

# In the Zeitgeist: Common Ground and Collective Attention

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Ordinarily, felicitous use of an anaphoric phrase requires that there be a linguistically introduced antecedent. However there exists a class of cases that violate this rule of thumb, for example (1) might be uttered discourse-initially:

- (1) There's no way he'd declare war on Greenland. Right?

To resolve the referent of “he”, the hearer must be aware of recent news and take the speaker to be similarly aware. Standard theories suggest these events must be *common ground* (Clark 1996; Stalnaker 1978, 2002, 2014), requiring conversational participants to mutually know, believe, or accept certain facts. However, these accounts face a coordination problem: in cases like (1), or social media posts like (2), speakers often lack the evidence necessary to justify an iterative mutual propositional attitude.

- (2) Sooo do we think jumbotrons are gonna be things of the past now?

In social media contexts, this is exacerbated by *context collapse* (Marwick and Boyd 2011), where the speaker cannot verify the audience’s knowledge. Furthermore, for such utterances to succeed, the event must not only be known but achieve a high degree of *mutual manifestness* (Sperber and Wilson 1986) or *salience*. Out of context, (2) is difficult to interpret. But when viewed in July 2025, when a CEO went viral for being caught on the kiss cam at a Coldplay concert apparently having an affair with another company executive, (2) makes sense. In February 2026, even if one were aware of last summer’s incident, it would be considerably more effortful to interpret the message. Unlike in e.g. cases in which a goat walks into the room in which a conversation is taking place (Stalnaker 1978, p.86), it is difficult to see how the interlocutors in (1) and (2) could achieve *grounding* (Clark and Brennan 1991). In cases of social media communication such as (2), the speaker does not even know who the audience is or if there is one at all.

In this paper, I argue that the requirement of standard views that interlocutors hold some kind of mutual propositional attitude is too strict. I offer an account designed to make sense of cases like (1) and (2) which prioritizes states of *collective attention*. Drawing on recent trends in cognitive psychology (Brennan et al. 2010, 2013; León 2021; Shteynberg 2015, 2018; Shteynberg et al. 2020, 2023; Tollefsen and Dale 2012), I argue that communication of the kind operative in (1) and (2) depends on cognitive states which represent interlocutors as co-attending to some event. Such attentional states crucially involve first person plural representations—they are not representations of “you” and “I” co-attending, but of “us” as attending. On the account I develop, in uttering (1) or (2), the speaker can satisfy the requisite attentional state—attending to the relevant event via a plural “we” representation—without possessing the kind of evidence that would be required to justify a mutual propositional attitude such as knowledge, belief, or acceptance. On the hearer side, when uptake is achieved, they come to attend to the event in a first person plural mode as a result of hearing/reading the utterance.

I compare my view with a recent proposal by Lewis (2025), which is designed to update standard common ground theories in light of cases like these. On her view, communication goes by way of an *imagined common ground*—instead of actually achieving a state of mutual knowledge/belief/acceptance, the speaker merely imagines that such a state has been achieved. I show that while our proposals are compatible, the unique advantage that my proposal enjoys is that it

can provide an explanation of the cognitive transition a speaker undergoes when they decide to deploy an anaphoric phrase discourse-initially: they shift from a first person singular attentional state (“I”) to a first person plural one (“we”). Whereas an imagined common ground approach continues to require an overt representation of an (imagined) audience, the collective attention approach analyzes speakers as attending to relevant events in distinctly plural modes (Gallotti and Frith 2013; Schmid 2014).

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