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The interdependence of common ground and context

Abstract: The aim of this essay is to argue that common ground is context shared between S (speaker, writer, signer) and H (audience) under the following conditions: S utters v , evoking context C1 (the ‘world and time spoken of’) so as to bring about in C3 (the ‘situation of interpretation’ from H’s point of view) H’s understanding v in terms of the relevant beliefs that S holds or purports to hold in respect of uttering v (i.e. speaking of C1) in C2 – the ‘world and time spoken in’ – which is the situation of utterance from S’s point of view. If C3 is very different from C2 such that H does not share some of S’s system of beliefs and assumptions, H may be well able to understand what S intended to mean; nevertheless, v can have reduced comprehensibility and its psycho-social appropriateness may be differently evaluated from the way S expected to be understood: examples would be when a 21st century H reads a sonnet by William Shakespeare or, for another instance, reacts to Jeannie Gunn referring in 1908 to Indigenous Australians as *niggers* (despite her showing greater respect for their culture and land rights than most of her white contemporaries).

1 Overview

Common ground (CG) exists between members of community K who mutually know or believe some possibly singleton set of (purported) facts F . A purported fact can be expressed as a proposition φ believed to be true within K (that is, by at least some members of K). When a member μ of K applies knowledge of F (that is, belief in the truth/existence of F) in order to interpret state of affairs, a possibly singleton set of propositions Φ , μ_K can presume that others in the community will also be able to apply knowledge of F (belief in the truth/existence of F) in order to interpret Φ (cf. Garfinkel 1964: 33). The existence of F , Φ , and the application of knowledge of F to interpreting Φ is what constitutes common ground for members of the community K . Once attended to, Φ becomes part of F , incrementing the common ground. When S , the speaker, writer, signer, is a member of K ($\mu_S \in K$), S ’s utterance v pragmatically entails that S presupposes that Φ is already part of the conversational context at t (in other words, it is in the CG), or that H ($\mu_H \in K$) is prepared to add Φ , without objection, to the context against which v is evaluated, such that the CG is extended. Pragmatic entailment

can be characterized as follows: when A pragmatically entails B, B cannot – given A – be denied without creating a paradox, absurdity, or contradiction. Pragmatic entailment gives rise to Moore's paradox: *I went to the pictures last Tuesday, but I don't believe that I did* (Moore 1952: 543); more generally, *p* and *I don't believe that p* and *p* and *I believe that not-p*.¹

In saying that both S and H are members of K ($\mu_S \in K$ and $\mu_H \in K$) I invoke the normal situation in which S and H are members of same community and, broadly speaking, share knowledge of a common language and knowledge of a common culture. This default is the basis for real world variations, where S and H do not share knowledge of a common language and/or knowledge of a common cultural heritage. In such statistically unusual cases, S and H negotiate CG on the basis of common humanity. Speakers also address animals (which may seem to react appropriately) and inanimate or metaphysical objects (which don't react²) in which cases 'H' is anthropomorphized. I assume that when S utters *v*, there is always an actual or presumed H. Typically, in conversation S perceives an actual H (seen and/or heard); but a writer presumes a reader (H); the farewell video of a suicide bomber presumes a viewing listener (H); persons (including writers of secret diaries) may on rare occasions talk to themselves (S=H).

The context of a language expression ϵ , a constituent of utterance *v*, such that $\epsilon \subseteq v$, comprises C1, C2, and C3. C1, 'the world (and time) spoken of' by S, is a mental model of an actual or recalled or imagined world. C1 captures what is said about what at some world – a possible world accessible from C2.³ A model of the world (and time) spoken of is the content of a mental space which can be readily associated in a variety of ways with other worlds (and times) occupying other mental spaces. C1 is largely identified from co-text:

- (i) via the semantic frames and scripts (Bartlett 1932; Fillmore 1982; Marslen-Wilson, Levy and Tyler 1982; Mazzone 2011; Minsky 1977; Prince 1981; Sanford and Garrod 1981; Schank 1984; Schank and Abelson 1977) evoked by the various constituents ($\epsilon_1 \dots_n$) of *v* – given their structure within *v*; and

¹ There is similarity between my 'pragmatic entailment' and 'explicature' in Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995; Carston 2002; Capone 2013) but the definitions are not the same. An explicature is a proposition communicated by an utterance if and only if it is a development of a logical form encoded by the utterance (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 182). Nonetheless, it is possible that my 'pragmatic entailment' may indeed be what, in RT, is an 'explicature'.

² Ignoring inanimates programmed to react to recognized speech through artificial intelligence and prayers imagined to be answered by gods.

³ Although some of the worlds described in Douglas Adams *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (Adams 1992) are subject to different natural laws than the world of its readers, they are 'accessible' worlds in my use of the term because we can understand them in the sense that we can follow the action in the way the author seems to have intended.

- (ii) S's attitude to what is spoken of or to the persons addressed as this is revealed by the locution.

(i) and (ii) contribute to identifying what S's purpose might be in making the utterance, which is the effective meaning of $\varepsilon \subseteq v$.

C2, 'the world spoken in', is the situation in which v is expressed from S's point of view (POV), where the POV derives from S's *weltanschauung*. C2 captures who does the saying to whom, and where and when this takes place. C2 normally determines the social relationships and conventions that S is expected to follow and, in consequence, sets the standard for the psycho-social appropriateness of what is said. C2 is what governs, for instance, whether such terms as *bitch*, *cunt*, or *nigger* are used as a slur or as an expression of (?bantering) camaraderie and whether or not a particular form of words is polite (or not).

C3 is a corresponding situation of interpretation in which H seeks to understand $\varepsilon \subseteq v$, i.e. the meaning of ε in the context (C1 + C2) of the utterance v in which it occurs (the interpretation from H's POV/*weltanschauung*). In face-to-face interaction, C3 is approximately identical with C2 but they are perceived from different points of view. So far as possible, S predicts common ground with H in order to shape utterance v for maximum comprehensibility. Where C3 is very different from C2 such that H does not share many of S's system of beliefs and assumptions, the context is disparate from S's presumed common ground. Although H may be well able to understand what S intended to mean, $\varepsilon \subseteq v$ can have reduced comprehensibility and its psycho-social appropriateness may be differently evaluated from the way S expected to be understood, as when a 21st century H reads a sonnet by William Shakespeare (S).

Ideally, CG is context mutually believed to be shared between S and H where S attempts to present C1 in uttering $\varepsilon \subseteq v$ so as to achieve the relevant beliefs in C3 that S holds or purports to hold in C2; concomitantly, in C3 H seeks to interpret C1 in the light of H's assumptions about C2.

For the remainder of this essay: §2 elaborates CG; §3 elaborates context; and §4 demonstrates the interdependence of common ground and context.

2 More on common ground

I assume, contrary to Chomsky (1975: 56f, 1980: 229f, 239), that human language is characteristically a form of social interactive behaviour (Allan 1986/2014; 2003; 2010; 2020a). This is the motivation for its coming into existence (Dunbar 1996) and by far the majority of its usage is when S addresses utterance v to audience H

for an unbounded number of perlocutionary and illocutionary purposes such as to establish or maintain a social relationship, to inform, question, demand, warn, apologize, and so forth. S and H are mutually aware that, normally, their interlocutor is an intelligent being, that is, a person capable of rational behaviour.⁴ S does not need to spell out those things which are obvious to the sensory receptors of H, or such that H can very easily reason them out on the basis of communicative competence – knowing the language and the conventions for its use that each of us develops from birth as we experience the world around us. These assumptions about the interlocutor's abilities with respect to what is presented in *v* constitute CG. So, for instance, when S points to something visible in the situation of utterance and says *Isn't that nice?* there is an assumption that H understands English and can also perceive whatever 'that' refers to; or, saying *Let's go to Uluru* assumes that 'Uluru' will be understood as referring to a certain place (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uluru>). Some CG is universal, for example, knowledge of the sun as a heavenly body that is a source of light and warmth, rain as a source of fresh water replenishing the earth, the physiological and socio-cultural differences between the sexes. Some CG is very restricted, for example, between a couple who use *the Hobgoblin* to refer to the man's first wife. Normally, S can readily assess the probable CG with H, and chooses his or her words accordingly. S must make assumptions about H's capacity to understand *v* well enough that S's expressed intention in the message is going to be, in S's opinion, more or less correctly interpreted by H (Allan 1986/2014; Clark, Schreuder and Butterick 1983; Colston 2008). Because addressing a neophyte or a child must be differently handled from addressing a group of experts, assumed CG is based on an assessment of H's competence to understand *v*, and it motivates such things as choice of language and language variety, style and level of presentation. CG allows meaning to be underspecified by S, so that language understanding is a constructive process in which a lot of inferencing⁵ is expected from H.

In addition to these linguistic aspects of CG there are assumptions about what H may know of the world, which can affect the choice of utterance topic, and even whether or not S should address H at all. H also makes assumptions about the CG with S, basing it on H's assessment of *v* in the context of utterance and of S as a person. S's assessment of CG with H and H's assessment of CG with S are unlikely to be identical: as I have just said, all that is required is that the overlap in S's and H's assessments of mutual CG enables S to be satisfied that H understands

⁴ And not (or not necessarily) a person of above average IQ.

⁵ Inferencing, which may arise from spreading activation within an associative network, includes enrichment of implicatures and implicatures, disambiguation, and the like.

ν well enough for S's communicative purpose to, in S's judgment, succeed. This will apply to each utterance in a discourse such that the relevant CG is dynamic and accretes. As conversation proceeds, the CG develops (Stalnaker 2002: 701): if, where X, Y, and Z are interlocutors, X says φ and Y says χ then, normally all of X, Y and Z (keeping score in terms of Lewis 1979) will know that X either subscribes to or purports to subscribe to φ and Y to χ , whether or not the other interlocutors also subscribe to φ and χ . Furthermore, in a talk exchange, the roles of S and H will alternate among interlocutors. The situation is again complicated by the fact that, when uttering ν , S will often address more than one person and so is required to assess CG with an audience of any number of people.

It is, of course, possible that individual μ_i does not know/believe F, permitting miscommunication to arise. For instance, if X says *I've just been talking to Louise* and Y responds *Louise who?* then X is expected to explain who 'Louise' is. Sometimes S assumes something is not in CG with H, when in fact it is; in which case, H will often correct S (Horton and Gerrig 2005: 24).

It is necessarily the case that what S utters is based on S's own knowledge and perspectives, which may not match H's even though S is desirous of communicating with H. Such egocentrism is a function of what is severally salient to S and H; to seek CG with another person⁶ is an effortful process employing cognitive resources to incorporate beliefs about the knowledge and perspectives of other interlocutors. Thus, I assume a conscious effort on S's or H's part but nonetheless predict that, given the near constant exposure to language interchange during the waking hours of most human beings, under most circumstances S and H automatically assume that for S to get a message across in ν , and for H to understand ν , one has to put oneself into the interlocutor's shoes. For instance, this enables us to correctly interpret utterances in unfamiliar accents or dialects through a sort of analysis-by-synthesis: 'It seems as if listeners sometimes perceive an utterance by reference to their own motor activities. When we listen to speech, we may be considering, in some way, what we would have to do in order to make similar sounds' (Ladefoged 1982: 104).⁷ Linguistic communication in general is a matter of putting oneself into the interlocutor's shoes and, because this behaviour is the norm, it very quickly becomes automatic except perhaps in people with autism spectrum disorders, or those who are severely narcissistic or very deeply depressed. Otherwise, neither S nor H needs to consciously accommodate

⁶ People occasionally address animals or inanimate objects, but these are effectively anthropomorphized.

⁷ I see this as altruism rather than egocentrism. The reader of this essay will probably be faced with the task of trying to interpret utterances in an unfamiliar dialect when reading example (17) below.

themselves to the needs of an interlocutor; such behaviour has become automatic and takes no noticeable processing effort. In the words of Horton (2008: 202): ‘automatic commonality assessment provides one possible basis upon which language users may generate inferences about common ground.’

Generalizing, CG is achieved under the following circumstances:

- (1) X saying φ to Y pragmatically entails (a) X believes that φ and (b) Y has reason to believe that X believes that φ .
- (2) If in saying φ to Y, X refers to α , this act of referring to α pragmatically entails that (a) X believes Y can identify α (knows who or what α is) and (b) Y recognizes that X believes Y can identify α . Typically, when Y cannot identify α , Y asks X for further information.
- (3) X asking Y φ pragmatically entails (a) X believes Y may be able to do φ and expects Y to accede or refuse to do φ ; (b) Y recognizes that X believes Y may be able to do φ and Y needs to decide whether to accede or refuse.

It seems probable that other illocutionary types will give rise to additional patterns corresponding to the preconditions of those illocutions, but I do not have space to offer a complete account of CG here.

3 More on context

A competent S supplies sufficient context for the anticipated audience that a competent H can recreate the world and time being spoken of (C1); consequently, Aristotle recommended: ‘Your language will be appropriate if it expresses emotion and character, and if it corresponds to its subject’ (*Rhet.* 1408^a10, Aristotle 1984: 2245). Aristotle is talking about S’s style and manner of presentation, which a competent S knows will normally be evaluated by a competent H; typically this is part of the CG. In a similar vein, Quintilian approved language expression that is ‘adapted to the matter and the persons concerned’ (Quintilian 1920–22, XI.i.2). And three centuries later, Augustine used the word *contextio*, e.g. ‘caetera contextio sermonis’ ‘the general drift of the passage’ and ‘contextio Scripturae’ ‘the purport of Scripture’.⁸ *Contextio* derives from the verb *contextare* denoting the

⁸ Quotes from Augustine are found in *De genesi ad litteram* I.xix.38 (Augustine 1836); Taylor SJ 1982: 66.

weaving together of words, which is not quite equivalent to English *context* – for which Augustine used ‘*circumstantiae*’ “what stands around, context, circumstances”. Until modern times, when context was discussed it was usually referred to as *circumstantiae* or *circumstances*. Indeed, the context of expression $\varepsilon \subseteq \nu$ could alternatively be described as the circumstances in which $\varepsilon \subseteq \nu$ occurs.

Saying that a competent S supplies sufficient context that the anticipated audience can recreate the world and time being spoken of places more focus on the establishment of CG than was usual before the late 20th century. Stalnaker 2014 treats context as CG (p. 3 and passim): ‘context [is] a body of available information: the common ground’ (Stalnaker 2014: 24, an idea already in Stalnaker 1978). Stalnaker also believes that common ground is something that speakers typically presuppose (Stalnaker 2014: 25). So, what is ‘presupposition’? Scott Soames’ defines ‘utterance presupposition’ as follows:

- An utterance U presupposes P (at t) iff one can reasonably infer from U that the speaker S accepts P and regards it as uncontroversial, either because
- a. S thinks that it is already part of the conversational context at t, or because
 - b. S thinks that the audience is prepared to add it, without objection, to the context against which U is evaluated. (Soames 1982: 486, (13))

My notion of pragmatic entailment corresponds to Soames’ notion of what H, and a bystander, or an overhearer can reasonably infer from the utterance; and I prefer to say that S does the presupposing which sanctions S’s utterance, ν , which in turn induces the pragmatic entailment. Consequently, rewriting Soames’ definition in my terms gives (4).

- (4) S’s utterance ν pragmatically entails that S presupposes that φ is already part of the conversational context at t (i.e. it is in the CG), or that the audience (primarily H) is prepared to add φ , without objection, to the context against which ν is evaluated (thus extending the CG).

CG may be established by introducing someone or something in what is often called a ‘presupposition’ but is in fact pragmatic entailment. Consider (5):

- (5) I’m going to a wedding next week. My ex-wife’s cousin is marrying a grandson of one of the Rolling Stones.

S does presuppose the future factuality of φ , viz. the ex-wife’s cousin marrying a grandson of one of the Rolling Stones; but S does not presuppose that H knows any of this already because, if S did, the second sentence would be something like *Remember my ex-wife’s cousin . . .* Instead H infers φ from what (5) pragmat-

ically entails (Grice 1981; Abbott 2008). Thus (5) contains a counterexample to Stalnaker's claim that S 'presupposes that ϕ if and only if [S] accepts (for the purposes of the conversation) that it is common ground that ϕ ' (Stalnaker 2014: 25). S may presuppose that the utterance carries one or more pragmatic entailments that H will accept as an extension to the common ground. Lewis 1979: 340 spoke of H 'accommodating' to such introductions: in (5) it is a predictable part of a personal relations frame or schema. In (5), although the Rolling Stones can be assumed to be in the CG, the actual individuals to be married and S's ex-wife – even that S had an ex-wife – need no more be known to H such that they can be named and/or picked out in a crowd than they are known to readers of this essay. It is conceivable that the people to be married are unknown except as hearsay to S. The descriptions are adequate to the purpose of the communication because the principal focus is in the first sentence of (5); the second sentence is an elaboration of it and rhetorically subordinate (Mann, Matthiessen and Thompson 1992; Mann and Thompson 1987).

Allan 1980; 1981; 2011 (see also Copestake and Briscoe 1992) drew attention to the significance of identifying C1, the world spoken of, in making the different interpretations of the animal nouns in sentences (2)–(7).

- (6) It's because Nellie likes rabbits that she won't eat rabbit.
- (7) The girl holding the plate was wearing rabbit.
- (8) The girl who wore mink was eating rabbit.
- (9) Because she decided she preferred the lamb, Hetty put back the pigskin coat.
- (10) The butcher has some impala right now.
- (11) The tannery has loads of impala right now.

(6) refers to live rabbits and then rabbit-meat, (7) to rabbit pelt, (8) to mink pelt and rabbit meat, (9) to lamb pelt, (10) to impala meat, and (11) to impala pelts. In (6)–(11) the different interpretations are derived from the semantics and pragmatics of the co-text (utterance internal CG) rather than knowledge of human behaviour that is a part of utterance external CG, but the oddity of (13) in contrast to (12) is custom/ situation-based and more obviously derives from utterance external CG.

- (12) A. Have some more oysters.
 B. Have some more lamb [with those potatoes].
- (13) ?* Have some more lambs [with those potatoes].

The CG relevant to evaluating (12)–(13) is that, where one or more ingesta are normally eaten at a sitting, a countable NP is used when speaking English felicitously; where only a part is normally eaten at one sitting, the uncountable (bare) form is used except in generics like *Hindus don't eat cows, and Muslims don't eat pigs*. From this follows the difference between *Have a coffee* [cup of coffee] and *Have some coffee* [from this pot]. I would speculate that a non-native speaker of English who uttered (13) might be offering more pieces of lamb rather than more whole lambs.

A rather similar kind of contextual influence, based on CG, affects the differing interpretations of 'old' in (14)–(15). The different interpretations of 'old' in (14) and (15) arise from the effect of C2 (essentially, the situation of utterance) on C1, what is spoken of: α_i in (14) vs α_j in (15).

- (14) Queen Elizabeth II is old [uttered in 2021].
- (15) Little Moreton Hall is old [uttered in 2021].

Both utterances of (14)–(15) are true as uttered in 2021, which is part of C2: Her Majesty was born in 1926, so in 2021 she was 95 years old, which counts as old for a human; Little Moreton Hall (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Moreton_Hall) was built very early in the 16th century, so it is approximately 500 years old, which counts as old for a building. Our knowledge of the differing life-spans of things is called upon when evaluating the particular meaning of *old* and the truth of such utterances.⁹ The time of utterance is relevant: in 1520 (14) would have been nonsense and (15) false ('truth-or-falsity [is characteristic] of *a use of a sentence*' (Strawson 1950: 326)).

And, now consider (16), from Smith 2012: 5.

- (16) Doorbell! She stumbles through the grass barefoot, sun-huddled, drowsy. The back door leads to a poky kitchen, tiled brightly in the taste of the previous tenant.

⁹ This parallels the different interpretations of *cut* given in Searle 1980.

The H anticipated by S (Zadie Smith) is a reader of her novel *NW* which in itself arouses certain expectations. (16) evokes a world from the text in which ‘She’ was barefoot outside in the back yard drowsing in the sun. The very mention of ‘She’ being barefoot implicates that it is not her normal state – a conclusion surely confirmed from CG, given that the novel is about a locality of early 21st century London centred on NW10. There is a CG based implicature that the doorbell rang and ‘She’ went through the cramped kitchen, with its tiles ‘She’ probably doesn’t like, to find out who is ringing the doorbell. As already said, the time is early 21st century as determined by additional co-text, which will also most probably offer more information about the identity of ‘She’ and the location (to which the book’s title, *NW*, is already a clue¹⁰). These expectations arise from CG, namely, the reader’s experience of novels. Although ‘She’ could be a girl-child, the second sentence quoted evokes attitudes to her environment that are more typical of an adult than a child. The reference to a previous tenant makes it most likely that the property is rented not owned – which hints at her socioeconomic status. These are all things cued by the semantics of the language used to evoke C1 but fleshed out by the pragmatic modulation of C1 in the CG that Zadie Smith (in C2) shares with her readers (in C3).

It is widely acknowledged that *cunt* is the most offensive word in English. Although French *con* and Spanish *coño* have the same origin (Latin *cunnius* “cunt, promiscuous woman”) their extended uses are far less dysphemistic. For instance, French *Vieux con* (literally, “old cunt”) is more likely to be jocular than insulting – comparable with British *old bugger*.¹¹ So, generally speaking, *cunt* is strongly tabooed. However, like *silly ass*, *idiot*, *bastard*, and *fucker*, it can be used as an expression of bantering camaraderie or to show camaraderie and empathy¹² as in (17) from *Trainspotting* (Welsh 2001: 99–100) – which is in the Leith dialect of Edinburgh (Scotland).

- (17) – Granty . . . ye didnae hear? . . . Coke looked straight at Lenny.
 – Naw. Wha . . .
 – Deid. Potted heid.
 – Yir jokin! Eh? Gies a fuckin brek ya cunt . . .
 – Gen up. Last night, likes.
 – Whit the fuck happened . . .

¹⁰ Try Googling ‘nw10’.

¹¹ On Spanish *coño* see Allan and Burridge 2006: 52.

¹² See Allan 2015; 2020b; Cepollaro and Zeman 2020; Hornsby 2001; Jeshion 2013.

- Ticker. Boom. Coke snapped his fingers. – Dodgy hert, apparently. Nae cunt kent about it. Perr Granty wis workin wi Pete Gilleghan, oan the side likesay. It wis aboot five, n Granty wis helpin Pete tidy up, ready to shoot the craw n that likes, whin he jist hauds his chist n cowps ower. Gilly gits an ambulance, n they take the perr cunt tae the hospital, but he dies a couple of ooirs later. Perr Granty. Good cunt n aw. You play cairds wi the guy, eh?
- Eh . . . aye . . . one ay the nicest cunts ye could hope tae meet. That’s gutted us, that hus.¹³

A newspaper report of ‘the perr cunt’ Phil Grant’s fatal heart attack, even if equally sympathetic, would necessarily use very different language – as a matter of social appropriateness. In other words, a different C2 would likely lead S to present the C1 of (17) using different locutions.

The phenomenon of subversion/reclamation of slurs is not so outlandish when we compare it with the existence of contronyms¹⁴ in the vocabulary of English, e.g. *bound* “fastened to a spot” vs “heading for somewhere”; *cleave* “adhere to” vs “separate”; *consult* “offer advice” vs “seek advice”; *dust* “remove fine particles” vs “cover with fine particles”; *fast* “moving quickly” vs “fixed, unable to move”; *give out* “provide, supply” vs “stop for lack of supply”; *hold up* “support” vs “impede”; *overlook* “supervise” vs “neglect”; *sanction* “approve” vs “boycott”; *trim* “decorate” vs “remove excess from”; etc. Some are controversial, for instance *infer* is used to mean both “imply by saying” and “understand from what is said”; *rent* and *let*¹⁵ can both be ambiguous between “allow the use of something in return for being paid” and “use something in return for payment to the owner”. What contronyms show is that speakers and writers and their audiences can happily operate using a word or phrase with contrary meanings

13 A translation for those who need it. ‘Granty [Phil Grant] . . . did you not hear?’ Coke looked straight at Lenny. ‘No. What?’ ‘Dead. Stone dead.’ [*Potted head* is rhyming slang for “dead”, its literal meaning is “brawn”.] ‘You’re joking! Eh? Give us a fucking break, you cunt . . .’ ‘Honestly. Last night.’ [‘Likes’ = *like I say* approximately “I’m telling you”.] ‘What the fuck happened?’ ‘Ticker [heart]. Boom.’ Coke snapped his fingers. ‘Dodgy heart, apparently. No cunt knew about it. Poor Granty was working with Pete Gilleghan on the side [illegally]. It was about five and Granty was helping Pete tidy up, ready to go [*shoot the craw/crow* is rhyming slang for “go”] and that, when he just holds his chest and keels over. Gilly [Gilleghan] gets an ambulance, and they take the poor cunt to hospital, but he dies a couple of hours later. Poor Granty. Good cunt and all. You play[ed] cards with guy, didn’t you?’ ‘Eh . . . Yes . . . One of the nicest cunts you could hope to meet. That’s gutted me, that has.’

14 Also called *contronyms* and *autoantonyms*, among other things.

15 There are also the verb *let* “allow” as in *Let me pay* and the noun *let* “hindrance” as in tennis (when during service a ball is hindered by the net cord).

because they rely on C1 and C2 to disambiguate – which is exactly what normally applies with terms of abuse and their contronymic subversions (Allan 2020b).

Consider the effects of C3 on interpretations of C1 as presented in C2. In the later 19th century white people were regarded as superior to non-whites even by enlightened scholars such as Charles Darwin.

At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world. At the same time the anthropomorphous apes [. . .] will no doubt be exterminated. The break between man and his nearest allies will then be wider, for it will intervene between man in a more civilised state, as we may hope, even than the Caucasian, and some ape as low as a baboon, instead of as now between the negro or Australian and the gorilla. (Darwin 1871: 201)

Today Darwin's view seems racist: the lesson is that what was not intended as a slur by S at the time of utterance C2, can be perceived as a slur by a reader today (H at C3) because beliefs have changed over time (a shift in *weltanschauung*). Asim 2007 criticizes dysphemistic uses of *nigger* by a number of white authors but forgives its use in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain 1884) because use of terms like *Injun* and *nigger* are unequivocally suited to the context of the book. In 1885 *Huckleberry Finn* was not deprecated for the use of racial slurs but because the humour and language used is 'of a very coarse type [. . .] more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people' (*Boston Evening Transcript* March 17, 1885, p. 6). *Nigger*, *nigra* and *nigga* are colloquial counterparts to *Negro*: compare similar colloquial–formal correspondences such as *bubby*–*baby*, *bust*–*burst*, *crick*–*creek*, *critter*–*creature*, *cuss*–*curse*, *gal*–*girl*, *hoss*–*horse*, *sassy*–*saucy*, *tit*–*teat*. Colloquial language uses informal and intimate styles (cf. Joos 1961); it includes, but is not identical with, slang (see Allan and Burridge 2006). The term *African-American* did not exist in the 1880s and, given the deliberate use of colloquial language in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the term *nigger* was an appropriate alternative. By all accounts, Samuel Clemens had African-American friends and thought highly of them (Fishkin 1993); he was no racist (cf. Kennedy 2003: 109f; Asim 2007: 107; McWhorter 2011). Although some of the characters in the book are racist, so was much of white America, and for them (as for too many people today) *nigger* is an expression of disparagement that discredits, slights, smears, stains, and besmirches African-Americans (and other dark-skinned people). But whereas some of the characters created by author Mark Twain employed *nigger* as a slur, his alter ego Samuel Clemens deplored such practice. Today, the text of *Huckleberry Finn* has been censored, for instance, with *slave* substituted for *nigger* and *Injun* omitted (Twain 2011a) and with *nigger* replaced by *hipster* but *Injun* retained (Twain

2011b).¹⁶ Enlightened people such as Asim, Kennedy, and McWhorter condemn such bowdlerisation in C3, recognising that in the context in which Twain wrote (the world spoken in, C2) the terms he used – that in other contexts might be slurs – in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are not. Their use in the book is socially appropriate, though perhaps their use by certain fictional characters may nonetheless be slurs within the world of the book, C1.

In §3 of this essay, I have demonstrated the importance of distinguishing between those different aspects of context that I have named C1, C2, and C3. I have also given a sketchy account of the interplay between context and CG. In the next, and final section, I elucidate the interdependence of CG and context.

4 The interdependence of CG and context

The interdependence of CG and context is shown in (18).

- (18) (a) Common ground (CG) for any community K of two or more people is that every member, or almost every member, of K believes some fact or set of facts F .
- (b) F can be expressed as a proposition or set of propositions Φ believed to be true (or purported to be true) within K .
- (c) A member μ of K (μ_K) is presumed to know or believe Φ (F) by (almost) every other member of K .
- (d) μ_K knows/believes that (a), (b), and (c) are purported to be true.
- (e) Both S and H are members of K , $\{\mu_S, \mu_H\} \subseteq K$.
- (f) S utters v to H in context $C2$. v expresses a state of affairs, a possibly singleton set of propositions, Φ_v .
- (g) When μ_K applies knowledge of F (that is, belief in the truth/existence of F) in order to interpret v , i.e. the state of affairs expressed in Φ_v , μ_K can presume that others in the community will also be able to apply knowledge of F (belief in the truth/existence of F) in order to interpret Φ_v .
- (h) The existence of F , Φ_v , and the application of knowledge of F to interpreting Φ_v is what constitutes CG for members of the community K . Once attended to, Φ_v becomes part of F , incrementing the common ground. In other words, S 's (μ_S 's) utterance v pragmatically entails that S presupposes that Φ_v is already part of the conversational context

¹⁶ See McWhorter 2011.

(C1 + C2) at time of utterance (in other words, it is in the CG), or that the audience (primarily H, μ_H) is prepared to add Φ_v , without objection, to the context against which v is evaluated, the CG is extended.

- (i) If language expression ε is a constituent of utterance v , such that $\varepsilon \subseteq v$, then part of the context C_ε of ε , namely $C_{\varepsilon 1}$, is the world (and time) spoken of, constituted by the topic of discourse revealed by expression ε 's co-text, namely, what has been said and what is said, including text that follows ε . This is effected (i) via the semantic frames and scripts evoked by the various constituents ($\varepsilon_1 \dots \varepsilon_n$) of v – identified through ε and its co-text; and (ii) S's attitude to what is spoken of or the persons addressed as this is revealed by the locution. (i) and (ii) contribute to identifying what S's purpose might be in making the utterance, which is the effective meaning of $\varepsilon \subseteq v$.
- (j) Part of C_ε , $C_{\varepsilon 2}$, is, from S's point of view (deriving from S's *weltanschauung*), the situation in which $\varepsilon \subseteq v$ is expressed. C2 captures who does the saying to whom, and where and when this takes place. C2 normally determines the social relationships and conventions that S is expected to follow and, in consequence, sets the standard for the psycho-social appropriateness of what is said. Together with C1, C2 is what governs whether such terms as *bitch*, *cunt*, or *nigger* are, from S's POV, used as a slur or an expression of camaraderie and whether or not a particular form of words is polite (or not). In other words, C2 includes what is known about S and the perlocutionary effect of this and similar uses of ε .
- (k) Finally, part of C_ε , $C_{\varepsilon 3}$, is a corresponding situation of interpretation in which H seeks to understand $\varepsilon \subseteq v$, viz. the meaning of ε in the context C1 + C2 of the utterance v in which it occurs – the interpretation from H's POV, deriving from H's *weltanschauung*. In face-to-face interaction, C3 is closely similar to C2, though they differ in POV. So far as possible, S predicts CG with H in order to shape utterance v for maximum comprehensibility. Where C3 is very different from C2 such that H does not share many of S's system of beliefs and assumptions, the context is disparate from S's presumed common ground. Although H may be well able to understand what S intended to mean, $\varepsilon \subseteq v$ can have reduced comprehensibility and its psycho-social appropriateness may be differently evaluated from the way S expected to be understood, as when as when a 21st century H reads a sonnet by William Shakespeare (S).

(18)(a)–(d) define the basis for CG. (e) establishes the basis for initiating an occurrence of CG within some particular context of utterance wherein S utters v to H, see (f). (g) initiates the evocation of CG relevant to v . (h) explains how Φ_v , what

is said in *v*, increments the CG. (i) elaborates the world (and time) spoken of in *v*, identifying it as C1, part of the context which establishes the co-text. (j) establishes C2 as the situation of utterance from S's POV. In face-to-face interactions C2 is effectively simultaneous with C3. But C3, as established in (k), is the context from H's POV. C3 may be simultaneous with C2 but they may be in different locations (as with a telephone conversation or video conference), or they may be at different time points in which case it is likely the locations will also be different, though this is not necessarily the case. These differences potentially lead to H misinterpreting S's intended meaning.

It has long been accepted that CG and context are closely related. In the course of this essay I have established that they are separate entities, but interdependent. CG is invariably partially dependent on context and context is partially dependent on CG when S utters *v* to H.

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