



MANDY SIMONS

**AVAILABILITY
WITHOUT COMMON
GROUND**

SIMONS' TARGET

There is a single body of information that is:

- Common Ground (here defined as the set of propositions that interlocutors commonly believe that they all accept (Stalnaker 2002))
- That which it is the “characteristic effect” of assertions to add their content to (Stalnaker 1978)
- The information that is “available” for use in pragmatic inference (Stalnaker 2014)

AVAILABILITY: STALNAKER

...the account of context we need for our background story must distinguish a body of information that is *available*, or presumed to be available, as a resource for communication. The development of this point is part of what led to [the theory of] context as a body of available information: the common ground. ...

—Stalnaker, *Context*, pp.24–25

AVAILABILITY: STALNAKER

The same notion of context plays the role of providing the information relative to which context-dependent expressions are interpreted and the role of representing the possibilities that speech acts aim to discriminate between, and it is this fact that allows for a perspicuous representation of the dynamic interaction of context and content.

—Stalnaker, *Context*, pp.24–25

AVAILABILITY: CLARK & CARLSON

...when a listener tries to understand what a speaker means, the process he goes through can limit memory access to information that is common ground between the speaker and his addressees. ... and its performance will be optimal if it limits its access to that common ground. Whether its design is actually optimal in this respect is a question that can only be answered empirically

—Herbert H. Clark and Thomas B. Carlson, *Context for Comprehension* (1981)

AVAILABILITY: CLARK & CARLSON

- Clark and Carlson seem to be saying that *all* pragmatic inference could (and should) ignore non-CG information.
- Notably, Stalnaker does not commit to this claim. It is compatible with everything he says that CG plays a narrower range of circumscribed roles in pragmatic reasoning.



HELLER & BROWN SCHMIDT DETOUR

- When I ask someone a question, I need to reason about their private information (e.g. that they have the answer to the question), and not just about what is common ground.
- HBS point out that this shows that speakers don't restrict their attention to CG when doing pragmatic reasoning.
- (Note: not even Clark and Carlson said that *speakers* must completely restrict their attention to CG.)



AVAILABILITY: CLARK & CARLSON

“You can tell someone about your day, which has to be something that only you know.”

—My 7yo daughter, after a minute of me trying to explain to her what I was reading

AVAILABILITY VS. RETRIEVABILITY

DESCRIPTIVE OR NORMATIVE?

A general theme in Simons' argument:

- A lot of the main arguments for common ground seem to be normative, about what ideal speaker/hearers should do.
- But linguistics should be in the business of giving descriptive/predictive theories, not normative recommendations.

ROLES FOR COMMON GROUND?

- **Target of Assertion**

The “characteristic” or “essential” effect of asserting p is to add p to the CG (Stalnaker 1978)

- **Felicitous Assertion**

It is (usually?) infelicitous to assert p if p is already CG (Stalnaker 1978)

- **Presupposition**

Presupposing p is felicitous only if p is CG (or if p can be accommodated) (Stalnaker 1974)

ROLES FOR COMMON GROUND?

- **Context Sensitivity**

CG “provid[es] the information relative to which context-dependent expressions are interpreted” (Stalnaker 2014; cf. 1978)

- **Felicitous Definite Reference**

It's infelicitous to use a referring expression if it won't be CG who the referent is (Stalnaker 1978; Clark and Marshall 1981)

- **Anaphoric Dependence**

Anaphora depend on some aspect of the context that was put there by the antecedent.

QUESTION:
**WHICH CG ROLES FIGURE IN
SIMONS' CRITICISMS?**

**DO THEY APPLY TO ALL OF CG'S
ROLES?**

SIMONS' ARGUMENTS

SIMONS' ARGUMENTS

RAMADAN

CONTEXT: Leslie has just accepted Micah's invitation to go to lunch. Leslie has no opinion about whether Ned observes Ramadan.

Leslie: Let's see if Ned wants to come too.

Micah: It's Ramadan.

IMPLICATURE: Ned won't come.

PREMISE: Ned is fasting.

TIMING PROBLEM:

Leslie needs the premise in order to infer the implicature.

But she won't accept the premise until after she has identified the implicature, and inferred that it is what is needed to make Micah's utterance relevant.

So, Leslie needs access to non-CG info in order to interpret Micah's implicature.

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ANDRE:

It's not obvious that Leslie needs the premise to get to the implicature.

She could instead reason:

"if Micah does not say yes then they are giving a reason why the answer to my question is no; they mention Ramadan so Ramadan must explain why the answer is no; the most likely such explanation is that Ned observes Ramadan; so [Ned won't come]"

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TIMING PROBLEM IN GENERAL:
"the hearer must...be able to identify consequences of using the retrieved proposition in interpretation prior to accepting it, in order to determine whether this is plausibly the intended background assumption. The same must be true for any case of accommodation."

—Simons, p.8

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POSSIBLE TRIVIALIZING GENERALIZATION:

Any time I interpret an assertion, I may consider whether to accept or reject it, and this will depend on checking it (and its presuppositions) against private as well as public information.

SIMONS' ARGUMENTS

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PREMISE: Ned is fasting.

QUESTION 1:

Why think that all of the background info needed for interpreting implicatures must be presupposed/CG?

Should we take this to be part of the functional role of CG?

SIMONS' ARGUMENTS

I therefore use a case of what has been called contextual presupposition: a background implication necessary for deriving a conversational implicature (Kadmon 2001; Simons 2013; Thomason 1990).¹⁰

¹⁰. For current purposes, it's not essential whether we agree to classify this as a presupposition or not. All that matters is that we agree with respect to the example that the proposition I below call NR functions as a premise in the implicit argument that explains the relevance of Micah's utterance.

—Simons, p.7

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—Simons, p.7

SIMONS' ARGUMENTS

...as various authors have argued, the background assumptions required to identify a relevance implicature are also a type of implicature... (Simons 2005; Sperber and Wilson 1995; Thomason 1990).

—Simons, p.17

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QUESTION 2:

Could we construct a similar example that involves a less controversial example of presupposition?

SIMONS' ARGUMENTS

SURPRISE AIRPORT SISTER

CONTEXT: Leslie doesn't know whether Micah has a sister.

Leslie: Want to have lunch?

Micah: I have to pick up my sister from the airport.

PRESUPPOSITION:
Micah has a sister.

QUESTION 2:

Could we construct a similar example that involves a less controversial example of presupposition?

How about this classic?



Is there a timing problem here?

SIMONS' ARGUMENTS

SCANDI MAYOR

CONTEXT: Leslie and Micah are visiting Stockholm. They are sitting on the subway when the mayor gets on the train. Leslie knows that it is the mayor but Micah does not.

Leslie: The mayor is wearing a t-shirt!

PRESUPPOSITION:

That guy over there is the mayor.

QUESTION 2:

Could we construct a similar example that involves a less controversial example of presupposition?

A better one involving definite reference.



The timing problem *does* seem to show up here.

SIMONS' ARGUMENTS

RAMADAN WITH ERROR

CONTEXT: Ned is not observing Ramadan, and Leslie knows this. Leslie has just accepted Micah's invitation to go to lunch.

Leslie: Let's see if Ned wants to come too.

Micah: It's Ramadan.

IMPLICATURE: Ned won't come.

PREMISE: Ned is fasting.

PROBLEM:

Leslie uses the premise to infer the implicature, but won't accept it at any point (and therefore it won't be CG at any point).

ARI'S SUGGESTION:

Leslie accepts the following:

People who are observing Ramadan won't want to come to lunch.

If Ned is [were?] observing Ramadan, he won't [wouldn't] want to come to lunch.

SIMONS' ARGUMENTS

RAMADAN WITH ERROR

CONTEXT: Ned is not observing Ramadan, and Leslie knows this. Leslie has just accepted Micah's invitation to go to lunch.

Leslie: Let's see if Ned wants to come too.

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SADIE:

"It seems persuasive to me that...Leslie treats the proposition 'Ned is celebrating Ramadan' as true very momentarily in order to make sense of why Micah would've mentioned Ramadan at all, and then rejects it once it has served its purpose."

After all: To accept p can temporary and for some purpose. Maybe in this case the purpose is pragmatic reasoning, and then she rejects it when she finishes.

cf. Balcerak Jackson, "On the epistemic value of imagining, supposing, and conceiving"

SIMONS' ARGUMENTS

ELLIOT IN DEFENSE OF SCG

To argue against even this weakened position, Simons introduces "Ramadan with error" where Leslie correctly derives Micah's implicature without ever accepting NR. Still, it strikes me that the constraint interpretation still works in this case. While Leslie actually disbelieves NR, Micah evidently does not know this fact about her. As such it is open to Leslie to accept NR for purposes of the conversation e.g., by going on to accept Micah's implicature ("Oh yeah let's not invite him then"). Of course if she did actually accept NR as part of SCG she would be misleading Micah. But she would be misleading felicitously (as it were)

So (on some sense of "could"), NR could become CG without further explicit mention. And so per the constraint interpretation, it's still appropriate for Leslie to retrieve it. Compare: it would not be appropriate for her to retrieve any information that contradicts propositions asserted thus far (or their entailments).

SIMONS' ARGUMENTS

INSIDIOUS INSINUATION

CONTEXT: A is a pregnant executive at a male-dominated workplace. A rejects the idea that having a baby impairs a mother's ability to do her job, and B knows that she rejects this.

B: Maybe you shouldn't be in charge of that, I mean you're supposed to have a baby and all.

INSINUATION: A won't be able to perform her job after having a baby.

PREMISE: New mothers can't be counted on at work.

PROBLEM:

A doesn't accept the premise, and won't come to accept it, but it still plays a role in A's ability to infer the insinuated content.

Moreover, this is exactly what B expects to happen.

SIMONS' ARGUMENTS

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INSINUATION: A won't be able to perform her job after having a baby.

PREMISE: New mothers can't be counted on at work.

LAURA:

An insinuation puts the addressee in an uncomfortable position: to be the kind of person who understands the bigoted insinuated content.

Intuitively, this is more uncomfortable than just objectively representing what the speaker means. The addressee is implicated, or complicit in some way ("you said it, not me"). There's some sense in which merely understanding the insinuation dangerously veers into implicit acceptance.

SIMONS' ARGUMENTS

CHRIS ON DEFECTIVE CONTEXTS (1/3):

Simons mentioned and then set aside what I take to be a key empirical feature of SCG: that speakers naturally detect defects in context, and automatically make moves to repair the context. For example, I find these tweaked scenarios much more realistic than those in the paper:

Ned Ramadan Case:

Leslie: Let's see if Ned wants to come too.

Micah: It's Ramadan.

Leslie: Oh! I didn't realize Ned observes Ramadan!

Micah (1): Yeah, he takes it pretty seriously, so maybe we shouldn't invite him out to lunch while he's fasting.

Course Case:

Teacher: We'll cover this on Wednesday

Student: But miss, isn't today Wednesday?

Teacher: Ah, yes. I actually meant Friday.

SIMONS' ARGUMENTS

CHRIS ON DEFECTIVE CONTEXTS (2/3):

My point here is that it seems more natural for the participants to recognize that the context is defective, and to work together (using an MPT toolkit) to get back on the same page.

HARRIS'S (2020) ARGUMENT

- (1) *Publicity-Averse Situations* are situations in which, if we try to communicate, we won't come to believe or accept that we've been understood.
- (2) We regularly communicate in situations of this kind, and we can then successfully presuppose things we've communicated, use anaphora, and do the other things that CG is supposed to do for us.
- (3) Therefore, whatever plays the CG role needn't involve *any* iterated acceptance states.

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES THEORY (MPT)

According to MPT, each participant in a conversation maintains a representation of the discourse-relevant information of each conversational participant, including themselves. HBS call these representations *perspectives*. An agent A's self-perspective is a representation of the discourse-relevant information A currently has, including the source of each item of information (cf. Gunlogson 2008) and A's degree of certainty about it. The representation also tracks discourse-relevant information that A is aware that they *lack*. (For example, A may know that their spouse will come home later but be aware that they do not know at what time.) For each additional participant p, A maintains a *partner-perspective*, the analog of the self-perspective but representing the information that, as far as A knows, that participant has.

—Simons, p.15

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES THEORY (MPT)

RUTGER ON COGNITIVE HABITS AS PERSPECTIVE COMPONENTS:

It seems an element from the partner-perspective is missing, namely the partner's cognitive habits (and maybe noncognitive habits too). Take cases in which you're knowingly talking to someone who has deviant belief-forming mechanisms or other conversation-relevant habits that one better take into account when talking to them. We routinely say things such as: "You better not use that argument around him, he'll just dig in his heels even more." Or: "Never say such-and-such, she'll just get angry with you and derail the conversation." This indicates that we keep track not just of the information that partners have, but also of their conversation-relevant dispositions.

Note: It's not obvious that CG theories have this in them either.

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES THEORY (MPT)

JIWOO (1/2):

In MPT, conversational competence can be understood in terms of retrievability. A competent speaker makes conversational acts based on a reasonable expectation of what the hearer might be able to retrieve in order to understand her utterance properly. A competent hearer, in turn, uses the information intended by the speaker in the way it is meant to interpret the speaker's utterance. –

My question is: what counts as a reasonable expectation about retrievability here? Is sound reasoning about retrievability required? Specifically, rather than relying on highly personalized expectations, we often seem to rely on certain cultural assumptions to judge what is retrievable for the hearer. However, in some cases, a cultural assumption the speaker relies on may not, in fact, be reliable. (I'm continuing in the comment)

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES THEORY (MPT)

JIWOO (2/2):

For example, consider sexist implicature cases like the one Simons mentions on page 12. (For my purposes here, I will consider the case as implicature rather than insinuation – where there is no calculation about the deniability of the implicated content.) When a sexist coworker makes a sexist implicature based on an assumption about the incompetence of women, it is possible that he is aware that such an assumption is not shared by the hearer, or he may not be. If the speaker is aware of this, his reasoning about retrievability might include the understanding that, even though the hearer does not share the assumption, she might be aware of his attitudes. On the other hand, if the speaker is not aware that the assumption is not shared, his reasoning might simply be: “It is obvious to everyone that women, especially new mothers, are not competent enough to fulfill work duties successfully, so she will get my point.” In the latter case, the speaker’s reasoning about retrievability is certainly unsound, even though the assumption could be retrievable by the hearer. In such a case, can it be said that the speaker made the utterance incompetently?

+1 Kelly on what counts as reasonable

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES THEORY (MPT)

RIVKA:

How will the descriptive theories that Simons would support without common ground account for normativity? In particular, how does presupposition failure figure in a theory like MPT?

(I haven't looked at the MPT paper yet, but one response I can imagine on behalf of the multiple perspective theorists is to say that a communication is successful when my self-representation matches your partner-representation in the domain of the discourse, or when my partner-representation of your ideas matches your self-representation. However, that still seems to need a criteria to signal when those multiple perspective representations are matching. Can we do it without publicity?)

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES THEORY (MPT)

LAURA ON OVERHEARERS (1/3):

I appreciated Simons' distinction between the descriptive notion of retrievability and the normative notion of availability. But I wonder if common ground can still play some important descriptive role. Namely common ground seems to distinguish the addressee of a speech act from overhearers.

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES THEORY (MPT)

LAURA ON OVERHEARERS (2/3):

As Simons notes, her example of Ramadan involves an implicature which a "competent overhearer" (15) could also interpret. But this is due to certain features of the example (general knowledge about what Ramadan is, how the relevance norm works). Other uses of common ground, such as discourse referents, seem to be less available to overhearers. I can tell my best friend, "my partner did that thing again," on the basis of our past conversations where I've complained about "that thing." An overhearer might be able to infer from my tone that I dislike it or that my partner does this frequently, but only my friend will know what "that thing" is. And this usage of the common ground is not normative -- it's not that I should use this phrase to be understood by my friend, arguably it would be better to be more explicit. My friend needs to descriptively retrieve from her memory of our past conversations what I could mean by "that thing." And this speech act is only intelligible if we understand that there is still special CG.

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES THEORY (MPT)

LAURA ON OVERHEARERS (3/3):

Simons' model (MPT) is able to handle this example -- my friend is interpreting me based on her representation of my perspective (on what she knows I'll mean by "that thing"). But MPT doesn't categorically distinguish between my friend and my overhearer, my overhearer simply has deficient knowledge of my perspective. So in Simons' model, how do we distinguish my friend as my addressee? The MPT model doesn't just include "misalignment" (23), but it seems to make everyone into an overhearer, trying to interpret my utterance. I have some intuition that the "participant stance" (to use Strawson's language) is being replaced by an "objective" one.

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES THEORY (MPT)

JIWOO (1/2):

In MPT, conversational competence can be understood in terms of retrievability. A competent speaker makes conversational acts based on a reasonable expectation of what the hearer might be able to retrieve in order to understand her utterance properly. A competent hearer, in turn, uses the information intended by the speaker in the way it is meant to interpret the speaker's utterance. –

My question is: what counts as a reasonable expectation about retrievability here? Is sound reasoning about retrievability required? Specifically, rather than relying on highly personalized expectations, we often seem to rely on certain cultural assumptions to judge what is retrievable for the hearer. However, in some cases, a cultural assumption the speaker relies on may not, in fact, be reliable. (I'm continuing in the comment)

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES THEORY (MPT)

CHRIS ON DEFECTIVE CONTEXTS (3/3):

I think there are solid grounds for both MPT and SCG playing an important role in modeling discourse. It seems to me that SCG as an idealized body of info that is also the target of our speech acts is still valuable because it's what we aim for as conversational participants. However, MPT is necessary for repair of incidental contextual defects, and utterance-planning given anticipation of incurable defects, as in a conversation between me and my Trump-loving uncle.

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES THEORY (MPT)

OBJECTION: COGNITIVE RESOURCES

- Keeping track of conflicts in perspective is much more demanding than keeping track of similarities in perspective.
- See, for example, the literature on factive mindreading: Nagel (2017), Phillips et al (2020), Westra and Nagel (2021).
- So, MPT seems much more demanding than CGT
- (Possible objection: CGT requires tracking disagreements between CG and one's own perspective!)

**A POSSIBLE SAVE
FOR COMMON GROUND?**

CG = commonly believed shared acceptance (Stalnaker 2002)

ϕ is CG for A and B iff:

(1) A and B each accept ϕ for the purposes of the conversation;

(1a) A believes (1);

(1b) B believes (1);

(2a) A believes that B believes (1);

(2b) B believes that A believes (1)

⋮

CG = common acceptance
(Stalnaker 2014)

ϕ is CG for A and B iff:

(1a) A accepts ϕ ;

(1b) B accepts ϕ ;

(2a) A accepts that B accepts ϕ ;

(2b) B accepts that A accepts ϕ ;

⋮

BOB VS. BOB

Stalnaker (2014) introduces a modified definition using acceptance not only as the base attitude but also as the iterated attitude. Nothing in my discussion hangs on the difference between these two definitions.

—Mandy Simons,
“Availability without Common Ground,”
fn.3

...I'm going to
as if the difference
very much. I'm
the main thrust
surprised if I'm
for it. But (a) it
actually pretty
to me exactly
I'm doing it alr

—Andy Egan



is belief, and
doesn't matter
that is, given
extremely
taken to task
and (b) I'm
into explaining
you do it the way
ext.

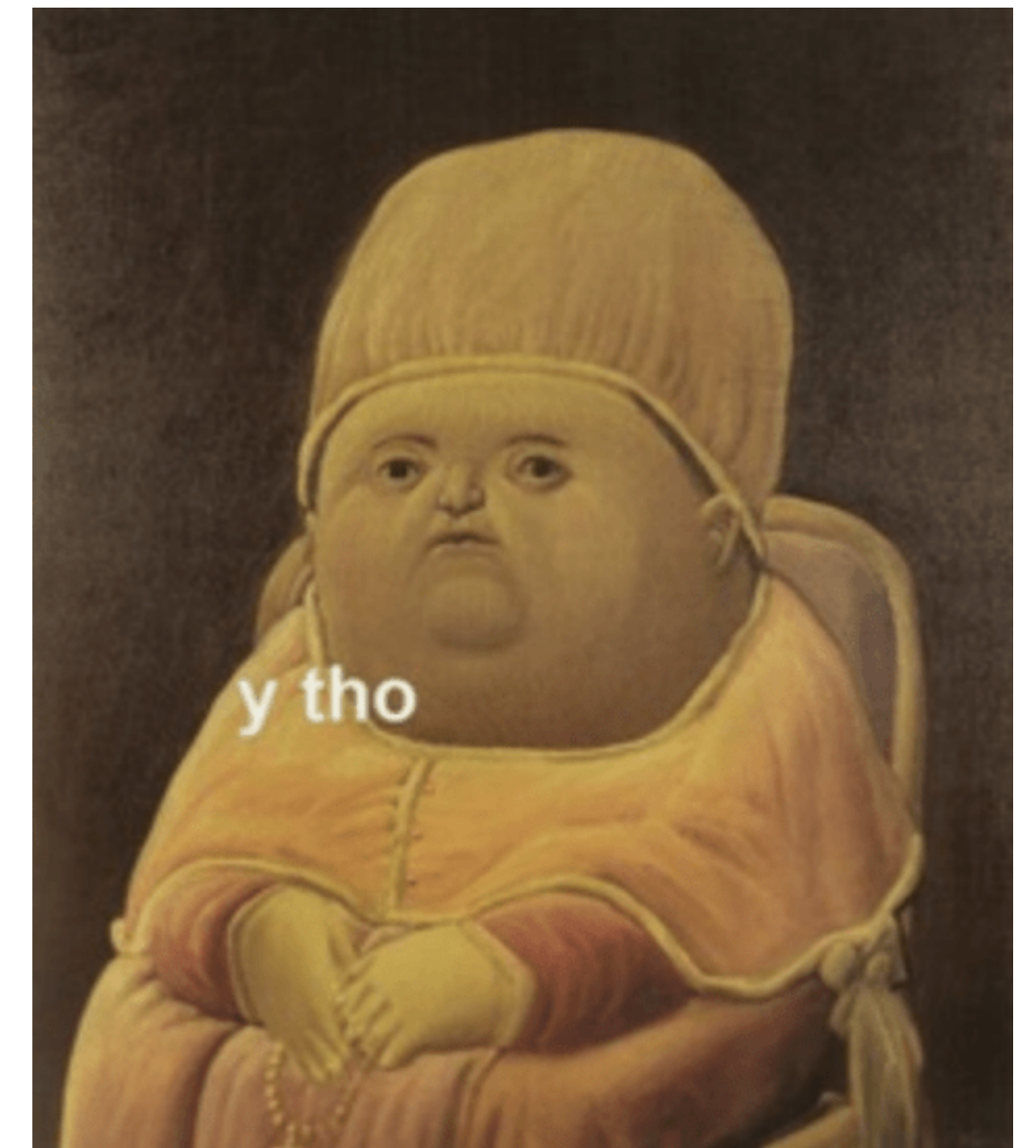
bookkeeping," fn.1

Common Acceptance without Commonly Believed Shared Acceptance? (i.e. 2014 Common Ground without 2002 Common Ground)

- Basic idea: A doesn't believe that B accepts p, but A accepts that B accepts p (and that B accepts that A accepts p, etc.) anyway.

Common Acceptance without Commonly Believed Shared Acceptance? (i.e. 2014 Common Ground without 2002 Common Ground)

- Basic idea: A doesn't believe that B accepts p, but A accepts that B accepts p (and that B accepts that A accepts p, etc.) anyway.
- Why tho?
- Some possible motivations:
 - A hopes that B accepts p (and that B accepts that A accepts p, etc.)
 - A is pretending that B accepts these things
 - A is intentionally trying to create a defective context.

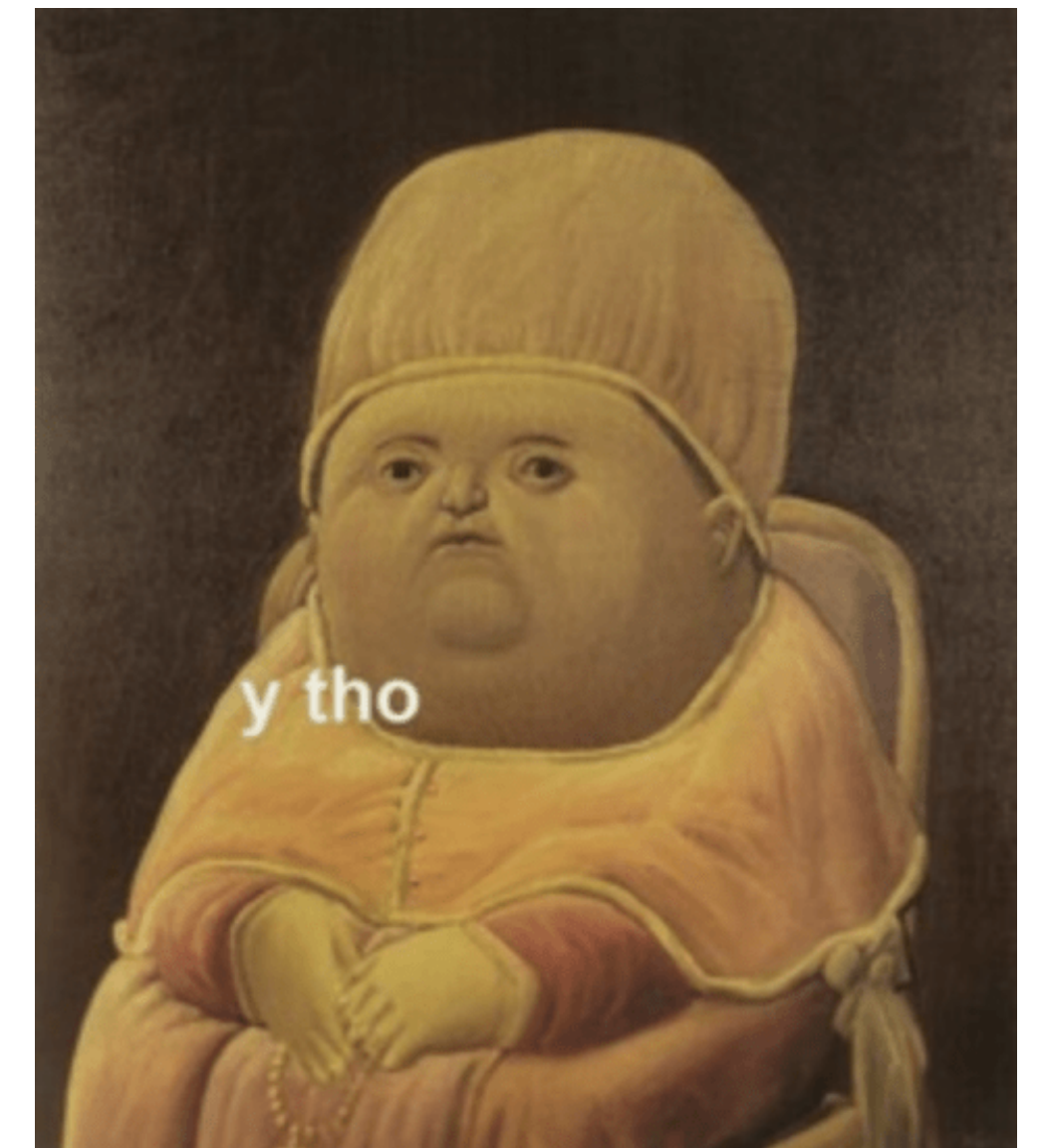


Commonly Believed Shared Acceptance without Common Acceptance? (i.e. 2002 Common Ground without 2014 Common Ground)

- This seems harder to pull off.
- *Maybe*: A and B both accept p, and commonly know this, but A pretends that B doesn't accept p.

Commonly Believed Shared Acceptance without Common Acceptance? (i.e. 2002 Common Ground without 2014 Common Ground)

- This seems harder to pull off.
- Maybe: A and B both accept p , and commonly know this, but A pretends that B doesn't accept p .
- Why tho?
- Maybe in order to uncooperatively tease B:
 - "Remember B, the sun
- Maybe to initiate small talk?
 - "So, the Knicks are going to make the playoffs this year."



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(1a) A believes (1);

(1b) B believes (1);

(2a) A believes that B believes (1);

(2b) B believes that A believes (1)

⋮

When these come apart,
the 2014 version does
the CG stuff.

CG = common acceptance
(Stalnaker 2014)

ϕ is CG for A and B iff:

(1a) A accepts ϕ ;

(1b) B accepts ϕ ;

(2a) A accepts that B accepts ϕ ;

(2b) B accepts that A accepts ϕ ;

IDEA 1: Older Bob = wiser Bob.

BOB VS. BOB

What a party to a conversation *presupposes* is defined as what that party accepts to be common ground: in a conversation involving just Alice and Bert, Alice *presupposes* that ϕ if and only if Alice accepts that Alice and Bert commonly accept that ϕ . The iterative structure implies that if what Alice and Bert presuppose is the same, then the set of possibilities compatible with what each presupposes will be the same as the set that is compatible with what the other presupposes. Their presuppositions diverge if and only if at least one is mistaken about what is common ground. Since successful communication depends on agreement about shared information, we say that a context is *defective* if the presuppositions diverge.

—Stalnaker (2014), pp.231–232

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IDEA 2: Because acceptance is voluntaristic, we can intentionally create a defective context by presupposing something that we know our addressee doesn't accept (and so doesn't presuppose).

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- Maybe this is how informative presupposition works.
- A intentionally creates a defective context, intending for B to repair it by adopting A's presupposition.
- Even when B doesn't do this repair, they can still infer what A's version of CG was, and infer their intentions based on that. (cf. Ramadan with Error)
- And A can even intentionally exploit this mechanism, presupposing p knowing that B won't accommodate but expecting them to infer their intention from the fact that A is presupposing p. (cf. Insidious Insinuation)

IDEA 3: If an interpreter finds themselves in a defective context, they should do their best to interpret the speaker's utterance relative to the speaker's version of CG (i.e., relative to the speaker's presuppositions).

- After all, it's *the speaker's* intentions that make it the case that they meant what they meant, and they arrived at their intentions on the basis of what *they* took to be CG.
- In unintentional defective contexts (e.g. Ramadan with error), this could lead the addressee to repair the context by accommodating the proposition.
- In intentional defective contexts (e.g. Insidious insinuation), they could still use this rule to understand the speaker's implicature, even if they then reject it.
- A speaker can exploit this intentionally (as in Insidious Insinuation).

WHY PREFER CG OVER MPT?
SAFE VS. UNSAFE BACKGROUND INFO

COMMON GROUND WITHOUT ITERATED ATTITUDES?

“Common ground is understood almost universally in terms of iterated attitudes.”

—Simons, p.2

HARRIS (2020) CONCLUDED:

Successful communication doesn't require updating common ground, or even intending to do so.

Anaphoric links can completely bypass common ground.

Maybe common ground only really exists in idealized models.

HARRIS (2024) DISAGREES:

Successful communication doesn't require updating ~~common ground~~, or even intending to do so. **iterated attitudes**

Anaphoric links can completely bypass ~~common ground~~. **iterated attitudes**

~~Common ground only really exists in idealized models.~~

HARRIS (2024) DISAGREES:

Even in iteration-averse situations, we still try to distinguish between information that we can safely treat as background information from information that we can't.

We just must not be using iterated attitudes to do that.