Silence, Dissent, and Common Ground

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1 Introduction

In the Common Ground picture (Stalnaker, 1999, 2002) speech acts are proposals to update a Common Ground of information. For example, an assertion that *it is raining* is a proposal to add information to the common ground. If the proposal is accepted, the participants add the proposition that *it is raining* to the set of propositions they agree upon. Stalnaker himself does not emphasize the notion of proposal. To him, it is enough that participants voice no objection for an update to take place. In this sense, 'silence gives assent' (section 2). But silence does not guarantee acceptance. In fact, 'eloquent silences' Tanesini (n.d.) may convey dissent (section 3). I argue that context, depending on how cooperative it is, supplies an interpretation for the silence of an audience (section 4). Based on pragmatic cues (I identify some), a speaker ascribes a default attitude to the audience. Then, she takes silence to express this default attitude. With this picture of silence, one can analyse non-cooperative contexts in a Common Ground perspective (section 5). In turn, this gives full weight to an analysis of speech acts as update proposals: in non-cooperative contexts, the update may require more than an absence of objection to go through.

2 Silence and Common Ground

The Common Ground picture of conversation, developed by Stalnaker (1970, 1973, 1974, 1999, 2002), characterizes speech acts as update proposals on a Common Ground shared by the participants. The Common Ground, as a conversational backdrop, keeps track of commitments that the participants undertake. The *context set* is the intersection of such commitments, ie what the participants jointly commit to. If we represent commitments as propositions (i.e. sets of possible worlds), the common ground consists of possible worlds compatible with beliefs that the participants have publicized, and the context set is the intersection of such possible worlds, which is possible worlds that are compatible with what the participants have jointly committed to.

Against this backdrop, speech acts perform updates. When they are accepted, they modify the context set in such and such way. In fact, what uniquely characterizes distinct speech acts is the type of update they perform if they are accepted by the participants in conversation. The structure of the Common Ground can be more or less complex to account for the update behaviour of different speech acts. Farkas and Bruce (2010) show how to implement the effect of polar questions in

a common ground like model, while Portner (2004, 2007) analyzes imperatives as proposals to update participants to-do lists. For the paradigmatic example, an assertion that p has the unique effect of adding the information that p to the context set. It does so removing all non-p worlds from the context set. Of course, this update on the context set only goes through if all the participants agree to add p to their joint commitments.

One key point to determine acceptance is that, according to Stalnaker, an update is accepted *unless it is rejected*:

> To make an assertion is to reduce the context set in a particular way, *provided that there are no objections from the other participants in the conversation* . . . This effect is avoided only if the assertion is rejected. (Stalnaker, 1999, p86, emphasis mine)

Stalnaker does not give much importance to the notion of proposal. He focuses on the update behaviour of speech acts. So it is enough for him to consider a weak notion of acceptance, closer to 'illocutionary uptake' (Austin, 1975; Searle, 1969), and to assume that acceptance is granted unless the participants state otherwise.

This goes hand in hand an idealized picture of conversation at stake in Common Ground models. Participants are assumed to be competent speakers, free to speak, and cooperative, in a Gricean manner (Grice, 1967). So they share a common goal to harmonize and maximize the shared information. In this scenario, the audience has a responsibility to reject updates they do not agree with (Pettit, 2002; Tanesini, n.d.). They are not prevented from speaking in any way, and the cooperative thing to do is to clearly indicate their assent – or dissent – with the speaker's utterances. If it is further idealized that power dynamics do not muddy the picture, or that the audience is somehow biased against accepting the discourse moves of the speaker, then acceptance arises as a default. Pettit (2002), Goldberg (2016, 2018, n.d.) argue that in the absence of defeaters (power dynamics, silencing, inability of the audience to speak) silence conveys assent.

Throughout, I consider cases where silence is an intentional absence of communication. So the notion of silence at stake does not cover cases of non-verbal communication or non-communicative silences (Saville-Troike, 1995). Non-verbal communications, such as writing or gestures, still deploy devices of communication (and thus separately indicate assent or dissent). Non-communicative silences, like pauses to take a breath or process speakers contributions, do not translate to an audience intention. By contrast, an intentional silence marks a conscious decision not to speak.

The stalnakerian framework interpret intentional silence as assent: the audience does not oppose what the speaker is adding to the Common Ground. While fully understanding how assent emerges as a default is complex, the assertion example provides telling clues:

> Assertions project confirmation, and therefore the move of confirming an assertion is the least marked next discourse move. (Farkas and Bruce, 2010, p93)

When silence is intentional, it signifies that the participant opts out of performing an utterance. Thus, the least marked discourse move can be attributed to them. In the example, confirming an assertion. Similarly, when a speaker has authority to give orders, or make promises, a default assent arises from silence.

Goldberg (n.d.) likens this presumption of assent to a 'tacit acceptance procedure'.

Example 1. A committee sets a report to be tacitly accepted unless an objection is raised by May 3rd.

Example 2. The officiant instructs the audience to 'speak now or forever hold your peace'. If they remain silent, the marriage takes effect.

Example 3. The teacher tells her students to interrupt her whenever they have a question or objection.

In 'tacit acceptance procedures', the conversational setting is explicitly structured so that silence expresses assent. Similarly, the idealized common ground picture attributes to the audience a default attitude of assent (they will voice their dissent). So intentional silences are taken to convey that the least marked an absence of rejection to a proposal. Silence, being an absence of rejection, stands for assent.

3   Silent Dissent

The stalnakerian picture is rather idealistic; in real life, the situation is more complicated, and silence does not automatically mean assenting to an update. In fact, Tanesini (n.d.) collates examples of *eloquent silences*: silences whereby the audience expresses something distinct from assent. She follows Saville-Troike (1995) in distinguishing 'eloquent silences' both from non-verbal communication and from non-communicative silences. Non-verbal communications, such as writing, or gestures, are not silences, as they still deploy devices of communications. On the opposite end of the spectrum, pauses to take a breath, process what the speaker just said, are silences that enable communication, but don't have themselves communicative functions. In both these cases, the silent participant does not make clear an intention to convey something by their silence. Thus, in a Gricean sense, they do not communicate anything by their silence.

By contrast, eloquent silences have a communicative intention. Examples of eloquent silences abound: the politically loaded silence of white audiences when confronted to discrimination stories from persons of colour (DiAngelo, 2012); the pointed silence that follows an offensive remark at a dinner party, followed by a topic change; defiant silence faced with a question, or an order, ... Far from being cooperative silences, these eloquent silences signal that the audience refuses to cooperate in the conversation (Tanesini, n.d.).

DiAngelo (2012) analyzes the case of 'white silence' as enmeshed with power dynamics. Its effects, during antiracist discussions, differ:

> Silence has different effects depending on what move it follows. For example, if white silence follows a story shared by a person of color about the impact of racism on their lives, that silence serves to invalidate the story. People of color who take the social risk of revealing the impact of racism only to be met by white silence are left with their vulnerability unreciprocated. [...] Conversely, when white silence follows a particularly problematic move made by a white participant, that silence supports the move by offering no interruption; in essence, white silence operates as a normative mechanism for these tactics. When white silence follows a white, antiracist stand (such as challenging one's fellow whites to racialize their perspectives), it serves to isolate the person who took that stand. This isolation is a powerful social penalty and an enticement to return to the comfort of white solidarity. In this context, white silence denies the support that is critical to other whites working to develop antiracist practice. (DiAngelo, 2012, p5)

However, the crucial point is that silences from a person in power who is expected to participate and contribute in a conversation convey a refusal to engage, and thus an implicit agreement to a statu quo.

The converse also stands: in imbalanced power dynamics, silence from an inferior party can convey their disagreement in a form that is less susceptible to punishment.

Example 4. Your boss makes a sexist joke. You are not in a position to call them out on their behaviour. You remain silent, exchanging loaded glances with sympathetic coworkers

Both of these examples are cases of 'eloquent silences', according to Tanesini (n.d.). In a situation where the audience is expected to continue the conversation, but instead elects to remain silent, they signal that something is awry. Eloquent silences have a specific illocutionary force, that of blocking a conversation (or attempting to). Occurring after assertions, they can evoke disinterest, refusal to share the commitment the assertion seeks to introduce. After questions, they convey a refusal to answer, or engage with a certain topic. In general, they express a refusal of the audience to engage with a certain content.

> The person who is deliberately keeping silent, instead, indicates that something is amiss with the conversation which, therefore, cannot continue as normal. It may be worth noting in this regard how awkward silence often is in conversation. Silence is uncomfortable because it often marks the fact that things are not going well with the conversational exchange. (Tanesini, n.d., p16)

Eloquent silences are distinct from the kind of silence at stake in the idealized stalnakerian picture. They are also extremely common, which makes clear that non-cooperative contexts, where the audience is not assumed to agree with the speaker until they explicitly claim their agreement, are far from being exceptional. And that in such contexts, silence means dissent.

What this paper aims to show is that different readings on silence, that distinguish an absence of objection from an assent, can be incorporated in a stalnakerian framework.

4   Silence and default attitudes

My stance is that silence is not, *per se*, an expression of assent or dissent. Instead, a conversational context supplies a *default attitude* of the audience with respect to the speaker's utterances. When the audience remains silent, they are assigned this default attitude. In an idealized context, *à la* Stalnaker, the audience is assigned a default attitude of assent when they remain silent. And, in non-cooperative contexts, silence of the audience can supply a default attitude of defiance, or dissent, with respect to the speaker's updates.

4.1   Dialogue cooperativeness

To categorize the adversarial, or cooperative, levels of contexts, I help myself to the four scenarios of dialogue that Dutilh Novaes identifies for Prover-Skeptic argumentation games:

(1) Prover and Skeptic have a common goal, that of establishing the validity or invalidity of proofs, and no (conflicting) individual goals (they either win or lose together). They each perform a different task, but in view of a common interest (or converging individual interests). This is a purely cooperative, division-of-labor game, where neither player can 'win' alone; both players will benefit from achieving the overall goal of correctly identifying (in)validity.

(2) Prover wants her proof to go through no matter what (as this counts as a win for her), regardless of whether it is a valid proof or not. Skeptic, by contrast, wants valid proofs to go through and invalid ones to be refuted, and is neutral with respect to 'pay-offs' of the game for him (no win or loss). Here, Prover can win or lose the game, and Skeptic can neither win nor lose (the outcome is neutral for him).

(3) Skeptic wants to block (refute) the proof no matter what (as this counts as a win for him), regardless of whether it is a valid proof or not. Prover, by contrast, wants valid proofs to go through and invalid ones to be refuted, and is neutral with respect to 'pay-offs' of the game for her (no win or loss). Here, Skeptic can win or lose the game, and Prover can neither win nor lose (the outcome is neutral for her).

(4) At a lower level, the game is a classical adversarial, zero-sum game: Prover wins if the proof goes through, Skeptic wins if the proof is refuted or otherwise blocked. But, at a higher level, they are in fact cooperating to establish whether a proof is valid or not.

(Dutilh Novaes, 2020, p55sq)

Dutilh Novaes applies these different scenarii to particular dialogues, whose practice is exemplified in mathematical proofs. However, the taxonomy is useful when extended to casual, or normal conversations to gauge their level of cooperativeness or adversariality:

1. **Fully cooperative dialogue:** Speaker and Audience have a common conversational goal. For example, to establish the truth or falsity of a claim; to settle on a movie to watch; to maximise the number of sailing-related puns in their dialogue. They have no conflicting individual goals.
2. **Semi-cooperative dialogues:**[1] Speaker and Audience conversational goals partially align. Speaker wishes to convince an agnostic Audience to have a church wedding; Speaker presents her paper to an audience of her peers; Speaker questions an Audience decision.
3. **Adversarial dialogues:** Speaker and Audience conversational goals do not align. Speaker debates an hostile Audience; a black Speaker wishes to challenge discrimination to a white Audience; Speaker orders her teenage child to clean their room.

Whether the dialogue is cooperative or adversarial, in turns, impacts how the Speaker perceives the silence of her audience. In a cooperative setting, Speaker is likely to interpret her audience's silence as assent. Her conversational move went through. She suggests an action movie, her Audience stayed silent and followed her to the DVD shelf. On the other hand, adversarial settings introduce dissent as a default attitude. When the teenage child stays silent after being asked to clean their room, they express their rebuttal of the imperative. Finally, semi-cooperative settings introduce an interesting read on silence. Speaker answers an Audience question about her paper. Her Audience remains silent, not expressing assent or dissent. Speaker deduces that she has to provide more information to ground her claim.

4.2   Identifying dialogue situations

How the speaker perceives the dialogue situation, whether it is more or less adversarial, influences the default attitude she attributes to her audience. In a fully cooperative situation, the 'tacit acceptance procedure' of idealized stalnakerian models applies. By contrast, in adversarial situations, silence is perceived as hostile, a refusal to let a speech act go through. The perceived cooperativeness is influenced by the explicit discourse moves that the participants make in the conversation, and by various pragmatic factors. Discourse moves can convey cooperation or adversariality in a more or less overt manner: enthusiastic assent, explicit rejections, etc. If an audience rejects every move that the speaker

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[1] This is in correspondence with Dutilh Novaes' (2) and (3) scenarii of Prover-Skeptic dialogues, where Prover and Skeptic individual goals conflict in some respect. These scenarii are semi-cooperative in that one of the participants is neutral with respect to the conversational outcome.

attempts, the speaker will identify an adversarial situation. But speakers and audience also use pragmatic cues to assess cooperation, and thus attribute default attitudes. I identify some of these pragmatic cues.

Priors. A speaker goes in a conversation with certain beliefs concerning the other participants and whether the conversation is cooperative. When she tells her teenage child to clean their room, she expects some resistance. When she discusses which movie to watch with her friend, she assumes that their conversational goals align: find a movie that they will both enjoy.

These priors are of course defeasible. At any point, the speaker may reassess the situation, and discover that a setting is more, or less cooperative than she previously thought. She can also investigate whether her audience actually holds the default attitude she attributes them.

Example 5. After asking her child to clean their room, and meeting only silence, the speaker checks in. 'Did you hear me? Does that mean you will clean up?'

These priors are influenced by what the speaker knows of the audience beliefs and attitude, but also by the sociological factors at stake, such as power dynamics, epistemic authority, politeness, etc.

Power dynamics and adversariality. Sociological factors also influence the perceived cooperativeness of a situation. When a speaker is an authority in a conversation (be it because she has more socio-political power, or more knowledge), it is likely that silence indicates audience assent (6). If the audience is an authority, then the speaker can interpret silence as unconvinced, or hostile.

Example 6. A teacher is giving a history lesson in front of her class. She is confident that she knows more on the lesson topic than her students.

Example 7. A student has claimed that dolphins are mammals. Her professor asks her to justify her claim. The student goes through her evidence.

In (6), as long as there are no objections to clear up, the teacher can safely assumes that her students' silence stands for an assent to update the common ground with the contents of her lesson. In a context such as (7), the student assumes that, when her teacher keeps silent, she needs to provide more evidence. The update is not going through unless her audience explicitly allows it.

Paralinguistic cues. A third type of pragmatic factors to consider are paralinguistic cues. It is very rare that an audience is entirely 'silent', in the sense delineated by Tanesini. Instead, audiences nod, look skeptical, smile, frown, hum with interest, etc. These para-linguistic cues come into play for the speaker to distinguish between an audience that is silent because they assent to the update proposals, and an audience keeping silence out of disinterest, or boredom.

Example 8. A teacher is giving a history lesson in front of her class. Upon seeing perplexed frowns, she realizes that she needs to provide more details on the changes in U.S. foreign policy following the Cuba missile crisis.

Example 9. I advise my friend to read *The Last Girl Scout*. He seems unsure, so I make a case for the book, until he hums with interest.

The paralinguistic cues allow the speaker to interpret in a more fine-grained manner attitude her audience holds towards her discourse. She can change her perception of the cooperativeness degree of a conversation.

4.3   From cooperativeness to interpretation of silence

Following different pragmatic cues, more or less overt, a speaker determines whether a dialogue is cooperative or adversarial. From this, she attributes a default attitude to her audience. If the conversational situation is cooperative, she assumes that her audience shares her conversational goals, and thus that the less marked attitude is assent. In cooperative settings, silence is interpreted as an assent. If the conversational situation is adversarial, she assumes that her discourse move is not accepted until an explicit confirmation is reached. In adversarial setting, silence is interpreted as dissent. If the situation is semi-cooperative, the speaker may be unsure whether her discourse move is accepted or rejected, unless there is an explicit confirmation or rejection from the audience. The semi-cooperative setting makes it likely that a silence is an invitation to ground her assertion with evidence, explain her question, show that her request makes sense. The speaker attributes these default attitudes to an audience until proven otherwise; either by an explicit discourse move (confirmation, rejection), or by pragmatic cues that indicate changes in the cooperativeness.

5   Silence and updates

The perceived cooperativeness of a conversation provides three interpretations of silence:

1. Fully cooperative conversation: silence means assent
2. Semi-cooperative conversation: silence means 'tell me more!'
3. Adversarial conversation: silence means dissent

This allows us to define distinct behaviours of conversational updates depending on conversational cooperativeness. Speech acts can be taken, for simplicity sake, to be proposals to update a (more or less complex) conversational common ground in certain ways (section 2). These proposals may be accepted or rejected by the participants in a conversation. Or the audience may suspend their judgment, leaving the common ground undecided on the speech act, and keeping both worlds compatible and incompatible with the update in the context set.

The perceived cooperativeness of a conversation determines the default result of a proposal:

1. Fully cooperative conversation: The update goes through *unless explicitly rejected by the participants.*

2. Semi-cooperative conversation: The update remains undecided *until the participants assent or dissent.*

3. Adversarial conversation: The update is rejected *unless explicitely accepted by the participants.*

In turn, this requires us to separate two essential effects of speech acts. First, the effect of adding to the conversational record that a proposal to update the common ground in a certain way was made. Second, the effect of updating the common ground *only if* the proposal is accepted. The requirements for acceptance can be determined depending on the cooperativeness of the dialogue. In some cases, acceptance only requires an absence of rejection. In others, acceptance needs to be made explicit, or even enthusiastic.

6   Conclusions

Taking silence to express a default attitude, not necessarily an assent, complicates the Stalnakerian picture. But it also shows how we can model, and even make use of non-cooperative contexts when analyzing the effects of speech acts on a less idealized picture of conversation. Moreover, taking seriously silence emphasizes the talk of 'proposals' when considering the effect of speech acts on common ground. While the full update effect of a speech act can only occur if the participants assent to the update, the first and main effect of most speech acts is to issue a *proposal* to update. No matter the reaction of the participants, the proposal goes on the conversational record. And considering that silence might not mean immediate assent also highlights the part that pragmatic cues play into determining uptake from the participants in a conversation.

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