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Language-in-Use: a Clarkian Perspective*

Introduction to Reading 1.3

This paper is an overview of some aspects of Clark's theoretical perspective on language analysis, with two other key theories in pragmatics being mentioned briefly (Austin's Speech Act Theory, which claims that language use can be equated with performing *actions* linguistically; and Grice's Cooperative Principle and concomitant conversational maxims (cf. Reading 1.2), which espouse the view that language use involves rational inferential processes). Other concepts that are presupposed include the following.

An *Adjacency Pair* (cf. Reading 1.1) is a pair of utterances that are (normally) placed contiguously (*adjacently*). The actions within the two utterances fit together to form an ordered sequence (what Clark calls a minimal joint project of *proposal* and *acceptance*) where the First part sets up certain expectations about what the Second part might be. Examples of pairs include: Question–Answer; Blame–Denial; Compliment–Thanks; Offer–Acceptance.

A *Transition Relevance Place* (TRP) is simply the place where it is Relevant (possible) for there to be a Transition (change) in who is speaking. This may often coincide with the completion of a First pair part.

Preference Organisation (cf. Reading 1.1) relates to how Second pair parts are built. Preferred seconds are (in terms of probability) expected and as such they are 'unmarked' – both in the sense of being usual, but also in that they are typically done quickly, simply, explicitly and positively. Dispreferred seconds, on the other hand, are unexpected. They are unusual and are marked by such features as delay, complex linguistic material, implicitness and negativity. Preference is not about what people *want* (prefer) but rather what they, in all likelihood, *expect* to happen. Hence, after blaming someone for something, the first speaker might *want* an admission of guilt (or apology or other redressive action), but what they will *expect* to hear next is some form of denial. Preference also links into the concept of *Face*. This is the concept that figures in the idiomatic sayings 'to lose face' and 'to save face'. Briefly – following Brown and Levinson (1987) following Goffman (1967) – Face is the (jointly) constructed image/personality that someone claims for themselves, and it crucially includes the inherent assumption that this personality (face) will be approved of by others. So Second pair parts (actions) that will not offend someone's face can, because of their positivity, be done quickly, simply, explicitly – in other words, in *preferred* formats. Actions that may run counter to a person's personality (such



* 2000, first published in this Reader.





as those which indicate that in some way the second speaker does not appreciate or value the first speaker – actions such as threats, disagreements, admonishments), on the other hand, tend to be packaged as *dispreferred* actions: delayed, with complex linguistic material, implicit and negative.

Finally, a tag-question is one that is tagged on to the end of a non-interrogative (non-questioning) clause. In this way, declaratives (statements) or imperatives (orders) may be changed (mutated) into interrogatives. For example: ‘You will come’ (declarative) + ‘won’t you’ (tag-question) = ‘You will come, won’t you?’. ‘Shut up!’ (imperative) + ‘will you’ (tag-question) = ‘Shut up, will you?’.

Using these concepts, this paper highlights Clark’s (1996: 212) proposal that ‘what the speaker means’ should be replaced by ‘what the speaker is to be taken to mean’. In other words, meaning-making is not in the autonomous hands of the speaker.

Finally, the paper shows how meaning can evolve *in retrospect*, and that one course of action is built on the basis of another, prior action. In other words, the process of making meaning needs the action of all participants to develop: it is their *shared* responsibility – in short, it is a *joint action*.

This chapter is an introduction to Herbert H. Clark’s (1996) theory of language-in-use as a form of ‘joint action’. First, we offer a very brief overview of his position in relation to previous literature to provide some context for his contribution. Thereafter, the use of language as ‘joint action’ is considered using three of Clark’s key terms – *common ground*, *closure* and *construal* – specifically:

- (i) genuine examples of humour and irony illustrate the need for common ground;
- (ii) response tokens are examined for their functions in relation to checking and closure; and
- (iii) an attested example of talk is used to illustrate various aspects of interpretation and arriving at joint construal.

1. INTRODUCTION

Early submissions in the field of language-in-use, such as Austin’s (1962) Speech Act theory and Grice’s (1975) Cooperative Principle (and concomitant conversational maxims), set the bases for a burgeoning new area of study (now recognised as Pragmatics). Their achievement was to identify and explain patterns of linguistic use, and were, in their time, pioneering. However, traditional theorists on language-in-use tend to offer their insights based on models in which speakers and hearers work, if not completely separately, then with little obvious interpretive collaboration.

Clark’s more recent approach, on the other hand, recognises several unrealistic aspects to the established ideas, and he progresses them to derive a more workable notion. A key point of contention arises from the traditional position that the speaker ‘means’ something specific which the hearer must succeed in recognising. As Clark (1996: 212, emphasis added) says:





Although there is a lot wrong with the classical view, the underlying problem is that it treats the speaker's and addressee's actions as *autonomous*: Speakers fix their intentions *unilaterally*, never changing their minds, and addressees try *independently* to identify those intentions.

Thomas (1995: 22, emphasis added) agrees that, subject to the context and meaning-potential of an utterance, 'meaning is not something which is inherent in the words alone, nor is it produced by the speaker alone, nor the hearer alone. Making meaning is a *dynamic* process, involving the negotiation of meaning between speaker and hearer'. Goodwin (1979: 98, emphasis added) also argues that 'sentences in natural conversation emerge as the products of a process of interaction between speaker and hearer and that they *mutually construct* the turn at talk'.

Common experience shows that, generally, participants in talk-in-interaction do not wait impassively until their interlocutor has presented a neatly packaged turn before turning their attention to a considered reply – using language is much messier: it involves gestures, interjections, distractions, mishearings, misconstruals, teasing, mind-changing, 'mutation' and any number of other alternatives. Some of these features are incidental side-effects while some are deliberate tactics to redirect topic or monitor progress. And it is Clark's perspective on 'joint action' which reveals how tacit shared commitment to, and responsibility for, conversation enables contributors to mutually assist and work cooperatively to achieve success.

Consequently, it is this Clarkian perspective which we address in the following sections, and we do so via three fundamental concepts: *common ground*, *closure* and *construal*.

2. COMMON GROUND

Clark (1996: 93) explains common ground between two people as essentially 'the sum of their mutual, common or joint knowledge, beliefs, and suppositions' and his fundamental claim is that these shared assumptions are an indispensable condition for every joint activity. Of course, whether two individuals actually experience common ground absolutely the same is not only unknowable, it is actually probably quite unlikely – but the point is that they individually *believe* in their shared ground.

This shared knowledge applies at both macro and micro levels of written and spoken language use. In a broad societal context, members need it as a basis for interaction with an unknown audience: interactants feel it safe to assume that certain characteristics and world-experiences are shared by potential interlocutors. Such assumptions are exploited, for example, by the mass media, which can use the cultural connotations of stereotypes to convey their messages economically, based on an assumed shared interpretation with the audience. Thus, if a news story describes a 'single mum of two, 16', it relies on the common ground shared with a complicit readership to extract from the wording negative inferences about teenage sexual morality. The example is no less a joint action for being asynchronous: it is, as Clark (1996: 90) comments, designed with all the cultural conventions and precedents of written text that are required 'to make processing optimal' for the audience to coordinate its part in the communication.

Thomas (1995: 138) illustrates the importance of cultural common ground in an anecdote explaining how a (spoken) 'what's the difference between . . .' joke fell flat when





attempted for a foreign addressee due to their unfamiliarity with both the cultural genre of the joke form and the referents within it: ‘Without these elements of background knowledge and belief, it would be impossible to construct any propositions on which to base deductions’. Here, a lack of common ground makes joint action unattainable and is responsible for the failure of the interaction.¹

Similarly, Kreuz *et al.* (1999) demonstrate the need for common ground in the use and interpretation of verbal irony: it is necessary, for example, to know someone well enough to interpret their intended ironic remark non-literally, as in example (1):

- (1) **Andrew:** How was Agnes then.
Becky: Oh you know, (.) irrepressible!

In (1), part of the common ground between Andrew and Becky is that Agnes is the most resolutely staid and gloomy person in their mutual acquaintance. The slight pause before ‘irrepressible’, and the accompanying extra-linguistic emphasis of widened eyes help to signal the ironic intent behind its use.

Clark (1996) shows that language use builds progressively upon the cultural and personal common ground that already exists between speakers and addressees, and that this accumulation is constantly checked by all sides. At its simplest, this notion suggests a somewhat dry exchange in which participants periodically ensure they are aligned in their world-view. The reality is that a multi-layered system of overt and tacit signalling between parties constantly advances the conversation.

3. CLOSURE

In any joint action, Clark asserts, we seek proof that we have succeeded. Affirmation of this comes from the numerous conversations experienced which begin by checking ‘Did you get my e-mail?’ – having transmitted the first part of a proposed joint communication act, albeit one which cannot rely on the synchrony of face to face interaction, senders need confirmation of their success. As Clark (1996: 225) says:

Without such evidence, we may try the action again, or try to repair what went wrong, or stop before taking the next step – each disrupting our ongoing activity.

This ‘principle of joint closure’ extends to talk: conversation cannot advance without the mutual belief that ‘for current purposes’ points of acceptable joint understanding have been achieved, thus, to obviate miscommunication, those involved ‘ordinarily go to some effort to reach joint closure on their actions’ (1996: 226).

Such effort is, according to Clark (1996), achieved on two simultaneous ‘tracks’: one which overtly attends to the official business of the talk; the second, ever-present and implicit, which checks the hearer’s consensus. Schegloff and Sacks (1973: 297f) hold that in the second part of an adjacency pair ‘a speaker can show that he understood what a prior aimed at, and that he is willing to go along with that’ and for Clark (1996: 198) this also exemplifies a joint action in which a proposal is made and accepted. Although interaction does materialise in the formation of adjacency pairs, Clark’s hypothesis offers

¹ The joke was: Question: What’s the difference between Oxford University and *Jurassic Park*? Answer: One’s a theme park inhabited by dinosaurs, the other’s a film by Steven Spielberg.





insight beyond the structural functions that they fulfil, adding an extra dimension to the notion of the joint construction of talk.

For ‘track 2’, Clark’s (1996: 243) claim is this:

Every presentation enacts the collateral question ‘Do you understand what I mean by this?’ The very act of directing an utterance to a respondent is a signal that means ‘Are you hearing, identifying, and understanding this now?’

When such verifications are constantly sought, seeming inattention from a co-participant is judged highly disruptive to interactional progress. The importance of eye-contact in attesting to these conditions is explored by Goodwin (1979: 106):

A speaker can request the gaze of a recipient by producing a phrasal break, such as a restart or a pause, in his utterance. After such a phrasal break, nongazing recipients regularly bring their gaze to the speaker.

Arguably, if speakers manufacture circumstances to confirm listeners’ continued attention through eye contact, this indicates continued attention as a preferred assurance of involvement in the conversation. The non-linguistic and extra-linguistic characteristics of these significant devices are, however, generally not accounted for within traditional theories.

Returning to Clark’s ‘collateral question’, it is in response to this tacit second track of meaning that listeners’ reactions shape and determine the development of the conversation just as surely as in their attention to the official topic. Clark (1996: 228) argues that whereas the traditional view assumes interlocutors understand each other unless they produce evidence to the contrary, in his model the need for joint closure predicts regular *active* confirmations.

Stubbe (1998: 258, emphasis added) supports this:

Listeners are expected to provide regular and appropriate feedback to signal their *active* involvement in a conversation, and they can select from a wide range of interactional devices to do so.

These may be realised by gesture, by spontaneous reactions or, indeed, by a range of verbal response tokens such as ‘uh huh’, ‘mm hm’, etc.

Noting the lack of attention traditionally paid to these objects despite their frequency, Gardner (2001: 2) identifies the functions of such ‘brief, non-topical responses’ from listeners as ‘**Continuers . . . Acknowledgements . . . Newsmarkers . . . Change-of-activity tokens . . . Assessments . . . [and] Collaborative completions**’ (emphasis in original), and notes that what they do relies essentially ‘on the context in which they occur, particularly their timing and their precise placement within a sequence of talk’ (2001: 4).

Certain response tokens may be semantically empty – indeed, Clark (1996: 390) claims they have developed solely to deal with ‘track 2’ – but Stubbe (1998: 258, emphasis added) maintains they:

provide a sophisticated means of indicating the listener’s *attitude* towards both the speaker and what is being said, and can convey a wide range of meanings from relative indifference or doubt, through simple affirmation to enthusiastic interest and agreement.





The token ‘mm’, for example, can be employed to various effects. Taking note of Gardner’s (2001: 6) point that response tokens are not distributed evenly, but are more concentrated during lengthy speaker turns, it is observable that ‘mm’ often serves as an encouragement whilst a flow of talk is in progress. In such circumstances it acts as an acknowledgement to confirm the addressee’s continued attention and understanding. Crucially however, depending on intonation, it may just as easily signal irritation or boredom, or question veracity. Stubbe (1998: 258) suggests that ‘because minimal responses such as *mm* can be inserted almost anywhere in the stream of talk, they are an excellent device for “pretending to listen”’; however, even a subversive use still shows a commitment to the joint undertaking of conversation – for the sake of perceived politeness if nothing else. Occurring near transition relevance places, its use as a continuer also illustrates the collaboration between interlocutors. As Gardner (2001: 5, original emphasis) puts it:

Even a continuer takes a stance: if a listener does nothing except hand back the turn to prior speaker, this contrasts with doing anything else, and this means that the prior turn has been responded to in a *particular* way.

McGregor and White (1990: 1, cited in Gardner, 2001: 2) regard ‘receiver–responders’ as vital in determining the shape of discourse: it is they who are the real ‘arbiters of what becomes meaningfully determinant in an interpretive sense’, and thus, as Gardner (2001: 2) states, ‘as such can be understood to be more powerful than speakers’. This view is derived from the listener’s role of processing and reacting to the speaker’s turn; the way participants choose to respond represents a specifically constructed comment on their attitude. The direction a conversation takes can be influenced by the use of response tokens acting to evaluate the content of current as well as prior talk. As an example, a continuing wry smile from a hearer may well prompt the speaker to defend his talk if the smile is perceived as signalling non-belief in an anecdote. Sending such a message is integral to the development of the conversation: it presents an analysis and requires a response to its inherent assessment. Goodwin (1979: 98) addresses this generation of modifications:

the speaker can reconstruct the emerging meaning of his sentence as he is producing it in order to maintain its appropriateness to its recipient of the moment²

In another instance, a hearer’s facial expression denoting incomprehension, or a ‘huh?’ response token calling for explanation, may compel the current speaker to elaborate.

Both the length and the meaning of the sentence eventually constructed within a turn at talk can thus emerge as the products of a dynamic process of interaction between speaker and hearer.

Goodwin (1979: 98)

Parallel with several conversation analysts, including Pomerantz (1984: 70), Gardner (2001: 15) considers that ‘markers of dispreference, including *Well*. . . are frequently used to project disagreement’. Their use can therefore predict the shape of subsequent discourse, and allow current speaker to adjust their stance on current topic to accommodate hearer’s attitude. For example, in a scenario where an offer is met with a slight delay,

² Indeed, this is the notion of recipient design which is so basic to conversation-analytic method.





followed by ‘well’, both devices are likely to signal a pending dispreferred non-acceptance. At this point in the exchange, to counter the perceived impending refusal, the speaker may either attempt to save face by downgrading the importance of the offer (thereby minimising the impact of its actual rejection), or upgrade the offer in the hope of enabling acceptance. In either event it can be seen that the recipient’s action affects the construction of subsequent talk by current speaker.

4. CONSTRUAL

Part of the data which constitutes common ground is arrived at through the interpretations placed by all parties on the talk in which they engage. Arguing against the classical view, Clark (1996: 212) proposes the ‘small, but radical’ change that ‘what the speaker means’ be replaced by ‘what the speaker is to be taken to mean’. As he suggests (1996: 195), this notion accounts for the adjustments to speaker intentions which regularly occur to accommodate responses that do not match the original desired effect. Without it, conversations would presumably become arenas of constant pedantic correction and frustration. (And they do not.)

In his extended reading of adjacency pairs, Clark (1996: 198) assigns them properties of ‘proposal’ and ‘uptake’ and asserts ‘the first part projects the uptake of a joint task, and the second part effects that uptake’ (1996: 201). Crucially, he claims that uptake offers proof of understanding (1996: 200). With a richer, more inclusive definition of ‘language’ than that of traditional theorists, Clark observes that ‘neither first nor second part need be an utterance. The first part may be any type of signal, and the second, any action that takes up the proposal of the first part’ (1996: 200). In reality, many joint actions may be performed without need of the spoken word. For example, fixing questioning eye-contact and miming the action of raising glass to lips can effectively offer to buy the addressee a drink in a bar; a returned wink or smile displays evidence of accepting the offer: in Clark’s (1996: 193) words, ‘people display their construals by the next step they take in the social process they are engaged in’ – howsoever they might take that step.

Not only is uptake important in making evident what joint project the listener is ‘willing and able to commit to’ (Clark 1996: 213), but also in revealing the degree of commitment to it. As noted by Clark (1996: 214), deliveries in ‘enthusiastic, business-like, disappointed or subdued’ intonations each signal different degrees of commitment. The ongoing scrutiny of common ground which happens throughout talk is the ongoing production of joint construal. This continual processing of small elements (which may involve repairs, checks, assessments, collaborative completions, etc.) usually serves to avoid accumulations of misunderstanding: it is highly disruptive and inefficient to have to unravel the source of major misconstruals and then reconstruct the talk accurately.

In Clark’s model, the construal of speaker meaning is a process involving both speaker and listener working to achieve a mutually acceptable joint interpretation. On receipt of a display of what has been taken as meant, the speaker has the ‘opportunity to validate or correct’ (Clark 1996: 215). The point here is that the construal may or may not be what was originally intended – joint construal is regularly the best workable option to be settled on (the cost of the effort required to pinpoint precise intention may often outweigh any useful benefit this resultant change in interpretation may generate). Thus it can be argued that speaker meaning is arrived at *retrospectively* – after the listener has displayed, and had





accepted, their interpretation of the prior turn. Goodwin and Goodwin (1987: 4, cited in Gardner 2001: 4) have also made this point:

The treatment that a bit of talk gets in a next utterance may be quite different from the way in which it was heard and dealt with as it was spoken; indeed, rather than presenting a naked analysis of the prior talk next utterances characteristically transform that talk in some fashion – deal with it not in its own terms but rather in the way in which it is relevant to the projects of subsequent speaker.

This accounts both for small nuances of difference in interpretation which do not impede the flow of talk and for major divergence between interlocutors. Clark (1996: 206) points out that:

Respondents aren't always prepared to take part in the joint actions that others have contemplated for them. Indeed, they can alter, decline, or withdraw from joint projects that speakers have proposed.

Example (2) illustrates various aspects of (mis)construal: D has been humming the line 'There are nine million bicycles in Beijing'³ for most of the morning, to the increasing annoyance of co-worker W.

- (2) 1 W: That's a very infectious tune isn't it?
 2 D: Yes Ryan bought me the CD - he came home with it and said
 3 'This is the song I should've written for you!'
 4 W: Why (.) d'ya need a new bike?

The song is a love song; Ryan is D's new boyfriend. These facts are in W and D's common ground.⁴

With line 1, rather than overtly express her annoyance, W hopes that D will make the inference that 'infectious' might stand to mean irritatingly so. Hence, line 1, the first part of an adjacency pair phrased with a tag-question is actually an assessment, acting as a proposal; the proposal being that D stop humming. D (perhaps unintentionally?) misconstrues this critical intention behind line 1. Line 2 displays her uptake, which is apparently that W wants more information about the provenance of the tune, and in line 3 she proposes that W join her to appreciate the romance of the gesture from Ryan. W understands this proposal of joint action, but declines to take part. At this juncture, having read D's display, W had the opportunity to 'validate or correct' (Clark 1996: 215). However, in this case, aiming to bring D out of her romantic reverie, W chooses deliberately to misconstrue D's prior turn. Thus in line 4 she foregrounds the 'bicycle' reference in the lyrics in the pursuit of comic effect.

This brief example shows how meaning can evolve (or indeed, be manipulated or 'mutated') *in retrospect*, and that one course of action is built on the basis of another. The process of making meaning needs the action of all participants to develop: it is their *shared* responsibility – in short, it is a *joint action*.

³ Katie Melua. Opening lyrics: 'There are nine million bicycles in Beijing/That's a fact/It's a thing we can't deny/Like the fact that I will love you till I die'.

⁴ We can make this claim quite safely, as one of the current authors was 'W' in this exchange.





5. CONCLUSION

Clark's own definition of a 'joint action' involves 'an ensemble of people acting in coordination with each other' (1996: 3). The basis of language use is common ground: it is supplemented each time communication occurs, and interactants actively engage in regular checking of mutual construal by coming to points of closure. These checks take place on overt as well as tacit 'tracks'. Encouragements and assurances of attention are used to display continued commitment to interaction. Assessments of interlocutors' construals are regularly made, and responded to both affectively and effectively.

Thus the collaborative nature of using language is revealed: social interaction is not pre-planned, it evolves (between interactants, between topics, between turns . . .) based on the coordinated action of the participants involved. But then, that should really perhaps come as no surprise – for as far as we are concerned, it is already there in the morphology: using language (what we have been calling *language-in-use*) is necessarily *social interaction* and if it is truly social, it must be collaborative and if it is truly *inter*-action, it must be joint action. At least, that is what Clark thinks – and we agree.

NOW, THINK, DO!

1.3.1 Think of your favourite joke. Now imagine having to tell it to a friendly alien. What do you have to make explicit that you would normally assume to be common ground with other earthlings. And if you think the alien angle is a little weird, think instead about telling the joke to your best friend, your parents, your grandparents, a stranger from your home town, a stranger from your country, a stranger from your continent, a stranger from some other continent. What aspects of the joke can you no longer take for granted and why?

1.3.2 Spend just a little while thinking more about the absolutely fundamental nature of common ground. When you find yourself overhearing a conversation taking place in public (for example, on a bus/train, in a queue, in a restaurant – pretty much anywhere, really) think about what the participants must know in order for their conversation to make sense. Alternatively, try this micro-conversation that AJM had recently:

Person: That didn't bang you=did it?

AJM: No no. You're alright.

What does this mean? What do these people know that you have to know in order to know what it is they are talking about?

1.3.3 If you dare, try not giving people feedback about whether you have understood them. For example, avoid eye contact, don't provide minimal responses, don't provide expected second pair parts. What are the consequences?





FURTHER READING

Clark's (1996) book, *Using Language*, is currently the best place for fuller coverage of Clarkian philosophy. Alternatively, visit his website (<http://www-psych.stanford.edu/~herb/>) where he hosts e-versions of many of his papers: the URL <http://www-psych.stanford.edu/~herb/1970s/> is where his papers from the 1970s are located; <http://www-psych.stanford.edu/~herb/1980s/> is the location for 1980s papers; and so on.

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