

Channels for Common Ground

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Abstract

One potentially ethically relevant feature of an utterance is that utterance's influence on the likelihoods that our future discourses wind up with one Stalnakerian 'common ground' or body of shared information rather than another. Such likelihoods matter ethically, so the ways our utterances influence them can matter ethically, despite the fact that such influences are often unintended, and often hard to see. By offering a relatively neutral descriptive framework that can enhance our collective sensitivity to and discussion of ethically, socially, and politically important features of language use, this paper contributes to the ethics of language use. It discusses ways in which utterances can influence the likelihoods of future common grounds by deploying one system of categorization rather than another, and argues that language's effects on the evolution of discourse can affect the paths to and probabilities of different sorts of consensus.

When we ethically evaluate an utterance, we often pay attention to features of it that are independent of its temporally extended influence on subsequent discourse. For example, we might ask whether the utterance is true; whether it is misleading; whether the speaker believes it to be false; whether it conveys false or controversial presuppositions; whether it is rude, impolitic, or ambiguous; whether it says what the speaker intended; and so on. These features are often ethically relevant. But more temporally extended influence on subsequent discourse is also often ethically important. Many literatures have

made this clear, including those on silencing,¹ on conversational exercitives,² on propaganda,³ and on other socially and politically portentous speech.⁴

I argue here that one potentially ethically relevant feature of an utterance is that utterance's influence on the likelihoods that our future discourses wind up with one Stalnakerian 'common ground' or body of shared information rather than another. I argue that such likelihoods matter ethically, and that as a result the ways our utterances influence them can matter ethically, despite the fact that such influences are often unintended, and often hard to see. This paper develops a way to describe such influence that helps us see it more easily and deliberate about it more responsibly. My mode of description is, I argue, available to those who endorse a wide range of answers to foundational questions about language. Whether or not one believes the semantic or pragmatic meaning of an utterance is constrained by the speaker's intentions, for example, one can accept that temporally extended influence on subsequent discourse is not so constrained. Whether or not one believes there are ways in which meaning is transparent to a competent speaker, one can accept that temporally extended influence on subsequent discourse is not transparent in those ways. And so on. By offering a relatively neutral framework that can enhance our collective sensitivity to and discussion of ethically, socially, and politically important features of language use, the paper contributes to the ethics of language use.

To be clear, this contribution is not through moral prohibitions, permissions, or requirements; work in the ethics of language use needn't be directly prescriptive. I rather hope to provide a framework that can help us "see the many relevant features of [a] case as truly and distinctly as possible"—an important project when the case "does not present itself with labels written on it, indicating its salient features" (Nussbaum, 1986, 42; see also Herman, 1985), and when some ways of labeling relevant features are themselves contentious. To think responsibly about the ethics of language use we *at least* need to be sensitive to ethically important features of language use. I here aim to enhance that sensitivity.

§1 characterizes influence on the likelihoods of future common grounds abstractly, and uses simple examples to show that such influence is only sometimes itself represented in the Stalnakerian common ground, and only sometimes even intentional. §2 turns to some ways in which utterances can influence such likelihoods by deploying one system of categorization rather than another. §3 closes by arguing that language's effects on the evolution of discourse—especially those effects that aren't common ground or even transparent to the participants in a discourse—can affect the paths to and probabilities of different sorts of consensus.

1 | CHARACTERIZATION

I follow Robert Stalnaker and others in thinking of discourse **common ground** as content that is both shared amongst discourse participants and relevant to the interpretation of speech acts. Such content needn't be believed by the discourse participants: it generally suffices that they treat it as true for purposes of conversation (Stalnaker, 2002, 717–718). However, to the extent that such content guides the interpretation of speech acts, it is important that it be shared, or close enough to shared for relevant

¹E.g., MacKinnon (1987) and (1993), Langton (1993), Hornsby and Langton (1998), Langton and West (1999), and Maitra (2004), (2009), and Maitra and McGowan (2010).

²Especially McGowan (2003), (2004), (2012), and (2019).

³E.g., Stanley (2015), Maitra (2016), and Swanson (2017).

⁴E.g., Haslanger (2012), Tirrell (2012), McKinney (2016), Saul (2017), and Langton (2018a) and (2018b), among many, many others.

conversational purposes. Otherwise different discourse participants may interpret context sensitive expressions in importantly different ways. Although it's helpful for some purposes to require more than the mere *sharing* of content—for example, one might require that the content be common belief or even common knowledge, or an attitude with broadly similar properties—such stronger conditions aren't necessary for the work I do here.

Now for some new terminology. Any temporally ordered sequence of common grounds is a **common ground path**, and to say that a common ground path P is **the common ground path for a discourse D** is to say that P is the (temporally ordered) sequence of common grounds that occur in D . To say that a common ground path P is a **continuation of a common ground path P' fromt** is to say that P coincides with the common ground path of P' up to and including the common ground at t . These definitions are obviously very permissive: some common ground paths are so disconnected and incoherent that there is no possible discourse with that common ground path. So there is ample reason to focus on common ground paths that are practically possible continuations of the common ground path of a discourse up to and including t , or that are relatively likely continuations of it. In typical discourses—indeed, in all discourses that are not highly scripted in one way or another—there will be considerable uncertainty at a given time about the common ground path's possible continuations from that time. But the uncertainty will be limited, since discourse participants have informed expectations about how others might contribute to the evolution of the discourse. And as a given discourse evolves, the discourse participants' information and expectations change, changing their credences about possible continuations of the common ground path.

A guiding metaphor will be helpful too: paths of discourse evolution run through *channels*. This metaphor suggests some ways in which the probability of paths can be affected, and some ways in which paths can in turn affect the probability of other paths. The probability of paths for water is influenced by the shape, depth, gradient, and material of a channel, among other things. If some water might go down either a shallow channel with little gradient or a deep channel with great gradient, it's typically more likely to go down the deep, steep channel. Generalizing in accord with the thought that there are often many channels available, we can say that *terrain* affects the likelihood of paths, which in turn shape, erode, and accrete the terrain. Similarly, the probabilities that (for example) ideologies, power, and discourse will evolve in certain ways are affected by the channels available to them. In particular, the **channels for common ground** causally influence the probabilities of common ground paths, and channels for common ground can be shaped and influenced by conventions, by practices, and by particular speech acts. For example, our convention of using 'green' and 'blue' as opposed to 'grue' and 'bleen' positively causally influences the probability that our discourses' common grounds distinguish between green and blue things, and negatively causally influences the probability that our discourses' common grounds distinguish between grue and bleen things. Put metaphorically, our discourse deepens the 'green' / 'blue' channels for common ground.

'Causally influencing probabilities' can be understood in many different ways, and I won't choose between them here. For other applications of the notion, consider the claims that practice causally influences the probability of a team's success, that monetary policy causally influences the probability of high inflation, that warmth causally influences the probability that bread will rise, and so on. One can understand these as claims about causal influence on objective probability, as claims about influence on evidential probability that are mediated by hypotheses about the causal structure of the world, as claims about the degree to which one thing is causally relevant to something else, and doubtless in other ways besides. I assume that there's some sensible way to understand them, and that on any such way of understanding them, claims like "That linguistic practice makes these common ground paths likelier" can be true.

Here is a first example of an utterance that shapes the terrain of common ground paths, influencing the probabilities of common ground paths. Thomas A. Greenfield recounts a tour guide at Monticello addressing his "group of black college students" using the active voice for Thomas Jefferson's

actions—as in (1) and (3)—and the passive voice for the actions of those Jefferson enslaved—as in (2) and (4):

1. “Mr. Jefferson used to wind the clock on Sundays...”
2. “Holes *were cut* in the floor to allow for the weights to drop the full seven days.”
3. “Mr. Jefferson designed these doors.”
4. “The doors *were installed* originally in 1809.” (Greenfield, 1975)

The choice of (2) and (4) over, say, (5) and (6) is obviously ethically important.

5. People enslaved by Mr. Jefferson cut holes in the floor to allow for the weights to drop the full seven days.
6. People enslaved by Mr. Jefferson installed the doors originally in 1809.

Some—though of course by no means all—of that ethical import is a matter of the utterance's influence on the likelihoods of subsequent common ground paths. For example, (1), (3), (5), and (6) all allow subsequent pronominal reference to Jefferson or to the relevant people he enslaved; (2) and (4) do not. It's easy, for example, to follow (6) with

7. Did they learn their trade from other enslaved people, or from white people?

But (7) is not felicitous after (4). In many situations, using (4) rather than (6) affects the likelihoods of common ground paths by forcing questioners to get information like that requested with (7) with a more verbose and pointed continuation like

8. Did the people who installed the doors learn their trade from other enslaved people, or from white people?

Making it more difficult to ask such questions—questions specifically about the people that Jefferson enslaved, their expertise, their learning, their teaching—is a way of influencing the likelihoods of subsequent continuations, and is clearly an ethically relevant feature of (2) and (4).

That said, we can see this ethically relevant feature without appealing to anything beyond Stalnakerian common ground. We simply need to play **Stalnaker's gambit** (Sherman, 2015): the observation that even simple representations of context may include “facts about the words used to express certain propositions in the discourse” (Stalnaker, 1998, 105–106). Stalnaker appeals to this thought to argue that differences between the anaphoric potentials of logically equivalent claims do not, without further argument, motivate complicating the representation of context. In particular, Hans Kamp 1988 uses a contrast due to Barbara Partee to argue that Stalnaker's representation of context needs to be enriched because (9) is so much more natural an exchange than (10):

9. a. Exactly one of the ten balls is not in the bag; b. It is under the sofa.
10. a. Exactly nine of the ten balls are in the bag; b. It is under the sofa.

‘Now wait a minute!’ responds Stalnaker: the context *does* distinguish between the logically equivalent (9a) and (10a), because it's manifest that different words are used to assert the relevant propositions.

And a theory of anaphora is welcome to appeal to those differences (1998, 105–106). To be sure, (9) and (10) are a nice example of shaping the channels for common ground—uses of (9a) make it much likelier that ‘it’ can be used felicitously to refer to the ball that isn’t in the bag, and uses of (10a) don’t. Uses of (9a) thus make responses like (9b) likelier than uses of (10a) do. Stalnaker’s gambit is to point out, in effect, that the relevant effects of this example on the channels for common ground will themselves be represented in the common ground even on a simple possible worlds representation of common ground. Similarly, even if some speakers don’t *notice* the differences in anaphoric potential between (2) and (5), and between (4) and (6)—and, I stress, may benefit quite a bit from having those differences pointed out—those differences are still represented in the conversational common ground. This is why typical language users who are paying attention would find it anomalous if someone were to follow (4) with (7), and will not find it anomalous if someone follows (6) with (7).

When we turn to other cases, however, it quickly becomes clear that different discourse participants will often have very different views on the probabilities of different common ground paths—the probabilities that discourse evolves in one way rather than another.⁵ So these probabilities cannot in general be common ground. In a slogan: the *ethical* ‘scoreboard’ for language use (Lewis, 1979) must record not just effects on the channels for common ground that are themselves common ground, but also effects on the channels for common ground that are *not* common ground.⁶

For example, consider discourses whose common ground paths coincide up to the point at which one of the following four claims is made:

11. Sarah is my partner.
12. Sarah is my spouse.
13. Sarah and I are married.
14. Sarah is my wife.

The more socially conservative an area, the likelier it is that utterances of (11) and (12) will flout norms when used in that area, conversationally implicating (among other things) that I might disprefer the comparably complex alternative term ‘wife.’ The more socially liberal an area, the likelier it is that an utterance of (14) will flout norms when used in that area, again conversationally implicating (among other things) that I might disprefer the comparably complex alternatives ‘partner’ and ‘spouse.’ As someone who makes efforts to be conscious of my utterances’ impact on the channels for common ground, I try to modulate my choice among (11)–(14) depending among other things on how much I want that particular speech act to attract attention, and what kind of attention I want to attract with it. But I often encounter social liberals in socially conservative settings, and vice versa. Suppose I am in a socially conservative area, but unbeknownst to me I am talking with a social liberal. My expectation that a given use of (11) will probably flout norms, in a conversation with that social liberal, might well not be shared by my socially liberal interlocutor. In such a case, we will have different expectations about how an utterance of (11) will affect the channels for common ground and those expectations will not be common ground. This is not to say that the representation of *common ground itself* must be enriched, and so it is not an objection to Stalnaker’s way of representing common ground. It is simply to say that effects on the channels for common ground are not always represented by the

⁵This contrasts with the important body of work on discourse and information structure that in some sense ‘projects’ into the future. For such work see, e.g., Roberts (1996), Asher and Lascarides (2003), Farkas and Bruce (2010), Ettinger and Malamud (2015), Malamud and Stephenson (2015), Krifka (2015), Beltrama (2018), and Heim (2019).

⁶Mary Kate McGowan notes that common ground does not include “everything relevant to a conversation” (2019, 44), emphasizing that it can omit “facts relevant to the proper development of the conversation.” Such normative facts are orthogonal to causal influence on probabilities, although conversational participants’ beliefs and desires with respect to normative facts can of course affect the terrain for common ground.

common ground, in virtue of the fact that our information about them is not always shared. So quite generally, to be sensitive to the (potentially) ethically relevant features of an utterance, we need to be sensitive not just to its common ground effects, but also to its downstream effects on the channels for common ground.

2 | SYSTEMS OF CATEGORIZATION

Language that affects the probability that the common ground winds up one way rather than another can enable and disable, and encourage and discourage, particular discourse topics, exchanges, and addresses. The examples I discussed in §1 illustrate how particular speech acts can do this. But conventions, practices, and systems of categorization can also affect the channels for common ground. Such effects often won't themselves be common ground to the discourse participants. In this paper I focus on systems of categorization because their mechanisms and effects are relatively easy to see and understand, and I leave work on conventions and practices more broadly construed for another time.

There is a tendency in analytic philosophy to think of systems of categorization largely in terms of facts about naturalness (Merrill, 1980; Lewis, 1983). My discussion is compatible with naturalness playing a large role in winnowing out gruesome categorization systems. But naturalness does not do all the work, as Lewis surely would agree. Contingent facts influence which categorization systems we deploy, and many of those facts are laden with and embedded in social and political history, assumptions, and ramifications. Here is a quick example to illustrate. Jorge Luis Borges famously argues that it was only after Franz Kafka's work that we could discern certain pairwise similarities between *earlier* writers—writers with a sensibility we would now describe as 'Kafka-esque.' Kafka's work, its reception, and its place and singularity in the canon gave us a new way to categorize writers and texts the similarities between whom would not be apparent without Kafka's work. And so, Borges writes, in a sense "...every writer *creates* his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future" (2007 [1951], 201). We should draw several lessons for present purposes. However natural a property is, we must be sensitive to that property for it to be represented by our categorization systems. Whether we are sensitive to such a property will be influenced by social, political, and cultural facts. And our talk about it will in turn influence society, politics, and culture—often in ways that are not common ground—in part by influencing the channels for common ground.

2.1 | Default linguistic marking

By **default linguistic marking** I mean defaulting to words that indicate how the subjects of discourse are categorized. A case of linguistic marking thereby affects the channels for common ground, making it likelier that continuations of the discourse will draw on those features. This effect on the channels for common ground promotes and facilitates the particular categorization system or systems that the linguistic marking deploys.

For example, default marking of the race of the subjects of conversation was once not only common but also pervasive in many regions of the United States. The effects of such marking were profound, in part because language that marks 'blackness' and 'whiteness' doesn't just facilitate differential treatment: it also provides ways to *address* certain segments of the population to the exclusion of others, making it possible to fragment groups with common class interests.⁷ Such racial

⁷For discussion see Jordan (1968); Morgan (1972); Roediger (1991) and (2005); Segal (1991), 7; Allen (1994) and (1997), 163; Jacobson (1998); and Baum (2006); among others.

marking worked in part through “A racist code of social conduct and customs [which] reserved the use of the titles ‘Miss’ and ‘Mister’ for white men, women, and children; disparaging epithets were reserved for black Americans, including, but certainly not limited to, such words as ‘boy’ or ‘gal’ regardless of the person’s age, ‘auntie,’ “ and slurs (Chafe, Gavins, & Korstad, 2001, 299). Similarly, enslavers marked both race and whether a person was enslaved through their choice of names. ‘Scipio,’ for example,

...was a classic slave name, one of a catalogue of cynical, almost sneering, designations rooted in the white South’s popular fetish for the mythology of the classic cultures. It came from the name of a second-century general who governed Rome as Scipio Africanus. ...His reign had also seen the brutal suppression of the first great Roman slave revolt, in which on one occasion more than twenty thousand rebelling slaves were crucified. The context of such a name might have been lost on an African slave barred from learning Western history, but to educated whites the mocking irony would have been obvious. (Blackmon, 2008, 32; see also Ritterhouse, 2006, 29).

In relevant contexts, the use of ‘boy’ or ‘gal’ for an adult or of a name like ‘Scipio’ affects the channels for common ground in a host of ways, including by making likelier continuations of the relevant common ground path that rely on the presupposition that the adult is Black, or that the adult is or was enslaved.

Sometimes this effect is itself represented in the common ground, and sometimes it is not. For example, for some enslaved people, and for others not inculcated into the ideology, the effect was opaque. Olive Westbrooke Quinn reports that children who erred in using such markings, according to widespread but generally tacit norms and defaults, were corrected by their elders (1954, 43), but (again) in an opaque way. For example, she quotes one respondent as saying: “Once when I was a little girl a Negro woman came to the door. I told my aunt a lady wanted to see her. She went to the door, and when she came back she told me that I should have said a woman was there to see her. I wondered about it a little, but I think I didn’t question it” (42). On my view, one ethically relevant feature of the use of ‘woman’ rather than ‘lady’ for a Black woman in such a context is its influence on the channels for common ground. Such an influence is completely opaque to at least some children, and to at least some others subject to or being inculcated into an ideology that they do not fully understand. In such cases, a speech act’s influence on the channels for common ground will not itself be common ground, and need not be intended by or transparent to the participants in the discourse.

2.2 | Alternative systems of categorization

Which systems of categorization an utterance deploys can make momentous differences to the terrain for common ground. For example, in *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* Simon Gikandi argues that a system of categorization that emphasized ‘taste’ and ‘virtue’ was used to whitewash the brutality of enslavement. Language users could in effect choose between deploying two readily available systems of categorization—one oriented around ‘taste’ and ‘virtue’ and the other oriented around ‘wealth.’ Using the ‘taste’ / ‘virtue’ categorization system made critical continuations of a given discourse less likely, and salutary continuations more likely. So, as Gikandi writes, “Through their patronage of art and taste, the slave-owning plantocracy ... laundered its ill-gotten money and refashioned its identity. In even more extreme cases ... living an aesthetic life, even an eccentric one, transformed one from being the son of a crass Jamaican planter to a person of taste” (2011, 149). In a particular

case, Gikandi writes that a plantation owner relying on the labor of many enslaved workers could be speaking “the language of providence, duty, and virtue,” emphasizing his ‘white man’s burden’ with the aim of “concealing his other identity, his role as a hardened slave master.” The plantation owner “...would use language and self-presentation to conceal the fact that what he was calling ‘my people’ were, in fact, African slaves” (165).

Choosing ‘taste’ and ‘virtue’ over ‘wealth’ also affects the channels for common ground. For example, (15) and (16) typically have different effects on the channels for common ground:

15. He is a man of great taste and virtue.

16. He is a man of great wealth.

The possibility that someone categorized with (15) is acting or would act in a deeply unethical way would often appear far more remote to the participants in a discourse than the possibility that someone categorized with (16) is so acting or would so act. Because the truth value of counterfactuals is at least apparently sensitive to contextually supplied orderings (Stalnaker, 1968; Lewis, 1973), this makes at least an apparent difference to the truth value of conditionals like (17) and (18):

17. If the price of sugar were lower, he would treat the people working on his plantation worse.

18. If the price of sugar were higher, he would treat the people working on his plantation better.

As a result the terrain for common ground can be changed in innumerable ways. It can be helpful to make effects like these on the channels for common ground salient and explicit. But such effects will often themselves be represented in the conversational common ground, whether or not the participants in a conversation pay attention to them.

In some nearby cases, however, an ethically relevant effect on the channels for common ground is not itself common ground. Suppose Betty’s dispositions do not incline her toward raising ethical concerns about a person introduced as a topic of conversation with (15), but do incline her toward raising ethical concerns about a person introduced as a topic of conversation with (16). Suppose further that Al introduces Charles (as a topic of conversation) using (15) rather than (16). Al’s choice of (15) rather than (16) makes it less likely that Betty will raise ethical concerns about Charles. But that effect need not be visible to Al—as in a situation in which he doesn’t know about Betty’s dispositions. And it need not be visible to Betty—as in a situation in which Betty is unsure whether Charles *could* be characterized using (16). And, of course, it need not be common ground in Al and Betty’s conversation. But the choice may nevertheless be ethically important. For this reason, again, effects on the channels for common ground that are not themselves common ground or transparent to discourse participants can be ethically relevant and important.

Similarly, discourse that facilitates thinking in terms of the ‘white man’s burden,’ even in subtle ways, makes certain narratives and ideals look more important than others. This has an effect on what symbols, metaphors, and ideas are likely to be deployed in conversation. This can affect many aspects of the conversation, including the likelihoods of various continuations. If all conversational participants are aware of how thinking in terms of the ‘white man’s burden’ will affect the other conversational participants, aware that they are aware, and so on, then such effects on the channels for common ground may be common ground (or close). But even if the conversational participants aren’t aware of these effects—as is extremely common—they may still be ethically important phenomena, insofar as they influence

1. the salience, assertibility, and apparent truth of ethical and political appraisals;
2. the salience, assertibility, and apparent truth of counterfactuals, causal claims, and potential interventions;
3. the salience, assertibility, and apparent truth of explanations, rationalizations, and lawlike generalizations;
4. who is included and who excluded from cooperative discourse;
5. what possibilities are seen, raised, ignored, and dismissed;

and so on.

For another sort of example, consider the tendency to yoke together etiquette, culture, class, prudence, and ethics. Virginia Foster Durr relates that in her childhood

‘Common’ was a great word. If anything was common, it was just terrible. Mother used that word often. She would say, ‘Well, dear, I think that it is extremely common.’ That meant it was just vulgar. You felt guilty if you did anything that was common. If you ate too much, if your mouth was full, if you didn’t use the right fork, whatever you did that wasn’t right, was common (1985, 27).

(What’s “just not done” plays similar roles for many; cf. Foot, 1958.) This kind of discourse effaces distinctions that many participants in the discourse would make, if pressed, between the different things that are “common” or “just not done.” But a discourse that deploys categorization systems that do not make those distinctions is likelier to blur or confuse the distinctions than a discourse that does not deploy such categorization systems. This is in part because the ways such locutions shape the channels for common ground is not especially visible in everyday usage. If something’s just not done, there is often not much apparent point to pointing out, possibly pedantically, that it’s not done only for *cultural* reasons—that there’s nothing *ethical* at stake. But again the effect such discourse has on the terrain for common ground blurs those distinctions. This is especially vivid when different discourse participants agree that something’s “not done” but disagree about whether it’s not done for ethical reasons, cultural reasons, religious reasons, or other reasons. And expressions that have a ‘thick’ ethical reading or even a wholly descriptive reading—like ‘common’ and ‘just not done’—blur yet another important distinction. Such blurrings can easily affect the likelihood of various sorts of continuations, and affect such likelihoods in ethically important ways even when they are not represented in the common ground.

2.3 | Dominant systems of categorization

A system of categorization is **dominant** in situation *s* to the extent that alternative systems of categorization with similar subject matter are not widely used in *s*. While categorization systems like those discussed in §2.2—the ‘taste’ / ‘virtue’ system and the ‘common’ system—certainly can have insidious effects on the terrain for common ground, they were not especially *dominant*. Other systems of categorization for similar subject matter persisted and were widely used alongside them. It might have been seen as rude or inadvisable to refer to a self-styled ‘man of taste’ in a way that emphasized his wealth, for example, but the words needed to say this were readily available. The systems of categorization I discuss in this section, by contrast, were dominant in the actual historical situations at issue. That is, they were far more widely used than alternative systems of categorization in those situations, whether by legal requirement, by consent, or by acquiescence.

Much of the vast literature that critiques dominant systems of categorization looks back to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as paradigmatic “masters of suspicion” (Ricoeur, 1970, 33)—and so as inspirations for critique—and to Antonio Gramsci’s notion of ‘hegemonic’ ideology (1971 [1929–1935]). Theorists in these traditions often make strong claims about the nature of language and knowledge. For example, Gary Peller argues that “The construction of a realm of knowledge separate from superstition and the identification of a faculty of reason separate from passion” contributed to the dominance of categorization systems that “...have always served political roles in differentiating groups as worthy or unworthy and in justifying particular social hierarchies” (2012, 137). These are strong claims. Whatever their merits, a nearby but less controversial hypothesis could easily be put in terms of dominant systems of categorization shaping the terrain for common ground. For example, Peller might say that dominant systems of categorization make likelier continuations of discourse which categorize groups that have a claim to knowledge and reason as worthy, and others as unworthy. This hypothesis could be confirmed or disconfirmed through empirical observation,⁸ perhaps through careful comparisons of linguistic communities that differ with respect to their categorization systems. And we have reason to hope that such empirical work could persuade those dubious of some of Peller’s stronger claims about the nature of language and knowledge—for example, that

...what has been presented in our social-political and intellectual traditions as knowledge, truth, objectivity, and reason are actually merely the *effects* of a particular form of social power, the victory of a particular way of representing the world that then presents itself as beyond mere interpretation, as truth itself. (138)

Clearly one could deny this strong claim while rationally endorsing hypotheses about dominant systems of categorization helping shape the terrain for common ground.

Put in an even starker way, Peller and many other critical theorists hold that a “word only ‘means’ with reference to other words in the play of difference in the socially created system of signification” (1985, 1168). As Michel Foucault puts it, “There is nothing absolutely primary to interpret, because at bottom everything is already interpretation. Each sign is in itself ... the interpretation of other signs” (1990 [1964], 64). Given such a view, Peller holds, “‘Knowledge’ is not an adequation of consciousness to the world” (1169–70) but “the produced effect of social power institutionalized in social representational conventions” (1170). The thought seems to be that those with the power to interpret have the power to *make* some things knowledge, and others not knowledge.

The view articulated here is just one view on what Stalnaker calls “foundational-semantics”: on “what makes it the case that the language spoken by a particular individual or community has a particular descriptive semantics” (1997, 536). According to views like Peller’s, those in power make it the case that a language has a particular descriptive semantics. But Peller and similar theorists could bracket this thought and try to find more common ground with the many who are skeptical of their foundational-semantic views by arguing that dominant systems of categorization do political work in part by shaping the terrain for common ground. Consider someone who holds that “what semantic value an expression has depends on the facts,” (Stalnaker, 1997, 544; see also, e.g., Haslanger, 2012b) including perhaps causal facts that are not influenced or even known by those in power. Such a person could readily admit that various speech acts nevertheless affect the channels for common

⁸As Peller surely would agree—see, e.g., his citations of empirical research on 169 and 174.

ground. Put another way, thinking in terms of effects on the terrain for common ground can provide a tool or resource that helps address “hermeneutical injustices” (Fricker, 2007, chapter 7) without the excesses of a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion.’ As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick puts it, “for someone to have an unmystified view of systemic oppressions does not *intrinsically* or *necessarily* enjoin that person to any specific train of epistemological or narrative consequences” (2003, 127). Unmystifying systemic oppressions nevertheless requires sensitivity to the influences of language and language use, and theorizing in terms of the terrain for common ground enhances that sensitivity.

Here is a concrete example. In their analysis of the 1978 Indian land claim suit *Mashpee Tribe v. Town of Mashpee*, Gerald Torres and Kathryn Milun argue persuasively that the Mashpee Tribe was rendered “incapable of *legal* self-definition” (1990, 655). The Tribe was instead made to “point to something that then points back and leads others to declare the Tribe is indeed what it claims to be” (655). In other words, the Mashpee Tribe was legally required to cite some standard for membership that others—who of course have their own interests in and understandings of the situation—would find compelling. In lieu of self-definition, the judge in this case adopted a “completely acontextual (as well as profoundly ethnocentric)” (646) standard deriving in part from *Montoya v. United States* 180 U.S. 261 (1901).⁹ As Jack Campisi puts it, the judge “dr[e]w his own definition, which few could meet.... He could do no less than define away the plaintiff” (1991, 58). And so—put in terms of effects on the channels for common ground—the judge’s decision to make the *Montoya* system of classification dominant made it likelier that any common ground the jury could arrive at would not count the Mashpee as the Mashpee Tribe.¹⁰ This is an important, insightful, and well-supported conclusion. But one can endorse it whatever one thinks of Torres and Milun’s claims that “The very idea of what we can know is unstable” or that “The conflict between these systems of meaning—that of the Mashpee and that of the state—is really the question of how can we ‘know’ which history is most ‘true’” (629). It’s far easier to find consensus about the Judge’s effects on the terrain for common ground than it would be to find consensus on the nature of knowledge, truth, objectivity, reason, and language. Sensitivity to questions about how various speech acts would affect the terrain for common ground might help ‘stitch together’ intellectual communities that would otherwise find themselves somewhat mystified by each other, or even at odds. Where social and political critique overlaps with the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion,’ theorizing in terms of the terrain for common ground itself changes the *theorists’* terrain for common ground, sometimes making it easier to arrive at theoretical consensus.

To be sure, the ways in which channels for common ground contribute to ‘stitching together’ are not always helpful. For example, in the United States in the late twentieth century, ‘law and order’ talk helped stitch together political groups that had different sensibilities and values.¹¹ Naomi Murakawa, for example, argues that in the United States “liberal law-and-order ... converged with racially conservative ideas” (2014, 29) in part because it “promised to deliver freedom from racial violence by way of the civil rights carceral state, with professionalized police and prison guards less likely to provoke Watts and Attica” (151). To see the role channels for common ground can play in such discourse, consider a hypothetical activist who wanted to stop lynchings, and a hypothetical politician who wanted to reassure white people that the law was on their side. As distant as their goals were from each

⁹According to the *Montoya* standard, “By a ‘tribe’ we understand a body of Indians of the same or similar race, united in community under one leadership or government, and inhabiting a particular though sometimes ill-defined territory.”

¹⁰It’s true that the jury was all-white and that this feature of the jury was “virtually guaranteed by the *voir dire*” (Torres and Milun, 1990, 650), so one might feel skeptical that in counterfactual scenarios the jury could have found that the Mashpee were a Tribe even with a different terrain for the common ground. But it’s plausible that the jury could have found that the Mashpee were a Tribe and nevertheless arrived at some other way to maintain the status quo with respect to land use.

¹¹See Garland (2001) for relevantly similar arguments about British discourse on punishment and rehabilitation.

other, they could be brought together under the guise of ‘equality before the law,’ whereby extra-legal violence would not be tolerated. Political groups that were distant from each other thus both saw a way to make progress on their different goals. They could unify, provisionally, with their erstwhile opponents with respect to ‘law and order’ talk, leaving to the side differences about just what ‘law and order’ comes to. Kimberlé Crenshaw puts the general point concisely: “antidiscrimination discourse is fundamentally ambiguous” in the sense that it “can accommodate conservative as well as liberal views of race and equality” (1988, 1335). The dominance of ‘law and order’ discourse in the late twentieth century United States helped shape the channels for common ground, making discourse that deployed the ‘law and order’ system of categorization likelier, and thus helping to stitch together groups that were willing to use that system of categorization. Obviously there would be wide variation in how much effect something like this would have on a particular discourse participant’s interests, values, and actions, but in at least some cases such an effect would be ethically important. And in many cases the effect would not itself be represented in the common ground. For example, conversational participants could easily be unaware of how the relatively dominant ‘law and order’ system of categorization impacted the channels for common ground—unaware of the differences between its effects and those a system of categorization that emphasized racial justice, unaware of its impact on the discourse moves made by particular conversational participants, and so on.

Similarly, the discourse of ‘accountability’ and ‘standards’ in education in the United States, starting in the 1980s, stitched together left and right perspectives (Mehta, 2013, 207–224). It did so in part through shaping the terrain for common ground in ways that flattered both the left and the right. ‘Accountability’ sounds so innocuous that an advocate of accountability in education made it likelier that they would be praised, and that their opponents would be criticized. The resulting dominance of this system of categorization was ethically significant insofar as it helped garner support for certain education reforms, and reduce support for others. And again, it was and is easy to be unaware of those effects. So, again, effects on the channels for common ground can be ethically relevant and important without being common ground, or transparent to language users, or constrained by their intentions.

3 | PATHS TO CONSENSUS

We can reach consensus on a proposition only if that proposition can become common ground. Because effects on the channels for common ground can make it more or less likely that a proposition will become common ground, the phenomena I have discussed in this paper also affect the likelihood of consensus with a given content. In a real world liberal democracy, the channels through which discourses flow will often be different from those through which they would flow in a more ideally democratic setting. This can have profound effects on the kinds of consensus we can establish. This is a powerful reason to expose and resist anti-democratic and illiberal effects on the terrain for common ground. Whatever we as individuals want, the terrain for common ground can make certain *consensuses* hard to reach, in virtue of diverting discourse away from common grounds with one content and toward common grounds with another content. And the channels for common ground can make the space of consensuses we can assent to unnecessarily distant from what we actually want. These effects are largely probabilistic, unlike the deterministic effects of Max Weber’s “‘world images’ that ... have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest” (1946, 280). Discourse does not run on strict Weberian tracks, on my view. But the influence of the terrain for common ground is nevertheless often opaque, often profound, and often ethically important.

Unfortunately, it is very difficult to tell what the channels for common ground are, and to tell how we're affecting the terrain at any given time. We are all constantly making linguistic contributions that shape the channels for common ground in ways that aren't clear to us—and sometimes neither reflection nor feasible empirical research suffices to make those effects clear. In light of our inevitable ignorance, we should face and try to absorb the fact that even the most well-intentioned are inevitably complicit in harmful effects on the flow of discourse. And then those of us who are well-positioned to do so have considerable reason to engage with each other, humble in our recognition of that complicity, in efforts to change the terrain when the channels that we have unwittingly carved for discourse threaten to take it where we don't want to follow.

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