COMMON GROUND FROM A SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that current pragmatic theories fail to describe common ground in its complexity because they usually retain a communication-as-transfer-between-minds view of language, and disregard the fact that disagreement and egocentrism of speaker-hearers are as fundamental a part of communication as agreement and cooperation. On the other hand, current cognitive research has overestimated the egocentric behavior of the dyads and argued for the dynamic emergent property of common ground while devaluing the overall significance of cooperation in the process of verbal communication. The paper attempts to eliminate this conflict and proposes to combine the two views into an integrated presumed concept of common ground in which both core common ground (presumed shared knowledge, a priori mental representation) and contextual common ground (emergent participant resource, a post facto emergence through use) converge to describe a dialectical socio-cultural vision.

Both cognitive and pragmatic considerations are central to this issue. While attention (through salience, which is the cause for interlocutors’ egocentrism) explains why emergent property comes around, intention (through relevance, which is expressed in cooperation) explains why presumed shared knowledge is needed. Based on this, common ground is perceived as an effort to converge the mental representation of shared knowledge present as memory that we can activate, shared knowledge that we can seek, and rapport as well as knowledge that we can create in the communicative process. According to this dialectical socio-cultural approach common ground is present throughout the whole communicative process. However, the question
is which side of the common ground (\textit{a priori} or \textit{post facto} or both) is present in which phase of the communicative process and to what extent.

\section*{2. Theoretical Background}

Current pragmatic theories emphasize the importance of intention, cooperation, common ground, mutual knowledge, relevance, and commitment in executing communicative acts. All approaches emphasize that successful communication requires cooperation and common ground. There are two main approaches to this issue. Researchers (e.g., Stalnaker, 1978; Clark and Brennan, 1991; Clark, 1996) consider common ground a category of specialized mental representations that exist in the mind \textit{a priori} to the actual communication process. As Arnseth and Solheim (2002) pointed out, Clark and Brennan’s joint action model (1991) and Clark’s contribution theory (1996) retain a communication-as-transfer-between-minds view of language, and treat intentions and goals as pre-existing psychological entities that are later somehow formulated in language. In these theories, common ground is considered as relatively static, \textit{a priori} mental representations of the interlocutors on which basis they conduct successful communication in a cooperative way and their intentions are warranted.

The other approach to common ground has emerged as a result of recent research in cognitive psychology, linguistic pragmatics, and intercultural communication. Investigating how the mind works in the process of communication, cognitive researchers (Barr and Keysar, 2005; Colston, 2005) revealed that mutual knowledge is not as significant as most people assumed; instead, they formed the emergence-through-use view of common ground which conceptualizes it as an emergent property of ordinary memory processes (also see Arnseth and Solheim, 2002; Koschmann and LeBaron, 2003). This dynamism is also emphasized in other studies (e.g., Heritage, 1984; Arundale, 1999) which report that real everyday communication does not look like recipient design and intention recognition as most theories that have grown out of Grice’s approach claim. The process is more like a try-and-error, try-again-process that is co-constructed by the participants. It appears to be a non-summative and emergent interactional achievement (Arundale, 1999, 2008).

With this dynamic revision of common ground, the role of cooperation is also challenged. Several researchers (e.g., Keysar and Bly, 1995; Giora, 2003; Barr and Keysar, 2005; Keysar, 2007) indicate that speakers and listeners are egocentric to a surprising degree, and the individual, egocentric endeavors of interlocutors play a much more decisive role in the initial stages of production and comprehension than current pragmatic theories envision. Their egocentric behavior is rooted more in the speakers’ or listeners’ more reliance on their own knowledge than in mutual knowledge.