

WE TALK TO PEOPLE, NOT CONTEXTS

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THE PLAN

Two kinds theory of the nature of speech acts:

- Addressee-directed theories.
- Context-directed theories.

Two arguments that the former are better than the latter:

- A pragmatic argument.
- A semantic argument.

ADDRESSEE-DIRECTED THEORIES OF SPEECH ACTS*

*Caveat: I'm mainly interested in *communicative illocutionary* speech acts, not locutionary acts, perlocutionary acts, or institutionalized acts like getting married or christening ships.

i_2

$i_3?$ $i_2?$
 $i_1?$ $i_4?$

S

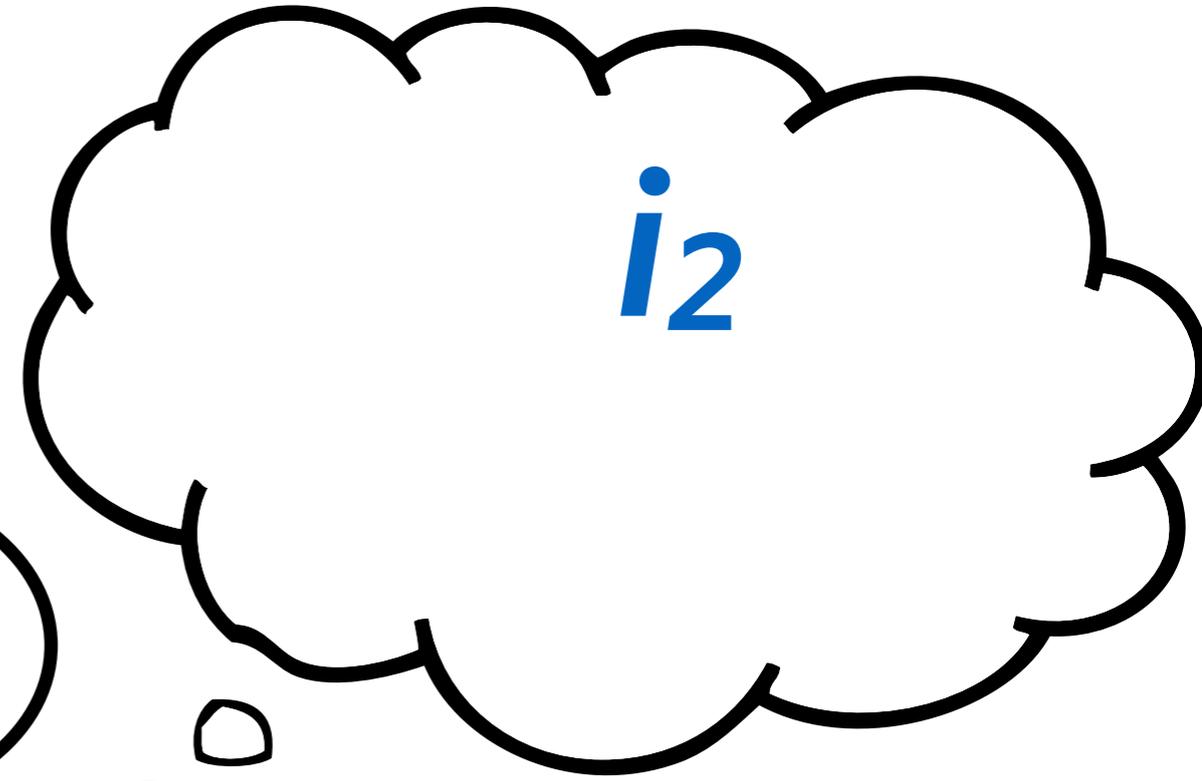
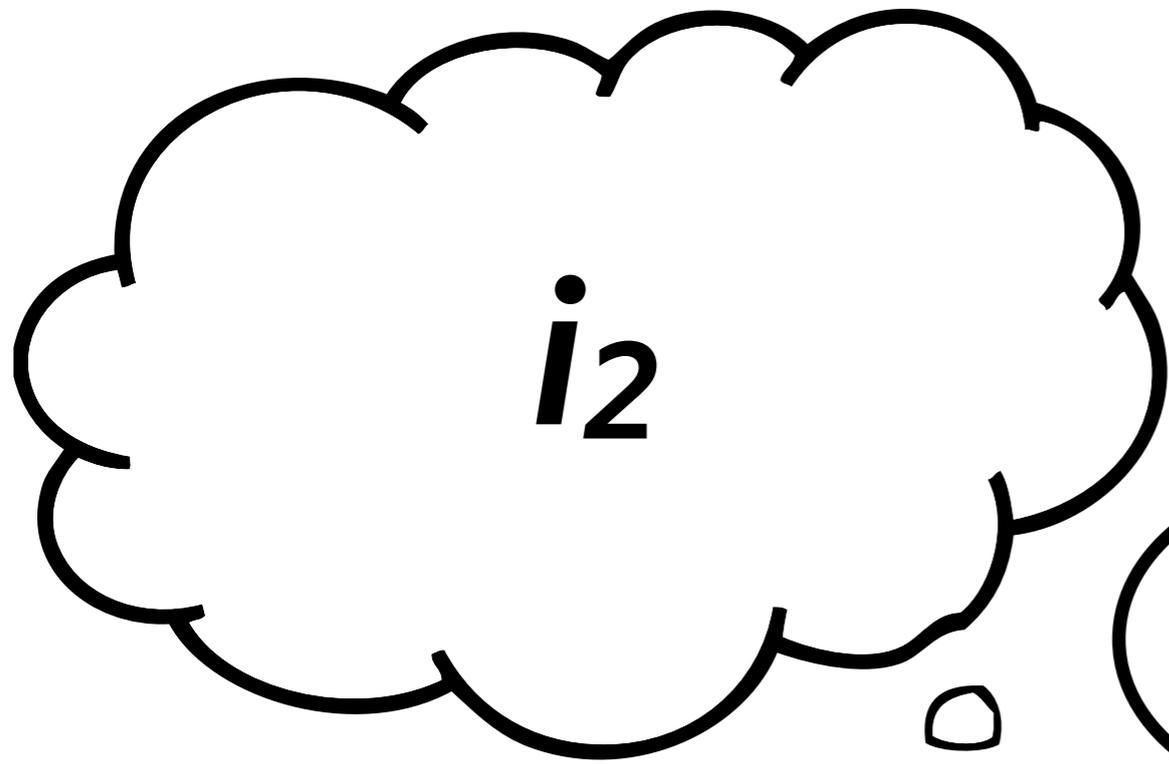


i_2

$i_3?$ $i_2?$ $i_4?$
 $i_1?$

i_2





MEANING AND INTENDING

(Grice 1957, 1968, 1969; Strawson 1964)

By doing something, x , S , **MEANT** something iff, for some audience, A , and response **R**, S did x intending

- (i) A to have a certain response **R**
- (ii) A to recognise that S did x intending (1)
- (iii) A 's recognition that S did x intending (1) to function, at least in part as a reason for (1)

MEANING AND SPEECH ACTS

(Strawson 1965; Schiffer 1972; Bach & Harnish 1978)

- To perform a speech act is to mean something.
- Different types of speech acts are individuated by different values of **R**.

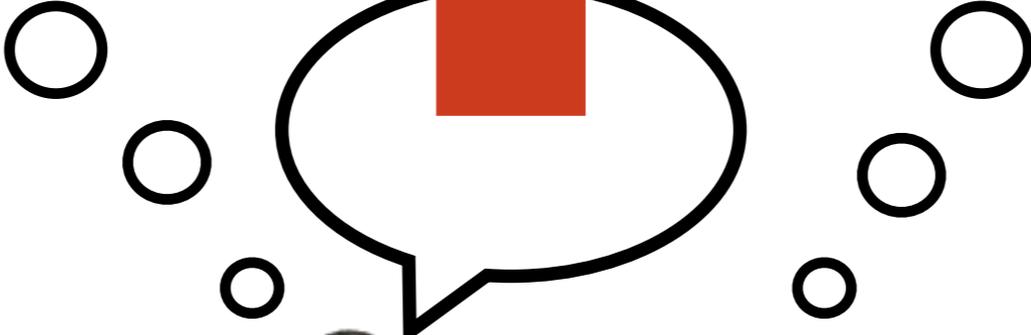
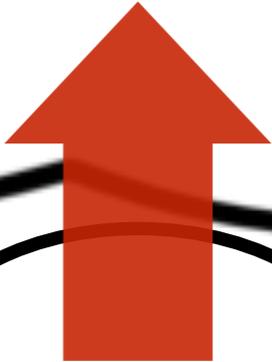
CONTEXT-DIRECTED THEORIES OF SPEECH ACTS

context





context



STALNAKER (1978, 2014):

To **assert q** is to propose adding p to the Common Ground (CG).

ROBERTS (1996/2012):

To **ask q** is to proffer q , intending that it be adopted as the new Question Under Discussion (QUD).

PORTNER (2004):

To **direct A to φ** is to propose that φ be added to their section of the conversation's To-Do List (TDL).

CONTEXTS ARE PUBLIC

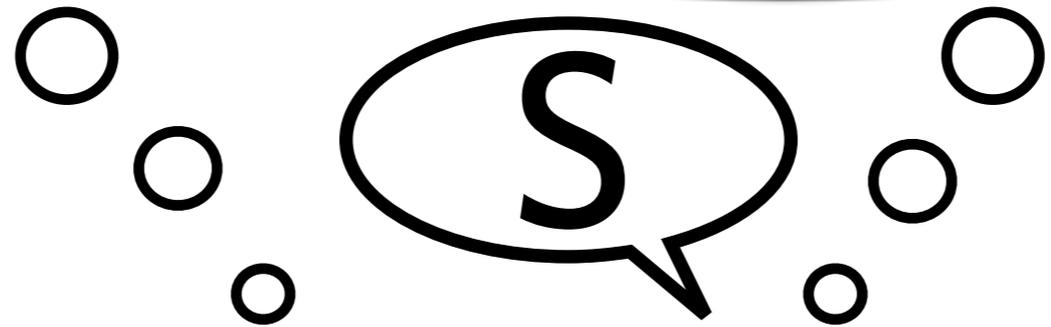
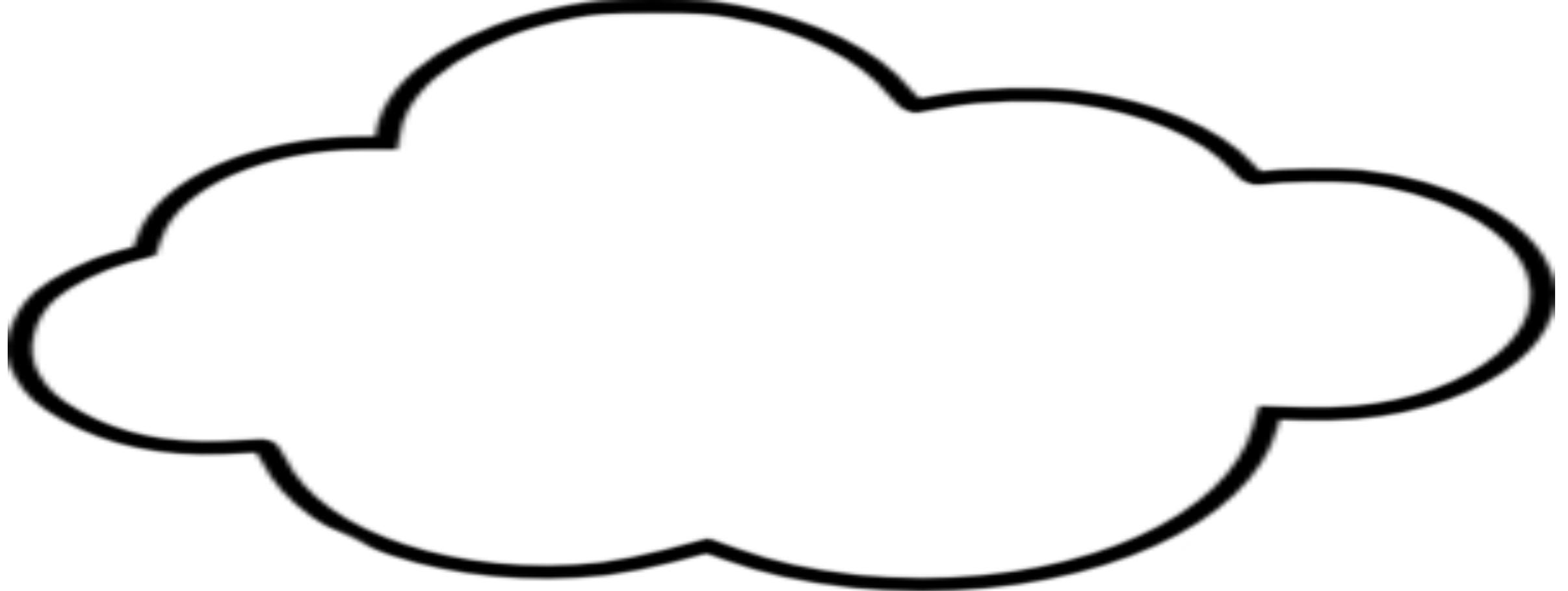
A proposition p is common ground of a conversation iff the participants *commonly accept* p :

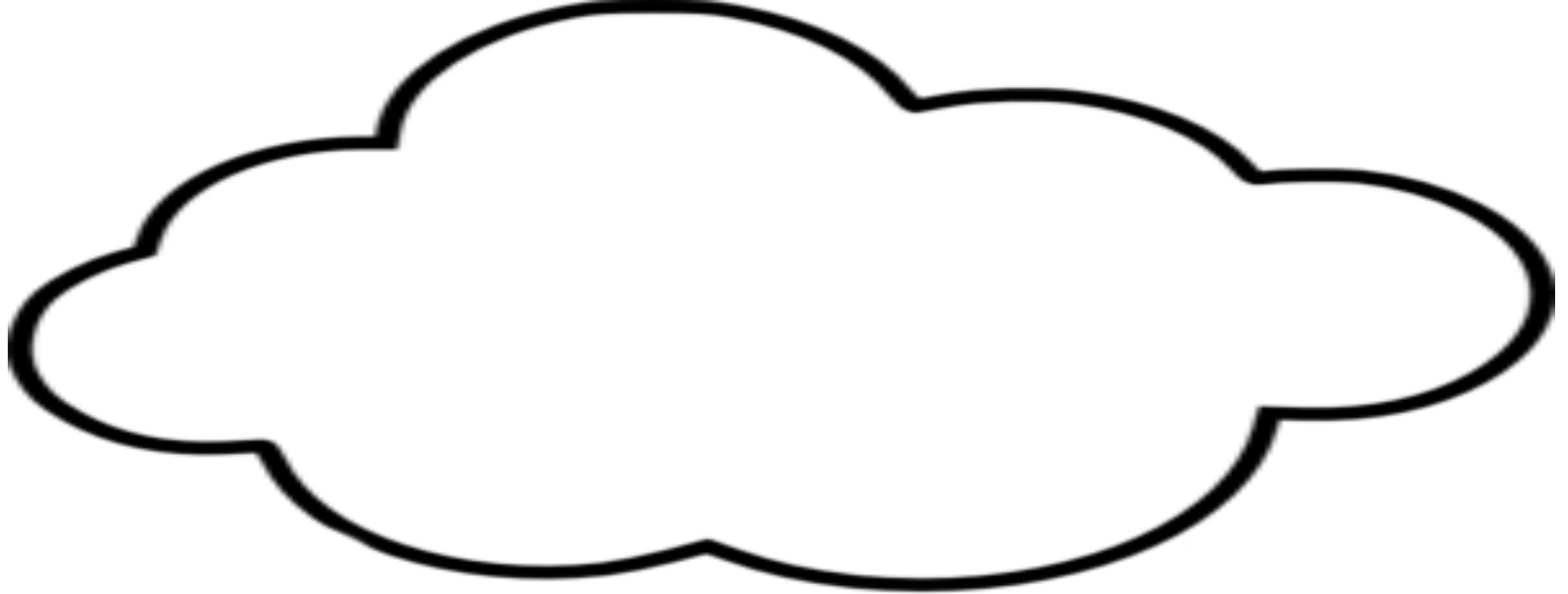
- each accepts p ;
- each accepts that each accepts p ;
- etc.

(Stalnaker 2014)

A PRAGMATIC ARGUMENT

Roughly: We regularly perform speech acts and successfully communicate, in situations where we can't, and can't expect to, change the common ground.



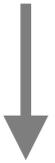


The Coordinated Attack Problem

(The Byzantine Generals Problem)



General A



Enemy Army



General B















Messenger













Dear General B,

*The attack will be at dawn
tomorrow.*

Please confirm.

with love, General A.





Dear General A,

*I got your message. The attack
will be at dawn.*

Please confirm.

your best bro, General B.





Dear General B,

*Got it. I love the smell of
battle in the morning.*

Please confirm.

bros 4 life, General A.





*Dear General A,
Roger. Lock and load.
Please confirm.*

bro grabs, General B.



THEOREM

Given reasonable assumptions about the generals' utility functions and epistemic standards, they will never achieve common knowledge or common belief. (Akkoyunlu et al., 1975; Gray, 1978; Halpern and Moses, 1990; Yemini and Cohen, 1979)

A (PRETTY CLEAR) COROLLARY

They won't achieve common acceptance, either.



Dear General B,

*I've been reading some theoretical
computer science papers, and it turns
out that this is never going to work.*

*Anyway, my men have come down
with cholera. Do you know the cure?*

kisses, General A





Dear General A,

Shame about the attack.

*Wash your hands and don't
eat so close to the latrines.*

💙💙💙, *General B.*



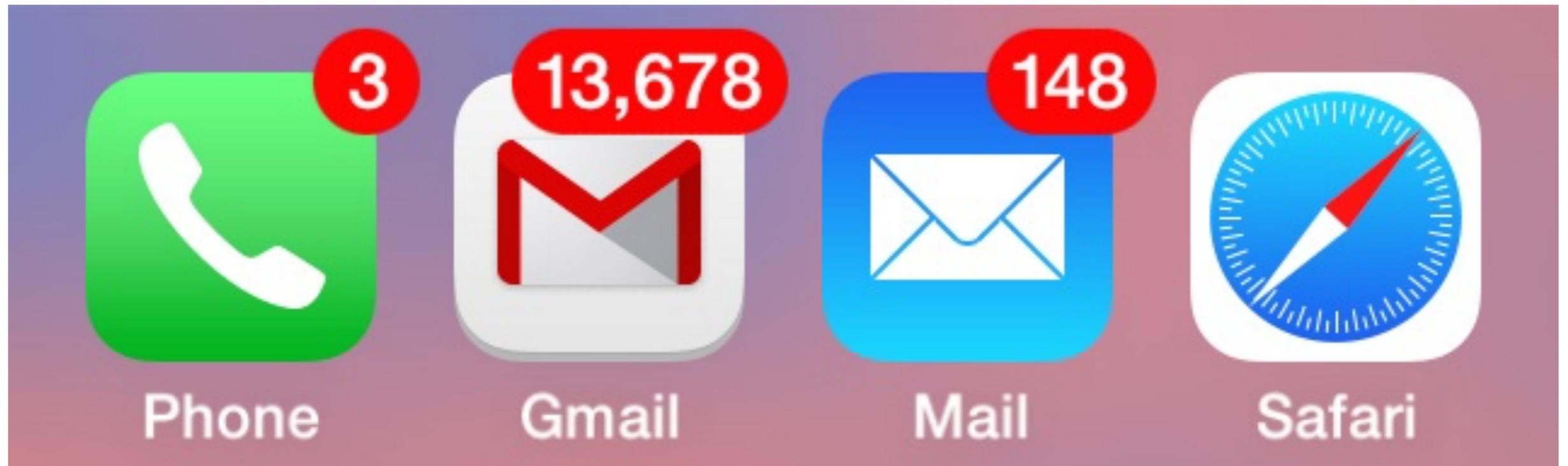


Last Will

~ and ~

Testament





(Rubenstein 1989; Binmore 1998)

CONCLUSIONS

Successful communication doesn't require changing the context, if the context is built out of common (or even shared) attitudes.

Performing a speech act doesn't require *intending* or *proposing* to update the context, either.

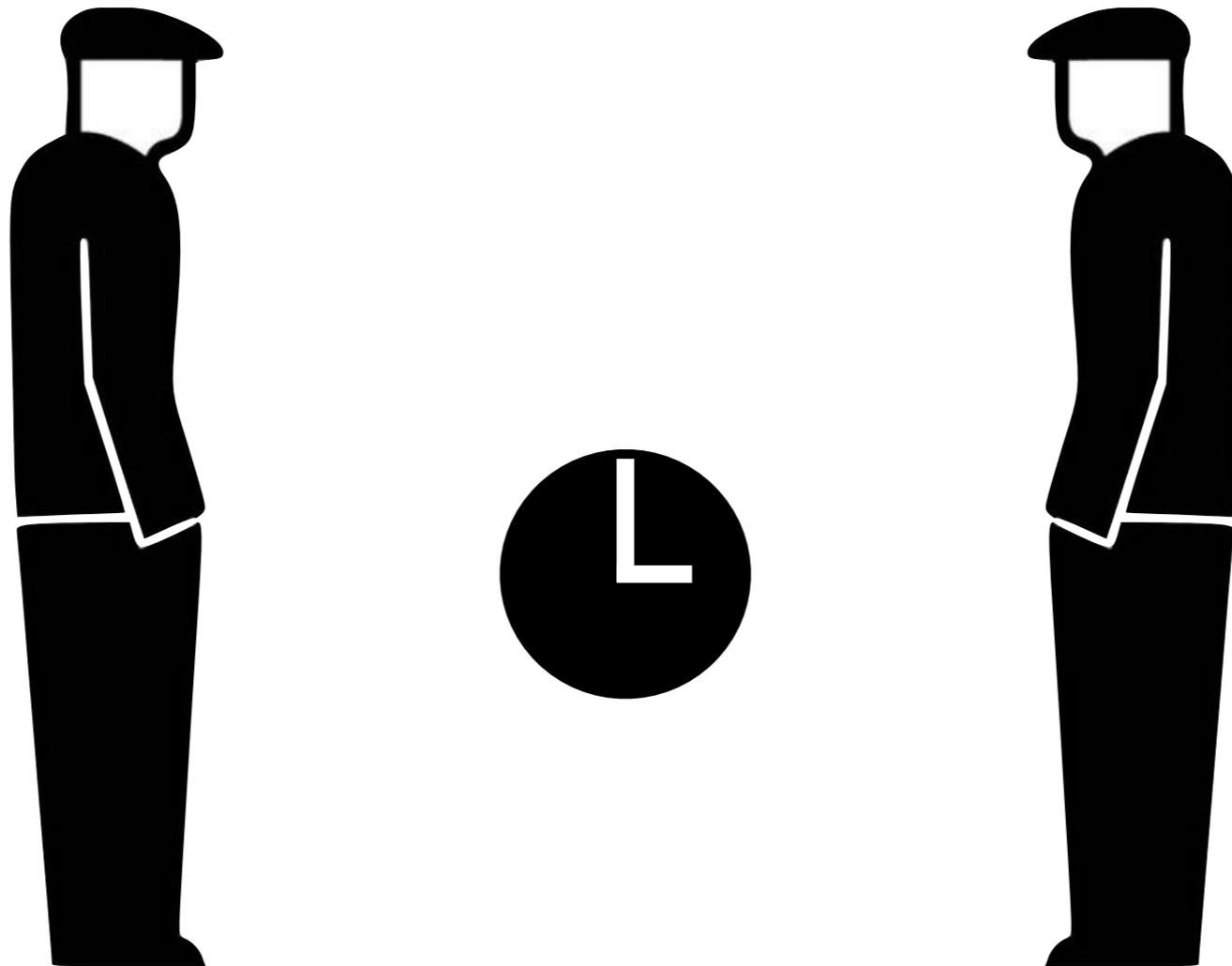
CONCLUSIONS

Context change can result from communication only in certain special circumstances.

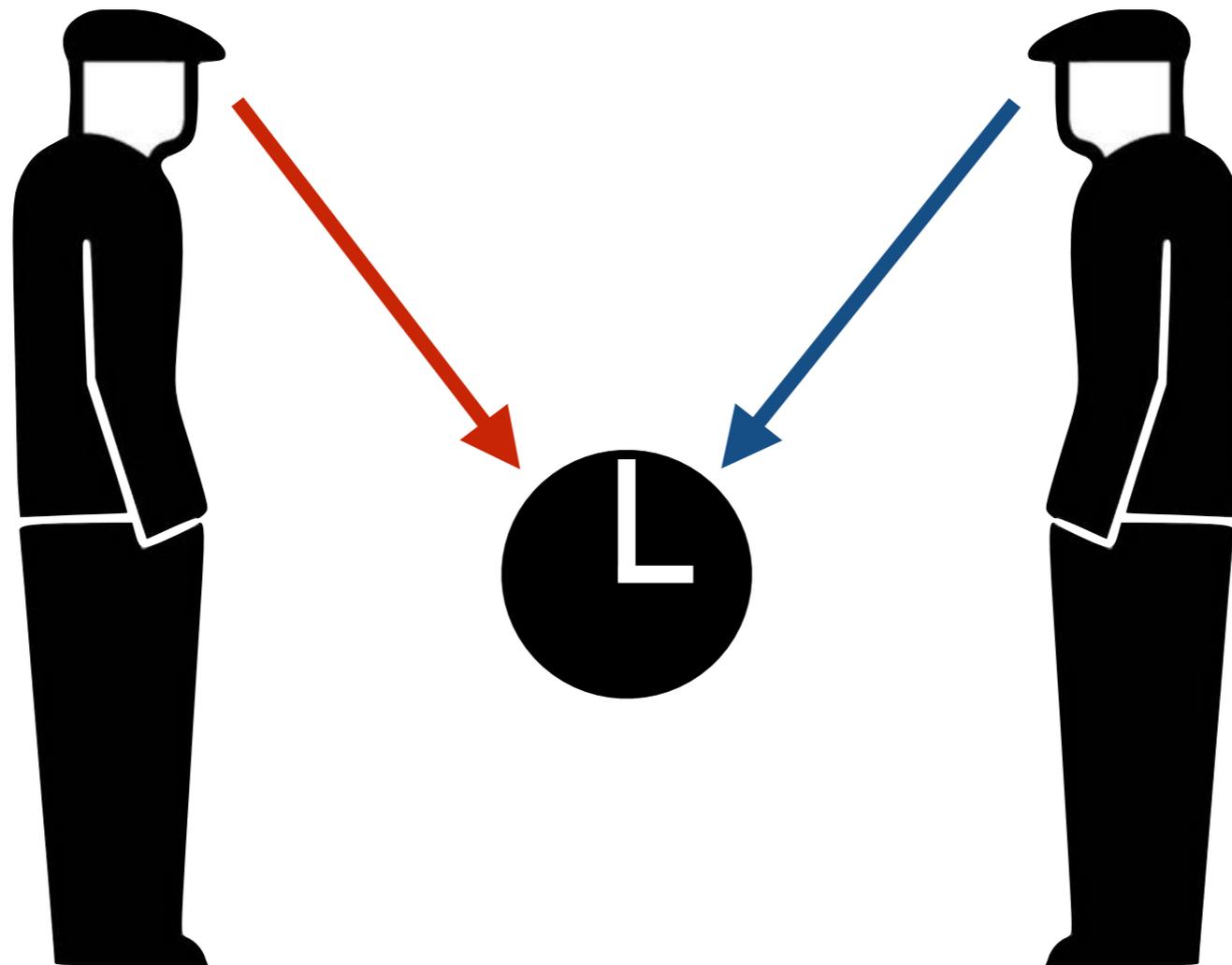
Which circumstances, you might ask?

When the speaker and addressee are in a **shared situation** (Schiffer 1972; Clark & Marshall 1981).

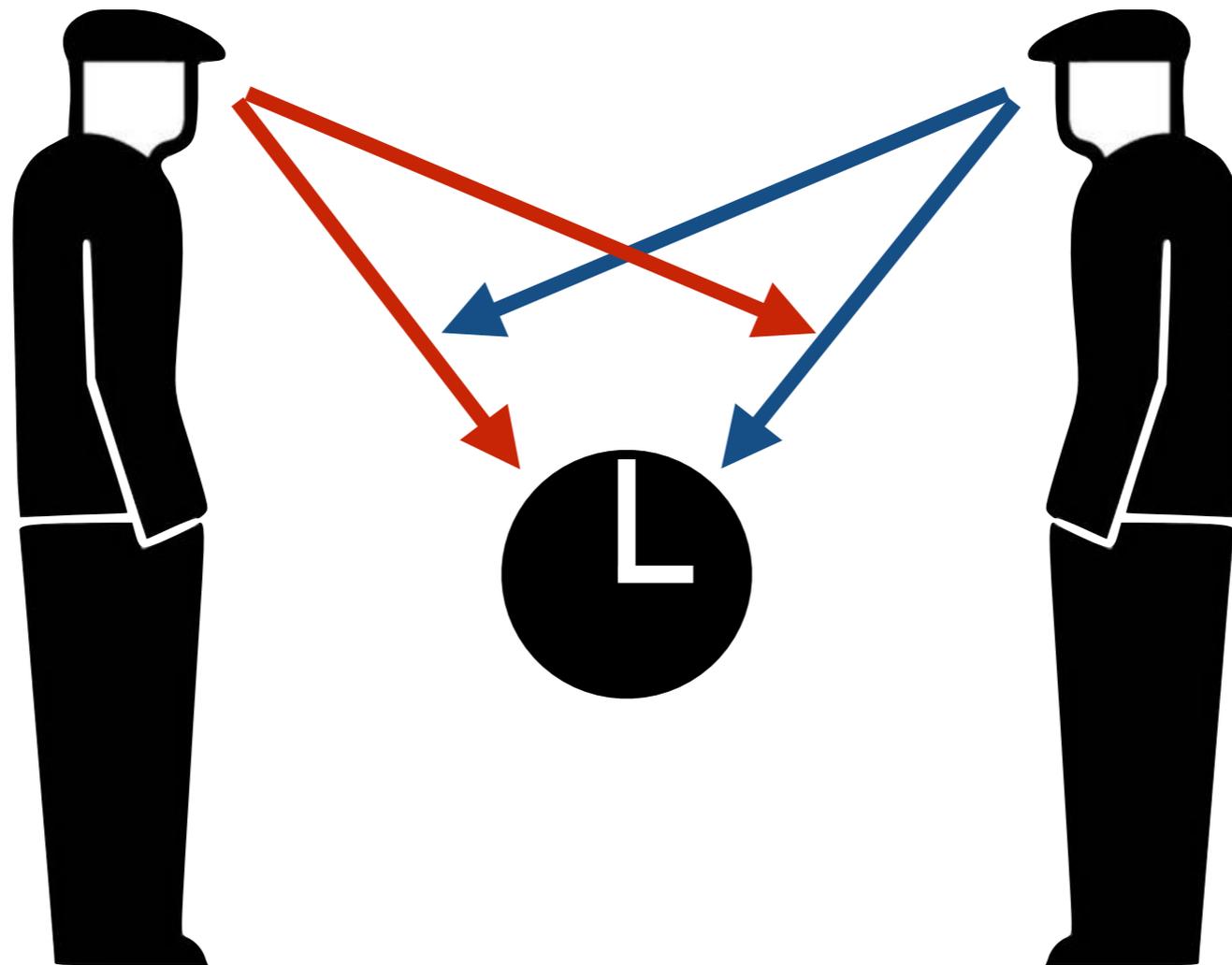
SHARED SITUATIONS



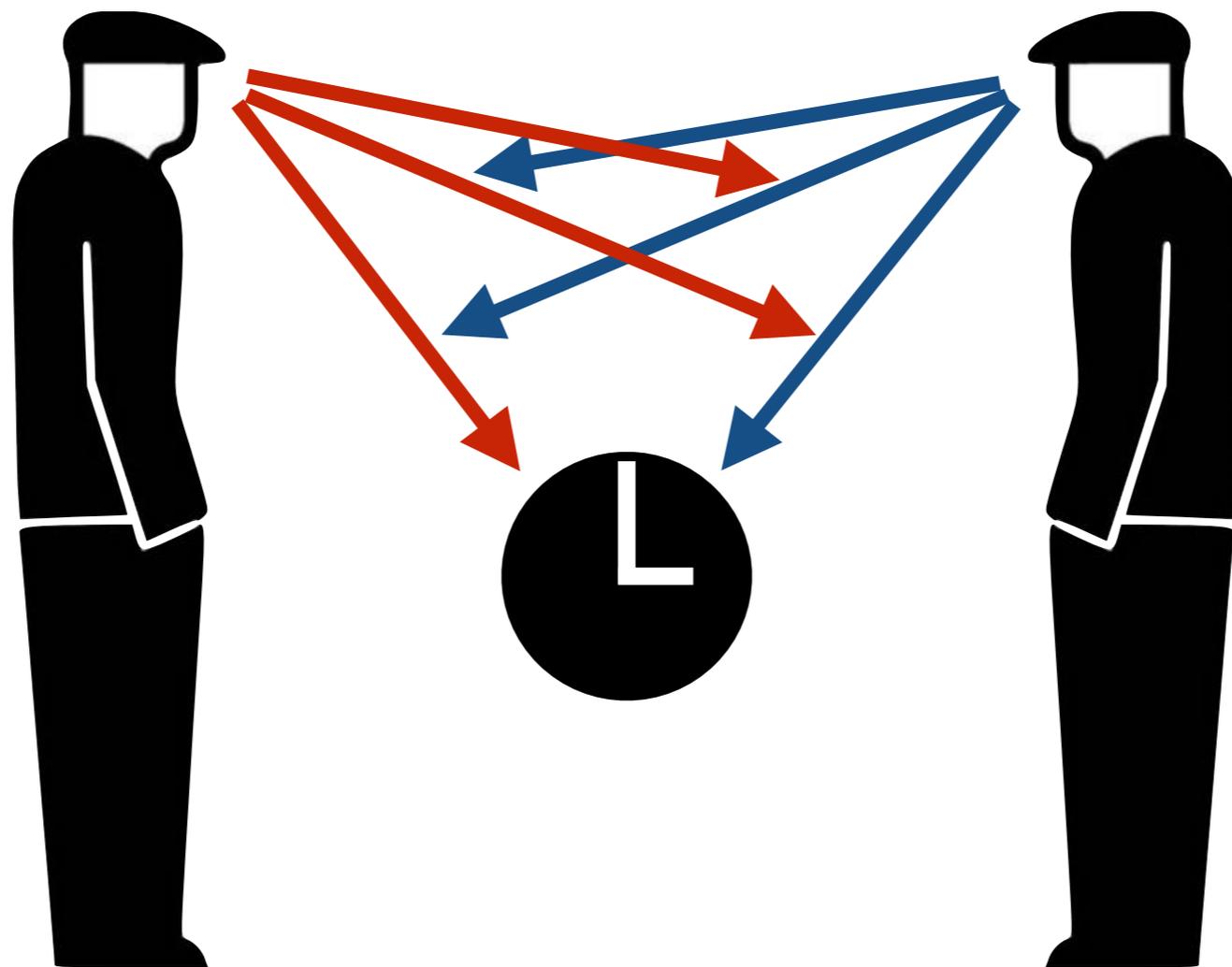
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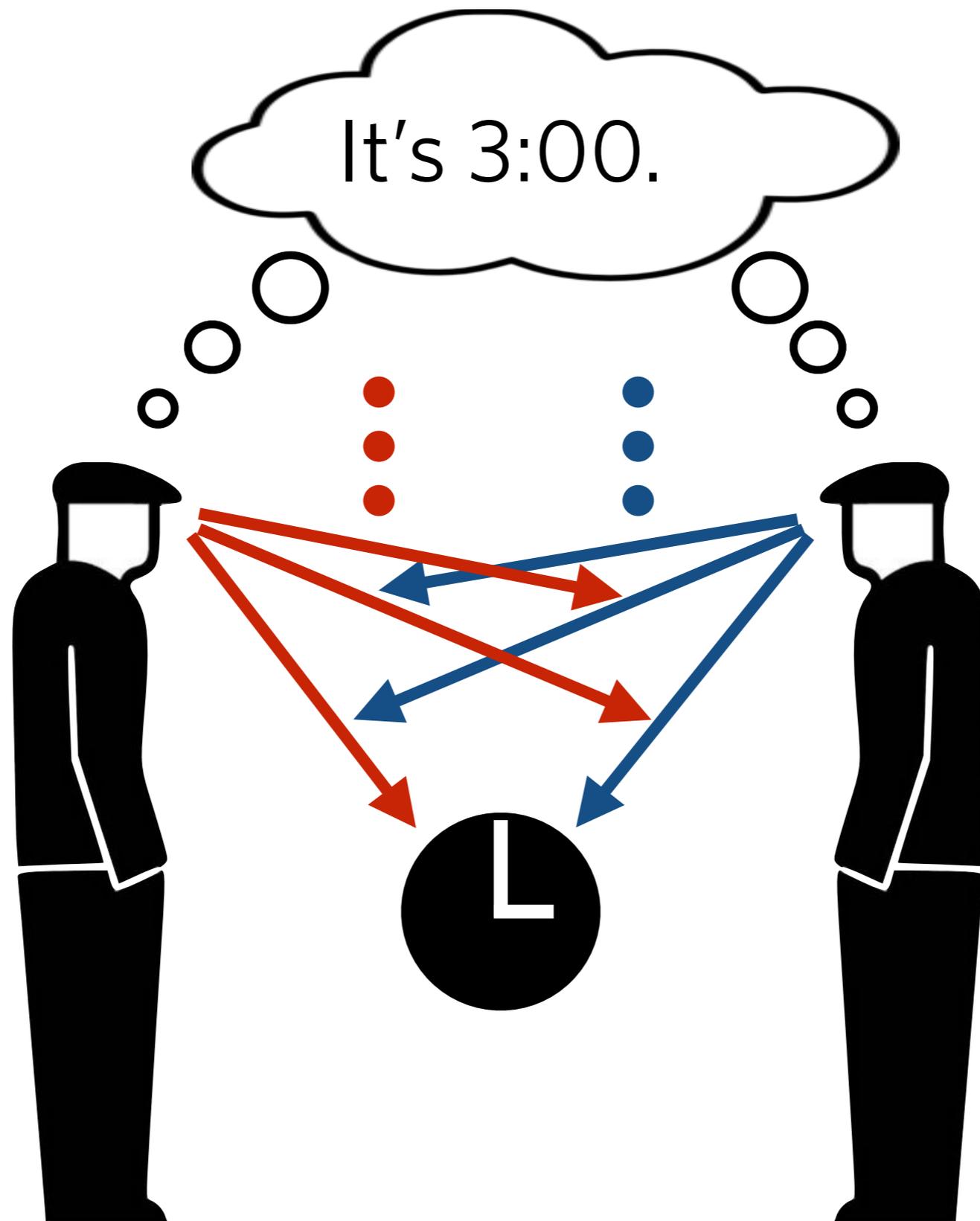
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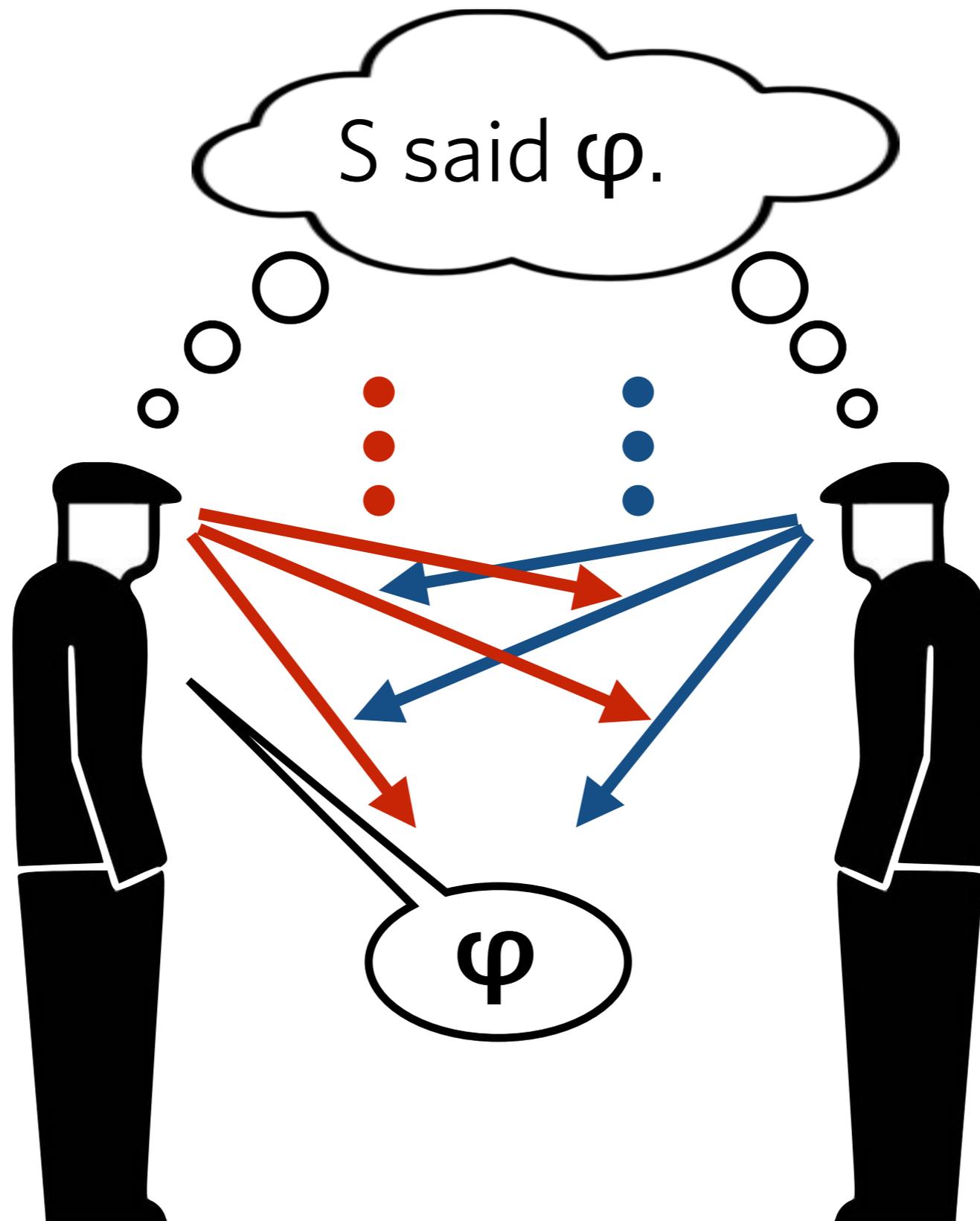
SHARED SITUATIONS



SHARED SITUATIONS



SHARED SITUATIONS



A SEMANTIC ARGUMENT

Informal and heavily abbreviated. For the full formal semantics, see this paper (on my website): 'An Intention-Based Semantics for Imperatives'

[Snow is white.] = ???

DECLARATIVE

[Do the right thing!] = ???

IMPERATIVE

OPTION 1:

STATIC SEMANTICS, DYNAMIC PRAGMATICS

(Stalnaker; Portner; von Stechow & Iatridou; Roberts)

[[Snow is white.]] =

$\lambda w_{st} . \text{snow is white in } w$

(The proposition that snow is white.)

[[Do the right thing!]] =

$\lambda w_{st} . \lambda x_e : x = \alpha_c . x \text{ does the right thing in } w$

(A property (restricted to the addressee) of doing the right thing.)

PROBLEM:

MIXED COORDINATION

(We're about to go into the bar together. I say:)

Buy us drinks and I'll find a table.

NOTE:

- Needn't have a conditional meaning.
- Can mean roughly: 'I'll find a table. Buy me a drink.'
- Can be the consequent of a conditional:
'If your friend is tending bar, buy us drinks and I'll find a table.'

PROBLEM:

MIXED COORDINATION

(We're at a book store. Each of us has three books, but we only have enough money for five, total:)

Put back Naked Lunch or I'll put back Waverley.

(Starr ms)

NOTE:

- Needn't have a conditional meaning.
- Can be the consequent of a conditional:
'If we only have \$5, put back Naked Lunch or I'll put back Waverly.'

PROBLEM:

IMPERATIVE INFERENCE

Buy me a drink.

You won't buy me a drink unless you go to the bar.

↳ So, go to the bar!

Attack if the weather is good.

The weather is good.

↳ So, attack!

OPTION 2: DYNAMIC SEMANTICS

(e.g., Starr)

[[Snow is white.]] =

$\lambda C . CG_C \cup \{\lambda w_{st} . \text{snow is white in } w\}$

(A function that adds a proposition to the Common Ground.)

[[Do the right thing!]] =

$\lambda C . TDL_C \cup \{\lambda w_{st} . \lambda x_e : x = \alpha_c . x \text{ does the right thing in } w\}$

(A function that adds an action to the addressee's To-Do List.)

WHY NOT DYNAMIC SEMANTICS?

- Dynamic treatments propose context-directed theories of speech acts.
- They explain imperative inference in terms of *stipulated* properties of contexts—features that aren't, in turn, explained.

POSITIVE VIEW

- Adopt an addressee-directed theory of speech acts.
- (Roughly: what Grice (1968) thought.)
- An atomic clause's semantic values are the kinds of responses we communicatively intend to produce in addressees when using them literally.

BASIC SEMANTIC VALUES

(This is simplified. See 'An Intention-Based Semantics for Imperatives')

[[Snow is white.]] =

$\lambda M . M$ believes that snow is white.

(The property of being a mind that believes that snow is white.)

[[Do the right thing!]] =

$\lambda M . M$ intends to do the right thing.

(The property of being a mind that intends to do the right thing.)

(Cf. Charlow 2014)

COMPLEX SEMANTIC VALUES

[[Buy us drinks and I'll find a table]] =

$\lambda M . M$ intends to buy drinks and M intends to find a table

(The property of being a mind that intends to buy drinks and find a table.)

COMPLEX SEMANTIC VALUES

[[Put back Naked Lunch or I'll put back Waverly]] =

$\lambda M . M$ is in a state incompatible with failing to intend to put back Naked Lunch and failing to believe that S will put back Waverly.

IMPERATIVE INFERENCE

Buy me a drink.

You won't buy me a drink unless you go to the bar.

↳ So, go to the bar!

This seems valid because rational agents obey strict means coherence:

A intends to φ

A believes that ψ ing is necessary for φ ing

↳ A rationally should intend to ψ .

CONCLUSIONS

- Addressee-directed theories of speech acts make better sense of a wide range of communication.
- They're also compatible with a semantics that makes sense of embedding and inference.
- And, this account of inference *explains* why inferences seem valid in an independently motivated way.

Thanks.