Fragmented contexts

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Stalnaker’s influential conception of the conversational context as common ground models it in terms of the information mutually taken for granted by all interlocutors (e.g., Stalnaker 1978). But Stalnaker’s account has a downside: All information in the common ground – whether it was contributed as at-issue content or non-at-issue content – is equally available, or accessible, to all participants. However, a number of seemingly unrelated phenomena motivate the thesis that all information is not equally available:

1. Questions & Answers: The same presupposed information may be available as a correct (partial or complete) answer to one question not to another, to which it is also a correct answer.

2. Presupposition accommodation in disagreements: In disagreements, speakers are often willing to temporarily accept presuppositions of their opponents. Such presuppositions are only available for as long as the parties jointly accept one view. Different presuppositions become available with the temporary joint acceptance of the other view.

3. Making information available: Under some conditions, asserting information that is already in the common ground is a felicitous move and serves a conversational purpose.

In this talk, I will argue that adding the notion of available information to the model can account for the above phenomena. On the model, the common ground is ‘fragmented’: the common ground does not form a single consistent, deductively closed set of presuppositions, but is rather organized into a number of fragments. (Cf. Stalnaker 1984, Cherniak 1986, Elga & Rayo 2014 for mental fragmentation.) Information in a single fragment is jointly available relative to a linguistic task. Linguistic tasks, in turn, are individuated by questions-under-discussion (cf. Roberts 1996).