



Original Research Article

Presupposition as a Verbal Strategy of Disparagement in Selected Memes

Article History:

Name of Author:

Asst. Lect. Maryam Abdul Kadhim Mahdi Duraye ¹,

Prof. Nesaem Mehdi Al-Aadili (Ph.D.)²

Affiliation:

¹University of Babylon, Department of English, College of Education for Human Sciences, Iraq.

²University of Babylon, Department of English, College of Education for Human Sciences, Iraq.

Corresponding Author:

Asst. Lect. Maryam Abdul Kadhim Mahdi Duraye ¹,

Received: 12-1-2026

Revised: 06-02-2026

Accepted: 15-02-2026

Published: 23-03-2026

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

Abstract: This study examines presupposition as a verbal strategy in the construction of disparagement in meme discourse. Although memes are inherently multimodal, the study isolates the verbal layer to investigate how presuppositional mechanisms contribute to implicit derogatory meaning. Drawing on the presupposition taxonomies proposed by Levinson (1983) and Yule (1996), the analysis of three selected English memes—social, and religious—shows that presuppositions can background negative assumptions and present them as already given. In this way, presupposition enables disparagement to be conveyed indirectly without explicit insult. The study argues that presupposition functions as a concise but powerful pragmatic resource for encoding ideological stance and interpersonal hostility in meme discourse.

Keywords: Presupposition, disparagement, memes, pragmatics, verbal analysis, meme discourse.

1. INTRODUCTION

Meme discourse has become a productive site for the circulation of evaluative, ideological, and often disparaging meanings. While many studies of memes focus on humor, irony, or multimodal interaction, less attention has been given to the role of presupposition as a specifically verbal mechanism in the indirect construction of disparagement.

Presupposition is particularly significant in this context because it allows meme producers to embed degrading assumptions within what is treated as already given rather than openly argued. As a result, the disparaging meaning may appear natural, shared, or unquestionable. This study investigates how presupposition operates as a verbal strategy of

disparagement in three selected memes representing political, social, and religious discourse. By limiting the analysis to the verbal level, the study aims to show that presupposition is not merely an accompanying pragmatic feature, but a central mechanism through which disparaging meanings are conveyed, stabilized, and intensified in meme discourse.

Accordingly, based on the aims of the present study, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How does presupposition function as a verbal strategy in constructing disparagement in selected political, social, and religious memes?
2. What types of presupposition are most relevant in conveying disparaging meaning across the selected memes?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Disparagement

Disparagement in Mariam webster (n.d.) is defined as "to speak slightly about (someone or something): to belittle the importance or value of (someone or something) or to lower (someone or something) in rank or reputation."

Rossolova (2020, p. 1409) defines disparagement as a form of verbal hostility. The defamation is intended to undermine the adversary's reputation, resulting in a detrimental emotional impact. The framework of a subversive informative act suggests the presence of an imminent threat of defamation; motives directing communications designed to disparage an individual; and the process of conveying messages, encompassing strategies and techniques for expressing harm. Disparagement can be conveyed by several available resources, with the choice depending on the participants of the public protest, their objectives, and the characteristics of discourse behavior. If the recipient intends to express his negative attitude indirectly, he employs subtle ways and strategies, creating a negative context for interpreting the information in a statement.

2.1.1 Disparagement Across Contexts

Disparagement is manifested through derogatory treatment, unfavorable stereotyping, or amusement at others' expense—takes varied forms and produces different outcomes depending on the context. Research indicates that its effects are shaped by social structures, group identities, and institutional contexts, contributing to inequities in education, health, justice, and interpersonal relationships.

A. Social and Structural Contexts

Social hierarchies such as race, class, caste, and gender have disparagement profoundly rooted

within them. These frameworks are responsible for the continuous differences in wealth, opportunities, and treatment that exist between people in different cultures (Darity & Ruiz, 2024). Jackson and Vander (2016) argue that the disciplines of stratification economics and intersectionality frameworks demonstrate that the origins and persistence of disparities that are related to disparagement are frequently discovered at the points where several marginalized identities intersect. They also show that policy interventions must target these overlapping systems in order to be successful.

B. Educational Contexts

Disparagement in education may be the result of dissimilarities between the cultural backgrounds of students and the cultures of educational institutions. For instance, kids from working-class backgrounds may experience feelings of devaluation when they are in academic environments that place a high importance on competition and independence. This can result in self-threat and unfair treatment from teachers (Micheltmore, & Rich, 2023). In addition, there is a substantial correlation between long-term exposure to contextual disadvantage in families, schools, and neighborhoods and racial and socioeconomic gaps in educational outcomes. Gender and social identity stereotypes significantly influence students' self-concept and academic performance, with classroom attitudes and peer dynamics being crucial factors (Andersen & Smith, 2022).

C. Health and Healthcare Contexts

In the field of healthcare, disparagement manifests itself in the form of inequalities in access, quality, and outcomes that are determined by a patient's race, ethnicity, mental health state, or socioeconomic background. As a consequence of systematic biases, biases exhibited by providers, and structural restrictions, these inequities persist, which leads to underrepresented populations experiencing worse health outcomes (Conn, 2025).

D. Interpersonal and Relational Contexts

The perception of disparagement at the interpersonal level varies based on the status and relationship of individuals who are participating. Jokes that are told by people who are of a higher social status or who are members of out-groups are seen to be more hurtful and less acceptable, particularly when those jokes are directed at groups who are marginalized. Depending on the context, which includes cultural norms and power relations, disparagement can be perceived and experienced in different ways (Weitz & Koç, 2022).

2.2 Presupposition

A presupposition denotes the assumptions inherently embedded within the linguistic structure of texts,

linking linguistic elements to extralinguistic context through inferences that are likely to be derived about this context (Levinson, 1983, p.68). Yule (1996) asserts that speakers consistently formulate their language messages based on assumptions on the prior knowledge of their listeners. A speaker's assumptions regarding what is true or known by the listener are termed presuppositions (pp. 131-132). Akmajian et al. (1995) define presupposition as "an implicit assumption about the world or background belief relating to an utterance whose truth is taken for granted in discourse".

Yule (1996) asserts that presumption is typically characterized as stability despite negation. This indicates that despite the negation of a statement's assumption, the presupposition itself remains unaltered. According to Grundy (2008), there are two approaches to determine presuppositions; either through presupposition triggers, or to think of them as expressions with shared background belief of knowledge.

Building on Grundy's (2008) perspective, both methods of identifying presuppositions will be used in this study's data analysis. It will start by looking at presupposition triggers, which are particular lexical or grammatical components found in meme texts that typically indicate underlying preconceptions. Second, it will take into account presuppositions as statements that represent socially or culturally established ideas and are based on shared background knowledge between the viewers and the meme creator. By combining these two approaches, the study can make a thorough examination of the hidden meanings included in the memes, exposing the ways in which presupposed information aids in the creation of disparagement.

Levinson (1983, p.217) posits that presupposition is typically viewed as a "heterogeneous collection of quite distinct and different phenomena". He further asserts that presupposition denotes the assumptions or inferences inherent in language utterances. According to this view, presupposition connects linguistic structure with extralinguistic context by inferences derived from the linguistic structure itself. This work synthesizes Yule's (2000) typology of presuppositions and Levinson's (1983) list of presupposition triggers to elucidate the functioning of implicit assumptions in memes. Yule's approach classifies presupposition types, including existential, factive, lexical, structural, and counterfactual, whereas Levinson's analysis identifies the linguistic triggers that indicate these presuppositions within context.

2.2.1 Yule's (1996) Classification of Presupposition Types

Yule (2000) asserts that the extensive utilization of

diverse terminologies, expressions, and constructs is equivalent with assumption. These linguistic forms are recognized as possible presupposition indicators and can only manifest as actual presuppositions in connection to the speaker or writer. He identifies six types of presupposition utilized by the researcher: existential, factive, non-factive, lexical, structural, and counterfactual. The following elucidations pertain to the six categories of presumption. The sign (>>) denotes "presupposition."

1. Existential Presupposition

Existential presupposition is a type of presupposition that implies existence. A presumption regarding the existence of an entity denoted by a noun phrase. For example:

(1) *Mary has a new car.*

>> *Mary exists and she has a new car.*

2. Factive Presupposition

The presupposition can be shown by certain verbs that are regarded as a fact such as know, learn, regret, discover, understand, hear, notice, resent, accept, enjoy, tolerate, recall, and realize, which all imply the factual accuracy of their objects. Moreover, factive predicates such as "be sorry that," "be proud that," "be glad that," "be aware that," "the fact that," and "be sad that" might serve as presuppositional triggers (Brinton & Brinton, 2010). For example:

(2) *Jacob **realized** that he was in trouble.*

>> *Jacob was in fact in trouble.*

3. Lexical Presupposition

When people talk about something that is traditionally understood, they usually use one form with its asserted meaning, assuming that the other meaning is also understood. For example:

(3) *The crowd begin to laugh.*

>> *the crowd did not laugh before.*

(4) *He stops searching the document.*

>> *he was searching the document before.*

4. Structural Presupposition

The presupposition is linked to some types of phrases in which the speaker treats them as already known facts and accepts them as true about the listeners. You can see that in the way Wh- questions are made, which is when the information after the Wh-question is already known to be true. For example:

(5) *Where did you buy the bike?*

>> *You bought the bike.*

5. Non Factive Presupposition

The presumption relates to specific verbs that are regarded as being false. Dream, imagine, and pretend

are verbs of a similar kind. Individuals who typically presume that the subsequent information is inaccurate.

For example:

(6) **I dreamed** that I was rich.

>> I was not rich.

(7) He **pretends** to be ill.

>> He is not ill

6. Counterfactual Presupposition

This form creates a preconception that contradicts the facts or reverses reality. The assumption of this form is seen in the application of if-clause constructions when the data is inaccurate at the given time. For example:

(8) **If you were my friend**, you would have helped me.

>> You are not my friend

3. Data Analysis

Meme 1

Happy INTL Women's Day!! (Imgflip, n.d.).



This meme activates *existential presupposition*. The primary presuppositional trigger in the meme is the definite description embedded in the phrase “International Women’s Day.” Definite noun phrases conventionally presuppose the existence of “women” as a coherent social category and the legitimacy of marking a day dedicated to them. Crucially, it also presupposes a shared cultural understanding of what such a celebration entails

Disparagement arises because the presupposed content narrows the meaning of “women” without explicitly stating this limitation. By presupposing domestic labor as an appropriate or self-evident frame for celebrating women, the text avoids overtly evaluative language while still enabling a reductive interpretation. The negative evaluation is therefore not asserted but smuggled into the background as assumed knowledge.

Table1

The results of Presupposition analysis in meme 1

Linguistic trigger	Types of presupposition
Happy int'l women's day	Existential

Meme 2
spreading
about religion
2019).



untruths
(Guidos,

The presupposition work is carried by *lexical* and *existential* triggers. The meme’s verbal layer contains two parallel clauses: “**SCIENCE: On the verge of resurrecting the woolly mammoth**” and “**RELIGION: On the verge of returning us to the Dark Ages.**”

Lexically, *resurrecting* presupposes that the *woolly mammoth* is extinct and that bringing it back is a conceivable act; *returning* presupposes a prior state of “*Dark Ages*” that “we” have already been in, so the movement is framed as regression rather than a new direction. The idiom *on the verge of* presupposes proximity and imminence that the relevant processes are already underway and close to completion. These lexical choices load both clauses with “already-established” background conditions, pushing the reader toward accepting progress for science and regression for religion without argumentation.

Existential presuppositions appear through definite noun phrases. “*The woolly mammoth*” presupposes the referent as a recognized entity in shared knowledge, not a hypothetical creature; similarly, “*the Dark Ages*” presupposes the existence of a known historical category and that it is a relevant explanatory frame for the present. The second clause additionally presupposes a collective deictic subject via “*us*,” treating the audience as part of an affected in-group whose shared future is at stake.

In this meme, disparagement is conveyed through presupposition by presenting the evaluative contrast as already given rather than openly argued. The phrase “resurrecting the woolly mammoth” lexically presupposes scientific progress and recovery, whereas “returning us to the Dark Ages” lexically presupposes that religion leads back to an earlier state of backwardness and decline. In this way, presupposition helps normalize the disparaging meaning by backgrounding the negative portrayal of religion as something self-evident rather than debatable.

Table 2

The results of Presupposition analysis in meme 2

Linguistic trigger	Types of presupposition
SCIENCE: On the verge of resurrecting the woolly mammoth	Lexical
SCIENCE: On the verge of resurrecting the woolly mammoth	Lexical
SCIENCE: On the verge of resurrecting the woolly mammoth	Existential
RELIGION: On the verge of returning us to the Dark Ages	Lexical
RELIGION: On the verge of returning us to the Dark Ages	Existential
RELIGION: On the verge of returning us to the Dark Ages	Existential

4. Data Discussion and Results

The analysis of Meme 1 and Meme 2 indicates that existential presupposition is the most consistent presupposition type across the data, while lexical presupposition is more salient in Meme 1 than in Meme 2. In both memes, presupposition contributes to disparagement by backgrounding negative assumptions rather than stating them directly. In Meme 1, disparagement is supported through a contrastive structure that associates science with progress and religion with regression. In Meme 2, it is conveyed through a conventional celebratory

expression whose presupposed frame is redirected toward a gender stereotype. These findings suggest that presupposition functions as an indirect but effective verbal strategy in the construction of disparagement.

5. Conclusion

The study shows that presupposition is a significant pragmatic resource in the verbal construction of disparagement in memes. By embedding negative assumptions in taken-for-granted meanings, memes can convey disparagement indirectly while

preserving brevity and rhetorical force. The findings from the selected memes confirm that presupposition helps normalize derogatory meanings by presenting them as familiar or self-evident rather than openly asserted. This highlights the importance of presupposition in the linguistic analysis of meme discourse.

REFERENCES

1. Akmajian, A., Farmer, A. K., Bickmore, L., Demers, R. A. & Harnish, R.M. (1995). *Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and communication* (4th ed.). MIT Press.
2. Andersen, I., & Smith, E. (2022). Social Contexts and Gender Disparities in Students' Competence Beliefs: The Role of Gender-Stereotypical Beliefs and Achievement Patterns in the Classroom for Students' Self-Concept in Gender-Stereotypical Subjects. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.840618>.
3. Conn, D. (2025). Health Disparities Based on Race or Ethnicity Require Interventions at Multiple Levels of the Healthcare System. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 73.
4. Darity, W., & Ruiz, I. (2024). Caste, class, race, and inequality: insights for economic policy. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/graec038>.
5. Grundy, P. (2008). *Doing Pragmatics* (3rd ed.). Hodder Arnold Press.
6. Jackson, J., Williams, D., & VanderWeele, T. (2016). Disparities at the intersection of marginalized groups. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 51, 1349-1359.
7. Levinson, S. C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge University Press.
8. Michelmores, K., & Rich, P. (2023). Contextual Origins of Black-White Educational Disparities in the 21st Century: Evaluating Long-Term Disadvantage Across Three Domains. *Social Forces*, 101, 1918 - 1947.
9. Rossolova, O. A. (2020). The discrediting of a linguistic persona in the linguistic space of the communicative act. *PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology*, 17(4), 1243-1252.
10. Weitz, B., & Koç, Y. (2022). The effect of relational status on perceptions of gay disparaging humor. *Current Psychology*, 42, 26617- 26632. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03712-9>.
11. Yule, G. (1996). *The study of language*. Cambridge University Press.
12. Yule, G. (2000). *Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.
13. Imgflip. (n.d.). Happy INTL Women's Day!! [Meme]. Imgflip. <https://imgflip.com/i/7drdgq>
14. Guidos, R. (2019). The dark side of memes: spreading untruths about religion. *The Catholic Weekly* <https://catholicweekly.com.au/the-dark-side-of-memes-spreading-untruths-about-religion/>

Web sources