

# A Social Semantics for Agent Communication Languages

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## Abstract

The ability to communicate is one of the salient properties of agents. Although a number of agent communication languages (ACLs) have been developed, obtaining a suitable formal semantics for ACLs remains one of the greatest challenges of multiagent systems theory. Previous semantics have largely been mentalistic in their orientation and are based solely on the beliefs and intentions of the participating agents. Such semantics are not suitable for most multiagent applications, which involve autonomous and heterogeneous agents, whose beliefs and intentions cannot be uniformly determined. Accordingly, we present a social semantics for ACLs that gives primacy to the interactions among the agents. Our semantics is based on social commitments and developed in temporal logic. This semantics, because of its public orientation, is essential to providing a rigorous basis for multiagent protocols.

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# 1 Introduction

Interaction among agents is the distinguishing property of multiagent systems. Communications are a kind of interaction that respect the heterogeneity and preserve the autonomy of agents. In this respect, they differ from physical interactions. An agent may have no choice but to affect another agent—e.g., to bump into it or to lock a file it needs—or similarly be affected by another agent. By contrast, unless otherwise constrained, an agent need not send or receive communications; if it is willing to handle the consequences, it can maintain silence and deny the requests or even the commands it receives. Consequently, communication is unique among the kinds of actions agents may perform and the interactions in which they may participate.

Our particular interest is in *open* multiagent systems, which find natural usage in modern applications such as electronic commerce. In open multiagent systems, the member agents are contributed by several sources and serve different interests. Thus, these agents must be treated as

- *autonomous*—with few constraints on behavior, reflecting the independence of their users, and
- *heterogeneous*—with few constraints on construction, reflecting the independence of their designers.

Openness means that all interfaces in the system, and specifically ACLs, be given a clear semantics. A good ACL semantics must meet some crucial criteria.

- *Formal*. The usual benefits of formal semantics apply here, especially (1) clarity of specifications to guide implementors and (2) assurance of software. In fact, these are more significant for ACLs, because ACLs are meant to be realized in different agents implemented by different vendors.
- *Declarative*. The semantics should be declarative describing what rather than how. Such a semantics can be more easily applied to a variety of settings not just those that satisfy some low-level operational criteria.
- *Verifiable*. It should be possible to determine whether an agent is acting according to the given semantics.
- *Meaningful*. The semantics should be based on some intuitive appreciation of communications and not treat communications merely as arbitrary tokens to be ordered in some way. If it does, we can arbitrarily invent more tokens and there would be no basis to limit the proliferation of tokens.

These criteria, although simple, eliminate all of the existing candidates for ACL semantics. For example, English descriptions of communications (quite common in practice) are not formal, finite-state machines (FSMs) are not declarative or meaningful, mentalistic approaches are not verifiable, and temporal logics (if applied to tokens directly) are not meaningful. Briefly, we find that an approach based on social commitments (described within) and formalized in temporal logic can meet all of the above requirements.

**Organization** The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 motivates a semantics based on social constructs, and presents our conceptual approach. Section 3 presents a formal social semantics for ACLs, discusses its properties, and shows how it relates to communication protocols. Section 4 concludes with a discussion of our major themes, the literature, and some questions for future investigation.

## 2 Conceptual Approach

Most studies of communication in AI are based on speech act theory Austin [1962]. The main idea of speech act theory, namely, to treat communications as actions, remains attractive. An *illocution* is the core component of a communication and corresponds to what the communication is meant to accomplish independent both of how the communication is physically carried out (the *locution*) and the effect it has on a listener (the *perlocution*). For example, I could request you to open the window (the *request* is the illocution) by saying so directly or hinting at it (these are possible locutions). Whether or not you accede to my request is the perlocution. A proposition can be combined with illocutions of different types to yield different message. For example, my request to open the window is different from my assertion that the window is open.

It is customary to classify ACL primitives or message types into a small number of categories based on the different types of illocution. Usually these include the following categories—a sample primitive of each category is given in parentheses: *assertives* (*inform*), *directives* (*request*), *commissives* (*promise*), *permissives* (*permit*), *prohibitives* (*forbid*), *declaratives* (*declare*), and *expressives* (*wish*). Alternative classifications exist as well, and might be used. However, the above classification provides the necessary structure for our approach. Each message is thus identified by its sender and receiver, (propositional) content, and type.

Three components of an ACL are typically distinguished: (1) a content sublanguage to encode domain-specific propositions, (2) a set of primitives or message types corresponding to different illocutionary types (e.g., *inform* and *request*), and (3) a transport mechanism to send the messages. Part (2) is the core and the most interesting for the present study.

### 2.1 Mentalistic versus Social Semantics

Work on speech act theory within AI was motivated from the natural language understanding perspective and concerned itself with identifying or inferring the “intent” of the speaker. As a result, most previous work on ACLs too concerns itself with mental concepts, such as the beliefs and intentions of the participating agents. In fact, some theories emphasize the mutual beliefs and joint intentions of the agents as they perform their communicative actions. Inferring the beliefs and intentions of participants is essential to determining whether a given illocution occurred: did the speaker make a signal or was he just exercising his arm? However, in ACLs, the message type is explicit and no reasoning is required to determine it. In applications of multiagent systems, such reasoning would usually not be acceptable, because of the difficulty in specifying, executing, and enforcing it in an open environment.

There are a number of objections to using only the mental concepts for specifying ACL semantics, several of these are described in Singh [1998]. Although the mental concepts might be suitable for specifying the construction and behavior of the agents, they are not suitable as an exclusive basis for communications. There are a number of objections, but we summarize them in the following major categories.

- *Philosophical*. Communication is a public phenomenon, but the mental concepts are private. Any semantics that neglects the public nature of communication is deeply unsatisfactory. Something obviously takes place when agents interact through language even if they don't have or share the "right" beliefs and intentions.
- *Practical*. Ensuring that only the desirable interactions occur is one of the most challenging aspects of multiagent system engineering. However, the mental concepts cannot be verified without access to the internal construction of the agents. Under current theories of mental concepts, we cannot uniquely determine an agent beliefs and intentions even if we know its construction.

The above evidence supports the conclusion that a purely mentalistic semantics of an ACL cannot be a normative requirement on agents or their designers.

## 2.2 Language versus Protocol

To ensure autonomy and heterogeneity, we must specify communications flexibly and without making intrusive demands on agent behavior or design. Traditionally, heterogeneity is accommodated by specifying communication protocols. Because the traditional, mentalist semantics of ACLs are unverifiable, many researchers have resorted to the design of protocols in terms of FSMs. (Our argument applies equally to formalisms such as Petri Nets or temporal logic for protocols.) Such protocols are verifiable, but are devoid of content. They only state how the tokens are ordered. Thus, the ACL is effectively discarded, and we can just as well choose any arbitrary tokens for the message types. It is interesting how the unsuitability of the traditional semantics forces the protocols to be ad hoc. By contrast, the present paper seeks to develop a nontrivial semantics for an ACL that would also be usable for the construction and verification of protocols.

## 2.3 Validity Claims

The semantics of ACLs, which concerns us here, relates to the essence of communication. The currently popular approaches to ACL semantics are based on the speaker's intent Grice [1969]. Under this doctrine, the illocution is what the speaker believed and intended it to be. This doctrine, championed by Searle and others, however, leads to the philosophical and practical problems discussed above.

In philosophy, another of the best known approaches to communicative action is due to Habermas 1984; a tutorial is available in [Verharen, 1997, chap. 2]. The Habermas approach associates three "worlds" or aspects of meaning with communication. These correspond to the three *validity claims* implicitly made with each communication:

- *objective*, that the communication is true
- *subjective*, that the communication is sincere—in other words, the speaker believes or intends what is communicated.
- *practical*, that the speaker is justified in making the communication

In conversation, each of the above claims may be challenged and shown to be false. However, even if false, these claims are made with each communication. The claims involve different aspects of meaning including the subjective, but by fact of being claims in a conversation, they are public and social. If I tell you something, I am committed to being true, and you are entitled to check if I am. I am also committed to be sincere, even though you may not be able to detect my insincerity unless you can infer what I believe, e.g., through contradictory statements that I make at about the same time.

Perhaps more than his followers in AI, Searle too recognizes the institutional nature of language. He argues that the “counts as” relation is the basis for “constitutive reality” or institutional facts, including definitions of linguistic symbols [Searle, 1995, pp. 152–156]. But institutions are inherently objective. For example, in an auction, raising your hand counts as making a bid whether or not you have the intention to actually convey that you are bidding. In on-line commerce, pushing the “submit” button on your browser counts as authorizing a charge on your credit card.

Our proposed approach is, then, simply as follows. We develop the concept of social commitments as is studied in multiagent systems Conte and Castelfranchi [1995] and reasoning and dialogue in general Walton and Krabbe [1995]. Our technical definition differs from the cited works in two main respects. Our approach

- includes the notion of a social context in the definition of a commitment; the social context refers to the team in which the given agents participate and within which they communicate; it too can be treated as an agent in its own right—e.g., it may enter into commitments with other agents.
- allows metacommitments to capture a variety of social and legal relations.

The different claims associated with a communicative action are mapped to different commitments among the participants and their social context. Consequently, although our semantics is social in orientation, it admits the mental viewpoint.

### 3 Technical Approach

Communication occurs during the execution of a multiagent system. For this reason, our semantics is based on commitments expressed in a logic of time.

### 3.1 Background Concepts

The progression of events, which is inherent in the performance of any action, suggests the need for representing and reasoning about time. Temporal logics provide a well-understood means of doing so, and have been applied in areas such as distributed computing. By using classical techniques, such as temporal logic, we hope to facilitate the application of the proposed semantics when multiagent systems are to be integrated into traditional software systems. Computation Tree Logic (CTL) is a branching-time logic that is particularly natural for expressing properties of systems that may evolve in more than one possible way Emerson [1990]. Our formal language  $\mathcal{L}$  is based on CTL. Conventionally, a model of CTL is a tree whose nodes correspond to the states of the system being considered. The branches or *paths* of the tree indicate the possible ways in which the system's state may evolve. CTL provides a natural means to specify sets of behaviors.

Our approach builds on a flexible and powerful variety of social commitments, which are the commitments of one agent to another. A commitment involves three agents: the *debtor* (who makes it), the *creditor* (to whom it is made), and the *context* (the containing multiagent system in the scope of which it is made). The beliefs and intentions are as is customary in AI.

The following Backus-Naur Form (BNF) grammar with a distinguished start symbol  $L$  gives the syntax of  $\mathcal{L}$ .  $\mathcal{L}$  is based on a set  $\Phi$  of atomic propositions. Below, *slant* typeface indicates nonterminals;  $\longrightarrow$  and  $|$  are metasymbols of BNF specification;  $\ll$  and  $\gg$  delimit comments; the remaining symbols are terminals.

- L1.  $L \longrightarrow Prop \ll\text{atomic propositions, i.e., in } \Phi \gg$
- L2.  $L \longrightarrow \neg L \ll\text{negation}\gg$
- L3.  $L \longrightarrow L \wedge L \ll\text{conjunction}\gg$
- L4.  $L \longrightarrow A P \ll\text{universal quantification on paths}\gg$
- L5.  $L \longrightarrow E P \ll\text{existential quantification on paths}\gg$
- L6.  $L \longrightarrow R P \ll\text{selecting the real path}\gg$
- L7.  $P \longrightarrow L U L \ll\text{until: operator on a single path}\gg$
- L8.  $L \longrightarrow C(Agent, Agent, Agent, L) \ll\text{commitment}\gg$
- L9.  $L \longrightarrow xB L | xI L \ll\text{belief and intention}\gg$

The meanings of formulas generated from  $L$  are given relative to a model and a state in the model. The meanings of formulas generated from  $P$  are given relative to a path and a state on the path. The boolean operators are standard. Useful abbreviations include  $false \equiv (p \wedge \neg p)$ , for any  $p \in \Phi$ ,  $true \equiv \neg false$ ,  $p \vee q \equiv \neg p \wedge \neg q$  and  $p \rightarrow q \equiv \neg p \vee q$ . The temporal operators  $A$  and  $E$  are quantifiers over paths. Informally,  $pUq$  means that on a given path from the given state,  $q$  will eventually hold and  $p$  will hold until  $q$  holds.  $Fq$  means “eventually  $q$ ” and abbreviates  $trueUq$ .  $Gq$  means “always  $q$ ” and abbreviates  $\neg F\neg q$ . Therefore,  $EFp$  will hold on some path.  $R$  selects the real path.  $RFp$

means that  $p$  will hold on the real path. Although agents can't predict the future, they can make (possibly false) assertions or promises about it.

$M = \langle \mathbf{S}, <, \mathbf{N}, \mathbf{R}, \mathbf{A}, \mathbf{B}, \mathbf{I}, \mathbf{C} \rangle$  is a formal model for  $\mathcal{L}$ .  $\mathbf{S}$  is a set of states;  $< \subseteq S \times S$  is a partial order indicating branching time, and  $\mathbf{N} : \mathbf{S} \mapsto \Phi$  is an interpretation, which tells us which atomic propositions are true in a given state. For  $t \in \mathbf{S}$ ,  $\mathbf{P}_t$  is the set of paths emanating from  $t$ .  $\mathbf{R} : \mathbf{S} \mapsto \mathbf{P}$  gives the real path emanating from a state.  $\mathbf{PP}$  gives the powerset of paths.  $\mathbf{A}$  is a set of agents.  $\mathbf{B} : \mathbf{S} \times \mathbf{A} \mapsto \mathbf{S}$ ,  $\mathbf{I} : \mathbf{S} \times \mathbf{A} \mapsto \mathbf{PP}$ , and  $\mathbf{C} : \mathbf{S} \times \mathbf{A} \times \mathbf{A} \times \mathbf{A} \mapsto \mathbf{PP}$  give the modal accessibility relations for beliefs, intentions, and commitments, respectively.

$M \models_t p$  expresses “ $M$  satisfies  $p$  at  $t$ ” and  $M \models_{P,t} p$  expresses “ $M$  satisfies  $p$  at  $t$  along path  $P$ .”

- M1.  $M \models_t \psi$  iff  $\psi \in \mathbf{N}(t)$ , where  $\psi \in \Phi$
- M2.  $M \models_t p \wedge q$  iff  $M \models_t p$  and  $M \models_t q$
- M3.  $M \models_t \neg p$  iff  $M \not\models_t p$
- M4.  $M \models_t \mathbf{A}p$  iff  $(\forall P : P \in \mathbf{P}_t \Rightarrow M \models_{P,t} p)$
- M5.  $M \models_t \mathbf{E}p$  iff  $(\exists P : P \in \mathbf{P}_t \text{ and } M \models_{P,t} p)$
- M6.  $M \models_t \mathbf{R}p$  iff  $M \models_{\mathbf{R},t} p$
- M7.  $M \models_t xIp$  iff  $(\forall P : P \in \mathbf{I}(x, t) \Rightarrow M \models_{P,t} p)$
- M8.  $M \models_t xBp$  iff  $(\forall t' : t' \in \mathbf{B}(x, t) \Rightarrow M \models_{t'} p)$
- M9.  $M \models_t C(x, y, G, p)$  iff  $(\forall P : P \in \mathbf{C}(x, y, \tau, t) \Rightarrow M \models_{P,t} p)$
- M10.  $M \models_{P,t} p \mathbf{U} q$  iff  $(\exists t' : t \leq t' \text{ and } M \models_{P,t'} q \text{ and } (\forall t'' : t \leq t'' \leq t' \Rightarrow M \models_{P,t''} p))$

The above formal semantics is abstract, because it leaves open the concrete form of  $\Phi$ ,  $\mathbf{S}$ ,  $<$ , and  $\mathbf{N}$ .

## 3.2 Social Semantics

Table 1 gives the formal semantics of the ACL primitives. (All commitments are relative to  $G$ , the context group, which is not shown to reduce clutter; however,  $G$  is the creditor of some commitments, which are shown.) This semantics has three components corresponding to the objective, subjective, and practical meanings introduced in Section 2.3. Each aspect of meaning is automatically given from the public perspective, because each involves a social commitment. Let's consider each component of the semantics in turn.

Objectively, the sender commits for *inform* that its content is true, for *promise* that its content will be accomplished, for *permit* that its content may be realized, for *declare* that its content is true. For *request*, the sender expects that the receiver will commit to making it true, and for *forbid* that

Illocution	Objective	Subjective	Practical
<i>inform</i> ( $x, y, p$ )	$C(x, y, p)$	$C(x, y, xBp)$	$C(x, G, C(x, y, p) \rightarrow p)$
<i>request</i> ( $x, y, p$ )	—	—	$C(x, G, request(x, y, p) \rightarrow AFC(y, x, p))$
<i>promise</i> ( $x, y, p$ )	$C(x, y, RFp)$	$C(x, y, xIp)$	$C(x, G, C(x, y, RFp) \rightarrow RFp)$
<i>permit</i> ( $x, y, p$ )	$C(x, y, EFp)$	$C(x, y, \neg xI\neg p)$	$C(x, G, permit(x, y, p) \rightarrow \neg C(y, G, \neg RFp))$
<i>forbid</i> ( $x, y, p$ )	$C(x, y, \neg RFp)$	$C(x, y, \neg xIp)$	$C(x, G, forbid(x, y, p) \rightarrow C(y, G, \neg RFp))$
<i>declare</i> ( $x, y, p$ )	$C(x, y, p)$	$C(x, y, xIp)$	$C(x, G, declare(x, y, p) \rightarrow p)$

Table 1: Social semantics formalized

the receiver will commit that its content will not be realized. Although these are not part of the objective meaning, they are related to the practical meaning given below.

Subjectively, the sender commits for *inform* that he believes its content, for *promise* that he intends to carry it out, for *permit* that he does not intend the negation of its content, for *declare* that he intends to bring it about. For *request*, the sender expects that the receiver will commit to intending to make it true, and for *forbid* that the receiver will commit that its content will not be realized. These expectations are not directly incorporated in the semantics.

The practical aspect of the semantics is the most complex. Practically, the sender commits for *inform* that he has reason to know the content, for *promise* that if he promises something he can make it happen, for *permit* that he has the authority to relieve the receiver of any commitment to do otherwise, and for *declare* that his saying so, brings it about. For *request*, the sender commits that the receiver has committed to accepting a request from him. For *forbid*, the sender commits he can cause the receiver to take on a commitment to not let the condition come about. The above meanings are naturally phrased as metacommitments to the group. Some of them refer to the communication itself.

Conceivably, even the commitments relating to the subjective expectations might be added here, but we suggest they would be too strong for the basic practical meaning. This is because our goal with this semantics is to specify the objective and the practical components of the semantics for use in the construction and validation of multiagent protocols. This is facilitated if the subjective criteria are not included in the practical meaning.

### 3.2.1 Pragmatic Constraints

What we usually refer to informally as meaning is a combination of the semantics and pragmatics. We will treat the semantics as the part of meaning that is relatively fixed and minimal. Pragmatics is the component of meaning that is context-sensitive and depends on both the application and the social structure within which it is applied.

The above semantic validity claims, even the practical claims, are different from pragmatics. Pragmatic claims would be based on considerations such as the Gricean maxims of manner, quality, and quantity Grice [1975]. For example, a pragmatic claim basis for *permit* might be that the receiver desires or intends the content that is being permitted. Some of the pragmatic constraints would be the public versions of the expectations listed above in the subjective component of the



semantics.

### 3.2.2 Protocols and Compliance

The limitations of traditional ACL semantics force protocol approaches to fend for themselves and give low-level, procedural characterizations of interactions. Representations based on monolithic finite-state machines are suitable only for the most trivial scenarios. They cannot accommodate distributed execution, compliance testing, or exceptions. However, given a commitment-based semantics for ACLs, an observer of a multiagent system (possibly itself a participating agent) can maintain a record of the commitments being created and modified. From these, the observer can determine the compliance of other agents with respect to the given protocol. This compliance testing would be based on the contents of the messages and the formal public meanings of the ACL primitives used. It would not depend on the sequence of events in the system.

However, low-level protocols will continue to have some use even when a social semantics for ACLs is used. For example, turn-taking might underlie the specific commitments to ensure that they are created only when they make sense. For instance, a bidder shouldn't make a bid prior to the advertisement, or the commitment content of the bid won't be fully defined.

### 3.3 Properties

A formal semantics may be evaluated by showing that it supports the desirable properties. Our semantics satisfies the four criteria of Section 1.

- *Formal.* Our semantics is based on logic.
- *Declarative.* Our semantics involves assertions about commitments, rather than procedures or automata.
- *Verifiable.* Our semantics offers different levels of verifiability. Every commitment to a putative fact can be verified or falsified by challenging that putative fact. Every commitment to a mental state can be similarly verified or falsified, but only through the more arduous route of eliciting the agent's beliefs and intentions. These might be elicited by observing the agent's further communications or other actions. Every commitment to some institutional fact can be verified or falsified by appeal to some external authority. This authority is the context within which the communication takes place. The context could be defined as just the group of everyone involved, but would in practice refer to some sort of a leader, typically one that was elected.
- *Meaningful.* Every message type has an inherent meaning expressed in terms of commitments, and arbitrary tokens would be rejected.

We consider some additional technical properties. By being based on the commitments of the participating agents, our semantics provides a basis for describing the conversational state of a multiagent system in high-level terms, i.e., using commitments. Thus, the state, defined in terms

of commitments, is independent of the *history*, i.e., the steps of a protocol that may have been executed. History-freedom is essential to establishing some important properties of multiagent protocols, which we discuss next.

- *Composition.* Protocols may be combined into larger protocols, as long as one yields a commitment state that the other one needs.
- *Digression.* Ad hoc actions, e.g., in response to exceptions or errors, may be interposed without affecting the true meaning of a protocol as long as the commitments were not affected. If the commitments are affected, then we would know there was a fundamental deviation from the protocol, and may repair it or discard the protocol altogether.
- *Optimization.* The agents may directly enter a protocol in execution where the right commitments are defined even though the steps have not been carried out explicitly. Such short-circuiting of the protocols is crucial for optimizing the agents' behavior.

The above properties are essential for enabling opportunistic behavior by the agents while providing all the benefits of protocols in structuring their interactions and individual behavior. Achieving both flexibility and structure is essential for many multiagent applications.

Similarly, the *content* of a message is not only the direct action it connotes, but also the implied actions caused by the discharge of the applicable metacommitments. Thus, if *A* has a metacommitment that it will honor *B*'s bid, then *B*'s bid will create the commitment to honor it.

## 4 Discussion

A communication protocol involves the exchange of messages with a streamlined set of tokens. Traditionally, these tokens are not given any meaning except through reference to the beliefs or intentions of the communicating agents. By contrast, our approach assigns *public*, i.e., observable, meanings in terms of social commitments. This leads to the ability to test compliance at a level of abstraction higher than just the ordering of events. It also promises a canonical form of communication protocols, which would give us a meaningful basis for determining where in a protocol execution the agents in a multiagent system are, how to proceed, and how to accommodate exceptions naturally.

### 4.1 Literature

Besides the works referred to in the above, there is a fairly substantial body of literature on ACLs and their semantics. The Foundation for Intelligent Physical Agents (FIPA) has been standardizing an ACL along with a formal semantics. This ACL and its semantics are based on Arcol, which was part of a system for human-computer interaction Breiter and Sadek [1996]. Arcol and the FIPA ACL are mentalist in their orientation. FIPA also includes interaction protocols, which are characterized purely operationally. Labrou & Finin present a variant of the knowledge query and

manipulation language (KQML) 1997. They offer a semantics stating how the beliefs and intentions of the participants are affected by communications as well as a grammar for constructing conversations or protocols. The grammar is fundamentally of the same style of representation as FSMs, but is more expressive.

Smith & Cohen present an alternative semantics for an ACL, which is based on a theory of joint intentions 1996. The approach treats communication as creating or modifying structures of joint intentions, which are used to describe the agents working as a team. The joint intentions treatment of teams, however, is a mentalist approach to simulate an essentially social phenomenon. It fails to describe teams directly and suffers from all the problems attendant to the mentalist approaches. Joint intentions build on mutual beliefs. Roughly, a set of agents mutually believe  $p$  iff each of them believes  $p$ , and each of them believes that each of them believes  $p$ , and so on, *ad infinitum* Fagin et al. [1995]. In fact, mutual beliefs are used primarily to establish impossibility results for distributed computing protocols. Such results can readily be created for joint intentions as well.

Singh proposes a semantics that gives the conditions for the “whole-hearted” satisfaction of different communications 1994. Whole-hearted satisfaction depends on the intentions and know-how of the participants. This approach has ingredients relating to the objective and subjective aspects of meaning as described above. However, although it takes a public stance, it lacks a social perspective as developed here. This approach can state communication constraints for use as inputs into the design of the participating agents.

## 4.2 Directions

Interesting theoretical questions are opened up by the present approach. One of these is the long-standing topic of presuppositions and consensus. *Presuppositions* are essential to understanding and properly interpreting any communication. Potentially, we can interpret the implicit claims behind every communication as presuppositions Walton and Krabbe [1995]. If they are not challenged, they become accepted as *consensus*, which corresponds to commitments by the entire group of communicating agents. Consensus might offer a tractable alternative to mutual beliefs, which are used by current theories of dialogue, but which cannot be obtained in realistic environments, e.g., those with unreliable asynchronous communication Fagin et al. [1995].

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