

PRESUPPOSITION IN THE UTTERANCES OF MAIN CHARACTER NORA SEED IN THE NOVEL THE MIDNIGHT LIBRARY (2020)

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Abstract

Presupposition is one of the pragmatic mechanisms that allows speakers to convey meaning indirectly through assumptions considered mutually known before an utterance is made. This study aims to analyze the types of presupposition found in the utterances of the main character, Nora Seed, in Matt Haig's novel *The Midnight Library* (2020), and to examine the role of common ground between Nora Seed and her interlocutors in building comprehension of those implicit meanings. This research applies Yule's (2018) presupposition theory, which encompasses six types; existential, lexical, structural, factive, non-factive, and counterfactual, alongside Stalnaker's concept of shared knowledge (1978, as cited in Aini & Ariyanti, 2021). A qualitative descriptive method was employed, using note-taking technique for data collection and content analysis for data processing. From 44 utterance data collected, 56 presuppositions were identified, as several utterances contained more than one type simultaneously. All six types were found, with lexical presupposition being the most dominant at 24 instances, followed by factive at 14, structural at 10, counterfactual at 4, existential at 3, and non-factive at 1. Shared knowledge was found to operate in three patterns: knowledge established prior to the conversation, knowledge formed dynamically during the conversation, and knowledge imbalance that led Nora to use presupposition strategically. The findings demonstrate that presupposition and shared knowledge are interrelated in constructing implicit meaning in Nora Seed's utterances, while also revealing how the character convey her feelings and experiences indirectly through language.

Keywords: *implicit meaning, pragmatic, presupposition, shared knowledge, The Midnight Library*

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Introduction

Communication rarely relies on words alone. Speakers constantly lean on assumptions they expect their listeners to already share, allowing meaning to travel beneath the surface of what is actually said. Levinson (as cited in Berliana et al., 2024) frames pragmatics as the study

of how language and context work together to shape meaning. Geraldine and Manik (2025) add that understanding an utterance is never a matter of literal word meaning alone, since it also depends on situation, the relationship between speakers, and the knowledge they hold in common. Grasping and utterance fully therefore requires attention not only to its wording but to the shared background both parties bring into an exchange.

Among the mechanisms that make such indirect meaning possible, presupposition holds a particularly stable place. Yule (2018) defines it as a background assumption treated as true before an utterance is even made. Unlike implicature, which depends heavily on situational inference and can shift depending on context, presupposition tends to persist even when the utterance containing it is negated. This durability makes it a useful lens for uncovering the assumptions embedded in a speaker's words, and it is precisely this property that allows a great deal to be communicated economically. Risky and Nasution (2024) note that the ability to read implicit meaning is a genuinely important communicative skill, since how successfully a message lands depends as much on what is left unsaid as on its explicit content,

Fiction offers a particularly rich site for observing this phenomenon. Novels built around dialogue give characters space to reveal themselves indirectly, often saying less than they mean and trusting readers to infer the rest from shared context. Balogun and Emike (2023) describe this shared context, or common ground, as the information participants in a conversation already treat as mutually known, which allows inference proceed smoothly. Presupposition depends on exactly this kind of mutual acceptance to function at all.

Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* (2020) is a fitting example of a text built on this dynamic. The novel follows its protagonist, Nora Seed, through an existential crisis shaped by loss and regret, placing her in a library suspended between life and death where she is able to glimpse the lives she never lived (MacMillan, 2026). This premise generates utterances thick with unstated assumptions about who Nora is, what she has lost, and what she still hopes for, whether she is speaking to other characters or reflecting on her own condition. Aldihaymawee's (2025) critical discourse reading of the novel observes that Nora's language consistently builds her identity as protagonist and carries implicit standards about how life ought to be lived, a finding that already hints at how much pragmatic weight her utterances are carrying.

Even so, that attention has stayed outside the boundaries of pragmatics. Existing readings of the novel, including Aldihaymawee (2025) and MacMillan (2026), approach it through critical discourse analysis or philosophical and cultural interpretation rather than through presupposition itself. This gap sits alongside a second one visible in the wider literature. Studies that do apply presupposition theory to literary and public dialogue, such as Nyein's (2023) analysis of *Catch Me If You Can*, Pongoh et al.'s (2022) study of *Little Women*, and Salahuddin's (2025) work on *The Scarlet Letter*, tend to stop at identifying and classifying types of presupposition and the syntactic patterns that trigger them, without examining in depth how shared knowledge between speakers shapes the understanding of those presuppositions. Nora Seed's utterances have therefore not yet been studied from a pragmatic standpoint, and the interplay between presupposition and common ground remains largely unaddressed in studies that do use novels as data. This is the gap the present study responds to.

Filling it carries weight beyond a single novel. As Rizky and Nasution (2024) suggest, since the capacity to read implicit meaning shapes communicative success generally, a systematic study of how it operates in narrative discourse is worth pursuing in its own right. For pragmatic study in Indonesia specifically, where English language novels remain a comparatively underused source of data, a study of this kind widens the range of texts available for this type of analysis and opens room for further work on implicit meaning in contemporary fiction.

This study draws its theoretical foundation from Yule's (2018) framework of presupposition, which distinguishes six types, namely existential, lexical, structural, factive, non-factive, and counterfactual presupposition. As Yule (in Fahriza et al., 2025) further

explains, presupposition is fundamentally an assumption speakers make about what listeners already know, made so that an utterance can be understood as a whole. This taxonomy provides the tools to sort the implicit assumptions running through Nora's speech systematically. Alongside it, the study draws on Stalnaker's (1978, as cited in Aini and Ariyanti, 2021) concept of common ground, understood as the shared knowledge speakers and listeners rely on for an utterance to be understood as intended. Where Yule's typology identifies what kind of presupposition is present, Stalnaker's concept explains why it succeeds, or fails, as a vehicle for meaning between Nora and the people she speaks with.

What distinguishes this study, then, is not the use of presupposition theory itself but where and how it is applied. No prior work has examined Nora Seed's utterances specifically through a pragmatic lens, which makes this the first study to treat her as a subject for presupposition analysis rather than for discourse or cultural critique. It is also among the few studies on presupposition in literary dialogue to look beyond classification and consider the working relationship between presupposition and common ground directly.

Guided by these considerations, this study analyzes the presuppositions found in Nora Seed's utterances in *The Midnight Library* (2020), using Yule's (2018) six-part taxonomy together with the concept of common ground, in order to examine how implicit meaning is built and understood between Nora and her interlocutors throughout the novel.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a descriptive method. Moleong (2018) explains that qualitative research seeks to understand a phenomenon as experienced by the subject of study in a comprehensive way, with the results described in words within a specific, naturally occurring context. Rukajat (2018) similarly states that a qualitative approach is a research procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words drawn directly from the object under study. Sugiyono (2019) adds that qualitative research does not aim to measure or quantify data statistically, but rather to understand and interpret the meaning contained within the data in depth and in context. A descriptive method was chosen because this study aims to describe and explain the linguistic phenomenon of presupposition systematically as it appears in the data. Mahsun (2017) states that a descriptive method in language research aims to describe linguistic data according to its actual characteristics without judging the correctness of the language use itself. This combination of a qualitative approach and descriptive method was considered appropriate because it supports an in depth and thorough analysis of presupposition based on textual data from the novel, allowing the findings to reflect the linguistic phenomenon as it actually occurs in the source data.

The object of this study is the utterances of the main character, Nora Seed, in Matt Haig's novel *The Midnight Library* (2020), published by Canongate Books. All of Nora's utterances in the novel serve as the source of data, with particular attention given to those containing presupposition. The novel follows Nora, who feels her life has been reduced to a string of regrets with nothing left worth living for, and who wakes up after tempting to end her life in an endless library situated between life and death. This library holds countless books, each containing a version of the life Nora might have lived had she made different choices. As she moves through these alternate lives, Nora comes to realize that happiness cannot be measured by how right or wrong her past decisions were. The emotional complexity Nora experiences, together with the range of speech situations she moves through, makes the novel a rich source of utterances likely to carry various types of presupposition.

Data collection combined library research with the note taking technique. Library research, as described by Sari and Asmendri (2020), involves gathering data and information from written sources such as reference books, articles, journals, and relevant prior studies, which in this study served to establish the theoretical grounding used to interpret the findings.

The note taking technique followed the procedure outlined by Sudaryanto (2016), in which the researcher observes language use in the object under study and records it on data cards for subsequent classification, a process Mahsun (2017) describes as continuing into grouping the data according to the focus of the research. In practice, this involved reading *The Midnight Library* (2020) in full to understand its plot, context, and the utterances of its main character, identifying every utterance by Nora Seed that potentially carried a presupposition, reviewing each identified utterance again for accuracy, and recording the selected utterances into a data documentation table.

Data analysis relied on content analysis, a method Krippendorff (2019) describes as a systematic and replicable way of interpreting the meaning of a text while accounting for the context in which that text was produced and used. This method was chosen because it is well suited to uncovering implicit meaning through systematic interpretation, making it appropriate for analyzing presupposition in a literary text such as a novel. The analysis proceeded by reading the novel thoroughly, identifying Nora Seed's utterances that potentially contained presupposition based on existing presupposition theories, recording and selecting the data relevant to the focus of the study, namely utterances carrying implicit meaning, classifying each utterance according to Yule's (2018) six types of presupposition, namely existential, factive, lexical, structural, non-factive, and counterfactual, analyzing the implicit meaning that emerged from each utterance while considering the conversational context, the speech event, and the common ground between characters that shaped the presupposition, and finally drawing conclusions regarding the dominant types of presupposition and their role in constructing meaning within the novel.

The results are presented using an informal method of presentation. Sudaryanto (2016) distinguishes between a formal method, which relies on technical linguistic notation or symbols, and an informal method, which foregrounds meaning and presents findings through ordinary descriptive language. This study adopts the informal method so that the findings can be understood clearly and communicated systematically. The findings are presented as descriptive explanations of the types of presupposition found in Nora Seed's utterances, supported by data excerpts as empirical evidence, the conversational context surrounding them, and the pragmatic interpretation that follows from each. Sugiyono (2019) notes that data presentation in qualitative research can be complemented with tables to clarify the distribution and classification of findings, and in line with this, a recapitulation table of presupposition types is included to reinforce the classification of the data found in the novel.

Findings and Discussion

This study identified 56 instances of presupposition across 44 utterance data collected from Nora Seed's speech in *The Midnight Library* (2020). All six types of presupposition proposed by Yule (2018) were found, distributed as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Presupposition Types in Nora Seed's Utterances

No	Presupposition Type	Frequency
1.	Lexical Presupposition	24
2.	Factive Presupposition	14
3.	Structural Presupposition	10
4.	Counterfactual Presupposition	4
5.	Existential Presupposition	3
6.	Non-Factive Presupposition	1
Total		56

Lexical presupposition was the most dominant type, followed by factive and structural presupposition, while counterfactual, existential, and non-factive presupposition occurred less frequently. This distribution suggests that Nora's implicit meaning is most often carried through specific word choices, particularly verbs and adverbs that presuppose a prior state of affairs, rather than through more complex structural or conditional constructions. The following discussion presents representative data for each type, together with an analysis of how shared knowledge between Nora and her interlocutors contributes to the comprehension of each presupposition.

Lexical Presupposition

Context: After Nora comes to understand that her cat's death was not entirely the result of her own negligence, Mrs Elm asks her to look again at the Book of Regrets. Nora resists, recalling the unpleasant experience she had the first time she opened it.

Nora : *"Poor Volts."*

Mrs Elm : *"He loved you, Nora. You looked after him as well as anyone could. Go and look at the last page of The Book of Regrets."*

Nora : *"I don't want to open it again."*

Mrs Elm : *"Don't worry. It will be safer this time. Just stick to the last page"*

(Haig, 2020: 68-69)

The word *again* triggers a lexical presupposition, indicating that Nora had previously opened the Book of Regrets before this moment in the conversation. Through this presupposition, Nora implicitly conveys her fear of repeating a distressing experience, allowing her reluctance to be understood without needing to describe that earlier experience in detail. The shared knowledge between Nora and Mrs Elm, that opening the book had previously been an unsettling experience for Nora, is confirmed by Mrs Elm's following response, which reassures Nora that "it will be safer this time," a phrase that itself presupposes the earlier occasion was not safe. This shared understanding allows Mrs Elm to respond directly to Nora's underlying fear rather than questioning the basis of her refusal.

Factive Presupposition

Context: Nora runs into Ravi, a former bandmate, at a newsstand and asks him to confirm that her brother Joe had recently visited Bedford without telling her.

Nora : *"Ravi, hi. I hear Joe was in Bedford the other day? Did he, um, did you see him?"*

Ravi : *"Yeah, I did actually."*

Nora : *"He didn't tell me he was coming."*

Ravi : *"Was just fly-by."*

(Haig, 2020: 15)

The verb *tell* triggers a factive presupposition, meaning that the proposition following it, that Joe came to Bedford, is presupposed to be true regardless of the negation applied to the main verb. Through this presupposition, Nora implicitly expresses disappointment that her brother visited without informing her. The shared knowledge between Nora and Ravi, that Joe did visit Bedford, is confirmed by Ravi in the preceding turn. However, the two do not share equal knowledge of the visit's circumstances: Ravi already knows the visit was brief, while Nora does not, and it is this imbalance that motivates Nora's presupposition that she should have been informed in advance.

Structural Presupposition

Context: While babysitting Molly, her daughter in an alternate life with Ash, Nora uses casual questions to gather information about the life she has just entered, including her relationship with her brother Joe.

Nora : *"Do you have any aunts and uncles?"*
Molly : *"Yes, I have aunt Jaya."*
Nora : *"Anyone else?"*
Molly : *"Yes, uncle Joe and uncle Ewan."*
Nora : *"When did we last see Uncle Joe?"*
Molly : *"Christmas."*
(Haig, 2020: 230-231)

The wh-question structure *when* triggers a structural presupposition, indicating that a meeting between Nora, Molly, and Joe has indeed occurred, with the question only seeking to establish when this meeting last took place. Through this presupposition, Nora is able to gather information about her relationship with Joe in this alternate life without revealing that she has no memory of the life she is currently inhabiting. The shared knowledge that Joe is Molly's uncle is established earlier within the same conversation, when Molly herself introduces "uncle Joe" in a previous turn, allowing Molly to answer Nora's question directly without detecting Nora's underlying uncertainty.

Counterfactual Presupposition

Context: After entering the Midnight Library, Nora is guided by Mrs Elm to consult the Book of Regrets. She expresses her deepest regret concerning her broken relationship with Dan.

Nora : *"I wish I hadn't left Dan. And that I was still in a relationship with him. I regret us not staying together and working towards that dream. Is there a life where we are still together?"*
Mrs Elm : *"Of course."*
(Haig, 2020: 42)

The structure *wish* followed by the past perfect *hadn't left* triggers a counterfactual presupposition, indicating that the situation Nora wishes for is the opposite of what actually happened, namely, that she did in fact leave Dan. Through this presupposition, Nora implicitly acknowledges that ending the relationship with Dan is among her greatest regrets, without stating this evaluation directly. The shared knowledge required to interpret this presupposition, that Nora once had a relationship with Dan that she ended, is not established prior to the conversation but is instead constructed within the utterance itself. This is confirmed by Mrs Elm's immediate response affirming that an alternate life together with Dan is available to explore, showing that the presupposition is understood without requiring further clarification.

Existential Presupposition

Context: Ash visits Nora's apartment and asks about her cat, whose existence Nora affirms before Ash reveals that the cat has in fact died.

Ash : *"You told me you have a cat. I remember his name. Voltaire. A ginger tabby?"*

Nora : *"Yeah. I call him Volts. He finds Voltaire a little bit pretentious. It turns out he's not massively into eighteenth-century French philosophy and literature. He's quite down to earth. You know. For a cat."*

Ash : *"I'm afraid I think he's dead."*

(Haig, 2020: 8)

The definite references *Volts* and *He*, combined with present-tense verbs such as *finds*, trigger an existential presupposition that the cat exists and is alive at the time of speaking. Nora sustains this presupposition throughout her description of the cat's personality, treating its existence as uncontroversial background information. The shared knowledge between Nora and Ash, that Nora owns a cat named Voltaire, is confirmed by Ash's own recollection of the cat's name and appearance earlier in the conversation. However, this shared knowledge is asymmetrical: Ash already knows the cat has died, while Nora does not. This imbalance is what allows Nora's existential presupposition to be built entirely on outdated information, later contradicted when Ash delivers the news of the cat's death.

Non-Factive Presupposition

Context: The conversation takes place while Mrs Elm compliments Nora's intelligence during a game of chess at her school library. In response, Nora shifts the conversation to her anxiety about her father's opinion of her.

Mrs. Elm : *"See? with a brain like yours you can do anything."*

Nora : *"Dad thinks I've thrown everything away. Now I've stopped swimming."*

Mrs. Elm : *"Well, far be it from me to say, but there is more to this world than swimming really fast. There are many different possible lives ahead of you."*

(Haig, 2020: 5)

The verb *thinks* triggers a non-factive presupposition, indicating that the proposition following it, that Nora has wasted everything, is presented as her father's belief rather than as an established fact. Through this presupposition, Nora implicitly reveals that her father holds a negative judgment of her choices without stating whether she agrees with it herself, allowing her to voice this judgment while distancing herself from its truth value. The shared knowledge between Nora and Mrs Elm, that Nora's father disapproves of the direction her life has taken, is not stated outright but is treated by Nora as already understood, which is reflected in Mrs Elm's response that immediately reframes Nora's situation rather than asking who her father is or why he holds this view.

The six data above illustrate that presupposition in Nora Seed's utterances does not function merely as background information but as a device through which implicit meaning, including regret, denial, fear, and strategic concealment, is constructed. The dominance of lexical presupposition indicates that Nora frequently relies on single words carrying strong presuppositional force, such as *again*, *still*, and *stopped*, allowing her to communicate change, continuity, or repetition without elaboration. Factive and structural presuppositions, meanwhile, are more closely tied to Nora's efforts to either confirm or conceal her state of knowledge, particularly in the alternate-life episodes where she must navigate conversations without full information about the life she has entered.

The analysis further shows that shared knowledge does not always precede an utterance. In some cases, it is constructed within the conversation itself, as when a character's admission in one turn immediately becomes the common ground that allows a presupposition in the following turn to be understood. In other cases, an imbalance in shared knowledge becomes

the very condition that allows a presupposition to be misleading or later contradicted, particularly when one interlocutor holds information the other does not yet possess. Elsewhere, shared knowledge is affirmed rather than contradicted, showing that presupposition does not always signal a gap in understanding but can also reflect a moment of mutual recognition between speaker and interlocutor. This confirms that the successful interpretation of presupposition is not solely a matter of linguistic form but is fundamentally dependent on the extent to which speaker and interlocutor share, or fail to share, the same background knowledge (Stalnaker, as cited in Aini & Ariyanti, 2021). These findings support Yule's (2018) view that presupposition functions as an assumption tied to the speaker rather than to the sentence itself, since the same linguistic trigger can carry different implications depending on what each interlocutor already knows.

Conclusion

This study examined the use of presupposition in the utterances of Nora Seed, the main character of Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library* (2020), using Yule's (2018) taxonomy of presupposition along with Stalnaker's concept of shared knowledge. From 44 utterance data, 56 instances of presupposition were found, covering all six types proposed by Yule: existential, factive, lexical, structural, non-factive, and counterfactual. Lexical presupposition was the most dominant type, followed by factive and structural presupposition, while counterfactual, existential, and non-factive presupposition appeared less often. These findings show that Nora most often conveys implicit meaning through single words that mark change, continuity, or repetition, rather than through more complex sentence structures or conditional forms.

The analysis also shows that shared knowledge plays an important role in whether a presupposition is understood correctly. Shared knowledge was found to work in three ways: knowledge that already existed before a conversation began, knowledge that was built during the conversation itself, and situations where an imbalance in knowledge either caused a presupposition to be misunderstood or allowed Nora to use it strategically to hide her uncertainty, especially in the alternate-life episodes central to the novel. These patterns show that presupposition and shared knowledge are closely connected: a presupposition cannot be fully understood without considering what the speaker and listener both assume to be true, and this shared understanding in turn shapes how implicit meaning is delivered and received.

Overall, this study adds to pragmatic research on literary discourse by showing that presupposition in novel dialogue does not only make language more efficient, but also serves as a way to reveal a character's inner state, relationships, and hidden feelings throughout a story. Future research could build on this study by examining presupposition in the utterances of other characters in the novel, comparing presupposition across different literary genres, or exploring how shared knowledge changes across a story that, like this novel, moves through multiple timelines or alternate realities.

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