

Commitment and common ground

Common ground is information that is publicly available to all discourse participants; it is usually analysed in terms of a special configuration of psychological states, notably belief, knowledge, or acceptance (Fagin et al. 1995, Stalnaker 2002). For example, if A is the preferred attitude and $A_x(\varphi)$ stands for “ x As that φ ”, then φ is common ground between a and b iff $A_a(\varphi)$, $A_b(\varphi)$, $A_a A_b(\varphi)$, $A_b A_a(\varphi)$, and so on. A pragmatic theory must explain how communicative acts give rise to information that exhibits this structure. In order to achieve that goal, instances of A_x are construed as necessity operators in a normal modal logic at least as strong as K4, which validates the inference from $A_x(\varphi)$ to $A_x A_x(\varphi)$. The logic may be strengthened in various ways, depending on the intended interpretation of A , but this is not relevant for our purposes.

We agree with this general picture, but take exception to the claim that common ground is a configuration of psychological states. Our reason is simple. As is well known, normal modal logics yield unrealistically strong concepts of knowledge, belief, and so on. For example, they entail that A_x is closed under logical consequence. This implies that no finite x can be in the state described by $A_x \varphi$, nor can such creatures have common ground. Although it is uncontroversial that this is an problem, a principled solution has not been forthcoming so far, and the issue is dismissed, if it is acknowledged at all, by saying that the logic of A_x is an “idealisation”. Which confirms our point.

We propose an alternative account of common ground cast in social terms: instead of defining common ground as a configuration of psychological states, we define it as a configuration of social relationships. Our account is part of a larger effort to develop a general theory of pragmatics based on the premiss that communication is, first and foremost, a social practice of sharing commitments, rather than an exchange of information on intentions, beliefs, and other psychological states (cf. Brandom 1994, Geurts 2017, 2018).

So the key concept is commitment. We view commitments not as properties of individuals, but as a relations between them: it takes two to make a commitment. More accurately, a commitment is a three-place relation C between two individuals a and b and a proposition φ . $C_{a,b}(\varphi)$ is to be read as “ a is committed to b to act on φ ”, with “acting on” covering linguistic as well as non-linguistic acts. Commitment is a normative concept: if $C_{a,b}(\varphi)$, then a *must* act on φ , and b is *entitled* by a to act on φ .

Commitments enable agents to coordinate their actions; that’s what they are for. If Fred promises Wilma to do the dishes, he becomes committed to act on [Fred will do the dishes], and by the same token she becomes entitled to act on the same proposition, thus coordinating her actions with his. Likewise, if Wilma informs Fred that Chopin was Polish, she becomes committed to act on [Chopin was Polish], and by the same token he becomes entitled to act on the same proposition, thus coordinating his actions with hers.

Common ground is now defined in terms of commitment: φ is common ground between a and b iff $C_{a,b}(\varphi)$, $C_{b,a}(\varphi)$, $C_{a,b} C_{b,a}(\varphi)$, $C_{b,a} C_{a,b}(\varphi)$, and so on. We assume that commitment has a logic which is at least as strong as K4. This means that commitment

is closed under logical consequence, for example, but as commitment is a normative relation, rather than a psychological state, this is unproblematic. If Barney is committed to Betty to buy her a new skirt, and every skirt costs twenty euros or more, then Barney is committed to spend at least twenty euros, regardless whether he knows it or not. Hence, even if it uses the same kind of logic, a commitment-based account of common ground does not run into the problems that beset attitude-based accounts.

Whereas the standard approach is to treat common ground as an information resource that we exploit and modify in our communicative interactions, we view common ground as a set of constraints on social interactions in general, and communication in particular (cf. Krifka 2015). This concept of common ground can do most of the explanatory work that the standard concept has been called upon to do, and more. Specifically, it enables us to give a very simple and general account of the interdependence between speech acts and common ground. Here the key principle is ACCEPTANCE: if $C_{x,y}(\varphi)$ then $C_{y,x}C_{x,y}(\varphi)$. I cannot have a commitment to you unless you accept that I am so committed, and in the current framework it is natural to interpret acceptance in terms of commitment.

By adding this principle to our logic of commitment, we obtain two theorems of interest. The first is that if $C_{x,y}(\varphi)$ then $C_{x,y}(\varphi)$ is common ground between x and y : I cannot have a commitment to you unless it is common ground between us that I am so committed. The second theorem says that every SHARED commitment is eo ipso common ground: if $C_{x,y}(\varphi)$ and $C_{y,x}(\varphi)$, then φ is common ground between x and y ; or put otherwise, x and y are mutually committed to act on φ .

To illustrate what this means, suppose Fred tells Wilma: “Barney is mowing the lawn.” By means of his utterance, Fred makes a bid to become committed to Wilma to act on \llbracket Barney is mowing the lawn \rrbracket . Normally speaking, Wilma will ACCEPT Fred’s commitment, either overtly or tacitly, which means (i) that Fred becomes committed to Wilma to act on \llbracket Barney is mowing the lawn \rrbracket and (ii) that it becomes common ground between Fred and Wilma that Barney is so committed. Thus far, Wilma need not agree with Fred, but normally speaking she will SHARE his commitment, either overtly or tacitly, which means (i) that Wilma becomes committed to Fred to act on \llbracket Barney is mowing the lawn \rrbracket and (ii) that it becomes common ground between Fred and Wilma that Barney is mowing the lawn. This analysis applies across the illocutionary board, including promises, requests, and questions, but space limitations prevent us from showing that here.

References

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