it was not John*", "*John is not here*"; these interpretations are logically entailed by the presupposition trigger and focus item which is (*John*) in addition to new knowledge which is (*traveled to Spain*).

Another presupposition interpretation of students' responses in item (2), "*The thing that Ali lost was a watch*", "*Ali's watch was lost*", *Ali* and *the watch* stand for the focus and *lost* stands for new information. In item (3), responses such as "*He is out of money*" and "*He has lost his credit card*" state that the focused entity (*credit card*) and the pronoun (*he*) are the trigger based constrictions that make the resolution strategy preferred to the accommodation and rejection strategies.

Table 1: Participants' Responses to Cleft Sentences

Trigger	I Item No.	Per. of Correct Responses	Per. of Incorrect Responses	Resolution	Accommodation	Rejection	No Strategy
Cleft Sentences	1	84%	16%	44%	28%	12%	16%
	2	70%	30%	38%	22%	10%	30%
	3	76%	24%	30%	32%	14%	24%
Total Av. perc.		76.6%	23.3%	37.3%	27.3%	12%	23.3%

Counterfactual Conditionals

Item 4: If I were not short, I would have become a stewardess.

Regarding this item analysis, two presuppositions can be deduced: "*I am short*" and "*I am not a stewardess*". This item scores the third highest rate as it records (92%); 46 EFL students have answered it properly. Through eliciting the presupposition interpretations, students apply different presupposition strategies: 25(50%) tend to use the resolution strategy, 17(34%) tend to use the accommodation, whereas only 4(8%) tend to follow the rejection strategy.

Item 5: If Rosi sees Sam here, she would know that Sam lie.

In this presupposition item, the utterance presupposes that "*Sam is a liar*" and "*Sam is not here*". 37(74%) of the students are able to give the appropriate presupposition. Strategically, 19 (38%) of the students tend to follow the resolution strategy, 11(22%) choose to follow the accommodation, meanwhile 7(14%) choose to follow rejection the strategy, as illustrated in table (2) below.

Item 6: If you were my son, I would not allow you to do this.

This item has the second highest rate as it records (90%); (45) EFL students have answered it correctly. It seems that they have succeeded to interpret what is meant by counterfactual conditionals. The utterance presupposes that: "*you are not my son*". Consciously, EFL students tend to follow the resolution strategy since 26(52%) of

them employ it, and 10 (20%) choose to follow the accommodation, whereas 9(18%) choose to follow the rejection strategy, as seen in table (2).

Discussion of Counterfactual Conditionals

As table (2) illustrates, the total percentage of the students' responses of trigger (2) *Counterfactual Conditionals* amounts to (85%) which indicates that (15%) of the students cannot produce the appropriate interpretation of presupposition. Counterfactual Conditional presuppositions happen when the supposition of what is presupposed is not merely incorrect, but it is in contrary to the facts. This type of presupposition can be recognized by the *if clause* construction where the information is not true at the time of the utterance. The realization of the conditional structure of the *if clause* refers to the eighth type of presupposition. In item (4), systematically, the utterance presupposes that "*She is short*" and "*She is not a stewardess*". The *if clause* form creates an interpretation that indicates the fact that the speaker is *short* and thereby she is unable to work as a stewardess. Students' responses such as "*She is short*", "*She has another job*" and "*She wishes to be a stewardess*" clarify that this type of presupposition interpretation is an expected one which is regarded as a continuation to the truthfulness and the rightness of the utterance. When they interpret the utterance, the EFL students believe the agent (the focus point) is short and the linguistic expression, *become a stewardess* in addition to the trigger based-item, leads to resolve the whole utterance. Thus, this belief functions as resolution presupposition. In short, students assume that the use of *if-clause* meaning comes with a presupposition on an event that gives the opposite interpretations of presuppositions.

Table 2: Participants' Responses to Counterfactual Conditionals

Trigger	Item No.	Per. of Correct Responses	Per. of Incorrect Responses	Resolution	Accommodation	Rejection	No Strategy
Counter-Factual conditional	4	92%	8%	50%	34%	8%	8%
	5	74%	26%	38%	22%	14%	26%
	6	90%	10%	52%	20%	18%	10%
Total Av. perc.		85.3%	14.7%	46.6%	25.3%	13.3%	14.7%

In utterance (5), the relation between *Rossi seeing Sam* and *knowing of Sam's truth* is by no means is a logical relation. The presupposition *Sam is a lair* of the consequent of the utterance has been adjusted. Intuitively, *if Rossi sees Sam here* indicates the presupposition that *she doesn't see Sam here* and again the *if clause* represents a binary opposite function. As a result, most of the students choose to adopt the resolution strategy. It is hard to adopt the strategy of accommodation or rejection, when the students attempt to adopt the first strategy (resolution), they subconsciously adjust the room of *if clause* to the utterance expressing common ground information. This means that resolution is the identification of the shared information in the area of common ground.

To ensure the above analysis, here are examples of the students' suitable responses: "*Sam told Rossi that he is somewhere else*", "*Sam doesn't want Rossi to discover his lies*" and "*Sam is a lair person*". The grammatical construction of the if-conditionals indicates the shared condition of the information between the speaker and the hearer. The students believe that the speaker and the hearer have something in common. The same idea of analysis goes to item (6) "*If you were my son, I would not allow you to do this*" which presupposes that "*you are not my son*", and "*the boy did this*". The students believe that the speaker does not have a son since they realize that the *if-clause* here is the triggering point which activates the presupposition, in addition to the common ground. The students' belief and realization are obvious in some examples of their responses "*he is not my son*", "*you aren't my son*", and "*he has no son*". These interpretations function as resolution strategy. It seems that the EFL student succeed to interpret what is meant by counterfactual conditionals.

Causes of Pragmalinguistic Failure

Generally speaking, pragmatic failure goes to both the grammatical category and pragmatic knowledge. At the pragmalinguistic failure, the inappropriate interpretation happens when the speakers try to transfer from their L1 to L2. The utterances being transferred are semantically and syntactically equivalent, but carry a different pragmatic force in the target language. On the other hand, failure also may appear at the sociolinguistic level differences like social distance, relative power and rights can affect the linguistic choices that the speakers adopt. Since people have various cultures, these differences affect the communication between them. It can be noted that Iraqi EFL university students have been taught mainly through the Grammar Translation method. This domination of this method impacts upon the students' evaluation system. In addition, not all the English teachers have the ability to teach the commutative abilities for their students. They focus on the teaching of the students' linguistic competence and ignore the cultivation of the students' pragmatic competence.

CONCLUSIONS

- 1- Iraqi EFL university students have nearly the ability to drive the pragmatic interpretations of cleft sentences and counterfactual conditionals triggers.
- 2- They are familiar with the presuppositions of counterfactual conditionals trigger more than the cleft sentences trigger.
- 3- In their approaching the pragmatic interpretation of cleft sentences and counterfactual conditionals, Iraqi EFL students show an obvious tendency to employ the resolution strategy i.e to detect information found in the sentences associated with the context.
- 4- Some responses have revealed that some EFL university students face difficulties in realizing the utterance presuppositions. This is because of their lack of pragmatic competence which leads them to fail in deducing pragmatic interpretations of presupposition effectively. Consequently, they arrive at presupposition failure. Furthermore, the pragma-linguistic failure is linked to the fact that students are unable to connect grammatical (particularly syntactic) knowledge to pragmatic knowledge to approach at the intended interpretations of presupposition.

Pedagogical Recommendations

- 1- Inspite of that some students have the ability to produce grammatically appropriate sentences, they may not know how to use them in an appropriate context. Thus, teachers are required to teach their learners how to use triggers like cleft sentences and counterfactual conditionals.
- 2- Motivation is one of the most important factors that plays a decisive role in helping students to give appropriate interpretations. So, teachers should think that they are not information deliverers to their students, but they should work on language ability not only on language knowledge.
- 3- Consulting new grammar books that contain more details and more exercises about presupposition triggers focusing on cleft sentences and counterfactual conditionals with more practicing for students.

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