



The illusion of common ground

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ABSTRACT

When people talk about “common ground”, they invoke shared experiences, convictions, and emotions. In the language sciences, however, ‘common ground’ also has a technical sense. Many taking a representational view of language and cognition seek to explain that everyday feeling in terms of how isolated individuals “use” language to communicate. Autonomous cognitive agents are said to use words to communicate inner thoughts and experiences; in such a framework, ‘common ground’ describes a body of information that people allegedly share, hold common, and use to reason about how intentions have been made manifest. We object to this view, above all, because it leaves out mechanisms that demonstrably enable people to manage joint activities by doing things together. We present an alternative view of linguistic understanding on which appeal to inner representations is replaced by tracing language to synergetic coordination between biological agents who draw on wordings to act within cultural ecosystems. Crucially, human coordination depends on, not just bodies, but also salient patterns of articulatory movement (‘wordings’). These rich patterns function as non-local resources that, together with concerted bodily (and vocal) activity, serve to organize, regulate and coordinate both attention and the verbal and non-verbal activity that it gives rise to. Since wordings are normative, they can be used to develop skills for making cultural sense of environments and other peoples’ doings. On our view, the technical notion of common ground is an illusion, because appeal to representations blinds theorists to bodily activity and the role of experience. Turning away from how wordings influence the circumstances, skills, and bodily coordination on which interpersonal understanding depends, it makes premature appeal to reasoning and internally represented knowledge. We conclude that outside its vague everyday sense, the concept of common ground is a notion that the language sciences would be well advised to abandon.

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1. Introduction

Several years ago, the city of Washington DC was engaged in contract negotiations with the local Teacher’s Union. They went smoothly, by all accounts, partly because of the way the city’s lead negotiator opened up discussion. Rather than begin with the negotiation itself, she asked participants to talk about students who had most affected them and their careers. She said afterwards that “the very beginning of the negotiation was a shared experience around the ability to change children’s lives”, which had the effect of highlighting the negotiators’ shared concerns, values, and goals (Turque, 2010). In everyday conversation, the feeling of having

shared ideas, assumptions, or goals is often said to draw on “common ground”. This feeling is seen as a starting point for communicating or working together and is what we will refer to as the lay view of common ground (‘CG-lay’). Just as in our example, the concept is imprecise, unclear, and highly flexible, which may be why it is useful in describing how people talk and think about shared conversational projects. However, it is our contention that, as a naturalistic object for study, enquiry, or explanation, CG-lay identifies little more than a feeling that arises in everyday language-involving behavior (cf. Taylor, 2015).

This is not the dominant view in cognitive science, where there is a long history of both philosophical and experimentally-oriented efforts to develop a technical notion of common ground (‘CG-technical’) by placing CG-lay in an explanatory framework on which knowing is conceptualized in terms of internal data storage and logical reasoning. Within such a framework, interpersonal understanding is construed as CG-technical, that is, as a mental

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state or process that is somehow rendered “common” between two minds. In Section 2, we contrast this account with one that turns away from CG-lay by tracing the roots of human understanding to radical embodiment. First, though, we sketch the case against CG-technical, and against the representationalist framework that requires it by assuming both that human individuals are epistemically and teleologically isolated and that language is fundamentally a means of conveying information from one person to another (see e.g., Descartes, 2009; Fodor, 1975; Locke, 1996; Newell, 1982; Saussure, 2013).

Having made these assumptions, representational theorists are forced to posit CG-technical to explain how linguistic understanding depends on peoples' shared circumstances and common experiences. Historically, two parallel representationalist traditions have arrived at the notion of CG-technical by this process of inference from a priori assumptions. The first is philosophical pragmatics, where CG-technical (also called ‘mutual knowledge’ and ‘common knowledge’) is conceived of as a known set of propositions whose truth values can be used to evaluate the ‘content’ expressed by an act of utterance (Abbott, 2008; von Fintel, 2008; Grice, 1989; Lee, 2001; Lewis, 1979; Schiffer, 1972; Stalnaker, 2002). The second is computational psychology, where CG-technical refers to the shared, as opposed to private, information an experimental setup makes available to a participant by means of observation and reasoning (Barr & Keysar, 2005; Clark, 1996; Gibbs, 1987; Hollers & Stevens, 2007; Horton, 2005; Keysar, 1997; Keysar, Barr, Balin, & Brauner, 1998).

From both perspectives, CG-technical reduces the world where action occurs to a mentally represented, epistemic context. This is done by construing bodily coordination, ecological embedding, and distribution of activity as internal knowledge, or, in standard terms, as mental representations of the contexts, circumstances, background information, and contingencies that are brought into play as people speak and write. The model may also include the immediate perceptual environment, experience with a language, general cultural knowledge of every kind, in-group knowledge or special expertise, and what has already been said during current or prior conversations. Within this representationalist framework, the explanatory function of CG-technical is to posit internal computation and inference as the mechanism by which humans engage with their environments and coordinate with each other. By choosing to ascribe a technical sense to the familiar feeling of CG-lay, a theorist or experimenter buys into a model where shared understanding is abstract and divorced from any non-mental (or non-computational) process.

Like many others – and here we must show our colors by noting that we connect distributed language (e.g. Cowley, 2011a; Hodges, Steffensen, & Martin, 2012) with ecological psychology (e.g. Chemero, 2009) – we reject any approach that restricts its explanatory tools to algorithms operating on abstract representational objects and instantiated in the brains of individuals (e.g., Gibson, 1979; Hutchins, 1995; Maturana & Varela, 1987; Ryle, 1949; Sellars, 1956; Wittgenstein, 1958). In this essay, we turn to how representationalism distorts the phenomenon of language by using CG-technical to account for even mundane behavior. Above all, the idea of CG-technical imposes the view that humans are isolated cognitive agents and that shared experiences come from representing the world in the same way; on our distributed-ecological perspective, they simply come from inhabiting the same sociocultural world. For instance, on a classic view it is said to be our mutual knowledge (i.e., CG-technical) that the Louvre is in Paris. By contrast, we claim that writing (or reading) “the Louvre is in Paris” in this situation-for-action derives its force from the Louvre's being located in Paris. The difference is between a fact about what an agent knows and a fact about where

an agent is located in space, time, their social networks, and their sociocultural ecology.

In support of this perspective, we will sketch an alternative, non-representational framework for the explanation of linguistic phenomena. Section 2 argues that non-representational accounts of language begin with embodiment and bodily coordination, and that the current challenge for such an account is to get to grips with the richly meaningful, experiential aspects of language. Section 3 takes steps in this direction by identifying the ontogenetic routes of the relevant abilities, and conceptualizing them in ecological terms. The purpose of this sketch is to demonstrate that CG-technical is inadequate as an account of the feelings and experiences used in lay talk of common ground. For this reason, we regard the technical notion of common ground as a pernicious illusion which blinds researchers to crucial aspects of language and human understanding. It induces them to consider explanations that ignore crucial constitutive elements of how, in everyday life, people make effective use of linguistic coordination.

2. Linguistic embodiment

Representationalism is increasingly challenged by approaches based in radical embodiment (Chemero, 2009; Di Paolo, Rohde, & De Jaegher, 2010, p. 42; Wilson & Golonka, 2013). A representationalist construes language in terms of abstract forms that are said to be realized physiologically, and so holds that articulatory movements are planned on the basis of represented knowledge that the speaker wishes to convey about a shared situation. On an embodied account, language is primarily constituted by movement and bodily coordination, and so linguistic activity is often not planned at all. Rather, language is improvised as people navigate and construe meaning-laden sensorimotor environments where they act in the presence of, and with respect to, other people. Language does not reduce to movement, because of its emotional immediacy but also because, in languaging,¹ people use sociocultural norms that inhere to acoustic and graphic patterns. Together with emotion, these patterns function to regulate attention and lived experiences. To illustrate this, we will refer throughout this section to a focal scenario that, in terms of CG-technical, is described as follows. Imagine that you are visiting a friend, and, watching her chop vegetables for dinner, you say, “Have you got a second cutting board?” If she responds by handing one to you, then on the CG-technical view you now mutually know (i.e., have added to your common ground) several new propositions, which include the fact that she has got a second cutting board (which she knew but you did not), the fact that you would like to help prepare dinner (which you knew but she did not), the fact that there are still more vegetables to chop (which her action implies), and so forth.

2.1. Local coordination and synergies

The first thing to note is that representationalist description leaves out bodily activity. For the moment, let us set aside the question of how vocal activity can normatively regulate attention, and focus on the imagined situation's ‘local’ physical dynamics. Suppose that you articulate, not a name, but a demonstrative (“have you got another one of those?”) and that you glance or nod at the

¹ ‘Languaging’ is a term due to Maturana (1978), and indicates human vocal activity that is organized by a history of interpersonal coupling within a community. This term is used to avoid invoking ‘language’, which can indicate, e.g., an alphabet and a set of rules for combining its elements (as in Chomsky, 1965).

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