

The Common Ground – Communication

Marcello Di Bello - ASU - Spring 2022 - Week #2

Against Cheap Common Ground

Berlster's paper against cheap common ground shows Stalnaker's most recent definition of common ground in terms of mere joint acceptance runs into trouble: if one accepts an intentionalist view of meaning (which Stalnaker accepts, following Grice), common ground-as-joint-acceptance can no longer explain the relationship between meaning and rationality, and this is particularly clear in cases of cheap common ground. The solution is probably to bring belief back into the definition of common ground.

Let's consider some of the key moves in the argument.

(a) FIRST: Two definitions

Definition 1: p is common ground in a conversation if and only if the participants in the conversation *jointly believe that they accept p* for the sake of the conversation

Definition 2: p is common ground in a conversation if and only if the participants in the conversation *jointly accept p*

What is acceptance? Roughly, one can accept p if they believe p but also if they assume, pretend or behave as though p is true for the sake of the conversation.

(b) SECOND: Theoretical virtues

The concept of common ground illuminates a number of questions in philosophy of language, such as

What is it to mean that p ?

"... in the default case, in order to mean that p , I must intend to make it joint belief that I mean that p . Why? This is just the nature of meaning." (p. 18)

Or, how can I make sure my interlocutor understand that, when I say p , I actually mean $[p]$?

"In the default case, when we jointly know we are rational, and when I want you to recognize that I mean that p , I can (and usually must) rationally rely on [what] we already jointly believe in order to make my meaning manifest to you. And you may (and usually must) rationally rely on what we already jointly believe in order to lock onto what I meant." (p. 19)

Or, when I assert p , what do I intend to accomplish?

"...given the nature of coordination and our typical patterns of interests in a conversation, there is generally a principled relationship between my speech acts and what we jointly believe. When I assert in a conversation, I normally aim to make the contents of my assertion common ground." (p. 19)

(c) THIRD: Humpty Dumpty

The common ground also clarifies the relationship between meaning and rationality. What does that mean?

If one is an internationalist about meaning (like Grice, Stalnaker), could any string of sounds mean anything, say x , so long as x is the speaker's *intended* meaning? For example, could I mean [your paper is due tomorrow] by making the sound "blerg blerg" in front of my students as long as [your paper is due tomorrow] is what I intend to mean with the sound "blerg blerg"? This is the Humpty Dumpty problem.

There is something irrational—*linguistically* irrational, if you wish—here. I cannot possibly mean [your paper is due tomorrow] with the sound "blerg blerg" provided I am in my right mind. We need an explanation of why that is. The notion of the common ground can help.

Proposal: Some "meaning intentions" are irrational. They are irrational because they do not align with what is entailed by (what the speaker justifiably believes about) the common ground.

If I justifiably believe that the common ground entails that I meant that [your paper is due tomorrow], and if I did intend to mean that [your paper is due tomorrow], then my intentions were rational. (p 21)

But, clearly, what I justifiably believe about common ground does *not* entail that by "blerb blerb" I meant [your paper is due tomorrow]. I must be aware that the students could not have possibly understood that. So my intention of meaning [your paper is due tomorrow] by making the sound "blerb blerb" was irrational. It does not align with the common ground in the required way.

(d) FOURTH: Cheap common ground

The ability of the common to illuminate the relationship between meaning and rationality, however, comes under stress in cases of cheap common ground.

Belinda and Mark, by accident, happen to jointly accept that y (= The terrorists are about to attack). They come to this joint acceptance as follows. Belinda plays a spy game in which placing a yellow

bin accompanied by winking means y . She does that because she is bored during the coronavirus pandemic. Unbeknownst to her and by sheer coincidence, Mark, the mailman, is playing the exact same game. He is also bored for the same reason. So when Belinda places a yellow bin and winks in front of Mark, Mark utters “I get it” and winks to mean y . Both Belinda and Mark accepts y for the sake of the conversation, but neither believe that the other believes y . They have no idea they are playing the same game.

Do Mark and Belinda share a common ground, namely y ? Well, according to the definition of common ground as mere joint acceptance, they do. This is cheap common ground: joint acceptance by accident. But they do not share common ground in y according to the definition of common ground as joint belief of joint acceptance.

(d) FINALLY: The problem

Can Mark rationally mean y when he utters ‘I get it’ in response of Belinda’s placing a yellow bin? Intuitively, that cannot be rational. But according to the common-ground-as-joint-acceptance it would be rational.¹ So that’s a problem!

¹ Can you reconstruct Berstler’s reasoning for that conclusion?

But once we stop defining the common ground in terms of *belief*, the principled relationship between what I mean, what I believe the common ground entails that I mean, and what I would have meant, had I been rational, frays to the point of uselessness. Nowhere is this clearer than in cases of cheap common ground. (p. 23)

This, I propose, is why we find cheap common grounds so weird and unintuitive. We are implicitly presupposing that the common ground ought to clarify the relationship between what the speaker means and what she would be rational to mean. When the common ground comes cheaply, it cannot and does not do that. (p. 23)