

COMMUNICATION & COGNITIVE ARCHITECTURE

Week 6: Genre and Conversation

Daniel W. Harris

(with special guest: Elmar Unnsteinsson)



Some Non-Conventional Genre Differences

- **Informative vs. Practical**

Sharing information or making decisions?

- **Committal vs. Exploratory**

Undertaking commitments or merely floating options?

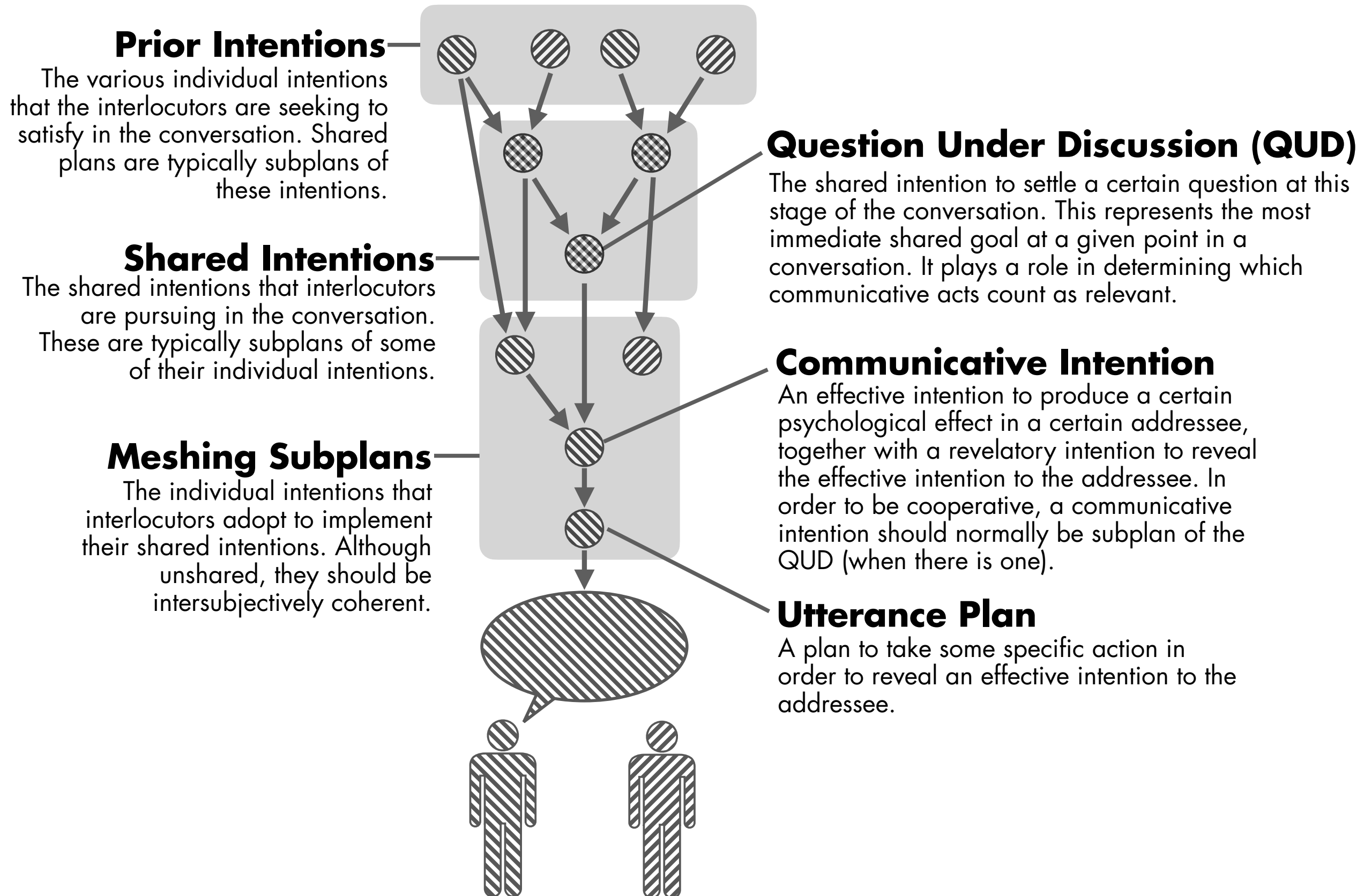
- **Factual vs. Make Believe**

About how things actually are, or about non-actual (make-believe) possibilities?

- **Cooperative vs. Adversarial**

Speakers motivated by complimentary or compatible goals, or not?

CONVERSATION PLANS



Minxin:

One thing I'd like to make sure is the meaning of the term "conversation."

A definition:

A conversation is a verbal information exchange between at least two people. All parties of a conversation are to have some certain objectives to be achieved, and each is to share certain information with the other participants to approach their goals for this conversation. However, the objectives for each participant of the conversation need not be the same nor are they necessarily known by their holder.

—What about cases when people are giving each other information unintentionally?

—What about when only one person is talking?

—What about "an authoritative and disciplined professor reading their prepared lecture notes without allowing their students to interrupt"

—"one's attempt to flirt with someone sitting at the table next to them but receiving nothing but an eye roll?"

—"a drunk person's "conversation" with their reflection in a mirror modeled in the proposed theory?"

Steve, on plans vs. reasons:

Here's how I understood one primary function of conversational genres: they dictate how utterances are to be produced and interpreted given that agents have shared goals in a conversation.

Here's what tripped me up: when discussing the factual/make-believe distinction in section 5, Dan & Elmar write "we should understand this genre difference in terms of Elmar's and Dan's reasons for adopting their QUD in the first place" (20). Okay, but sometimes people will have very different reasons for engaging in make-believe or factual conversations. Eg, if I'm playing doctor with my niece, she might be doing it to have fun, and I might be doing it to gain some insight into the nature of pretense. If genres are supposed to produce interpretive principles for utterances, and the reasons for which me and my niece are playing doctor are diverging, then this should threaten some communication breakdown. But that should not happen given that we're both in the make-believe mode. I think I must've misunderstood something: what is it?

Sadie, on joking

...jokes seem like they could be an interesting case of in-conversation genre complication (I know there's quite a lot to say about joke construction in this vein, but here I'm really just thinking about saying/ understanding something as a joke). One way of thinking about this is that we might understand them as being little fictions, and instances of make-believe. Just as we wouldn't respond in disbelief to a fantastical element of a made up story, we usually allow for some suspension of real-world knowledge and reasoning, and respond accordingly, once we've worked out (hopefully in time) that someone is making a joke. ...

Even if we don't like the idea of jokes as always being kinds of make-believe, humor seems like an easy way to say otherwise infelicitous things without disturbing the genre of the conversation on the axes discussed in the paper, getting around how genres make particular kinds of speech act more natural and expected- although jokes are of course sometimes ill-fitting with the conversation in other ways. A joke setup (often through non-linguistic means like tone of voice or timing) will prevent our utterance from being interpreted as a commitment even in a more committal than exploratory conversation - but it doesn't seem like a joke always shifts the conversation as a whole away from being committal.

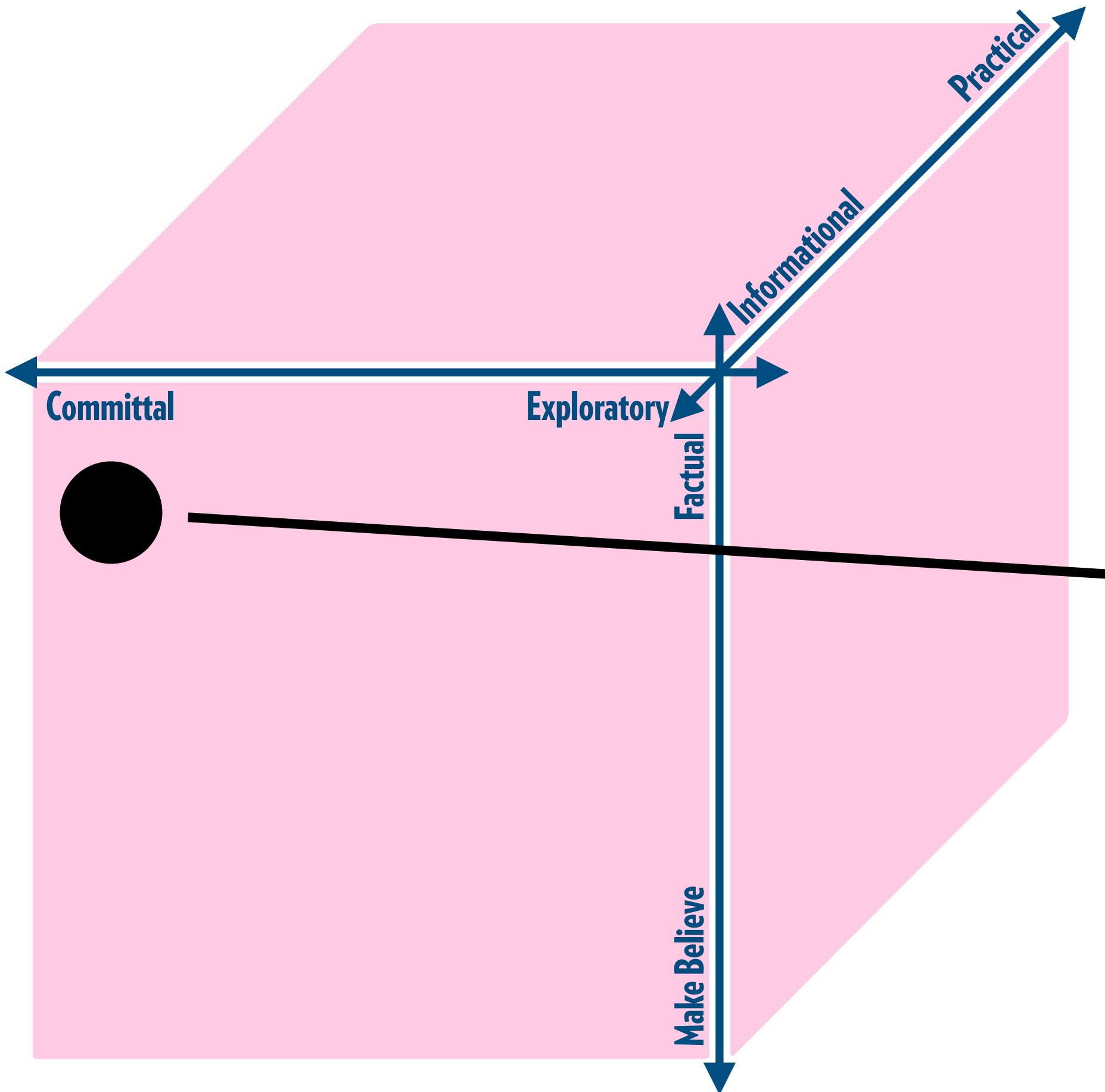
Petru on whether informative/committal collapse into one another:

One small worry/possible challenge about the account of conversational genre. Harris and Unnsteinsson argue for four pairs (presumably not exhaustive?) of “fundamentally distinct genres of conversation” (Harris & Unnsteinsson, p. 25). Two of these pairs – informative v. practical and committal v. exploratory – can be differentiated by looking at the type of QUD characterizing that (part of the) conversation and seeing whether it’s “a question about what to believe” (informative), “a question about what to do” (practical), “a question about how things are” (committal) or a question which “concerns how things might be or what interlocutors might want to do” (Harris & Unnsteinsson, pp. 17-8). I agree that conversations falling within these different genre-labels should count as type-distinct. However, I don’t think it will work to use the QUD as a difference-maker as Harris & Unnsteinsson propose – the ‘informative’ and ‘committal’ genres will collapse into one another.

Steven:

I totally see the merit of genres within the context of solving coordination problems, but I'm a bit confused about the four axes that genres can vary across. Do all genres exist as regions in, presumably, the Cartesian products of these axes? That is to say, for each genre, there is a neighborhood around an axial combination (a,b,c,d) that defines that genre? Or are these axes completely unlinked from one another? Or do genres only exist within one axis at a time?

If the axis are linked (as in a Cartesian product), then is moving between genres continuous, or discrete? Do I pass through overlapping genre regions? If the the axis are unlinked, then what's the basis for their existence? Do we just look at all the conversations we can imagine, analyze their aspects, look for mutually exclusive aspect-pairs and call that an axis? If so, how can we be assured that these axes have been well-defined? I can imagine having an informative, factual conversation, and even a practical, make-believe conversation, but what about a factual, practical conversation?

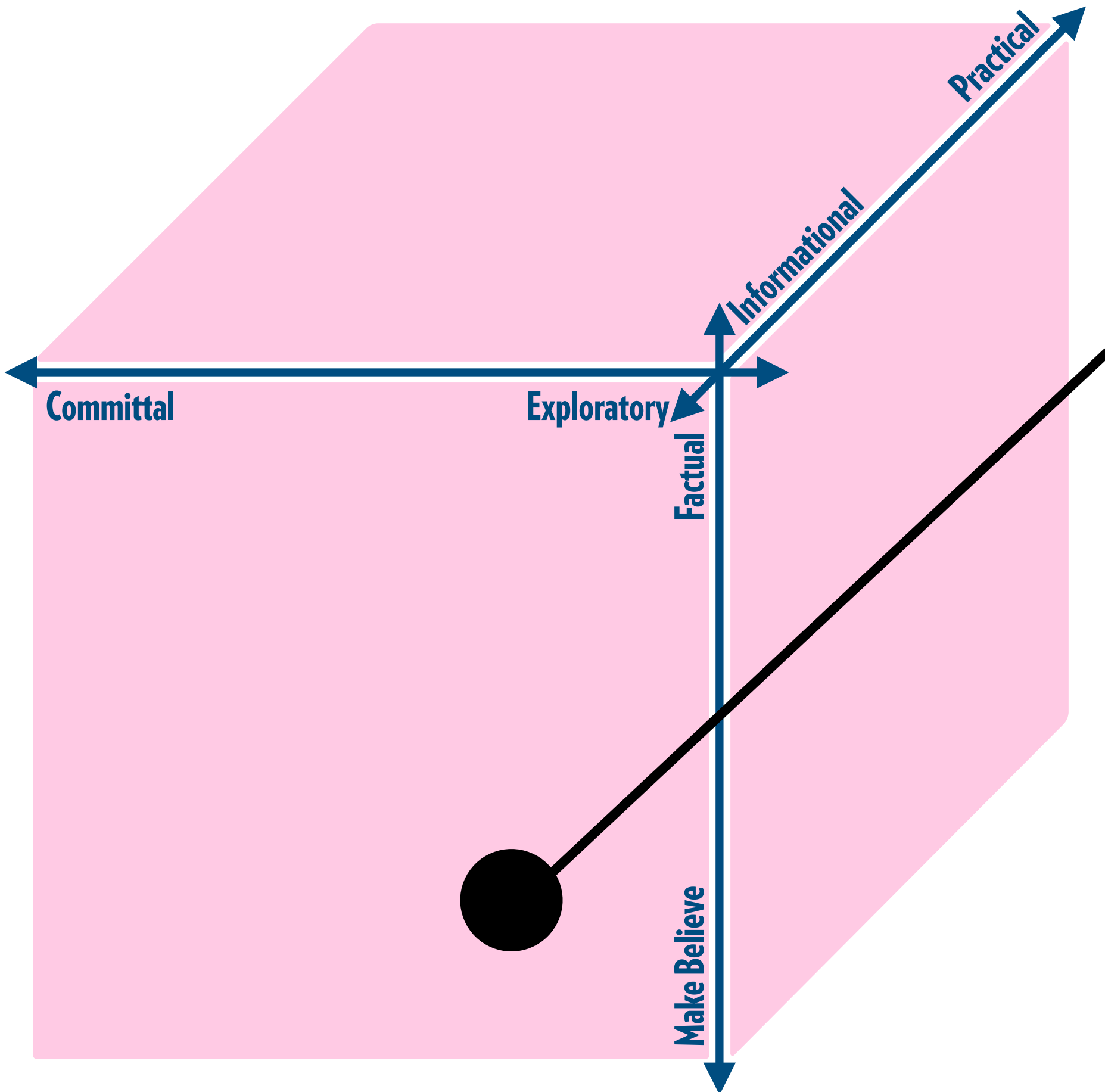


**Committal/Factual/
Informational**

Two people are talking
about late-night TV.

A: "Who was the
original host of the
Tonight Show?"

B: "Steve Allen"

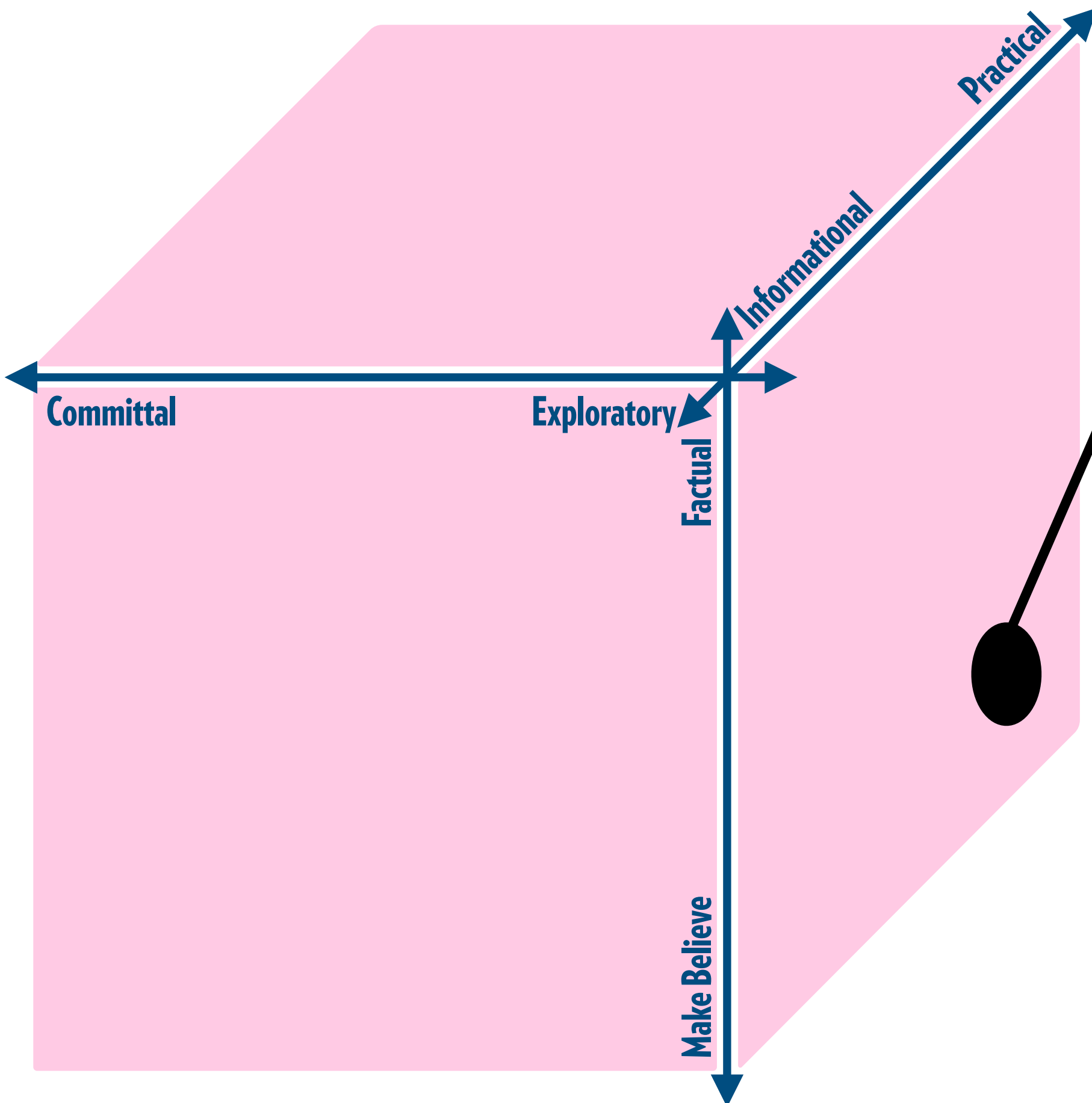


Exploratory/Make Believe/Informational

Two Dungeons & Dragons players talking about which class a certain character might be (according to what the Dungeon Master has already decided):

A: "A paladin"

B: "A fighter"



Exploratory/Make Believe/Practical

Two Dungeons & Dragons players considering options about what to do within the game.

A: "We could fight the orc."

B: "We could open the treasure."

Theo:

I...think some of the differences along the four axis are rarely so clear as to make some of the theory very robust.

In some ways the factual vs make believe distinction seems the clearest, yet in many conversations its not so. When telling a story about King Arthur and his knights to a child, they may have different ideas about the plausibility of Lancelot and a dragon as historical figures than you, and you may not even know if they do or not. So too with a conversation about a haunted house with a friend, or a theological discussion between a literalist and a less-literalist Catholic. And what about conversations when people are pretending, or half pretending, to not believe in the things they are presenting as make-believe. One can maybe say these are edge-cases, but the examples come fast enough that we might need to classify a lot of speech as edge cases.

Matteo:

What are the minimum necessary conditions for something to count as being a conversational genre? What distinguishes between a conversational genre x and some other shared intention y , which is also a superplan capable of generating a QUD and capable of fixing (jointly with the QUD) discursive paradigms surrounding “what is natural to say and what is natural to interpret”?

I use the term discursive paradigm as a placeholder to name an element of the communicative exchange that I would also be interested in better understanding – What cognitive resources are we using to ‘filter’ or ‘frame’ the conversation in accordance with the conversational genre? How does the fact that I know (another placeholder) ‘this is make-believe’ change what is available to me in terms of my interpretation? This amounts to asking about the mechanism through which shared intentions, and, downstream, their QUDs, make different associations/inferences/interpretations possible for us? If, as seems to be the case here, an intention and/or conversational genre in some way ‘attunes’, or ‘directs’ attention/expectation, then through what means?

Cornelia

...a further question I have: especially the committal/exploratory distinction seems gradable (something that fits its characterization as an “axis” at the very beginning). Can the explanations you’re giving account for this?

Steven:

Each axis independently makes sense (and each has been discussed in isolation), but it's not clear why QUDs with their sub-QUDs and super-QUD can't dictate the positions along these axis in the same way that genres do.

Griffin:

Can a conversation fall under multiple genres, even with respect to a single genre axis? I think how one answers partially depends on how finely one individuates conversations. (a) One might stipulate that if an exchange of utterances shifts along an axis, then interlocutors are not having the same conversation; sloganized, change in genre entails change in conversation. (b) One might hold that a single conversation can exemplify multiple genres (even relative to one axis) as it develops. Here's an example to make this more concrete.

A: How long was the hike we did yesterday?

B: Why don't you check the map?

In this exchange, it seems that we have a genre transition from an "informative conversation" to a "practical conversation," at least if we follow Harris and Unnsteinsson's characterization of these "conversations." For it seems to me that (1) has an informative QUD (making it an informative conversation), whereas (2) has a practical QUD (making it a practical conversation). The two options I layed out above are that either (a) (1) and (2) constitute (parts of) two conversations or (b) (1) and (2) constitute one conversation, but a single conversation can change genres.

Shin:

As argued in p. 18, I also think it is plausible that utterances (of non-modal declarative sentences) in exploratory conversations are not assertions, and this fact is explained by QUD in the conversation. However, this seems to raise some puzzles.

Intuitively, these two sentences have different contents. This is clear when we think of informative conversations in which these sentences are uttered.

(1) She has lupus.

(2) She might have lupus.

On the other hand, (1) roughly means the same thing as (2) (used in informative conversation) in exploratory conversation. If so, do they mean the same thing in exploratory contexts? Or does a might-sentence used in exploratory conversation express a weaker modality in some sense?

Shin:

Another question: if declarative sentences in exploratory conversation have non-assertoric force, how a speaker in exploratory conversation can make an assertion—shrink context set rather than make context set compatible with a certain possibility? (one option is to opt out of exploratory conversation, but is there another way to do so while remaining in exploratory conversation?)

Cornelia

I'm skeptical that the committal/exploratory distinction can be explained in the way presented. You claim that "committal conversations are those in which the QUD is a question about how things are or what interlocutors want to do, whereas exploratory conversations are those in which the QUD concerns how things might be or what interlocutors might want to do" (p. 18). What sort of modality is supposed to be captured by this "might"? The most natural candidate is epistemic possibility, which you also seem to endorse on the following page ("epistemically modalized question"). But we would typically characterize a conversation revolving around what might be the case (in an epistemic sense) as aiming at answering the question what is the case: We assert something that's consistent with our knowledge because that brings us closer to the way things are. In other words, the account given implies a fundamental difference between asking how things are and asking how things might be, which I don't see grounds for: When my friend says "I wonder what might be the reason he hasn't texted me back", this doesn't seem fundamentally different from saying "I wonder why he hasn't texted me back". I feel like she would take my response as committal in both cases if I said "he's not into you".

Griffin, responding to Cornelia:

...perhaps Harris and Unnsteinsson leave open the modal force of "might" in the characterization on page 18, and then later specify that they mean an "epistemically modalized question" on 19, because the example they are discussing on 19 is a specific case of exploratory conversation, but other exploratory conversations can have QUDs with different sorts of modality.

For instance, imagine a group of judges – A, B, and C – who are analyzing a recent criminal case. For simplicity's sake, suppose (i) they aren't presiding over the case, so the conversation is informative not practical; (ii) they agree on all the facts; and (iii) they have all the facts one would need to make a decision. A: "What should the defendant's punishment have been?" B: "He should have gotten a slap on the wrist" C: "He ought to have gone to prison for a long time." I think in this case, it is plausible that the judges engage in an exploratory conversation (if we define that as a convo with a QUD that concerns how things might be, or what interlocutors might do), but that the modal force of the "might" is deontic.

Griffin, responding to Cornelia:

However, thinking through this sort of case made me even more confused about the labels that Harris and Unnsteinsson use. It's very unclear to me why a conversation with a QUD that concerns how things might be or what interlocutors might do is "exploratory" rather than "committal." I think that in the deontic case, judges B and C are in some ways committed to their views. I'm having a hard time getting this straight, but it just doesn't seem like the contrast they are after pits commitment against exploration.

Eleonora (1/4)

I find myself strongly agreeing with Cornelia's remarks/confusions about the role of modality in the paper, specifically in the context of committal vs exploratory conversations. It is unclear to me that, in the context of an exploratory conversation, one ought to utter claims such as 'might Φ ', if one does not in fact think that Φ is a relevant candidate for actuality. (Granted, sometimes speakers truly do not know which possibility is even remotely plausible; most often, however, this does not seem to be the case). Indeed, mentioning a possibility that is compatible with one's evidence, as well as with the common ground, without the intention to implicate that such possibility is relevant, seems to me to be a violation of the Cooperative Principle, and more specifically of the Maxim of Relevance. In other words, utterances putting forth some possibility, or containing epistemic modals such as 'might', seem warranted if they attempt to shave off worlds from the context set (i.e. as tentative assertions of the factive kind).

Eleonora (2/4)

This is why I find Harris and Unnsteinsson's characterization of exploratory conversations as being: "all about filling the space of possibilities, by proposing something that might be done or might be true" to be somewhat weak. In uttering a claim which puts forth some possibility, speakers rarely do so to merely fill up/reiterate the modal space – i.e. speakers usually do not claim "it is possible that ϕ " to merely imply that, given the evidence, "not necessarily not ϕ ". Rather, such utterances are usually accompanied by a commitment of some sort to the relevance of the possibility being highlighted. (edited)

Eleonora (3/4)

If this weren't the case, these utterances would be conversationally inert. This is because, since (epistemic) modalized claims are usually about possibilities *already/in principle* compatible with the context set/common ground, then presumably conversational participants are, for the most part, *already aware* of what might be done, or might be true, etc. As such, these utterances would add nothing new. Thus it seems more plausible to me to understand exploratory conversations as those wherein one raises a specific possibility to salience because it seems relevant given the specific QUD. This is why I also disagree with Harris and Unnsteinsson's claim that "[in committal conversations] it can be fitting to criticize a speaker for speaking falsely... [while in exploratory conversations] asking for justification or expressing disagreement tends to be infelicitous or ill-fitting. " (4). This seems too strong a claim to me; for instance, the following exchange seems felicitous to me, despite the fact that one speaker disagrees with the other about some possibility:

A: "Bob might be in Boston."

B: "No, he can't be. I saw him just now by the Flatiron."

Eleonora (4/4)

Lastly, it was not clear to me that, in the context of the exploratory conversation about the patient's diagnosis, that the utterance (6) It's lupus Ought to be interpreted as a possibility being floated around, with no commitment on the part of the speaker. Rather, this seemed to me a case similar to those mentioned by Kratzer (2012), who argues that epistemic claims often contain covert modal operators, i.e. are implicitly modalized: modal operators are quantifiers whose domains are sets of possible worlds or situations, and the QUD can restrict those domains further. In uttering (6), the speaker seems to be making an assertion of a descriptive kind (for she claims that it is lupus). In turn, in uttering (6), the speaker seems to be claiming something along the lines of: "If the patient has such-and-such symptoms, then it is lupus", where its logical form features an implicitly modalized MUST: (6') (MUST: the symptoms are such-and-such) (It is lupus). The epistemic claim is then true iff the patient has lupus in the all accessible worlds (i.e. those compatible with the context set/common ground), where the patient has such-and-such symptoms. In other words, if (6) is to be interpreted as being implicitly modalized, it seems more plausible to me to interpret it as containing a covert "must", rather than "might".

QUD: On which day will I teach?

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

QUD: On which day will I teach?

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Not Monday!

QUD: On which day will I teach?

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Not Monday

QUD: On which day will I teach?

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Wednesday

QUD: On which day will I teach?

Wednesday

Wednesday

QUD: On which day *might* I teach?

**(Option 1: Epistemic modals
have ordinary semantic contents)**

QUD: On which day *might* I teach?



(Option 1: Epistemic modals
have ordinary semantic contents)

QUD: On which day *might* I teach?

M

Tu

W

Th

M,Tu

M,W

M,Th

Tu,W

Tu,Th

W,Th

M,Tu,W

M,Tu,Th

M,W,Th

Tu,W,Th

M,Tu,W,Th

I might teach
on Monday.

(Option 1: Epistemic modals
have ordinary semantic contents)

QUD: On which day *might* I teach?

M

M,Tu

M,W

M,Th

M,Tu,W

M,Tu,Th

M,W,Th

M,Tu,W,Th

I *might* teach
on Monday.

(Option 1: Epistemic modals
have ordinary semantic contents)

(Option 2: Expressivism about epistemic modals)

**On which day
might I teach?**

Expressivism about Epistemic Modals

FRANK VELTMAN

DEFAULTS IN UPDATE SEMANTICS

ABSTRACT. The aim of this paper is twofold: (i) to introduce the framework of update semantics and to explain what kind of semantic phenomena may successfully be analysed in it: (ii) to give a detailed analysis of one such phenomenon: default reasoning.

KEY WORDS: dynamic semantics, defaults, epistemic modalities.

Attention! *Might* in Inquisitive Semantics

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Abstract

This paper points out that the notion of meaning propounded by inquisitive semantics is not only suited to capture both informative and inquisitive content, but also a sentence's potential to *draw attention* to certain possibilities. This gives rise to a novel analysis of *might*.

Epistemic Modals

SETH YALCIN

Epistemic modal operators give rise to something very like, but also very unlike, Moore's paradox. I set out the puzzling phenomena, explain why a standard relational semantics for these operators cannot handle them, and recommend an alternative semantics. A pragmatics appropriate to the semantics is developed and interactions between the semantics, the pragmatics, and the definition of consequence are investigated. The semantics is then extended to probability operators. Some problems and prospects for probabilistic representations of content and context are explored.

ARTICLE

NOÛS

This paper might change your mind

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order.

Abstract

Linguistic intervention in rational decision making is standardly captured in terms of information change. But the standard view gives us no way to model interventions involving expressions that only have an attentional effects on conversational contexts. How are expressions with non-informational content – like epistemic modals – used to intervene in rational decision making? We show how to model rational decision change without information change: replace a standard conception of value (on which the value of a set of worlds reduces to values of individual

QUD: On which day will I teach?

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

**On which day
might I teach?**

(Option 2: Expressivism about
epistemic modals)

QUD: On which day will I teach?

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

***I might teach
on Monday.***

**(Option 2: Expressivism about
epistemic modals)**

QUD: On which day will I teach?

Monday

Tuesday

***I might teach
on Wednesday.***

**(Option 2: Expressivism about
epistemic modals)**

QUD: On which day will I teach?

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

***I might teach
on Friday.***

**(Option 2: Expressivism about
epistemic modals)**

QUD: On which day will I teach?

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

***I might teach
on Friday.***

**(Option 2: Expressivism about
epistemic modals)**

QUD: On which day will I teach?

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Big, unanswered questions:

How do might questions update
the context?

Why do they put us in
brainstorming conversations?

On which day
might I teach?

(Option 2: Expressivism about
epistemic modals)

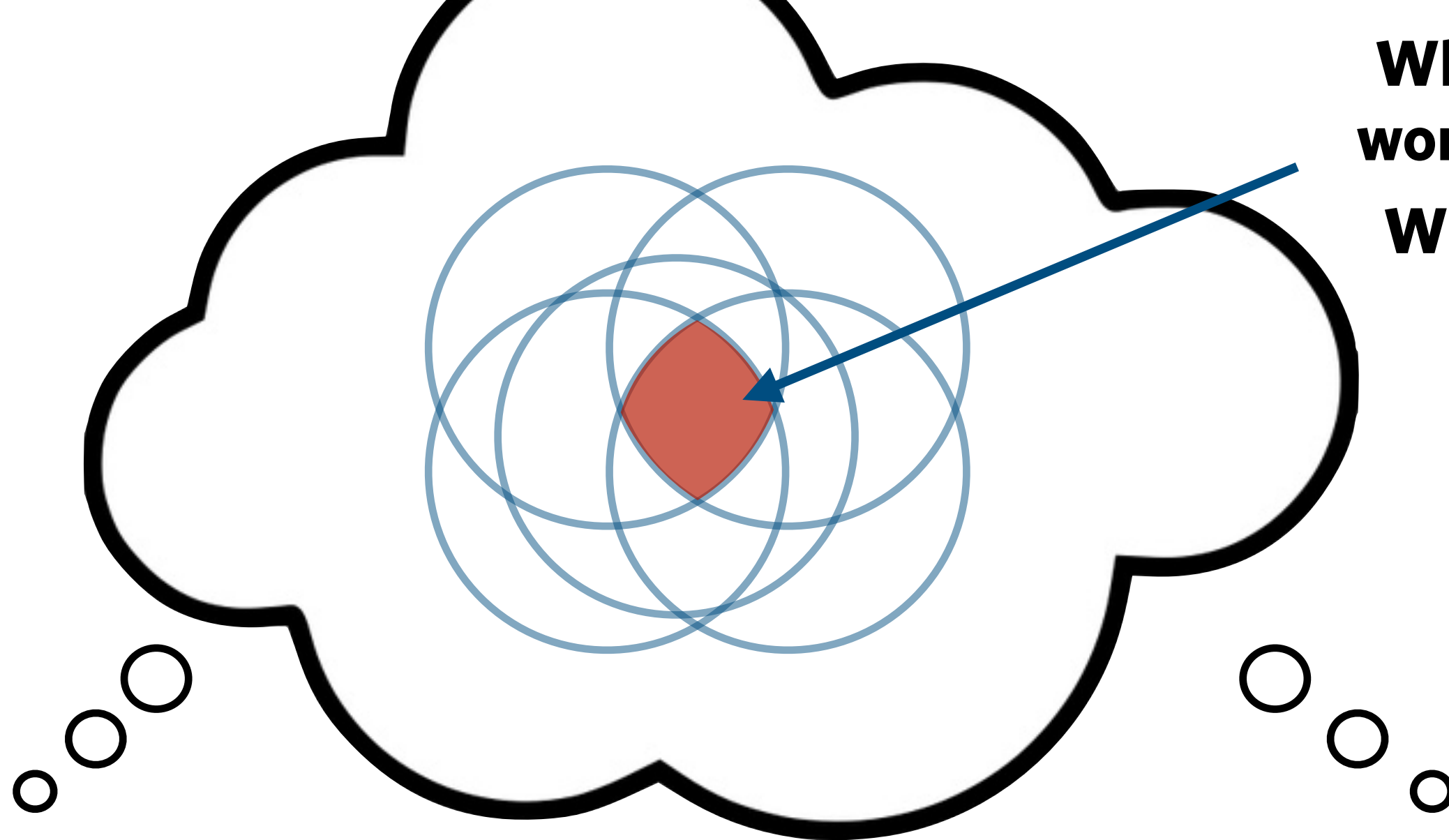
Kristin

I can't help but think that there are higher-stack questions that are assumed when the pretense to imagine is introduced, in conversation(!). Such as: "What is our story-world" and/or "What coheres within our given story-world" which would serve as the prevailing constraint on further questioning. (Story-world is a literary term but does have some overlap with possible world theories). I could see how this higher-stack question would be the same if Gillirut is 'real' in The Lord of The Rings, since we are conveying factual information which is true of Tolkien's story. But, assuming this higher-stack question (which lower-stacks would be in the service of), I don't know if we can say the "QUD is the same in both cases," if "Gillirut is a real person" (19) living wherever. Maybe I need more clarity on how factual v.s. make-believe "must be drawn above the level of the QUD" (20) or I need to consider make-believe more broadly or I need to be set straight on QUD's ...

Kristin

Acceptance: I'm interested in the mention of Stalnaker's acceptance for the sake of conversation (Harris 6) and conversational tone (21). Harvey Lederman seems to regard these together, *A Theory of Common Ground* (Chap 2): "Conversational tone determines what attitude is appropriate to the propositions introduced in the course of the conversation" (48). Though conversational tone "determines a unique attitude [..] in real conversations different attitudes may be appropriate to different (subsets of the) propositions which are relevant to the progress of the conversation" (48-49). Is this compatible with factual v.s. make-believe? I wonder if a better understanding of this would help me with my last question somehow.

**Which
worlds?
Why?**



**Everyone has to submit
three paper pitches.**



Elliot:

Harris and Unnsteinsson claim that factual and make-believe conversations can have the same QUD and we therefore need to introduce shared-super plans to differentiate the genres. I'm not so sure factual and make-believe conversations really can have the same QUD and therefore "have the same relevance constraints on subsequent sentential moves" p.19.

First, a quibble about the specific Gilitrutt example. Based on some googling it looks like Gilitrutt is a figure in icelandic folklore and is in that sense presumably 'make-believe'. But questions about folklore can also be factual. For example, a group of folklorists may have a conversation listing the properties of Bigfoot (who they all acknowledge to be a fictional entity). And even though bigfoot is in some sense 'make-believe' there are still factually wrong answers about what bigfoot is like (e.g., he doesn't fly around West Virginia, that's mothman). In other words there can be discussions about make-believe entities in a factual genre (even if the participants all believe the entity is make believe, like the folklorists do). I'm not sure if Gilitrutt is meant to be (i) a figure in Icelandic folklore or (ii) just a random name used for a free-flowing storytelling game. Either use could be described as 'make-believe' conversation but I think theses sense are important to keep separate. In either case i'm not sure participants will operate with the same QUD when compared to a factual case.

Elliot:

Start with case (i) where we have a conversation about a character conceived of as fictional versus a conversation about a character conceived of as actually existing. Maybe a group of cryptozoologists and a group of folklorists are both discussing the properties of bigfoot. Do these conversations have different QUDs? I think so, in particular because different sorts of things will count as relevant in each conversation. It will be highly relevant to the folklorists how bigfoot is portrayed in popular culture but irrelevant to the cryptozoologists (we don't study lions via the wizard of oz). Conversely trail cam footage will be relevant to the cryptozoologists but irrelevant to the folklorists (fictional creatures can't be captured on trail cams).

I take it that Harris and Unnsteinsson have something more like case (ii) in mind, where the contrast is between a discussion about the properties of a character in a storytelling game or a 'real' entity (whether a pre-existing fictional character or an actual creature). Even in this case it doesn't seem like the same conversational moves are licensed. If we're just playing a make-believe game the following move seems licit;

Dan: How many eyes does Gilitrutt have?

Elmar: I'm not sure, you pick.

But Elmar's move is infelicitous in a factual conversation. Since different moves are licensed the two conversations should have different QUDs.

Kelly:

Practically speaking, there are often a lot of interpretative space for each presupposition and/or statement in a conversation, and I'm getting from the paper that the four genre-distinction axes are tools that can narrow down common ground/better clarify the QUDs at hand. But along the line of external influences to the conversation (such as prosodic focus and shared attitudes), I'm wondering in the cases of interacting with non-strangers (meaning there are numerous conversations over time), if the introduction of prior beliefs, personalities, types of relationships will influence where the conversation falls on these four genre-distinction axes. Most importantly, maybe because of these pre-existing strictures, a conversation will always be more make-believe than factual or more adversarial than cooperative, despite the effort of interlocutors trying to explicitly/implicitly denote where they want the conversation to be on the axes?

Griffin

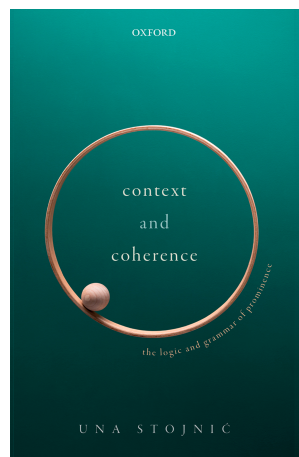
And now for a totally different question: Harris and Unnsteinsson consider an alternative interpretation of why Roberts' QUD model is so successful: the QUD machinery is "grammatical," in the sense that it is a function built into our linguistic system (16). They argue against this interpretation because they think that a QUD can be installed by non-linguistic means. Could we discuss this argument more thoroughly? I don't quite see how it follows from the fact that a QUD can be installed by non-linguistic means, that the QUD machinery is non-grammatical.

OXFORD

context
and
coherence

the logic and grammar of prominence

U N A S T O J N I Ć



While the traditional picture might be *prima facie* natural, it is, I shall argue, mistaken. According to the account of context and context-sensitivity I shall develop, the features of context that fix the meaning of context-sensitive expressions are *linguistically* determined, through the effects of *discourse conventions*, which trigger semantic effects of the linguistic items an utterance—or more generally the discourse in which it is embedded—comprises. The context, I shall argue, is a running record of *linguistic* information that is contributed by discourse-internal, linguistic cues; the record, in turn, fully determines the interpretation by fixing the content expressed by the discourse.¹² My conception of context is thus *linguistic*, rather than extra-linguistic.

(p.10)