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Andreas Stokke

To cite this article: Andreas Stokke (2017) Proposing, Pretending, and Propriety: A Response to Don Fallis, Australasian Journal of Philosophy, 95:1, 178-183, DOI: [10.1080/00048402.2016.1185739](https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2016.1185739)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2016.1185739>



Published online: 12 May 2016.



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Proposing, Pretending, and Propriety: A Response to Don Fallis

Andreas Stokke

Umeå University

ABSTRACT

This note responds to criticism put forth by Don Fallis of an account of lying in terms of the Stalnakerian view of assertion. According to this account, to lie is to say something one believes to be false and thereby propose that it become common ground. Fallis objects by presenting an example to show that one can lie even though one does not propose to make what one says common ground. It is argued here that this objection does not present a problem for the view of lying as Stalnakerian assertion. Responding to the objection brings out important features of this view of discourse and of assertion.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 27 February 2016; Revised 29 April 2016

KEYWORDS Lying; common ground; assertion; pretence

1. Introduction

In Stokke [2013], I proposed an account of what it is to lie that analysed lying in terms of assertion. Don Fallis [2013] has objected to this account of lying. I argue here that Fallis's criticism does not present a problem for my view of the nature of lying.

According to my view, to lie is to assert something that one believes to be false. Moreover, I think that the understanding of assertion needed to characterize lying is (a version of) the one that forms part of the theory of communication developed in the work of Robert Stalnaker [1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 1999d, 2002]. On this view, asserting that p involves making a proposal for p to become part of the *common ground* of the conversation. The common ground of a conversation at a given time is the information that is mutually taken for granted by the participants at that time.¹ In addition, I hold that assertion requires *saying* something, as opposed to, for example, merely conversationally implicating it.² So, my account of lying is that you lie if and only if you say something that you believe to be false and thereby propose that it become common ground.

Against this account of lying, Fallis objects [2013: 350] that 'while most liars propose that what they say be added to the common ground, we can imagine liars that do not.' I will argue here that he fails to present adequate support for this claim. At the same time, we will see that responding to his objection is useful in bringing out important

¹ For details about the characterization of common ground information, see, in particular, Stalnaker [2002].

² I defend an account of what is said, in this sense, in Stokke [2016] and Schoubye and Stokke [forthcoming]. See also Stalnaker [1999c: 87].

aspects of the Stalnakerian understanding of discourse and its application to lying *qua* asserting.

2. Deep Throat

As motivation for his objection, Fallis [ibid.] gives the following example:

In a deserted parking garage in our nation's capital, a devious Deep Throat attempts to mislead a journalist by saying, 'I am saying this only to you. And I am going to say it only once. If you repeat it (or say anything that presupposes it), I will deny it. The Attorney-General himself was behind the cover-up.'

Fallis's verdict [ibid.: 350–1] on this case is that

Deep Throat does not seem to be proposing that the claim that the Attorney-General was behind the cover-up be added to the common ground of the conversation. ... Even so, Deep Throat seems to be lying as he knows that the Attorney-General was *not* behind the cover-up.

I agree that Deep Throat is lying in this case, and hence I agree that Deep Throat is making an assertion. But I do not agree that Deep Throat is not proposing to update the common ground with what he says.

Deep Throat is making his utterance because he wants to communicate the information in question to the journalist. He wants the journalist to believe what he says, to use it in drawing inferences, and most likely he even hopes that the journalist will tell other people. Typically, whatever speakers try to communicate to others in this sense is something that they are trying to make part of the conversational common ground, and typically they succeed in doing so. There are good reasons to think that the same happens in this case.

3. Felicity and Pretence

Fallis acknowledges that Deep Throat's utterance of (1) has the effect of making what it says common ground.

(1) The Attorney-General himself was behind the cover-up.

The main evidence for thinking that Deep Throat's utterance of (1) has the effect of making what it says common ground is that, as a result of his utterance, it can felicitously be presupposed that the Attorney-General was behind the cover-up. It is worth stressing that, on the Stalnakerian view, that p can felicitously be presupposed is not a necessary condition on p being common ground.³ In particular, the fact that p is common ground does not guarantee that no one will object to p , if presupposed. Correspondingly, as I will emphasize later, the fact that p is common ground is perfectly compatible with there being strong reasons not to say things that presuppose that p . However, there is a clear sense in which the fact that p can be felicitously presupposed is good evidence that p is common ground, on the Stalnakerian view.

Imagine that, in reply to Deep Throat's utterance of (1), the journalist asks the question in (2).

(2) How did the Attorney-General arrange the cover-up?

³ Thanks to an anonymous referee for emphasizing this point.

Given the reasonable assumption that there is no relevant difference between being behind something and arranging it, in this case the question presupposes what is asserted by (1). The question is felicitous as a response to Deep Throat's utterance. That a presuppositional utterance is felicitous means, at least, that it does not require the kinds of repair strategy that are typically prompted by unfamiliar presuppositions.

There are two main types of such a repair strategy. An unfamiliar presupposition can be accommodated—that is, it can be allowed to become common ground.⁴ Alternatively, an unfamiliar presupposition can be questioned or rejected. The need for accommodating, rejecting, or questioning a presupposition is a sign that it was not common ground when the relevant utterance was made.

I take it to be clear that there is no intelligible sense in which Deep Throat can be said to have the option of accommodating what is presupposed by (2).⁵ Yet it might be said that there is a sense in which Deep Throat can reject or question the presupposition that the Attorney-General was behind the cover-up. For example, Deep Throat might react to (2) with responses like those in (3).

- (3) a. What are you talking about?
- b. What makes you think the Attorney-General was involved?
- c. He didn't.
- d. I never said he did.

Indeed, it is natural to think that, in a situation like the one Fallis describes, Deep Throat would react to (2) in this way.

However, for Deep Throat to respond to (2) with replies like those in (3) involves a significant degree of *pretence*. The familiar kind of stony and poker-faced effect of replies of this sort arguably owes a lot to this feature. By contrast, no pretence is needed for questioning or rejecting a presupposition in standard cases.

The fact that one can react to a presupposition by pretending that it is not already common ground is not evidence that it did not become common ground when it was originally introduced. So, we have strong reasons to think that what Deep Throat tells the journalist becomes common ground, as witnessed by the fact that it can felicitously be presupposed in subsequent conversation.

4. Proposing to Update

Yet Fallis [ibid.: 351] does not think that the fact that what Deep Throat says becomes common ground vindicates the common ground account of lying:

However, even if the information does affect the future progress of the conversation in this way, that does not show that Deep Throat is *proposing* that it be added to the common ground. This sort of reply from the journalist [i.e. (2)] is precisely what Deep Throat was trying to prevent.

⁴ The notion of accommodation was introduced by Lewis [1979]. See Stalnaker [1999d] and von Stechow [2008] for details about accommodation in a Stalnakerian framework.

⁵ The journalist's question might make Deep Throat believe that the journalist believes, or at least accepts for present purposes, that the Attorney-General was behind the cover-up. But even if one's beliefs about what is common ground change as a result, such a process is not to be confused with the process of accommodation (that is, the process by which a hearer accepts without comment a new presupposition with which she is presented).

Fallis's objection highlights an important point about this view of discourse. On the Stalnakerian picture, there is a distinction between something becoming common ground as the result of an utterance and a speaker proposing to make something common ground by uttering it.⁶ Yet it does not straightforwardly follow that one can make a particular kind of metalinguistic move—declining to propose to update the common ground with what one says—simply by making linguistic moves such as asserting that one will deny what one is saying, if it is repeated or presupposed.⁷

Indeed, as I will argue next, there is nothing about Deep Throat's utterance that motivates the suggestion that he is not making the kind of proposal to update the common ground with what is said that is characteristic of assertion, according to the Stalnakerian. Since what he says does become common ground, there is therefore no basis for thinking that Deep Throat was not making a proposal to add what he said to the common ground.

5. Propriety and Support Potential

As Fallis describes the example, Deep Throat prefaces his utterance of (1) with the three statements in (4).

- (4) a. I am saying this only to you.
 b. I am going to say it only once.
 c. If you repeat it (or say anything that presupposes it), I will deny it.

Does the fact that Deep Throat issues these explicit warnings motivate Fallis's suggestion that Deep Throat is not making a proposal to update the common ground by uttering (1)?

Consider, first, (4a). There is nothing in the Stalnakerian account of conversation that suggests that a piece of information cannot be common ground between only two people; nor is there anything in that account that rules out that a speaker might try to make something common ground between only two people. One can tell a friend or one's spouse things that are not meant to be shared with others. That does not mean that one is not proposing to make such things common ground.

The analogous point applies to (4b). There is no reason to think that someone who explicitly decides to say something only once is not proposing to make common ground what she says. A parent who tells her child that she will become angry if the child keeps misbehaving might add that she will not tell her again. That does not mean that the parent is not proposing to make what she says common ground.

Among Deep Throat's explicit injunctions, the best candidate for supporting Fallis's objection is arguably (4c). However, the thought that Deep Throat's utterance of (4c) motivates the claim that he is not proposing that what he subsequently says become common ground rests on a mistaken conception of the role of common ground information in discourse, and of what is involved in proposing to update common ground information.

Why would one think, as Fallis does, that issuing a warning like (4c) is a way of signalling that one is not proposing that what one goes on to say become common ground? One reason might be the thought that proposing that what one says become

⁶ See Stalnaker [1999d: 101–2] for discussion.

⁷ Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this way of describing the problem.

common ground involves agreeing to others repeating it or saying things that presuppose it. There is a sense in which this is true. Making something common ground makes it possible for others to repeat it or to say things that presuppose it without thereby triggering surprise or requiring repair.⁸ Call this the *support potential* of common ground information. Such information has support potential in discourse in the sense that it can be repeated or presupposed without the need for repair.

Yet it is important to note that the fact that common ground information has support potential does not imply anything concerning the *propriety*, broadly construed, of repeating such information or of saying things that presuppose it. The fact that something is common ground means that one can felicitously repeat it or say things that presuppose it. But, as noted earlier, that does not rule out that there may be reasons not to do so. For example, doing so might be imprudent, it might be disrespectful or impolite, it might be uninteresting, it might be morally problematic, or there might be still other considerations against it.

Correspondingly, proposing to make something common ground is compatible with forewarning others of the impropriety of repeating it or of saying things that presuppose it. One can tell a friend or one's spouse about a medical condition because one wants someone to know about it in case of an emergency, while at the same time explicitly requesting that it not be talked about again.

Hence, the fact that Deep Throat warns the journalist against repeating what he tells him, and against saying things that presuppose it, does not show that Deep Throat is not proposing to make what he says common ground. Another way to put this is to say that Deep Throat gives the journalist a reason not to repeat or presuppose what he tells him during their subsequent conversation. Correspondingly, it is natural to think that it would be imprudent for the journalist to do so. Perhaps there are even moral considerations against it. But this in no way implies that Deep Throat is not proposing to update the common ground of the conversation with what he is telling the journalist.

Another potential way of motivating Fallis's claim is to emphasize the fact that (4c) declares that, if repeated or presupposed, Deep Throat will *deny* what he tells the journalist. We have already seen that for Deep Throat to later deny what he tells the journalist requires him to pretend that it did not become common ground when he said it. But an explicit decision to later pretend that what he says is not common ground does not show that Deep Throat is not putting that information forward for the common ground in the first place.

Just as there may be reasons for not repeating something that is common ground or for saying things that presuppose it, there may be reasons for pretending that something is not common ground, should someone repeat or presuppose it. Stalnaker [1999b: 51] emphasizes the point that there may be considerations that require one to engage in pretence of this kind:

If one is talking for some other purpose than to exchange information, or if one must be polite, discreet, diplomatic, kind, or entertaining as well as informative, then one may have reason to act as if the common background were different than one in fact knows it to be.

⁸ Repeating common ground information, in the sense of explicitly saying it, is often infelicitous by being trivial. But repeating what is common ground can be felicitous—for example, when it functions as a way of eliciting confirmation, or has some other non-trivial function. I assume that Fallis is thinking of (4c) as targeting the latter kind of situation.

Similarly, it is easy to see why Deep Throat would need to pretend that it is not common ground that the Attorney-General was behind the cover-up, should the journalist bring this up again. But that does not mean that he was not trying to make that information common ground when he said it.

6. Conclusion

Fallis's objection does not show that one can lie even if one does not propose to make common ground what one says. Yet his example highlights two important points. First, the common ground, for the Stalnakerian, is not to be seen as delineating what can be brought up in conversation without impropriety. Second, one can forewarn of such impropriety, and indeed of how one might react to it, while one is still seen as making a bid to make common ground the sensitive information in question.⁹

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⁹ I am grateful to Torfinn Huvenes, Anders Schoubye, and two anonymous referees for *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* for helpful suggestions. I am especially indebted to Don Fallis for very valuable comments on an earlier version.