Anchoring New Ideas in Common Ground. A Linguistic Approach

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1. Introduction: common ground

Verbal communication is inherently dialogic: communication always takes place against the backdrop of alternative views. In order to communicate new information or a new point of view successfully, a speaker will have to anchor the message to the common ground, the body of knowledge, beliefs and attitudes shared between speaker and addressee (Stalnaker 1978, Clark & Brennan 1991, Clark 1996). In the words of Arie Verhagen, the common ground ‘contains the knowledge that conceptualizers 1 and 2 mutually share, including models of each other and of the discourse situation’ (Verhagen 2005:7).

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1 That language use is inherently dialogic is an idea that goes back to the work of Bakhtin (1981) and it is fundamental to various linguistic theories such as the argumentation theory of Ancombre and Ducrot, the Geneva school of discourse analysis (Roulet and others), and appraisal theory (Martin and White).
According to Clark, there are two types of common ground: *communal* and *personal* common ground. Communal common ground is based on shared culture: a shared nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, etcetera. It relates to shared expertise on general concepts or on specific social practices. Here, one may think of shared knowledge of cognitive schemas, frames, scripts, prototypes, genre conventions, shared vocabulary (or jargon). Communal common ground may also be based on shared attitudes (and stereotypes), for instance, of a religious or political nature. Common ground can, finally, also depend on the fact that we are all human beings and some of our mental attitudes (rationality), emotions and inclinations are universal to humans.

The second type of common ground is *personal* common ground. This type can be based on the physical copresence of the interlocutors. When speaker and hearer are physically copresent they will be able to perceive the same objects and experience the same things (joint attention). Personal common ground may also be based on linguistic copresence. Everything that has been previously said in a conversation becomes part of the common ground.

Common ground is not a static entity that can be taken for granted by the interlocutors: common ground has to be established by the interlocutors; it is constantly being negotiated and updated during communication. Common ground can be confirmed, modified and expanded on. To establish common ground is not always easy, due to the simple fact that we are not able to read each other’s mind. However, human beings have a theory of mind which enables them to imagine what the other thinks, beliefs and feels. As humans we interact with the world and with one another in similar ways and we are therefore capable of recognizing each other as intentional agents just like ourselves, and we assume that fellow human beings will entertain similar ideas and feelings about the world that surrounds us.

Every message that aims to convey a new idea in an effective way will have to be carefully designed to ‘fit’ the common ground. A linguistic expression will, therefore, tend to consist of two elements: on the one hand, it will necessarily contain new information which adds content to the common ground. In the terminology of Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 2000:264-5), this element may be called the *increment*. 
On the other hand, a message will contain an element which connects the new information to an already established item in the common ground, the *anchor*.

![Diagram of anchoring](image)

**Fig. 2. Anchoring a new idea into the common ground (cf. Langacker 2000:264-5).**

In this paper, we focus on two linguistic phenomena, discourse particles and negation, and we argue that their function in discourse can be insightfully analysed as the speaker’s instructions to the addressee specifying in which way new information is to be cognitively anchored to the already established common ground. In section (2), a number of Greek adversative particles will be analysed in terms of their anchoring function. In section (3), the anchoring function of negations is illustrated with some Latin examples. Section (4) contains a conclusion and presents a number of suggestions for future research on the role of common ground.

### 2. Adversative particles in Ancient Greek

The function of discourse particles is among the most hotly debated issues in linguistics. An attractive approach to this issue has been proposed by Arie Verhagen in his book *Constructions of Intersubjectivity* (2005). Verhagen sees discourse connectives as devices that play a role in what he calls *intersubjective coordination*. At the basis of intersubjective coordination lies, according to Verhagen, ‘(...) humans’ ability to engage in deep cognitive coordination with others’ (Verhagen 2005:4). Verhagen goes on to state that:

(1) ‘For a range of linguistic phenomena which are arguably quite basic (negation and negation-related constructions, complementation, discourse connectives) it can be demonstrated that connecting, differentiating, and ‘tailoring’ the contents of points of view with respect to each other (rather than organizing a connection to the world) is essential for understanding their semantics and, perhaps surprisingly, their syntax’ (Verhagen 2004: 4).

We will follow Verhagen’s approach here and regard discourse particles and negation as tools that serve to coordinate the two perspectives that are necessarily
involved in communication. More specifically, we will conceive of discourse particles and negation as instructions given by the speaker to the addressee how to anchor the content of the current utterance into the common ground established between speaker and addressee.

To illustrate the crucial role of common ground in the semantics of particles, we will discuss a number of Greek adversative particles and their relation to the common ground. However, before we turn to Greek we will start with an English example:

(2)  

\textit{John is a Republican but he is honest} (from G. Lakoff 1971:67)  

\textbf{Topos} \ (Anscombre \& Ducrot 1983):  
If one is a Republican (P), one is likely to be dishonest (Q) \ [P \rightarrow Q]  
John is a Republican (P). Inference \rightarrow He is dishonest (Q).

What exactly does the word ‘but’ do in this sentence? In order to understand what ‘but’ does, the French linguists Jean-Pierre Anscombre and Oswald Ducrot invoke the notion of ‘topos’ in the sense of a general rule that states what is normally the case. \textit{Topoi} are rules known by all members of some community or culture, and they are therefore part of the communal common ground shared by the interlocutors.

In our example, the \textit{topos} states that Republicans tend to be dishonest. This implicit \textit{topos}, then, serves as the basis of a possible inference: given that John is a Republican, the addressee might draw the valid inference that he is also dishonest. However, the function of ‘but’ in our example is to cancel this possible inference. The speaker does acknowledge that the \textit{topos} and the inference attached to it are generally valid. However, in the particular case of John, the speaker asserts that the inference that John is dishonest should not be accepted.

(3)  

\textbf{Topos}: P \rightarrow Q \ (‘P therefore Q’)  
P but \neg Q

This notion of \textit{topos} also appears to be useful to analyse the function of adversative particles in Ancient Greek. How this works can be illustrated by means of two adversative particles, μέντοι and καίτοι.\footnote{For a more elaborate discussion of the role of \textit{topoi} in the function of a number of Greek adversative particles (άλλα, καίτοι, μέντοι, μήν), we refer to Allan (forthc.) and Allan \& Van Gils (forthc.)}

The function of μέντοι and καίτοι can be summarized with the following formulas:
(4) **Topos:** \[ \text{P} \rightarrow \text{Q} \]
\[ \text{P} \text{ μέντοι} \neg \text{Q} \quad \text{('P but not Q') } \]
\[ \neg \text{Q} \text{ καίτοι} \text{P} \quad \text{('not Q, even though P')} \]

Both μέντοι and καίτοι crucially revolve around the validity of a mutually shared topos: ‘if P then Q’, ‘P therefore Q’. With μέντοι, a speaker cancels a possible inference Q: ‘P μέντοι not Q’. In a way, καίτοι can be seen as the mirror image of μέντοι in that the order of the two conjuncts is reversed: ‘not Q, even though P’.³

The role of *topoi* in use of μέντοι and καίτοι will be illustrated by means of a number of examples taken from Aristophanes and Thucydides. In example (5), Thucydides makes it clear that one would have expected that the Athenians and Peloponnesians would have started the war at that point in time, given their substantial mutual accusations. That it did not yet break out, is presented to the reader as a remarkable fact that counters every expectation.

(5) Τοῖς δ’ Ἀθηναίοις καὶ Πελοποννησίοις αἰτίαι μὲν αὐταὶ προσεγεγένητο ἐς ἀλλήλους (...). οὐ μέντοι ὅ γε πόλεμός πω ἐκφέρῃσθαι.

The Athenians and Peloponnesians had these antecedent ground of complaints against one another: (...) For all this, war had not yet broken out.⁴ (Th. 1.66.1)

[Topos: if two parties have serious complaints against one another, war will break out.]

In example (6), at the beginning of his speech Nicias acknowledges that they had agreed that the assembly was to be about the preparations for the expedition to Sicily, and he also acknowledges the general rule that an assembly should address the topic which was agreed upon. However, with μέντοι, Nicias marks that, in this particular case, there are good reasons to deviate from the norm.

(6) Ἡ μὲν ἐκκλησία περὶ παρασκευῆς τῆς ἡμετέρας ξυνελέγη, καθ’ ὅτι χρὴ ἐς Σικελίαν ἐκπλεῖν· ἐμοὶ μέντοι δοκεῖ καὶ περὶ αὐτοῦ τούτον ἔτι χρὴναι σκέψασθαι, εἰ ἄμεινὸν ἔστιν ἐκπέμπειν τὰς ναῦς (...).

[Nicias:] ‘Although this assembly was convened to consider the preparations to be made for sailing to Sicily, I think, **notwithstanding**, that we have still this question to examine, whether it be better to send out the ships at all.’ (Th. 6.9.1)

[Topos: if an assembly has been convened to discuss a particular issue, it is unusual to discuss other issues.]

³ Cf. Slings (1997), who characterizes the meaning of μέντοι as ‘denial of expectation’ and καίτοι as ‘inverted denial of expectation’.

⁴ The translations of Thucydides are Crawley’s (as revised by Strassler 1998).
In (7), an example from Aristophanes play *Acharnians*, we are dealing with the particle καίτου. Dicaeopolis states that he will speak in defence of the Spartans. Yet, Dicaeopolis adds, the chorus of Archarnians should not infer from that that he is not afraid to do so.\(^5\)

\[7\] λέξω δ' ὑπὲρ Λακεδαιμονίων ἁμοὶ δοκεῖ.
καίτου δέοικα πολλά·
[Dicaeopolis:] ‘I will speak in defence of the Spartans just what I think. Yet I’m very apprehensive.’\(^6\) (Ar. Ach. 369-70)
[Topos: if you are not afraid, you will dare to speak in defence of the Spartans.]

In (8), Socrates resumes in the conditional clause Strepsiades’ statement (in 397) that Zeus strikes all perjurors with his thunderbolt.\(^7\) He then refutes this idea by asking Strepsiades why Simon, Cleonymus and Theorus are not punished by Zeus, despite the fact that they are perjurors.

\[8\] καὶ πῶς (...),
εἶπερ βάλλει τοὺς ἐπιόρκους, δὴτ’ οὐχὶ Σίμων’ ἐνέπρησεν
οὐδὲ Κλεώνυμον οὐδὲ Θέωρον; καίτου σφόδρα γ’ εἰσ’ ἐπιόρκου·
‘If he [Zeus] really strikes perjurers, then why hasn’t he burned up Simon or Cleonymus or Theorus? Yet they are perjurors.’ (Ar. Nu. 398-400)
[Topos: if you are a perjuror, Zeus will strike you.]

In (9), after Sparta’s military fiasco at Pylos, Spartan envoys have come to Athens to settle the war. Yet, they are quick to add, the Athenians should not conclude that their peace offer is prompted by a loss of power or by an arrogant expectation of a better outcome. Instead, they ascribe their current troubles to some unfortunate errors of judgment.

\[9\] πρότερον αὐτοὶ κυριώτεροι νομίζοντες εἶναι δοῦναί ἐφ’ ἄ νῦν ἄφιγμενοι
ὑμᾶς αἰτούμεθα. καίτου οὔτε δυνάμεως ἐνδείᾳ ἐπάθομεν αὐτὸ οὔτε
μείζονος προσγενομένης υβρίσαντες (...).

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\(^5\) Olson (2002) *ad loc.* cites Denniston to explain the use of καίτου: ‘Used by a speaker in pulling himself up abruptly; the shaper ‘but’ is sometimes perhaps a better translation here than the quieter ‘yet’’ (Denniston 1954:557). Denniston’s characterization of καίτου, however, is somewhat unsatisfactory: not only is it relatively unspecific (it fails to distinguish καίτου from ἀλλά, which is also frequently used in such contexts), it also appears to be an interpretation of the particular context in which καίτου is used, rather than an adequate description of its actual semantic content.

\(^6\) The translations of Aristophanes are from Henderson’s Loeb edition.

\(^7\) For εἶπερ-clauses with indicative mood resuming the interlocutor’s preceding words, see also Wakker (1994: 326).
We [Spartans] have come to you [Athenians], although we formerly thought ourselves more able to grant what we are now here to ask. Nevertheless, we have not been brought to this by any decay in our power, or through having our heads turned by aggrandizement. (Th. 4.18.1-2)

[Topos: if you are superior in power, you don’t go to your enemy with a peace offer.]

These examples show that the communicative function of μέντοι and καίτοι crucially revolves around common ground management: both particles implicitly refer to topoi, which are shared cultural standards and therefore part of the communal common ground. However, the common ground is relevant to their function in yet another way: both particles serve to block a possible inference from being added to the common ground by the addressee. The two particles differ with regard to which specific inference evoked by the topoi is to be cancelled by the addressee.

3. Negation in Latin historiography

In the introduction of this paper two types of common ground were distinguished (following Clark 1996): communal and personal common ground. In section (2), we have seen how adversative particles may anchor new information to so-called ‘topoi’, presuppositions which are typically part of the communal common ground. In this section, we add a number of examples of negation, another linguistic phenomenon that also mainly draws on communal common ground, although the type of knowledge may not be captured by topoi. The examples derive from Latin historiography this time, but adversative particles and negation are expected to function in similar ways in both Greek and Latin discourse. This should be a topic of further investigation.

With the use of negation, part of the common ground is explicitly contradicted. This notion of contradicting information with negation is crucial, but also problematic from a communicative point of view. Why should a historiographer bother to tell what did not happen or why should he cancel views or features instead of directly stating what is the case? Let us take the following famous example of the introduction of Hannibal into the story:

(10) Livy, AUC 21.4

*has tantas viri virtutes ingentia vitia aequabant: inhumana crudelitas, perfidia plus*

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8 Kroon 2016 has shown how the historical present uses the personal common ground to present events in the shared context of the discourse, as if the listeners could see the events by themselves.
9 See Allan & van Gils, Forthc. and van Gils, Forthc. for adversative particles in Greek and Latin.
10 When negation is combined with adversative particles, with adversative particles the cancelled information may be updated or substituted with a correct view.
quam Punica, nihil veri, nihil sancti, nullus deum metus, nullum ius iurandum, nulla religio.

These admirable qualities of the man were equaled by his monstrous vices: his cruelty was inhuman, his perfidy worse than Punic; he had no regard for truth, and none for sanctity, no fear of the gods, no reverence for an oath, no religious scruple.\(^\text{11}\)

From a logical point of view the description starting with ‘inhumana’ is not very informative: it merely tells the reader what did not characterize Hannibal, except for the part about perfidia. However, most readers will judge this passage as highly informative, and rightly so. Even without the introductory sentence which announces a list of vices (vitia), one does not take nihil veri simply at its logical value, meaning ‘anything but verum’, leaving innumerable other characterizations. Rather, a reader will interpret nihil veri as its radical opposite: ‘all falsehood’. The interpretation of a negated feature as its ‘opposite’, or, to be more correct, as its ‘polar contrary’, is typical of negation in natural language.\(^\text{12}\)

In the characterization of Hannibal in example (10) the series of nihil ... nihil... nullus ... nullum and nulla is rhetorically forceful and it conveys a composite picture of two contrasted characters: on the one hand a truthful person, with regard for sanctity, the gods, oaths and religion, and, on the other, a man who tells lies and defies all forms of religion. This first characterisation conveys how a Roman general was supposed to be. This expected character of a Roman general is presupposed as part of the communal common ground of the narrator and his reader. By using negation, the narrator does not only describe Hannibal, but at the same time he implicitly evokes his opposite: the image of an ideal Roman general who meets all the desired ethical norms.

This example of negation is typical of most instances of negation in historiography: the negated element creates two contrasted elements: in this case a good general, part of the common ground, and a bad one, the protagonist of this story. Negation can thus be seen as a linguistic anchor which relates the story world to the common ground of reader and narrator by marking a contrast-relation. The contrast itself, however, is not always as straightforward. In example (11), war is excluded as circumstance and hence as cause of a naval disaster.

(11) Tac. Ann. 15.46

\(^\text{11}\) Translations of Livy are by Heinemann 1929.

nec multo post clades rei navalis accipitur, non bello (quippe haud alias tam immota pax), sed certum ad diem in Campaniam redire classem Nero iusserat, non exceptis maris casibus.

Soon afterwards, tidings of a naval disaster was received, but not from war, for never had there been so profound a peace. Nero, however, had ordered the fleet to return to Campania on a fixed day, without making any allowance for the dangers of the sea.13

The common ground contains the information that war is a likely cause for naval disasters, but the narrator points at the absence of war in this case; it was a period of profound peace (immota pax). War and peace typically form a contrast, but in this context, it is not enough to know that the naval tragedy occurred during peace, because peace cannot be the cause of the accident. The adversative particle sed introduces the main contrast which is between wars as a cause for naval disasters on the one hand and Nero’s orders on the other. The reader is subtly invited to update his common ground with the information that Nero’s orders were as devastating as wars could be.

The following example, number (12), shows in a longer passage how Livy constructs two opposites by means of negations and negative expressions, thus directing our interpretation of the main characters and events. It is a narrative passage about the siege of Mutina (Modena) by the Gauls who had sided with Hannibal. The Romans will be defeated at this occasion, but this outcome is not expected if one compared their strength or courage, as Livy tries to show.

(12) Livy, AUC 21.25

Mutinæ cum obsiderentur et gens ad oppugnandarum urbium artes rudis, pigerrima eadem ad militaria opera, segnis intactis adsideret muris, simulare coeptum de pace agi, evocatique ab Gallorum principibus legati ad conloquium, non contra ius modo gentium sed violata etiam quae data in id tempus erat fide, comprehenduntur, negantibus Gallis nisi obsides sibi redderent eos dimissuros. cum haec de legatis nuntiata essent et Mutina praesidiumque in periculo esset, L. Manlius praetor ira accensus effusum agmen ad Mutinam ducit. [9] silvae tunc circa viam erant plerisque incultis. ibi inexplorado profectus in insidias praecipitat multaque cum caede suorum aegre in apertos campos emersit.

Whilst they lay shut up in Mutina, the Gauls—who know nothing of the art of assaulting cities, and, besides, are very indolent in regard to siege-works, and were now sitting idly down before the walls without attempting them —

13 Translations of Tacitus, Annals are by Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb.
feigned a readiness to treat for peace; and their leaders having invited the Romans to send out spokesmen to confer with them, they seized these envoys, in violation not only of the law of nations, but also of a pledge which they had given for this time, and declared that they would not let them go unless their own hostages were restored to them. When word arrived of this affair of the envoys, and Mutina and its garrison were in danger, Lucius Manlius, the praetor, blazing with resentment, set out for Mutina with his army in loose marching order. In those days the road led through a forest, as the country was not, for the most part, under cultivation, and Manlius, advancing without reconnaissance, plunged into an ambush, and after sustaining heavy losses, managed with difficulty to get through into the open fields.

The Gauls are described as a people who know nothing of the art of assaulting cities and are indolent in siege-works (*gens ad oppugnandarum urbiurn artes rudis, pigerrima*): they besiege a city without touching the walls (*intactis muris*). Clearly, this description is contrasted to the image of soldiers as they are supposed to be: common ground prescribes that soldiers are experienced in besieging, and ready to fight and attack, and for the Roman reader, this is the type of Roman soldiers they collectively like to imagine. To arrive from this initial characterization of strongly contrasted peoples to the final result of a Roman defeat by these lazy Gauls is quite a rhetorical challenge. Key aspects of the rhetorical turn from dominant to defeated army is the characterization of the Gauls with the words *simulari, contra ius gentium, violata fide* and *negantibus* presenting a treacherous and unreliable enemy. Also the Livian adverb *inexplorato*, connected to the Roman commander Manlius, provides the strategic or moral lesson to the reader to always explore the field before leading troops to new territory. In his commentary, Walsh notes that the Roman general Manlius, blinded by anger, shows a lack of *prudentia* and *disciplina*, the essential attributes of a commander like Fabius Cunctator.\(^{14}\)

This passage shows how the use of negative expressions (including *rudis, piger* and *segnis*) evoke polar contraries with an inevitable preference for one pole. Part of the communal common ground is invoked, containing a negative judgment of people who are *rudis, piger* and *segnis*, and a positive valuation of cultured, educated and active people, like the Romans. This first portrayal of the adversaries, however, does potentially lead to an argumentative problem, since the Romans lost. Again, communal common ground is needed to show how the Gauls overpowered the Romans by defeating their expectations: The use of negation (*contra ius, violata fide*) makes it clear that *ius* and *fides* were the right thing to expect. The Gauls violated

\(^{14}\) Walsh also adds that no such moral condemnation of Manlius’ lack of discipline appears in Polybius who describes the same Roman defeat (Pol. III.40.) (1991[1973], 168).
laws and pledges, according to the narrator, and it brought about their victory. The second cause of the disaster is the *imprudentia* of the Roman commander Manlius. His march *inexplorato* was a major strategic mistake that did not meet the required standards of a Roman general, as the negated form implies.

We have seen how the use of negative expressions creates polar contraries in the universe of discourse, and how negations, at the same time, point to one of these contraries as normative or good (often the negated pole), while the other pole is presented as deviating from the (ethical) norm. By evoking this contrast, the hearer is supposed to agree with the positive assessment of one pole and with the condemnation of the other. This intersubjective alignment between speaker and hearer is a main rhetorical force of negative expressions in historiography.

4. Conclusion and suggestions for further research

This brief illustration of the use of adversative particles and negation in Greek and Latin texts shows the potential of the concepts of *common ground* and *anchor* to explain the rhetorical force of these texts. As linguists with a focus on discourse-pragmatics we look at the use of language in correlation to its communicative context. Common ground between the speaker and addressee is a crucial element in persuasive communication. Acknowledging the key role of common ground may help us to acquire a better understanding of the discourse function of a wide variety of linguistic phenomena, such as tense, modality, negation, discourse particles, word order and referential expressions. Analysing these linguistic phenomena as anchoring devices gives rise to various kinds of questions. By way of conclusion, we present a number of questions which may be addressed in further research on the role of common ground in discourse.

- Which other linguistic phenomena refer to common ground?
- Does the distinction in *communal* and *personal* common ground have enough explanatory force or do we need a more fine-grained idea of common ground and the linguistic possibilities to relate to it?
- How do the various linguistic phenomena involved in common ground management interact?
- What is the role of genre in anchoring mechanisms? Are certain parts of the common ground suspended, for instance, when a reader engages with poetry or fiction?
- Can we distinguish discourse modes that are geared to negotiate and construct new common ground (e.g. information, report, argumentation) from discourse modes that assume a broader and less problematic common ground (e.g. narrative)?
- In what way does a lack of common ground lead to interpretational difficulties?
- Are there any differences between anchoring mechanisms in Greek and in Latin?
- Can a linguistic common ground analysis be of value to historians interested in the general cultural beliefs and attitudes of the Greeks and Romans?
Bibliography


