Scorekeeping, Common Ground, and the Therapeutic Conversation: A Pragmatic Bridge Between Philosophy of Language and Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy can be viewed as a linguistic practice in which conversation reshapes beliefs, emotions, and patterns of action. This paper argues that David Lewis's scorekeeping framework offers a powerful model for understanding how therapeutic dialogue produces therapeutic change. On this view, conversation involves continuous updates to a shared "score," including common ground, presuppositions, norms, and the question under discussion (QUD). Overall, this analysis bridges philosophy of language and psychotherapeutic practice.

Focusing on cognitive-behavioural, psychodynamic, and systemic therapies, therapeutic interventions are interpreted as pragmatic moves that deliberately modify this score. Techniques such as clarification, validation, and confrontation function as largely implicit acts that reshape what is taken for granted and what counts as relevant or permissible. Psychotherapy thus emerges as a norm-sensitive language game aimed at consensual transformation, raising ethical questions about conversational authority.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it maps core therapeutic techniques onto scorekeeping concepts, offering a micro-level account of conversational change. Second, it explains breakdowns and atypical communication as disruptions in common ground, reframing them as diagnostically productive. Third, it highlights the framework's value for clinical reflection and training, providing a trans-theoretical vocabulary for tracking therapeutic interaction.

References

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