



Merely verbal agreement, speaker-meaning, and defective context

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Abstract

In a merely verbal agreement, a misunderstanding between two parties creates the false impression of agreement: one or both parties think they agree on something, when in fact they do not. There is reason to believe that merely verbal agreements are as common as merely verbal disagreements and disputes. Unlike the latter, however, merely verbal agreements have so far been ignored by philosophers. The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to clarify what merely verbal agreement is by considering various ways of defining and refining the notion; and second, to explore the effects of merely verbal agreement on conversational common ground, collaborative action, and academic philosophy. It will be argued that merely verbal agreement is best understood in terms of divergent speaker-meanings, that it has specific negative effects on common ground, that it impedes collaborative action, and that it is likely to play a significant role in academic philosophy.

Keywords Merely verbal agreement · Merely verbal disputes · Speaker-meaning · Defective context · Communication · Metaphilosophy

1 Introduction

Suppose the prime ministers of two nations, A and B, discuss how to react to the recent political developments in country X that is part of their trading union. A, who approves of the recent political developments in X, says: “These developments demand a strong signal from us.” Thinking that A disapproves of the recent political developments in X, B agrees. What A means by “a strong signal” are economic benefits; what B means to agree with are economic sanctions.

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The situation depicted is an example of what I call a *merely verbal agreement*. In a merely verbal agreement, a misunderstanding between two parties generates the false impression of agreement: one or both parties think they agree on an issue, when in fact they do not. Merely verbal agreements are closely related to merely verbal disagreements, where a misunderstanding generates the false impression of disagreement. Both merely verbal agreement and disagreement are doxastic notions that have behavioral counterparts. While it is common to call the behavioral counterpart of (merely verbal) disagreement a (merely verbal) *dispute* (cf. Beddor, 2019; Jenkins, 2014; Kocurek, 2023; Plunkett & Sundell, 2013), I call the counterpart of (merely verbal) agreement (merely verbal) *accord*. An agreement is a state of congruent attitudes on an issue, whereas an accord is a linguistic exchange in which speakers (at least apparently) express congruent attitudes. Importantly, people's utterances can be in accord without them agreeing, and they can agree about something without their utterances being in accord.

Merely verbal disputes loom large in contemporary analytic philosophy. Many philosophical disputes have been diagnosed as merely verbal, with candidates ranging from debates over material composition, personhood, endurantism vs. perdurantism, reductionism, free will, the semantic vs pragmatic distinction, knowledge, and justification (cf. Hirsch, 2011; Sidelle, 2007). There is also a lively debate about the nature of merely verbal disputes (cf. Balcerak-Jackson, 2014; Chalmers, 2011; Hirsch, 2005; Jenkins, 2014; Vermeulen, 2018). By contrast, merely verbal agreement has so far been largely ignored by philosophers.¹ But if, as philosophers have argued, there is sometimes reason to be suspicious of our disagreements and disputes, then should we not be similarly suspicious of our agreements and accord? Could a better understanding of merely verbal agreement and accord help us avoid certain misunderstandings, both within and outside of philosophy?

The present paper pursues these questions. It thereby aims to correct for the undeserved neglect of merely verbal agreements. Specifically, it pursues two goals. The first is to propose analyses of merely verbal agreement and accord. To this end, I will consider different approaches to analyzing merely verbal agreement and accord, argue that a pragmatic account in terms of speaker-meaning is most promising (Sect. 2), and then develop this account in detail (Sect. 3). The second goal is to make clearer the conversational, practical, and philosophical consequences of merely verbal agreement. I will argue that, unlike verbal disputes, they give rise to opaquely defective contexts (Sect. 4); that they impede collaborative action by incentivizing misaligned actions (Sect. 5); and that they likely play a significant role in academic philosophy (Sect. 6).

¹Chalmers (2011, p. 526) and Jenkins (2014, p. 12) acknowledge their existence in passing, but do not go into detail.

2 Merely verbal agreement– finding the right approach

What is merely verbal agreement? To answer this question, we can take inspiration from recent attempts to analyze the closely related phenomenon of merely verbal *disputes*. In this section, we will take a look at four of the most prominent approaches to merely verbal disputes– the semantic approach, the charitable interpretation approach, and two versions of a pragmatic approach– and discuss how they can be adapted to analyze merely verbal agreement. The goal of this section is not yet to state a fully developed view of merely verbal agreement, but rather to find a general approach that can be further developed in the sections to follow.

2.1 The semantic approach

Chalmers (2011) analyzes a verbal dispute as follows:

A dispute over S is (broadly) verbal when, for some expression T in S, the parties disagree about the meaning of T, and the dispute over S arises wholly in virtue of this disagreement regarding T. (Chalmers, 2011, p. 522)

Chalmers' account has been criticized on several grounds. Some argue that it comes with “excessive internalist commitments” (Belleri, 2018, p. 694), for it presupposes that the speakers have explicit opinions about the meaning of the words they use (see also Vermeulen, 2018). Others argue that the ‘in virtue of’ relation that the account is based on is notoriously unclear or costly (Kocurek, 2023). Here I will set aside these problems and instead consider how the account can be put in the service of analyzing merely verbal accord.

An adaptation of Chalmers' account to merely verbal accord might look as follows:

MVA-semantic

Two parties A and B have a merely verbal accord over S, when

- (i) they express matching attitudes with respect to S,
- (ii) they disagree about the semantic meaning of some expression T in S, and
- (iii) (i) wholly in virtue of (ii).

To see how the account works, suppose that two philosophers both say “people have free will” while having dramatically different opinions on what it means to have free will. Philosopher McA thinks that to have free will is to have the ability to deliberate about one's actions and to execute the result of this deliberation (short: compatibilist free will), whereas McB thinks it is the ability to act in ways that are not determined by the laws of nature (short: incompatibilist free will). McA does not believe that people possess incompatibilist free will. Supposing that these philosophers are unfamiliar with current debates on the topic (and so are not aware of the diverging senses of “free will”), it would seem that they are having a merely verbal agreement. And

this is indeed what MVA-semantic predicts. McA and McB's agreement (behavioral) arises wholly in virtue of their underlying disagreement about the semantic meaning of "free will," an expression that features in the agreed-upon claim that people possess free will.

On closer inspection, however, the conditions imposed by MVA-semantic are too strong to pick out the correct set of merely verbal accord. Suppose again that McA utters: "People have free will." But this time, McA and McB both agree that "free will" standardly means compatibilist free will. There is thus no underlying semantic disagreement. Does this preclude the possibility that they are having a merely verbal agreement? MVA-semantic would suggest so, but it seems wrong. For suppose that even though McA believes that "free will" standardly means compatibilist free will, in this particular instance, she believes that what is under discussion is incompatibilist free will, and so she means to assert that people possess incompatibilist free will.² If, as we stipulated, McB disagrees with that, but agrees that people possess compatibilist free will, then it seems they are having a merely verbal accord even in the absence of an underlying disagreement about the semantic meaning of "free will."³ It seems that divergent semantic beliefs are not necessary for having a merely verbal accord. Rather, what matters is how both parties interpret the respective utterances, and what they mean to say when they make them.⁴

2.2 Charitable interpretations

An alternative account of merely verbal disputes links them to how the parties involved in it would or should interpret the other. In Hirsch's (2009) view, a dispute is merely verbal if "each side can plausibly interpret the other side as speaking a language in which the latter's asserted sentences are true" (p. 231). As Kocurek (2023) notes, the word "plausible" is doing quite a lot of work here. Hirsch (2005) cashes it out in terms of being charitable: If it would be more charitable to interpret the other as saying something true in their own idiolect than to attribute to them major logical fallacies or other errors, the two are engaged in a merely verbal dispute.

An adaptation of Hirsch's view for merely verbal accord might look as follows:

MVA-charitable

Two parties A and B are having a merely verbal agreement over S, when

²Here I am relying on the assumption that the proposition asserted may deviate from the proposition semantically expressed by an utterance. This assumption is widely shared among contemporary philosophers of language. Further discussion in Sect. 4 below.

³Similarly, McA and McB could have a merely verbal agreement in a situation where they do have an underlying disagreement about the meaning of "free will" but their agreement does not arise wholly in virtue of this disagreement.

⁴Perhaps Chalmers would ultimately want to agree with this and thus understand "disagreement about the meaning of T" along the lines of speaker-meanings as well. In that case, his account more closely resembles the accounts I will discuss below.

- (i) they express matching attitudes with respect to S,
- (ii) if A were charitable to B, A would interpret B as speaking a language in which S expresses a proposition that A takes to be false (and vice versa).

What kind of indicators might make it charitable for A to interpret B as speaking a different idiolect, despite B expressing attitudes that seemingly match A's? Suppose, for example, that our philosopher McB is well informed about McA's view on free will (libertarianism), and about McA's incompatibilist use of the term "free will". If he finds himself in what appears to be an agreement with McA about whether people possess free will, then it might be more charitable, all things considered, for McB to interpret McA as claiming that people possess incompatibilist free will. Here, the charitableness of including background information about McA outweighs the *prima facie* uncharitableness of ascribing to her utterance a proposition that one believes to be false.⁵ Other considerations that may have the same effect include McA drawing seemingly puzzling inferences from the agreed-upon proposition or citing seemingly irrelevant evidence in support of it.

While all of this strikes me as plausible, the account overlooks instances of merely verbal accord. This is because there are paradigmatic instances of merely verbal accord where there is not enough background information to outweigh the *prima facie* uncharitableness of an interpretation that assigns propositions that one believes to be false (or does not believe to be true). To see this, suppose McB knows nothing about McA's view of free will, about her incompatibilist use of "free will," or about what arguments or inferences she associates with it. If he then finds himself in what appears to be agreement with McA about whether people have free will, there is nothing that could move him from a compatibilist to an incompatibilist interpretation of McA's utterance "people have free will." In such a situation, being charitable clearly favors a compatibilist interpretation of McA's utterance (with which McB agrees) over an incompatibilist interpretation (with which McB disagrees). And yet, the two are having a merely verbal accord.⁶

2.3 Answering the same question

According to Balcerak-Jackson (2014, p. 42),

a merely verbal dispute is a conversational exchange with a specific kind of defect. It shares with cases of genuine dispute the fact that the parties endorse contradictory sentences. But unlike cases of genuine dispute, we cannot identify a mutually agreed-upon question that both parties attempt to address, or at

⁵ Or weaker: a proposition that one does not believe to be true.

⁶ Inspired by how Hirsch develops his account in some of his writings, one might be inclined to solve this problem by modifying condition (ii) above as follows: (ii*) If, after all the evidence and arguments have been exchanged, A were charitable to B, A would interpret B as speaking a language in which S expresses a proposition that A takes to be false (and vice versa). But while this helps with the present case (if McB knew about McA's views, he would no longer interpret her along compatibilist lines), it does not provide a general solution to the problem I raise here. Any notion of charitable interpretation that falls short of omniscience will allow for cases where even a charitable interpreter gets it wrong.

least cannot do so without moving to a level of generality at which the answers the parties intend to offer do not conflict. There is no question under discussion to which the parties offer conflicting answers.

Put a bit more formally and adapted to the case of merely verbal accord:

MVA-Question

Two parties A and B are having a merely verbal agreement, when

- (i) they express matching attitudes with respect to S, but.
- (ii) there is no immediate single question Q such that both A and B attempt to address Q.

The account handles some cases quite well. Plausibly, philosophers who hold that people possess compatibilist free will and those who hold that they possess incompatibilist free will are answering different questions. If McA and McB both say that people possess free will, then McA is answering the question of whether there is incompatibilist free will, whereas McB is not. A plausible test for whether people are answering the same question is whether their proposed answers are freely combinable, that is, whether one answer can be coherently combined with both the other answer and its negation. The example of McA and McB satisfies this criterion. You can coherently believe that people have compatibilist free will and that they either have or do not have incompatibilist free will at the same time.

A problem with this account is that there are merely verbal accords even in cases where it seems that the parties are answering the same question. Suppose, for instance, that two people discuss how often they should meet to discuss their joint research project. One says “let’s meet bi-weekly,” meaning that they should meet *twice a week*, the other says “let’s meet bi-weekly,” meaning that they should meet *every other week* (cf. Vermeulen, 2018). The two parties are having a merely verbal accord, despite the fact that they are not obviously answering different questions. Both seem to answer the question of how often they should meet. And note that their answers are not freely combinable: if you believe that meeting twice a week would be best, you cannot also (rationally) believe that meeting every other week is best (and vice versa).

To avoid this problem, we have to individuate questions very finely, such that, for any statement S, S is answering the question whether S. What features of S determine what question S is an answer to? As cases of merely verbal agreement make clear, it can neither be S’s syntactic nor its semantic properties. Consider again McA and McB’s conversation about free will. McA and McB may very well use syntactically and semantically identical statements to formulate their apparent agreement. If we still want to say that they are answering different questions, and hence have a merely verbal accord, we have to look for features that might vary between syntactically identical utterances. This brings us to speaker-meanings, and with them the final account of merely verbal accord that I will discuss here.

2.4 Speaker-meanings

According to Vermeulen's (2018, p. 12) "first pass proposal,"

a dispute over a statement *S*—where one party utters *S* and the other not-*S*—is verbal when (1) parties use the same utterance-type *S* with different speaker's meaning such that what *A* means by uttering *S* (*p*) does not conflict with what *B* means by uttering not-*S* (not *q*), but (2) each ascribes the negation of their own speaker's meaning to the other (not *p* and *q* respectively).

Adapting this idea for merely verbal accord, there is a stronger and a weaker construal, depending on whether we take it to be sufficient that both speakers mean different things, or whether we demand that there be some kind of conflict between the things they mean. The following definition incorporates both options:

MVA-speaker-meaning [a: general/b: strong]

Two parties *A* and *B* have a merely verbal accord, when

- (i) they use the same utterance-type *S*,
- (ii-a) what *A* means by uttering *S* (*p*) is not the same as what *B* means by uttering *S* (*q*)
- (ii-b) what *A* means by uttering *S* (*p*) is in conflict with what *B* means by uttering *S* (*q*)
- (iii) each ascribes their own speaker-meaning to the other (*p* and *q* respectively).

To illustrate the account in the general version, consider again *McA* and *McB*'s apparent accord about free will. What *McA* speaker-means by uttering "people have free will" is that people have incompatibilist free will (*p*). What *McB* speaker-means is that people have compatibilist free will (*q*). These two propositions are not the same. If *McA* believes that *McB* speaker-means *p*, and *McB* believes that *McA* speaker-means *q*, the two have a merely verbal agreement.

This pragmatic account of a merely verbal accord in terms of speaker-meaning avoids the problems of the other accounts, for it neither invokes divergent semantic beliefs, nor charitable interpretations, nor the divergent questions that the parties are answering.⁷ This being said, the speaker-meaning account is not strictly incompatible with Balcerak-Jackson's account, for it offers a way of spelling out the type of content that is definitive of what question each speaker is answering. I conclude from this discussion that an account of merely verbal accord in terms of speaker-meanings

⁷Kocurek (2023) develops a similar account in terms of semantic plans rather than speaker-meanings. Although his account has many virtues, I will here side with the more orthodox notion of speaker-meaning rather than semantic plans. However, I am confident that a lot of what I have to say could be translated into his framework.

is the most fruitful option to pursue. In the next section, I will spell out the account in more detail and introduce a number of qualifications and distinctions.

3 Merely verbal agreement and accord

MVA-speaker-meaning appeared to be a promising candidate for an analysis of merely verbal accord. To develop it further, we first need to distinguish what we have earlier called merely verbal agreement—a doxastic notion—from merely verbal accord—a behavioral notion. The above definition was modeled on Vermeulen's definition of merely verbal disputes. To have a dispute, it is necessary that there be a clash of utterances; not that there be a clash of attitudes. Consequently, the above definition focuses on the relation between what both speakers meant by their respective utterances. This approach seems to be more promising for merely verbal accord than for merely verbal agreement. To obtain the full range of cases, these two phenomena must be distinguished and analyzed separately.

3.1 Merely verbal agreement

Both merely verbal agreement and accord begin with an utterance by a speaker whose speaker-meaning is subsequently misinterpreted by an interlocutor. Since speaker-meaning is the central notion of my account, it is necessary to say a few words about what constitutes speaker-meaning and how it figures in paradigmatic speech acts, especially assertion.

The distinction between semantic meaning and speaker-meaning is due to Grice (1989). Semantic meaning is, roughly, what an utterance of a given type *S* standardly means in a linguistic community; speaker-meaning is, roughly, what a speaker intends to convey by uttering *S* (their 'communicative' or 'm-intention') in a particular context. The semantic meaning of a given utterance type *S* and what a speaker means by *S* in a given context may diverge. I may, for example, utter 'It's another *beautiful* day!' to communicate that it is another *miserable* day (Pinder, 2021, pp. 12–13). According to the Gricean orthodoxy, speaker-meaning is exhausted by what is said (the semantic meaning) and what is implicated, where implicatures can be either conversational or conventional. However, as Saul (2002) convincingly argues, this equation is unfortunate, because speakers can easily mean things that are neither said nor implicated (pp. 229–37). I will therefore adopt a more liberal sense of speaker-meaning that is not necessarily limited to what is said and what is implicated.

Speech acts, as I understand them, are illocutionary acts as introduced by Austin (1962). Paradigmatic examples include assertions, requests, commands and questions. Speech acts can be broken down into contents and force-types. One and the same content can be coupled with different force-types, i.e., it can be asserted, raised as a question, posed as a command, etc. There is an extensive debate over what makes it the case that an utterance token has a particular force-type, with views ranging from conventionalism to intentionalism, functionalism, expressionism and normativism (cf. Fogal et al., 2018, ch. 1). For the purposes of this paper, we need not take a

stance in this debate. Suffice it to say that the speech act *content* of a given utterance token is provided by the speaker-meaning.

Not all speech act types lend themselves to the possibility of being agreed or disagreed about. The paradigmatic, though not exclusive, utterance type that gives rise to agreement and disagreement is assertion. So, to make the discussion more concrete, I will focus here on agreement about asserted content. Furthermore, I will adopt a roughly Stalnakerian account of what distinguishes the force type of an assertion from other kinds of speech acts (more on this below). This has further theoretical benefits that will be discussed below. Note, however, that much of what I have to say could just as well be formulated in terms of speech acts other than assertions, or using a different account of assertions (cf. Fogal et al., 2018; MacFarlane, 2011 for discussion).

Without further ado, then, this is how I propose to analyze merely verbal agreement. Just as we did in the above, we can define a general notion of merely verbal agreement and a strong one, where only the strong one requires the interlocutor to actually disbelieve what the speaker asserts:

MV-Agreement [a: general / b: strong]

Two parties A and B have a merely verbal agreement over A's assertion S iff

- (i) by uttering S, A asserts that p;
- (ii) B thinks that, by uttering S, A asserts that q ($q \neq p$);
- (iii-a) B believes q but does not believe p.
- (iii-b) B believes q but disbelieves p.

According to MV-Agreement, the crucial feature is thus that there is a mismatch between what A asserts by uttering S, on the one hand, and what B *thinks* that A asserts by uttering S, on the other (as per i and ii). Condition (iii) adds the belief pattern that is required for this mismatch to give rise to merely verbal agreement. In the general version (iii-a), B must believe what he takes A to have asserted, but not believe what A actually asserted. In the strong version (iii-b), B must also disbelieve what A actually asserted.⁸

Some remarks about the above definition. First, note that, as stated in (ii), it is necessary that B takes A to utter S in an assertive way. If B believes that A is joking, then B's belief in what she thinks A meant by S would not result in agreement, verbal or otherwise. It is not necessary, however, that A actually believes what she asserts. To see this, suppose A is a lawyer who is doing everything she can to defend her client in court. In doing so, she says, "There were no bi-weekly meetings between the defendant and the victim". Suppose A means to assert that her client and the victim did not meet twice a week, and that A is actually agnostic about how often her client

⁸Note that a very similar definition can be employed for merely verbal disagreement (understood doxastically). All we have to do is swap (iii-a) and (iii-b) with the following belief patterns: (iii-a*) B believes not-q but does not believe not-p and (iii-b*) B believes not-q but believes p.

met the victim. If B understands A to mean that they met every other week, they may still have a merely verbal agreement.

Second, in the example above, both speaker-meanings (actual and perceived) are covered by the semantic meaning of S: "bi-weekly" is semantically ambiguous between *twice a week* and *every other week*. But this is an accidental rather than a necessary feature of the case. People can use sentences to assert almost anything, and if the context is rich enough, they have a good chance of being understood in the way they intended. If a hiker on a rainy day says, "I just love the Scottish weather," it is clear what she means, even though what she means is not covered by the semantic content of her utterance.

Third and finally, note that merely verbal agreement, as just analyzed, need be neither *symmetrical* nor *behavioral*. It is sufficient that one party misunderstands the other and holds the requisite belief pattern (specified in iii above). It is not necessary that the other party also form beliefs about what the other party believes and feel a match between those beliefs and her own. Similarly, merely verbal agreement is a doxastic rather than a behavioral state. There is no requirement that the receiver express their agreement in any way.

3.2 Merely verbal accord

Unlike merely verbal agreement and disagreement, merely verbal disputes and accord are *symmetrical* in the sense that both parties misunderstand each other, and *behavioral* in the sense that the apparent (dis)agreement is openly expressed. To further characterize merely verbal accord, it will be helpful to say a few words about assertion.

Assertions are speech acts that combine some content with a characteristic illocutionary force type. According to Stalnaker, "an assertion should be understood as a proposal to change the context by adding the content to the information presupposed" (Stalnaker, 1999, p. 10). What Stalnaker here calls "context" is often called the "common ground" of propositions taken for granted in a given conversation. The particular force of an assertion, then, is to *add* its content to the common ground; or, equivalently, to *reduce* the set of possible worlds left open as candidates for actuality by eliminating those worlds that are incompatible with the asserted proposition (ibid.). Understanding assertions as proposals to add information to the common ground is helpful because it gives us an intuitive understanding of the interlocutor's options for responding to an assertion. An interlocutor can either *accept* the proposal to add the asserted proposition to the common ground of their conversation, or she can *reject* it.⁹ Both types of reactions can be realized by verbal responses such as "yes" or "no," or by gestures such as nodding or shaking one's head.

This minimalist account of assertion and how to respond to it sheds light on what it means for two parties to be in accord. Two parties A and B are in accord if A

⁹There may or may not be a third option of neither accepting nor rejecting an assertion. This depends in part on what a non-reaction does to the common ground. Goldberg (2016) argues that under certain widespread conditions, a hearer's silence in the face of a speaker's assertion is likely interpreted as indicating assent. Since my focus is on merely verbal agreement, I will not take a stance on this issue here.

proposes, and B accepts, putting a proposition into A and B's conversational common ground. Allowing a proposition into a conversational common ground does not imply believing it to be true. If A says, "It's best to meet biweekly" and B replies, "Suppose we do that - what would we discuss at the first meeting?," B is accepting A's proposition into their common ground, but not because she believes it to be true, but merely because she wants to see where it leads them. As I will use the term, at least for the time being, the two of them are nevertheless in a state that deserves to be called "accord."¹⁰

Here is, then, how I propose to define the notion of merely verbal accord:

MV-Accord

Two parties A and B are having a merely verbal accord over A's assertion S iff.

- (i) by uttering S, A asserts p;
- (ii) B thinks that, by uttering S, A asserts q ($q \neq p$);
- (iii) by accepting S, B means to accept q;
- (iv) A thinks that, by accepting S, B means to accept p.

Conditions (i) and (ii) are familiar from merely verbal agreement. What distinguishes accord from agreement is that an accord is behavioral rather than doxastic. For this reason, it is necessary for the receiver to openly accept what the speaker has said. For the resulting accord to be merely verbal, it is required that the proposition that B accepts is not the proposition that A meant to assert. Hence condition (iii). Moreover, if it were clear to A that what B is accepting is a different proposition from the one she is asserting, the two would not be in accord. Hence condition (iv).

Note that (MV-Accord) allows for merely verbal accord with residual agreement about one or both of the propositions involved. In his discussion of merely verbal disputes, Chalmers (2011, pp. 525–526) calls cases of verbal disputes with residual disagreements *partly* verbal disputes. Analogously, one might be tempted to classify verbal accord with residual agreement as partly verbal accord. Although not much depends on this, I prefer to classify them as special cases of *merely* verbal accord. My criterion for whether two parties are having a merely verbal accord is whether or not there is a match between what each of them meant by their respective utterance. This may be the case even if there is residual agreement about the propositions in question. It is of course possible that merely verbal accord occurs in combination with strong merely verbal agreement. This results in a state where both speakers verbally agree about an issue while simultaneously disagreeing with what each other has actually asserted. We may call such cases strong merely verbal accords.

¹⁰There are challenging cases. If B accepts p into common ground for the sole purpose of basing a reductio on this assumption, we might not want to say that they are in accord with A about p. There are different ways of responding to this challenge. One is to deny that, in such a case, B has really accepted p into common ground. Another is to bite the bullet and accept that, at least for the time being, the two parties' utterances are actually in accord. Note that accord is a technical notion that does not imply agreement.

4 Merely verbal accord and the logic of conversation

Now that the notions of merely verbal agreement and accord have been clarified, it is time to discuss their relevance. This section focuses on merely verbal accord and considers its effects from the perspective of conversational logic; the next section considers how merely verbal agreement impedes collaborative action. One might think that verbal agreements/accord and disagreement/dispute are two sides of the same coin, such that whatever consequences or import the one has, the other would have as well, and so, that there is no need, once one of them has been investigated, to separately investigate the other. However, I will show that there are some noteworthy consequences of agreements/accord which are not simply ‘translations’ of consequences of disagreement/disputes.

Merely verbal accord gives rise to a characteristic set of false beliefs about the involved parties’ conversational common ground. For A, it is obvious that *p* is part of their common ground because she believes that B has accepted *p*. For B, on the other hand, it is obvious that *q* rather than *p* is part of their common ground because he believes that A has asserted *q*. Both beliefs are false: neither *p* nor *q* are part of A and B’s conversational common ground. The actual common ground is thus *smaller* than the perceived common ground.

Now contrast this with merely verbal disputes. In a paradigmatic merely verbal dispute, both parties think they are making conflicting claims about an issue, whereas in fact they are not. A thinks that B has rejected A’s proposal to add *p* to their common ground, while B thinks that A has rejected B’s proposal to put *q* into their common ground. In reality, however, neither *p* nor *q* have been rejected for inclusion into common ground. The actual common ground is thus potentially *larger* than the perceived common ground.

While both merely verbal disputes and accord go hand in hand with mistaken views about what is, or could be, in the conversational common ground, there is an important asymmetry between the two cases. In the case of merely verbal accord, the actual common ground is smaller than the perceived one. Both parties presuppose first-order propositions that the other does not share. This does not happen in merely verbal disputes. Here, both parties refrain from expanding their common ground in a way that the respective other would accept.¹¹ An important consequence of this difference is that merely verbal accord does, whereas merely verbal disputes do not, give rise to *opaquely defective contexts*.

According to Stalnaker (2002),

A nondefective context is a context in which the participants’ beliefs about the common ground are all correct. Equivalently, a nondefective context is one in which each of the parties to the conversation presuppose the same things. A

¹¹Note that, in both cases, the involved parties make additional second-order presuppositions about what the other has said. If A thinks that B has accepted that *p*, A will go on to presuppose not only *p*, but also *that B has accepted that p*. These second-order presuppositions are not shared by both parties (in neither merely verbal disputes nor accord). While these problematic presuppositions might give rise to practical problems, I leave them out of the discussion, because they arise for both merely verbal accord and disputes.

defective context may go unnoticed; that is, it can happen that all participants believe that the context is nondefective even when it is defective (p. 717).

Peet (2021) calls defective contexts *transparent* if “at least one of the conversational participants realizes that the context is defective, but is either unable or unwilling to correct it” (200), and distinguishes them from *opaquely* defective contexts, in which the conversational participants do not realize the defects (ibid.).

In a merely verbal accord, both parties believe that what they have asserted is now part of their conversational common ground. According to A, p but not q is in the common ground; according to B, q but not p is in the common ground. Bracketing the (somewhat unlikely) possibility that what each of them said was *already* part of their common ground before the exchange took place, the parties involved are wrong: what they said has not been accepted by the other and so is not part of their common ground. This defect of common ground (or context) will typically go unnoticed, at least until further utterances bring it to the surface.

Viewed from this angle, the phenomenon of merely verbal accord suggests a previously unnoticed pathway to defective context. In his illuminating discussion of the issue, Peet (2021) mentions conceptual variation as a potential source of defective context:

I take it to be uncontroversial that different interlocutors will often understand the same word in slightly different ways. They may have slightly different patterns of association, their conceptions may center around slightly different prototypes, they may be disposed to make slightly different inferences with the same concept, etc. (p. 201)

If there is conceptual variation, Peet argues, then interlocutors will often have diverging conceptions of what addition a given utterance makes to their conversational common ground. Based on A’s utterance of S, A might think that she has added p to the common ground, whereas B believes that some other proposition p* has been added to the common ground. This argument strikes me as plausible, as far as it goes. But whether the resulting defects in context are problematic depends on the amount and the degree of conceptual variation that we find in linguistic communities. If the degree of conceptual variation is typically small, then the defects in context that they give rise to will be small as well— the two context sets might then be, as Stalnaker puts it, “close enough” to being nondefective for it not to matter (but see Peet, 2021, p. 204 for critical discussion).

Where a defective context is due to merely verbal accord, however, the extent of the defect is potentially unlimited. This is because assertion is based on speaker-meaning, and the variability in what interlocutors can speaker-mean by one and the same utterance type is not constrained by their respective concepts. Of course, people’s communicative intentions are typically constrained by how they can expect their utterances to be interpreted by others. If one wants to communicate successfully, not everything goes. But where misaligned speaker-meanings are due to a misunderstanding, e.g., about what is the topic under discussion, the defects that they create in

the conversational common ground may rise above the limits of typical conceptual variation.

5 Merely verbal agreement in collaborative action

Now that we have considered the effects that merely verbal accord may have on conversations, let us move on to how they affect collaborative action. Here, my focus will be on merely verbal agreement rather than accord, because what matters is not how different speech act contents relate to each other, but how what one person is perceived as saying relates to the other person's beliefs. Again, the aim is to show that merely verbal agreement affects collaborative action in a way that their counterpart, merely verbal disagreement, does not.

One preliminary before we start. The consequences of merely verbal agreement vary dramatically between cases, depending on the agents involved, the surrounding circumstances, what is at stake in a given situation, and so on. The same is true of merely verbal disagreement. My goal is therefore not to come to an overall comparison between the two, implying, for example, that merely verbal agreement is worse than merely verbal disagreement all things considered. Rather, my goal is to single out a type of effect on collaborative action that is distinctive of merely verbal agreement.

Consider a conversation between two parties, A and B, about some topic X that has the following features:

- (i) both A and B are honest and cooperative;
- (ii) what A thinks that B thinks about X is relevant for what A will do (or/and vice versa);
- (iii) A has no or little other means to find out what B thinks about X (or/and vice versa);
- (iv) what A (and/or B) does is relevant to whether A's and B's collaborative enterprise is successful.

To have a clear example in view, consider again the case where two researchers, say Susan and Fred, plan a research collaboration with regular meetings, and they discuss how often they should meet during the project. Fred is responsible for sending out the invitations and for booking the rooms. Fred will only send out the invitations if he believes that Susan and he agree on how often they should meet. If he sends out too many or too few invitations, this will negatively affect the success of their research project (e.g., because they will have to cancel sessions or not make as much progress as they could).

Now what happens if, under these circumstances, Fred and Susan run into a merely verbal agreement about the frequency of meetings? Suppose, for instance, that Fred believes that they should meet twice a week, whereas Susan thinks that they should meet every other week. Susan tells Fred, "let's meet biweekly," meaning that they should meet every other week. Fred, however, takes Susan to mean that they should meet twice a week, to which he agrees. In the absence of any background knowledge

about Susan's meeting preferences, this gives him sufficient reason to consider the issue settled and send out invitations for two meetings a week. Fred and Susan will not discover that their supposed agreement was merely verbal until the consequences are already unfolding, such as when Susan fails to show up for a meeting.

Compare this to what is likely to happen if Susan and Fred instead run into a merely verbal disagreement, for example, because Fred misunderstands Susan to mean that they should meet every other week (which he disagrees with), when in fact she meant that they should meet twice a week (which he agrees with). Thinking that they disagree about the frequency of meetings, Fred will not go along with sending out invitations and booking rooms. Rather, he will reply to Susan, telling her that meeting only every other week is not often enough and trying to convince her to meet more often.

This comparison points to an important asymmetry between presumed agreement and presumed disagreement. Presumed agreements are like *start signs* for action: If two collaborating parties think that they agree on an issue that is relevant to what each of them does next, they each feel incentivized to put their presumed agreement into action. By contrast, presumed disagreements are like *stop signs* for action: If two collaborating parties think that they disagree on an issue that is relevant to what each of them does next, they need to pause and try to resolve the disagreement before they can start acting again.

This asymmetry between presumed agreement and disagreement has implications for merely verbal agreements and disagreements. At least when considered in situations characterized by (i)–(iv) above, merely verbal agreements incentivize *incautious* behavior, whereas merely verbal disagreements incentivize *overcautious* behavior. If two parties are having a merely verbal agreement, each of them acts on a proposition that the other does not agree with. This creates the risk of jeopardizing the success of their collaborative action. By contrast, if two parties are having a merely verbal disagreement, neither of them acts on a proposition that the other might agree with (or at least does not disagree with). While this may slow them down or have other negative side effects, it does not incentivize either of them to do anything that the other disagrees with.

A second and related difference between merely verbal agreement and disagreement is that the latter have an inherent tendency to be resolved before they can do practical damage, whereas the former fly under the radar until their practical consequences reveal them. If two parties need to agree on what they want to do before they can go do it, a presumed disagreement incentivizes them to discuss the issue further. This gives them a reasonably good chance of discovering the verbal nature of their disagreement. By contrast, merely verbal agreements create the impression of agreement and thus do not incentivize either party to ask further questions. In the absence of further evidence, the merely verbal agreement goes unnoticed until one party's actions reveal it to the other.

To repeat, it is not my purpose to make empirical predictions about whether merely verbal agreements are ultimately more harmful than merely verbal disagreements, nor to make an overall judgment about their likely effects. This would require a quantitative assessment of how many conversations exhibit features (i)–(iv), an assessment of the comparative likelihood that people will end up having merely ver-

bal agreements and disagreements, and a consideration of what other effects each of them produces. None of these things can be done here. Nevertheless, the discussion shows that there is a distinctive thread associated with merely verbal agreements that we do not find in merely verbal disagreements. This, I hope, goes some way toward establishing that merely verbal agreements should be taken seriously and deserve more attention than they currently receive.¹²

6 Merely verbal agreement in philosophy

Now that we have considered merely verbal accord and agreement in conversation and collaborative action, let us turn our attention to philosophy. Merely verbal disputes have become a popular topic of discussion in philosophy, in part because philosophers have claimed that they are prominent in their own discipline. Can the same be said of merely verbal agreement?¹³ And what would follow if the answer were yes? This final section addresses these questions. Note, however, that my answers will remain tentative, since reaching definitive conclusions on this issue will require more extensive (and empirically grounded) treatment and discussion than is possible here. The main goal of this section is to begin, rather than end, the discussion of merely verbal agreement in philosophy.

One reason for thinking that philosophy is plagued with verbal disputes is the fact that there is so much disagreement in philosophy combined with the observation that philosophers hold different views (or theories or conceptions) about the key concepts involved in these debates. For example, philosophers disagree over whether people have free will *and* about what it means to have free will; they disagree over whether intuitions play an important role in philosophical theorizing *and* about what intuitions are; they disagree over whether conceptual engineering is a useful philosophical approach *and* about what conceptual engineering is; etc. When people dispute whether F is G, while at the same time disagreeing over what it means to be F or G, there is a chance that this dispute is merely verbal.

Interestingly, however, there is an analogous reasoning supporting the idea that philosophy is equally plagued with merely verbal agreement and accord. While metaphilosophers have focused more on disagreement than agreement, the recent philpapers survey illustrates that in many areas of philosophy there is a large amount

¹² It is worth noting that merely verbal agreement is not the only source of misaligned action due to faux agreement. In the cases just considered, misaligned actions arise from merely verbal agreements because they lead to defective common ground: mistaken beliefs about what the other person has said. But misaligned actions can also be based on inferences that people make about each other that are not part of what they think each other said. For example, if A knows that B is in a relationship and has three children, and B says, "I have a car," A might infer that the car has at least five seats and base her future actions on this information. If B's car has fewer seats, this could cause problems. Presumably, however, A does not think that, by saying, "I have a car," B has said that this car has five seats, or that B is committed to his car having five seats. This would be a case in which misaligned actions are rooted not in defective common ground, but in mistaken inferences that one party draws about the other. The category of faux agreement is larger than the more specific category of merely verbal agreement.

¹³ For the purpose of this section, the difference between agreement and accord will not matter much, which is why I often mean both by "agreement."

of (apparent) agreement on many philosophical questions. To put some examples on the table:

- 62.5% of philosophers accept or lean towards a distinction between analytic and synthetic sentences (n=1703);
- 72.8% accept or lean towards the existence of a priori knowledge (n=1749);
- 70.9% accept or lean towards the idea that conceptual analysis is the most useful/important philosophical method (n=1041);
- 88.3% accept or lean towards the idea that there is at least a little philosophical progress (n=1775) (Bourget & Chalmers, 2023, pp. 8–12).

If, as proponents of merely verbal disputes suggest, it is true that philosophers also disagree widely over what the analytic/synthetic distinction amounts to, what a priori knowledge or conceptual analysis is, or under what circumstances philosophy can be said to make progress, then there is a chance that some of this stated agreement comes out merely verbal. If people are in accord about whether F is G, while at the same time disagreeing over what it means to be F or G, then their accord is in danger of being merely verbal.

To make this more concrete, consider the case of conceptual analysis. Many philosophers agree that conceptual analysis is the most useful/important philosophical method. At the same time, however, there is vast disagreement over what conceptual analysis amounts to. According to Jackson (1998), conceptual analysis uses our “[i]ntuitions about how various cases, including various merely possible cases, are correctly described in terms of free action, determinism, and belief” to “reveal our ordinary conceptions of free action, determinism, and belief, or, as it is often put nowadays, our folk theory of them” (p. 31). Conceptual analysis thus targets concepts and proceeds on the basis of intuitions about cases. By contrast, according to Deutsch (2021), “philosophers engaged in conceptual analysis are not engaged in the analysis of concepts” (p. 11126), but in the analysis of “mostly nonconceptual philosophical phenomena, such as knowledge, freedom, personal identity, moral rightness, reference, and causation” (ibid.). In analyzing these phenomena, Deutsch argues, philosophers do not rely on intuitions about cases, but on arguments (cf. Deutsch, 2015). Depending on which of these conceptions one associates with “conceptual analysis,” the statement “conceptual analysis is the most useful/important philosophical method” can mean quite different things.

Note that, according to my analysis, people are in merely verbal accord or agreement about something only when they speaker-mean different things by their respective utterances. It is not clear, however, that philosophers always speaker-mean their preferred conceptions. For example, even if one is convinced by the Deutschian theory of conceptual analysis, one might still use “conceptual analysis” to speaker-mean *the sort of method that one finds in this or that text, or whatever comes out as the true theory of conceptual analysis*, etc. For this reason, we should not expect that every single accord about whether F is G between philosophers who have different conceptions of F and/or G will turn out to be merely verbal. The same is true, of course, of merely verbal disputes. If two philosophers have different conceptions of some phenomenon about which they make contradictory statements, they do not have

a merely verbal dispute unless they speaker-mean those different conceptions, which they may not always do.

How do we determine whether a presumed accord about some philosophical question is merely verbal? When it comes to merely verbal disputes, this conclusion is often the result of an inference to the best explanation. If the disputants seem to agree on many of the arguments and other claims in the vicinity, then the best explanation of the overall situation is that their dispute is merely verbal. As a more specific test, it has been suggested to eliminate key terms in the dispute, and to ask the disputants to reformulate their disagreement in different terminology. If they cannot do this, their dispute is likely to be merely verbal (cf. Chalmers, 2011).

Similar considerations apply to merely verbal accord. If two parties are in accord about a philosophical thesis even though they disagree on many of the relevant arguments and claims in the vicinity, an inference to the best explanation suggests that their accord is merely verbal. For example, if McB accepts McA's utterance "conceptual analysis is the most useful/important philosophical method," but McB and McA have elsewhere defended conflicting claims about how philosophers do and should pursue philosophical questions, then an inference to the best explanation might lead us to conclude that their accord is merely verbal. And if McA and McB were to endorse, respectively, Deutsch's and Jackson's conception of conceptual analysis, they might have a hard time expressing their accord in terms other than "conceptual analysis."

What are the likely consequences of philosophers engaging in merely verbal agreement? As with merely verbal disputes, this is difficult to say in the abstract. It depends crucially on how often they occur and how long it takes for them to be discovered. But at least in principle, merely verbal agreement could be problematic for philosophers for at least two reasons. First, academic philosophy is a collaborative enterprise. Therefore, merely verbal agreement may have the kinds of effects described in the previous section: it motivates action where further discussion is due, and it masks underlying disagreements, thereby depriving philosophers of the opportunity to resolve them. Second, merely verbal agreement in academic philosophy plausibly slows progress. The success of philosophy qua collaborative enterprise requires that its participants be able to identify their disagreements so that they can continue to exchange arguments about their respective positions and resolve them. Since merely verbal agreement tends to mask underlying disagreement, it impedes philosophical progress. But, as noted above, how these considerations play out in actual academic philosophy remains to be investigated.

7 Conclusion

Two parties are having a merely verbal agreement when they misunderstand each other in a way that makes them think that they agree about an issue, whereas in fact they do not. The recent literature has had to say a lot about merely verbal disputes, but merely verbal agreements have so far been ignored. In this paper, I have developed accounts of merely verbal agreement and accord in terms of speaker-meanings. Then, I have considered the effects of merely verbal agreement and accord along two differ-

ent dimensions: with respect to how it affects the logic of conversation by changing people's expectations about what is in their conversational common ground, and how it affects the success of collaborative action. In both cases, I have argued that merely verbal accord/agreement have distinctive effects that are different from merely verbal disputes/disagreements. Lastly, I considered the role that merely verbal agreement might play in academic philosophy. Just like merely verbal disputes, they are likely to arise in areas where philosophers vastly disagree over key concepts, and they may impede progress by covering up underlying disagreements.

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