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Genre and Conversation

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ABSTRACT

Conversations can belong to different types, or *genres*. We consider four dimensions of variation as case studies: Some conversations are about sharing information, others about making decisions; some are about making firm commitments, others about brainstorming options; some are about sticking to the facts, others involve make-believe; some are highly cooperative, others adversarial. These are orthogonal dimensions of variation which explain why some kinds of speech acts are more felicitous and expected than others in particular conversations. But what are genres, how do they shape conversation, and why do they exist? We argue that genre categories can be understood as types of conversation plans, which are the structures of intentions that we use to organize conversations, and that each of our four genre distinctions corresponds to an independently variable kind of element within these plans. Speakers are under rational pressure to make their communicative intentions cohere with the conversation plan, which gives their interlocutors a powerful extralinguistic resource for interpreting their speech acts. We use this idea to show how several influential pragmatic theories, including Grice's theory of conversational implicature, Stalnaker's theory of common ground, and Roberts' question-under-discussion model, can be generalized to account for more kinds of conversation.

1 | Introduction

Suppose that Sandra says to Abe, "I love Italian cinema." What is Sandra's point? Without more information, it is hard to tell: as usual, the utterance gives only partial and defeasible evidence about which speech act she has performed. In particular, it would be helpful to know what kind of conversation Sandra and Abe are having. If they are just exchanging information about their preferences, Sandra's utterance could be taken as an assertion, but if they are trying to decide what to do tonight, it is tempting to interpret her as making an indirect request or proposal. Similarly, it would help to know whether, at this stage of the conversation, Sandra and Abe are merely brainstorming—floating options about what to do—or trying to narrow down options they have already considered. Are they discussing their actual preferences, for that matter, or engaging in pretense? Finally, are they having an antagonistic argument, in which case Sandra's utterance might count as a defensive rebuke, or is their conversation a congenial and cooperative one, in which case it is a friendly observation or suggestion?

What is it for a conversation to belong to one of these categories—or, as we will put it, to one *conversational genre*, rather than another?[1] How does a conversation's genre shape how individual utterances are chosen, designed and understood? And why do conversational genres exist?

We think that there are at least two good reasons to answer these questions. First, conversational genre is an inherently interesting and underexplored topic in the study of human communication. The genre of a conversation shapes the choices that speakers make within it, and also how they are interpreted, and we should

[1] We could also have used the term "conversation type." Ginzburg (2012) uses both terms for roughly the same phenomenon. Some sociolinguists (e.g., Hymes 1977) and literary theorists (e.g., Bakhtin 1986) have used "genre" to denote conventionalized genres, which we will discuss in Section 2.

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try to understand how this works. Second, genre variation is an important lens through which to study the best pragmatic theories that we already have. These theories tend to idealize away from genre, tailoring their explanations to a relatively narrow range of conversation types. Taking genre variation into consideration therefore forces us to formulate more general and better motivated versions of these theories.

We will argue that at least some genre categories are types of *conversation plans*: interlocutors' plans about what to do in a conversation.[2] When a speaker forms a communicative intention, they are under pressure to do so in a way that coherently furthers the conversation plan, to the extent that there is one.[3] This is an instance of the more general kind of rational pressure that pushes agents to form intentions that cohere with their prior plans, including those that they share with others.[4] To the extent that someone is party to a conversation plan, their sensitivity to it, together with their expectation of rationality and cooperativity on the part of their interlocutors, will lead them to seek interpretations according to which speakers' intentions fit with the rest of the plan. When the conversation plan has features that are constitutive of a certain conversational genre, the rational pressure to cohere with the plan is also pressure to stick to the genre.

For example, suppose that Sandra and Abe are having what we will call a *practical* conversation—that is, a conversation about what to do—as opposed to an *informative* conversation about how things are. In particular, they are trying to decide how to spend their time this evening. On the view that we will defend, to be in a practical conversation is to have a conversation plan that includes a shared intention to answer a practical question (i.e., a decision problem)—in this case, *what should we do tonight?* This shared intention puts pressure on Sandra and Abe to form certain kinds of communicative intentions rather than others, and to expect the other to do the same. Sandra utters a declarative sentence whose literal meaning would normally indicate an intention to inform Abe that she loves Italian cinema, but this intention by itself would not coherently advance the conversation plan, because it would not address the practical question that they are seeking to answer. So, if Abe assumes that Sandra is sticking to their conversation plan, this will push him to interpret Sandra as performing an indirect speech act, backed by a communicative intention that *does* cohere. He might reason that since loving Italian cinema is a reason to go see an Italian movie, and a decision to do that *would* constitute a solution to their decision problem, Sandra must intend to propose a plan to go see an Italian movie.

In order to flesh out this picture, we will need a more detailed theory of plans (including shared plans) than has typically featured in pragmatic theorizing. This will have some welcome side-effects, because appeals to shared plans, goals, purposes, and aims have played central explanatory roles in many of the most influential pragmatic models, but these concepts have mostly gone untheorized. Grice (1957) posits communicative intentions as part of his theory of meaning, and then later, Grice (1975) argues that we infer indirect meanings by noticing and inferentially repairing apparent discrepancies between an utterance's literal meaning and "the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange" (Grice 1989, 26). Stalnaker (1973, 1978, 1984, 2014) argues that conversation revolves around common ground—a shared body of background information that plays many roles in the design and interpretation of speech acts—but that whether we take the propositions in the common ground to be true, or merely provisionally accept or pretend that they are true, is "partly a matter of what kind of discourse it is—what its common purposes are taken to be" (Stalnaker 2014, 89). Roberts (2012, 3) argues that many facets of how we interpret speech—for example, how we decide which speech acts are relevant, which prosody is licensed, and which content is foregrounded—depend on the question under discussion (QUD), which models interlocutors' "conversational goals and the plans or strategies which conversational participants develop to achieve them."

The view that we will develop here builds on and incorporates all of these theories. However, we take each of them to be limited by their treatment of plans, purposes, and goals as untheorized, exogenous forces, which nonetheless do considerable explanatory work. After arming ourselves with an independently motivated account of plans—one that is heavily indebted to Bratman (1987, 2014)—we will use that theory to say more about what it is for a talk exchange to have an "accepted purpose," and what it is for a speaker's communicative intention (and, so, the communicative act that they perform) to conform to this purpose. This will allow us to generalize these influential models beyond the narrow conversational genres that Grice, Stalnaker, and Roberts treat as paradigmatic.

Here is our plan. In Section 2, we will introduce the four dimensions of conversational-genre variation that will serve as our case studies, offer a preview of how our theory explains them, and clarify the scope and limitations of this theory. Over the following several sections (Sections 3–7), we will zoom in on each dimension of variation in turn, arguing that it should be understood in terms of a distinct component in conversation plans. Along the way, we will introduce the relevant parts of planning theory (Section 5). Finally, we will show how the resulting theory allows us to generalize both Roberts' idea of QUD-relevance and Grice's maxims of conversation, both of which turn out to be special cases of a principle of *conversation-plan relevance*, which enjoins us to form communicative intentions that coherently further our conversation plans (Section 8).

[2] We are inspired by other theorists who have understood conversations as jointly planned activities, although none of these theorists have developed a theory of conversation plans, or their connections to conversational genre, like the one that we develop here: Grosz and Sidner (1986), Roberts (2012), Grice (1975), Bratman (2014), Clark (1996), Hobbs and Evans (1980), and Evans (1985).

[3] We assume throughout that to perform a speech act is to act with a communicative intention, which is an intention to produce a certain mental state in one's addressee(s), in part by revealing the intention to do so. We will not explicitly argue for this view here, though we take its coherence with our account to be a consideration in its favor. For a comparison to other theories of speech acts, see Harris et al. (2018). For defenses of intention-based theories of speech acts, see Grice (1957, 1969), Strawson (1964), Schiffer (1972), Bach and Harnish (1979), Harris (2014, 2019, 2020), and Unnsteinsson (2017, 2022, 2023).

[4] On "rational pressure," see Bratman (2014, 56) and Fogal (2020).

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2 | Plans and Genres

We will focus here on four dimensions of conversational-genre variation that will provide us with usefully illustrative case studies.[5]

1. **Informative vs. Practical Conversations**

   Are we sharing information or making decisions?
2. **Committal vs. Exploratory Conversations**

   Are we taking on commitments or merely floating options?
3. **Factual vs. Make-Believe Conversations**

   Are we trying to stick to the facts or not?
4. **Cooperative vs. Adversarial Conversations**

   Are our goals complementary or in conflict?

We will argue that each of these genres manifests as a kind of pressure to perform different kinds of speech acts, and to expect our interlocutors to do the same. This leads us to perform different kinds of speech acts, to treat different kinds of utterances as more or less felicitous, and to interpret utterances in different ways—in particular, to interpret speakers as performing different kinds of indirect speech acts, and to understand ambiguous utterances differently.

Our explanation is that each kind of genre variation arises from a distinctive way that conversation plans can vary. Here is a preview of the theory: As we have already sketched in Section 1, the informative–practical distinction boils down to whether the interlocutors have a shared intention to address an informational QUD about how things are, or a practical question about what to do (i.e., a decision problem). But the other distinctions, we will argue, can vary independently of the QUD. The committal–exploratory distinction arises from whether the interlocutors currently intend to rule out live answers to the QUD, or merely to raise new possible answers to salience. The factual–make-believe distinction is determined by interlocutors' shared intentions about the extent to which they will presuppose counterfactual information. And finally, at least one way in which a conversation can be more or less cooperative or adversarial depends on the extent to which their relevant prior intentions are complementary or conflicting.

Why think of all of these things in planning terms? One reason is that they result from coordinated decisions that interlocutors make about what kind of conversation to have, which shape further downstream choices. Another is that each of the elements we posit, like the elements of complex plans in general, typically stands in means-end relations. For example, in one common configuration, we brainstorm as a means to later answering a question, which we do as a means to investigating a certain kind of factual or counterfactual subject matter, which we do as a means to achieving the prior plans that led us to engage in conversation in the first place (see Figure 1). We will unpack and justify each of these claims in later sections. But first, some general points and caveats:

First, we assume that each of our four genre distinctions can be found in all human speech communities, even if they may have different conventional means of navigating the genres. In this sense, they are nonconventional genres. Our explanation for this will be that all humans are likely to spontaneously form plans of the kinds that constitute these genres, and so one need not learn them from others or store them in memory for re-use, even if one does typically learn the locally preferred ways of navigating them.

By contrast, there are also inherently conventional genres, whose existence and nature depend on culturally local social practices or conventions—things like sports-announcer talk (Ferguson 1983) or doctor–patient interviews (Coulthard and Ashby 1975). Conventional genres have been extensively studied by sociolinguists, discourse analysts, and literary theorists.[6] We lack the space to adequately defend a theory of conventional genres, but here is a sketch of what we would want to say: Conventional genres are also (at least in part) types of conversation plans, but they are stored for re-use by localized speech communities, and this fact explains both why these communities (and not others) regularly adopt plans of this kind, and why particular conventional genres have the arbitrary features that they do. For example, in order to participate in the conventional genre, *faculty meeting*, participants must store a plan about who plays which roles in the meeting, which kinds of topics get discussed and in which order, and the means by which questions are to be resolved and decisions made. We should think of what is stored as a *plan* because it has the general features of plans (Bratman 1987, 2014): it is a partial, action-guiding mental representation that rules out some practical options while pushing us toward others, is subject to coherence requirements, and encodes means-end relationships (e.g., the faculty-meeting convention that voting is preceded by discussion and debate about what to do).[7] On the other hand, this stored plan is *conventional* because it is a learned, self-perpetuating solution to a coordination problem, with arbitrary features (Lewis 1969; Millikan 1998); for example, we begin meetings with announcements and end with old business, but could just as well have done the opposite. By contrast, although speakers might store and reuse plans about how to have (e.g.) practical conversations, this is inessential to explaining why humans have practical conversations as such, which will arise whenever interlocutors intend to discuss what to do.[8]

[5] This list is not intended to be exhaustive. Ultimately, it is conversation plans that do the explanatory work in our theory, and there may be as many genre categories (in our sense) as there are types of conversation plan, although only some will be of sufficient pre-theoretical or theoretical interest to single out and name.

[6] See, for example, Bakhtin (1986), Handford and Gee (2012), Hymes (1977), Stukker et al. (2016, 2024), Biber et al. (2021), and Quasthoff et al. (2017).

[7] One further reason to think that conventional genres have the same basis in planning structures as our nonconventional genres is that they can play a similar role in generating implicatures that we will attribute to conversation plans in Sections 7 and 8. For example, Grice's most famous example of conversational implicature—his reference-letter case—exploits culturally specific features of the conventional genre of reference letters.

[8] It follows that interlocutors need not have words or concepts for genre categories in order to participate in these genres. They need only be able to form joint plans of the relevant kinds. That said, there may be some advantage to having the relevant concepts. For example, being able to think of what you are doing as brainstorming might dispose you toward the right kinds of moves. This may be especially important for conventional genres, since they involve retrieving the right conversation plan from long-term memory.

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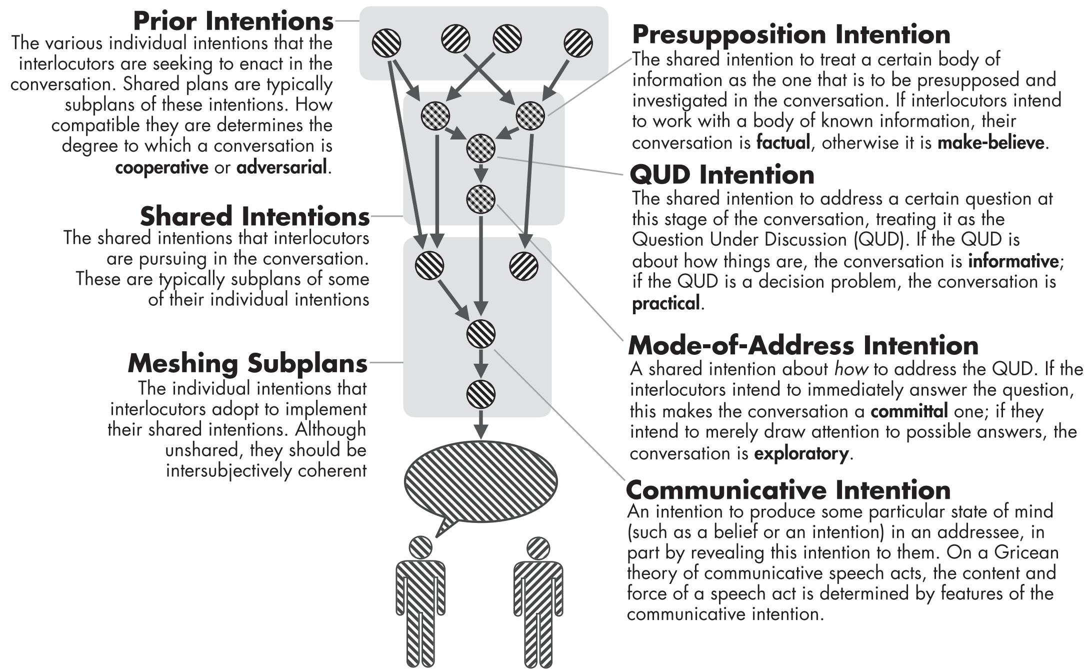

FIGURE 1 | A schematic example of a conversation plan, illustrating each type of recurring element that plays a role in the genre distinctions that we will discuss here, and illustrating a typical (but not the only possible) configuration of their means-end relationships.

Second, notice that philosophers and linguists have tended to work with models that treat informative, committal, factual, and cooperative conversations as paradigmatic, in effect focusing on the items on the left of (1)–(4) and idealizing away from the items to the right.[9] For example, Stalnaker (1978) and Roberts (2012) customize their models for "joint inquiry," and Grice's (1975) maxims of conversation are, to varying degrees, genre specific (see Section 8), as is most work on norms of assertion influenced by Williamson (2000). One of our goals in what follows will be to use plan-theoretic tools to show how to generalize these models.

Third, our proposed genre axes are orthogonal. To see this, consider just one permutation, in which two people playing Dungeons and Dragons brainstorm about what to do next within the game: "We could fight the orc." This conversation belongs to the *make-believe*, *exploratory*, *practical*, and *cooperative* sides of these axes. However, the conversation might later become committal if they begin making decisions rather than exploring options, informative if they begin merely discussing the properties of orcs, or more adversarial if they start to disagree about what to do. And we can imagine a similar range of variation arising in a factual conversation about a real-life aggressor, rather than an orc. Our explanation of the orthogonality of these genre axes is that each depends on a kind of recurring element within conversation plans that can vary independently of the elements that ground the others.

Fourth, a conversation's genre may be unsettled along each axis. Suppose that you run into an acquaintance on the train and the two of you strike up a conversation. Will it be an informative one about what is happening in your lives, or more practical, about when to meet for lunch? If the latter, will you commit to a day to meet, or merely float some options? Will you have a serious, factual conversation, or just joke around? Will this be a friendly conversation, or might it have an edge of conflict to it? Each of these questions might be unsettled, in which case the conversation does not yet belong to any of the genre categories we have outlined. We take it as a datum that such conversations exist, that they admit of a greater degree of conversational flexibility or open-endedness than genre-bound conversations, and also that this open-endedness can sometimes make such conversations more awkward to navigate, as interlocutors have fewer or less reliable expectations about what will come next. Our explanation is that it often takes time to form conversation plans, and that, until that happens, there are fewer constraints on which moves will coherently further the plan, and so fewer expectations about which moves other participants will make.

Fifth, as these examples illustrate, conversations can move between genres as they evolve. We will focus, therefore, on the genre of a conversation *at a time*. Ultimately, we would like to understand how speakers navigate and effect such changes, but we have little to say about this here. Our explanation of why

[9] Noteworthy exceptions: Yalcin's (2007) discussion of "conversational tone," and Berstler's (2025) criticism, both give us ways of understanding make-believe conversation, which we will discuss in Section 6. Some have also recently addressed adversarial conversation as such (see, e.g., Berstler 2025; Cappelen and Dever 2019; McGowan 2019; McKinney 2016; Camp 2018). We discuss Asher and Lascarides (2013) in Section 7. Clark (1996), Ginzburg (2012), and Ginzburg and Wong (2024) all discuss variations in conversation type, albeit not those on which we focus.

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genres shift is that our conversation plans, like our other plans, evolve over time as we accomplish some of our goals, postpone or abandon others, and adopt new subplans as means to our antecedent ends.

Sixth, although a conversations's genre pushes participants to perform and expect some kinds of speech acts rather than others, these are not hard constraints. Even in the middle of a committal conversation in which we are trying to quickly choose where to eat dinner, for example, it is possible to merely float a new option and be understood (cf. Buchanan and Schiller 2022, 74). So, genre does not directly determine the force or content of a speech act. Our explanation is that this is just how planning (and, in particular, joint planning) works: even if we have a shared plan to meet at a certain restaurant, I *can* nonetheless go somewhere else. It is just that this will violate your expectations, and might open me up to social sanction. If I have a good reason to change plans, I should go out of my way to let you know, on pain of violating my commitment to you, undermining your trust in me, and missing out on the benefits of shared plans. Similarly, we predict that unmarked genre-nonconforming speech acts are more likely to be misunderstood, because communicative intentions that do not cohere with the rest of the conversation plan are likely to be mistaken for others that do. So, when we do have such genre-defying communicative intentions, we have to go out of our way to make them understood, typically by offering more specific or marked linguistic evidence than would be necessary if we were conforming to the genre.

3 | Informative vs. Practical QUDs

In informative conversations, we share information, whereas in practical conversations, we make decisions. In practical conversations, the default speech acts are directives, suggestions, proposals, and questions about what to do.[10] Assertions are natural in a practical conversation only insofar as they bear on the decision at hand, and tend to be interpreted as indirect directives or practical suggestions. For example, suppose that we are deciding where to have dinner and I utter:

5. Calexico has good tacos.

Although (5) is a declarative sentence, whose canonical function is to perform an assertion, you will probably interpret my utterance as an indirect proposal to eat at Calexico.

Informative conversations can have a similar influence on how our speech acts are interpreted. Consider the following exchange:

6. (a) Anya: I am not trying to get to Grand Central Station, but I am curious: how does one get there?
   (b) Baker: Take the 5 train.

Here, Baker utters an imperative sentence—one that would normally be used to perform either a directive act, such as a command, or a practical suggestion. But in this context, Baker merely offers some information, apparently because Anya has made it clear that this is an informative conversation. This is what some authors have called an "instructional" use of an imperative—one whose point is informative rather than directive (e.g., Kaufmann 2012, 141). This is an atypical use of an imperative, which some theories of imperatives have struggled to make sense of Condoravdi and Lauer (2012).

Finally, consider sub-clausal utterances, such as (7), whose illocutionary force is not indicated by any clause-level features.

7. Calexico.

If uttered in an informative conversation—for example, one where we are trying to figure out which restaurants serve fish tacos—an utterance of (7) is most naturally understood as an assertion. But if we are having a practical conversation—say, one about where to eat dinner—the same utterance is most naturally understood as a practical proposal about where to eat.

What explains the distinction between informative and practical conversations? A simple hypothesis would be that the variation is a function of the QUD. The idea is attractive because QUD-based models of discourse have been used to explain other phenomena (Beaver et al. 2017), and are particularly useful in explaining why some speech acts seem more felicitous than others. They do this by predicting which speech acts are relevant to the question that interlocutors are addressing at a given moment in a conversation. We will argue that this simple hypothesis is indeed correct. As already indicated, however, we think the other three distinctions vary independently of the QUD. But it will be necessary to describe the QUD account first, because our theory will generalize rather than reject it.

QUD models' motivating insight is that a conversation tends to be organized around the common ground—the body of information that the interlocutors take for granted for the purpose of the conversation—together with the QUD. A speech act will normally be relevant only if it constitutes progress toward answering the QUD, in light of the current state of the common ground. In particular, an assertion is relevant only if it at least partially answers the QUD, in the sense that accepting its content into the common ground would eliminate one of the answers to the QUD that is still compatible with the common ground (a "live" answer).[11]

The QUD of an informative conversation is an informational question—a question that can be resolved by acquiring new information. By contrast, the QUD of a practical conversation is a practical question, or "decision problem"—a question about what one or more of the interlocutors is to do, which has to be answered by making a decision. Assertions are felicitous and favored in informative conversations because they are speech acts for imparting information, and so are the sorts of speech acts with which we can give literal answers to informational questions. Directives, as well as practical suggestions and proposals, are more felicitous in practical conversations, because they are speech acts for proposing actions, and so are the sorts of

[10] Stalnaker (1970) made a similar distinction between *inquiries* and *deliberations*. And Green (2017) explains Stalnaker's distinction in terms of conversational "projects."
[11] For a much more precise formulation of the model on which we rely here, consult Roberts (2012).

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speech acts with which we can give literal answers to practical questions.[12]

This view can explain why declaratives tend to come off as indirect proposals, suggestions, or directives in practical conversations, whereas imperatives can sometimes come off as mere attempts to share information in informative conversations. Suppose that when (5) ("Calexico has good tacos") is uttered, the QUD is the question, *where should we have dinner?* We can then understand the practical reading of (5) as a relevance implicature, which arises from a mismatch between the utterance's literal content and the QUD. Since the QUD can only be answered with a proposal about what to do, the assertion that is literally indicated by (5) is not, on its own, relevant. On the assumption that the speaker is cooperative, they must mean something more, which *is* relevant. Since Calexico's having good tacos would be a reason to have dinner there, the best explanation of why the speaker uttered (5) is that they were trying to indirectly propose eating there—a proposal that, if accepted, would answer the QUD. This mirrors QUD theorists' explanations of other relevance implicatures (Roberts 2012, 21).

We can give a similar explanation of the informative reading of "Take the 5 train" in (6): there is an apparent mismatch between the informative QUD and Baker's imperative utterance, which normally indicates a directive or practical suggestion. This sends Anya in search of an indirect meaning that *does* answer her question. An obvious candidate would be that Baker meant that *one gets to Grand Central Station by taking the 5 train*. Exactly how Anya works this out is an interesting question, and the details will depend on the precise theory of imperatives on offer. But suppose, for concreteness, that the meaning of an imperative specifies a plan for the addressee (Charlow 2013; Harris 2022). Given that the QUD is a question about how one gets to Grand Central Station, it is plausible that by literally expressing a plan *for Anya*, Baker makes salient the proposition that this is the sort of plan that anyone could adopt in order to get to Grand Central—a proposition that *does* answer Anya's question.

We can give a similar explanation about how genre influences the interpretation of sub-clausal utterances. Outside of a clause whose type conventionally indicates force, a one-word utterance is illocutionarily ambiguous. But it is well known that the QUD has broad powers to disambiguate sub-clausal answers. Compare (8) and (9):

8. Anya: Who has the best tacos in Brooklyn?
   Baker: Calexico.
9. Anya: Where do they have mezcal around here?
   Baker: Calexico.

Although Baker utters the same word in each case, he is using this word to say that Calexico has the best tacos in Brooklyn in (8), and that Calexico has mezcal and is nearby in (9). It is disambiguated in different ways by the interlocutors' assumptions that Baker is cooperatively trying to answer the QUD. Our proposal about (7) extends this point from the contents of speech acts to their force: illocutionarily ambiguous utterances get disambiguated as assertions when the QUD is an informational question, and as directives or practical suggestions when the QUD is a practical question.

Finally, this view can explain why practical conversations often have informative sub-conversations nested within them. For example, in a conversation about where to eat, we might briefly debate the informational question of whether Calexico is open. In cases like this, our practical options are restricted by the actually available options: we cannot reasonably plan on going to Calexico if it is closed. This is just to say that an informational question can serve as a subquestion of a practical one in this case, in the sense that a complete answer to the informational question, *Is Calexico open?*, would effectively rule out a hitherto-live answer to the practical question, *Where should we eat?*

We thus think that the QUD theory works well as an explanation of the informative–practical distinction. It might therefore be tempting to think that we should extend it to cover our other three dimensions as well: perhaps genre variation just is QUD variation? As we will see, however, this account cannot simply be extended to the other genres, which can vary independently of QUD. But the account we will offer is a further elaboration of the QUD account, rather than a rejection of it.

4 | Exploratory Conversations and Attentional Moves

In committal conversations, utterances commit to some options and rule out others. One can respond to an assertion by asking the speaker how they know what they asserted, or criticize them for saying something false, unlikely, or for which they lack evidence (Carter 2024; Grice 1975; Williamson 1996, 2000). Likewise, directives may provoke questions about why that action should be taken, as opposed to others. By contrast, in exploratory conversations, such as brainstorming sessions, we merely explore possibilities without committing ourselves to them. A useful characterization of the norms of exploratory conversation comes from the influential negotiation textbook, *Getting to Yes* (Fisher and Ury 1981, 60):

> A brainstorming session is designed to produce as many ideas as possible to solve the problem at hand. The key ground rule is to postpone all criticism and evaluation of ideas. The group simply invents ideas without pausing to consider whether they are good or bad, realistic or unrealistic. With those inhibitions removed, one idea should stimulate another, like firecrackers setting off one another.

As an example, consider a group of doctors brainstorming about a difficult diagnosis, writing their proposals on a whiteboard—a

[12] The idea that directives are felicitous only when they are being used to answer decision-problem QUDs has been defended by Kaufmann (2012, 159–161), Harris (2022, 1079), and Roberts (unpublished manuscript, §5). There are interesting questions about how to build a formal model that could help us to rigorously distinguish informative and practical questions and predict the felicity of speech acts of different kinds, but we will not attempt that here. For some previous attempts to model the interactions of decision problems and QUDs, see van Rooy (2003) and Bledin and Rawlins (2014).

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conversation of a kind that took place in most episodes of the TV series, *House*:

10. Thirteen: A brain tumor is restricting blood flow to her hypothalamus.

    Kutner: She fell and hit her head.

    Taub: She has lupus.

    Thirteen: A toxin.

We can assume that the doctors take the patient's symptoms to have, at most, one of these causes. Still, in this exploratory conversation, it is permissible for them to float incompatible possibilities, almost as if they are merely saying what *might* be causing the patient's symptoms. But, in this unambiguously exploratory conversation, the doctors need not actually include possibility modals like "might" in order to convey that they are just floating possibilities. By contrast, in committal conversations, of the kind that most pragmatic theories attempt to model, it is infelicitous to utter declarative sentences with inconsistent contents. And, once again, subclausal utterances, such as Thirteen's second contribution, are naturally understood in the possibility-floating way because of the genre of the conversation.

Of course, it is not felicitous to float *any* possibility in an exploratory conversation. If someone floats a possibility that the others take to have been rightfully ruled out, in view of their conversational goals, then it might be rejected, and perhaps rebuked. In this case, for example, their brainstorming is taking place within the broader context of a factual conversation, rather than a make-believe one, and, as we will argue in Section 6, we take this to mean that they intend to treat the common ground as containing only genuine candidates for actuality. If one of the doctors were to suggest that the patient's symptoms are caused by being very sleepy, or by a demonic curse, for example, the others would likely treat these utterances as infelicitous, because they take themselves to have ruled out these possibilities. In this context, whether an utterance is relevant is not a matter of whether its content is incompatible with one of the live answers to the QUD; rather, an utterance's relevance comes down to whether its content should be treated as a live possible answer to the QUD. This is why it is okay for the doctors to utter declaratives with inconsistent contents.

But notice that the same QUD will be operative at a later, committal stage of the conversation when the doctors are trying to cross possibilities off of their whiteboard, rather than to think up new possibilities to add. The doctors are having their conversation in order to answer this question. If they had the answer, they would move on to other business.[13] These are powerful reasons to think that a conversation can vary along the committal–exploratory dimension while holding the QUD fixed. So, what makes the doctors' conversation an exploratory one at this stage, and in what will the subsequent transition to committal conversation consist?

Our proposal is that a group of interlocutors who have coordinated on one and the same QUD can adopt different strategies about what to do with that QUD in different conversations, or at different stages of the same conversation. In committal conversations, they have a shared intention to immediately narrow down the set of live answers, directly making progress toward knowing which one is right. In exploratory conversations, they seek to (first) clarify and enlarge the set of candidate answers.

We engage in exploratory conversation because there is considerable cognitive distance between entertaining a *wh*-question and being able to recognize, entertain, and call to mind the various answers that are worth considering. One can be curious about a question without knowing some or all of its possible answers. Building on work by Bromberger (1992), J. Friedman (2013) calls this condition "hypothesis ignorance," or "abductive ignorance." Ignorance of this kind is particularly common when we face explanatory questions, such as *Why is the sky blue?*—or, we would add, *What is the cause of this patient's symptoms?* But it can also arise for practical questions, such as, *Where should we have dinner?* Friedman argues that, for someone who is curious about a question, but ignorant in this way, the next stage of rational inquiry is to generate options. Even if one does know of a possible answer, one might still have trouble calling it to mind in response to a particular question (cf. Hoek and Bradley 2024). Someone might know that Regina is the capital of Saskatchewan but tend to forget when asked to name all of Canada's provincial capitals, for example. Also, there may be possible answers that everyone knows about, without everyone knowing that everyone knows about them. Finally, in some contexts, one or more of the participants in a conversation may have mistakenly ruled out a possible answer that should be taken seriously. Exploratory conversation is useful for rectifying all of these barriers to the understanding and resolution of questions. It is a collective activity in which we generate, draw attention to, and share possible answers to a question, normally in the service of answering it later.

How should we characterize the individual speech acts by means of which we accomplish these aims—the kind that the doctors are performing in (10)? Here, we take inspiration from a number of theorists who have argued that sentences containing epistemic possibility modals, such as (11), are at least sometimes used to draw attention to live epistemic possibilities without eliminating other live possibilities—speech acts that we will call "attentional moves."[14]

11. She might have lupus.

A doctor might utter (11) in order to draw attention to a possible cause of the patient's symptoms that their interlocutors did not

[13] Why not say that the brainstorming phase of the conversation has the QUD, "What might be causing the patient's symptoms?," and that this just resides above the non-modalized question within the question-stack that Roberts posits? One reason to doubt this alternative approach is that we often brainstorm answers to a question as a means to the end of then answering it, and, in general, an epistemically modalized question—of the form *might-Q*?—is not a subquestion of its unmodalized counterpart, *Q*? But, on Roberts' view, each element in the question stack must be a subquestion of the next one down.

[14] See, for example, Veltman (1996), Yalcin (2007), Ciardelli et al. (2009), and Dever and Schiller (2020). For some experimental evidence that epistemic possibility modals are used to perform attentional moves, see Bade et al. (2022). We will not weigh in on the debates between these theorists about how to formally model attentional moves, or about the division of labor between semantics and pragmatics that makes epistemic modals particularly useful for performing them.

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know about, one that they did know about but are not actively considering, one that everyone knew about but was not sure if the others recognized, or one that the others might have mistakenly ruled out.[15] These are just the sorts of things that we take to be the aims of exploratory conversations.

Our hypothesis, then, is that exploratory conversations are those in which the participants have a shared intention to address the QUD only with attentional moves, thereby focusing on growing and clarifying the space of answers rather than shrinking it, at least for the time being.[16] By contrast, a purely committal conversation would be one in which the participants have a shared intention to immediately answer the QUD rather than merely generating possible answers. This kind of situation could arise if answering the QUD is particularly urgent, or if the participants feel that they have spent enough time exploring possible answers. Suppose that the patient's worsening condition demands immediate treatment, and our doctors have to decide between the possibilities they have considered right away in order to have any hope of saving them, for example.

Many conversations are neither strictly committal nor strictly exploratory, and both assertions and attentional moves are allowed. In these conversations, speakers typically mark attentional moves, either with epistemic possibility modals or in some other way. And when they utter a bare declarative without such marking, the best explanation is that they are performing an assertion. In this sense, we might think of assertions as the default use of bare declaratives. Our explanation of the fact that exploratory conversations sometimes license attentional readings of bare declaratives is that this assertoric default can be overridden by the participants' shared intention to restrict themselves to attentional moves, for it leads them to expect attentional moves rather than assertions.

5 | From QUDs to Conversation Plans

So far, we have argued that the distinction between informative and practical conversations is a difference between two kinds of QUD, and that the distinction between committal and exploratory is a difference in interlocutors' current strategy about how to address their QUD. What is the relationship between the QUD and the interlocutors' strategy for how to address it? Our answer is that each of these facts about the conversation's genre is grounded in an intention that the interlocutors share, and that these shared intentions are elements in their larger conversation plan.

According to Bratman (1987, 2014), on whose work we will build, plans are complexes of intentions, arranged into hierarchical structures that reflect the practical-reasoning process by which they were created. The plan-building process starts with an intention to do something—say, host a dinner party. This intention is *partial*, in that it represents a goal without specifying the details of how to accomplish it. In order to work out these details, the agent must choose *subplans* of their intention—further intentions that fill in the details of the plan. For example, in order to work out the details of how to host a dinner party, the agent has to choose when it will happen, whom to invite, what to serve, and so forth. If they decide to serve pasta, this new subplan still leaves many questions unanswered: Where will they get the ingredients, how will they cook them, and so on? They will thus have to iterate this reasoning process a number of times, resulting in a complex, hierarchical plan that connects the abstract intention with which they began, via a network of subplans, to intentions specific enough to be turned into bodily movements.

A rational planning agent forms intentions that are consistent with their other intentions, with their beliefs about what they can do, and with the need to constructively and coherently flesh out their existing plans. On Bratman's view, it is part of the nature of intentions not only that they function as elements in larger plans, but also that our mechanisms for forming them are responsive to these sorts of rational pressure.[17]

This sort of planning is useful for ambitious but cognitively limited creatures like us. It allows us to break complex, multivariate decisions into tractable chunks. And, because the outcomes of earlier decisions constrain the options from which we choose when making later choices, these later choices are easier to make. For both of these reasons, hierarchical planning allows us to accomplish more complex actions than would otherwise be allowed by our limited cognitive resources, and to pursue more abstract goals, in the sense that they would have to be pursued by very different specific actions in different circumstances.

Bratman argues that shared plans work in largely the same way as individual plans. The main new ingredient is for a group of agents to have a shared intention, which, on Bratman's view, requires that each intends to do something together with the others, intends to pursue this end by means of meshing subplans, and is aware that the others have these intentions.[18] A group of agents have meshing subplans of their shared intention when their various subplans, taken together, add up to an intersubjectively coherent plan about how to accomplish what they intend. For example, if Tim and Ruth have a shared intention to host a dinner party, then each of their plans about their own contributions must fit together with the other's. If Ruth intends to handle the logistics and expects Tim to cook, then Tim should intend to cook and expect Ruth to handle the logistics.

A more detailed example is illustrated in Figure 2. Several features of this plan merit attention. First, notice that the shared intentions have unshared intentions both as subplans (toward the bottom) and as superplans (toward the top). Shared intentions tend to have

[15] The analogous sort of attentional move in practical conversations is making a practical suggestion—a speech act in which one draws attention to a practical option without trying to rule out others. This is a speech act that has been discussed in work on the semantics and pragmatics of imperative clauses (e.g., von Fintel and Iatridou 2017; Harris 2022).

[16] Some philosophers of science have argued that it is a normal part of scientific debate for scientists to put forward a scientific theory as a way of drawing attention to its possible truth, when they lack belief or sufficient evidence (Dang and Bright 2021; Fleisher 2019; Dethier 2022). One way to justify this practice might be to conceive of these scientists as performing attentional moves within an exploratory stage of scientific discourse, for example, in the context of "pursuit" as suggested by Laudan (1977, 108–114).

[17] For proposals about exactly how these rational requirements should be formulated, see, for example, Bratman (1987, 2018), Broome (2013), and Worsnip (2021).

[18] Bratman's theory of shared intentions is somewhat more complicated and demanding than our description suggests, in ways that we do not think are relevant. For details, see Bratman (1992, 2014).

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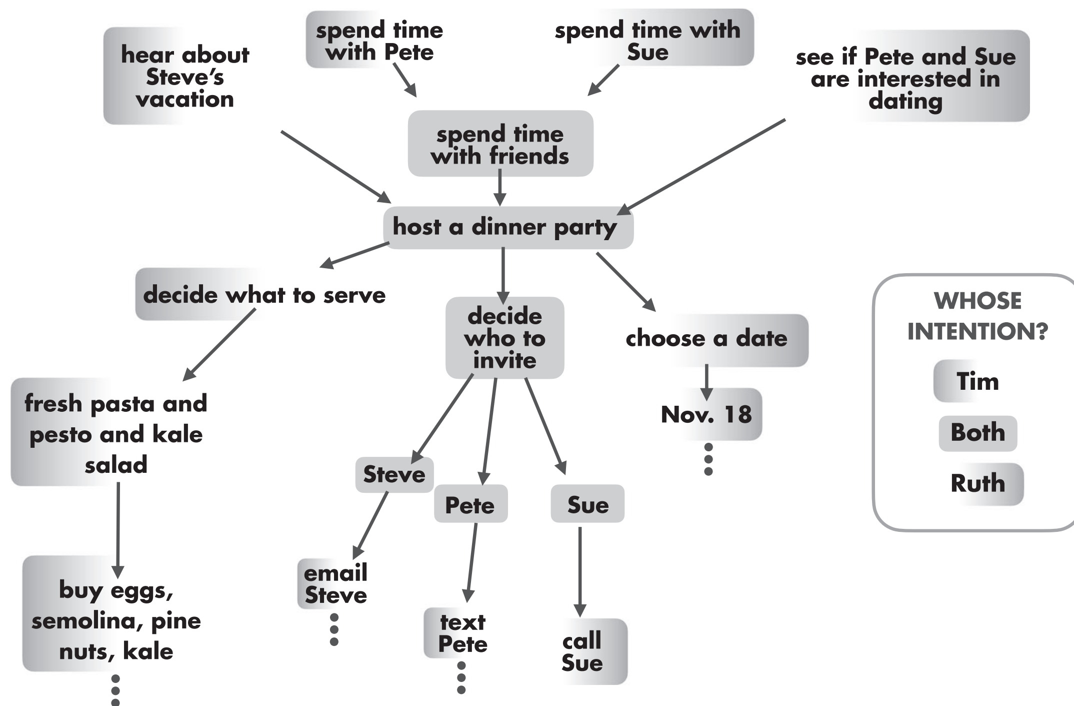

FIGURE 2 | An example of a joint plan. Arrows point from intentions to their subplans.

unshared subplans because it is ultimately individuals who must translate the shared plans into particular bodily movements, such as picking up the telephone to text Pete. This is part of why shared intentions need to have meshing subplans. On the other hand, agents typically engage in joint activity for their own reasons, and so shared intentions are themselves typically subplans of agents' unshared intentions. Whereas Tim wants to have a dinner party to learn about Steve's vacation, for example, Ruth's main aim is to spend time with Sue.

The QUD, together with the interlocutors' strategy for addressing it, have all the features of shared plans. They are action-guiding representations of goals—namely, the goal of addressing a certain question, and the goal of either eliminating or attending to answers. Moreover, these representations stand in plan–subplan relations: for example, brainstorming is normally a means to the end of later finding the best answer to the QUD.[19] These goal representations are also subject to rational coherence requirements, both with respect to each other and with respect to interlocutors' other beliefs and plans: There is normally something wrong with adopting a QUD if progress toward an answer would conflict with the interlocutors' other plans—for example, if it would be rude to consider the question. Likewise, there is something practically incoherent about a conversation in which doctors continue to float possible diagnoses when they urgently need to begin treatment. We take the best explanation of these facts to be that both the QUD and interlocutors' strategy for addressing it are grounded in their shared intentions, which are elements in a larger conversation plan.[20]

Most importantly, for our purposes, the idea that QUDs model shared intentions suggests an independently motivated relationship between QUDs and relevance. For a communicative act to be relevant to the QUD is just for the speaker's communicative intention to be a coherent and constructive subplan of the interlocutors' shared plan to address the QUD. Suppose that Baker and Anya have a shared intention to answer the question, *Do they have horchata at Calexico?* In this context, if Anya knows the answer, it makes sense for her to pursue their common goal by forming a communicative intention to convey this information. The fact that her communicative intention is a constructive and coherent subplan of their shared intention to answer the QUD is what makes Anya's assertion relevant. By contrast, if she were to form a communicative intention to assert that Wes Anderson's first film was Bottle Rocket, her intention would *not* be a constructive subplan of their shared plan, which is what would make her assertion *ir*relevant.

On this interpretation, Roberts' notion of QUD-relevance turns out to be just one instance of the broader phenomenon of plan coherence. To make a relevant move in a conversation is just to do something with a communicative intention that is a coherent and constructive subplan of the interlocutors' shared plans. There is considerable independent motivation for the idea that we strive to

[19] In principle, the means-end relationship could also be reversed: a group of interlocutors could decide to do some brainstorming, and only then choose a question to brainstorm about as a means to that end.

[20] Roberts (2012, 3) describes the QUD as a model of "conversational goals and the plans or strategies which conversational participants develop to achieve them." In later work, she cites Bratman as an inspiration (Roberts, unpublished manuscript). However, Roberts does not draw out the connection between the QUD model and plans beyond these informal remarks. D. C. Friedman (2025) argues that individual inquiry should be understood in terms of intentions to address questions, in a way that is congenial to our argument here, but does extend this theory to joint inquiry.

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form coherent plans, and that we are sensitive to others' failures to do so, particularly when we are engaged with them in joint planning, and so this interpretation of QUD-relevance grounds it in a more general and independently motivated notion.[21]

A further reason for generalizing QUD-relevance to plan-relevance in this way is that it allows us to generalize our explanation of the informative–practical distinction to our other genre distinctions. For example, suppose that what it is for a conversation to be exploratory is just for the interlocutors to have a shared intention to draw attention to more possible answers to the QUD, rather than eliminating answers. This shared plan, together with their plan about which QUD to address, restricts the space of coherent communicative intentions to those whose intended effects involve attending to neglected possibilities, and rules out communicative intentions to form new beliefs. This explains why attentional moves are preferred in such conversations, and why hearers come to expect them, in the ways that we outlined in Section 4. In the next two sections, we will extend this account to our other genre distinctions by positing further recurring forms of variation within conversation plans.

6 | Make-Believe as a Plan About What to Presuppose

In factual conversations, we try to assert what we regard as actually true or propose what we regard as actually doable, and we may hold others responsible if they fail to do this. But when we engage in make-believe—telling fictional stories or engaging in pretend play, for example—the relevant norms of knowledge and action are not in place. Imagine a parent who makes up a story for their child about a woman called Gilitrutt, saying that she had a third eye in her bellybutton. It would not be fitting to ask, "How do you know?" or "That's false." But the following interaction would be more natural:

12. Anya: How many eyes does Gilitrutt have?

    Baker: Three.

In a make-believe conversation, Anya will not come away believing that Gilitrutt exists, or has three eyes. Rather, Baker's aim is for Anya to imagine, or make-believe, that Gilitrutt has three eyes.[22] In this scenario, it would miss the broader purpose of their conversation for Anya to respond by pointing out that what he says is not actually true. On the other hand, if Anya thinks that Gilitrutt is real, then the same exchange could happen within a factual conversation. In this case, it would be perfectly natural for Anya to ask Baker how he knows, or to express doubt about the accuracy of Bakers's claim. And in this case, Baker's utterance will be fully successful only if Anya ends up believing what Baker has said.

Notice, however, that the QUD is the same in both cases, imposing the same relevance constraints on subsequent conversational moves. What differs between these two cases is not the QUD, but the kinds of propositions that interlocutors seek to treat as common ground. In the factual version of the conversation, Anya and Baker are treating as common ground only propositions that they believe and for which they have good evidence. We might say that they are trying to treat the common ground as the body of propositions that they know to be true. By contrast, in the make-believe version, they are working with a different sort of body of information as common ground—one that includes some propositions that they are treating as true only for the purpose of their game of make believe.

Aside from fictional storytelling and pretend play, there are other interesting examples of conversations of this kind. Consider a conversation in which two people make some supposition that they do not believe in order to explore its consequences. For example, imagine that Alvy and Allison are having a conversation about John F. Kennedy's assassination, and they temporarily make the supposition that a second shooter, in addition to Lee Harvey Oswald, was involved.

13. Alvy: Who was in on the conspiracy?

    Allison: Everyone was in on it: Earl Warren, Lyndon Johnson, the CIA.

Here, Allison is not trying to assert anything factual, but is putting forward a proposition that would be true if the supposition were true. In this context (unlike one involving real conspiracy theorists), Allison is not expressing a belief, or trying to get Alvy to believe what she says, and Alvy was not (necessarily) seeking factual information when he asked his question. Rather, Alvy's question, installed as the QUD, guides the conversation by partitioning a common ground that includes suppositions that neither Alvy nor Allison takes to be true, but which they are treating as true for the purpose of the conversation, which is (at least in part) to figure out what would follow from these suppositions.

Common-ground and QUD models of conversation were designed to make sense of the different kinds of attitudes that we sometimes take toward the propositions in the common ground. Stalnaker defines common ground either as the set of propositions that the participants commonly believe that they accept (Stalnaker 2002, 716), or as those that they commonly accept (Stalnaker 2014, 4) (for the purposes of the conversation). As Yalcin (2018, 405) has pointed out, a striking feature of common-ground models is that they can generate compelling predictions about the role of common-ground information in conversation, while abstracting away from the specific attitudes that interlocutors take to that information. Stokke (2023) makes a similar point about fictional discourses, arguing that since they

[21] Here, we are inspired by several other defenses of broader, goal- or plan-theoretic notions of relevance, which have been proposed to explain diverse empirical phenomena: Bledin and Rawlins (2014), Clark (1979), Ginzburg (2012), Hawkins et al. (2015), and Vesga and Starr (2025).

[22] We are assuming a theory of fictional discourse on which fictional and factual speech acts may share content but differ with respect to the attitudes that interlocutors adopt toward those contents (Currie 1986, 1990; Searle 1975; Stokke 2023). Others have argued that fictional and factual discourse both involve interlocutors taking the same attitudes (e.g., ordinary belief) toward different contents (Lewis 1978; Thomasson 1998). If a content-based theory is true, then our explanation of the fictional–factual distinction in the main text is not right, but our broader theory of genre can be adapted to such a theory. Roughly: in make-believe conversations, the QUD is a question about how things are (or what to do) according to some fiction or supposition. For example, Anya is actually asking a question about how many eyes Gilitrutt has *in the fiction*, and Baker could be asserting that Gilitrutt has three eyes *in the fiction*.

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are pragmatically similar to factual discourse, we have a strong reason to think that their contexts have a similar structure. As our two interpretations of (12) illustrate, the same goes for QUD models: we can ask the same question, thereby installing the same QUD, whether we do so in the pursuit of factual knowledge, the next element in a fictional narrative, or information about what follows from a bizarre supposition.

What leads the participants in a conversation to take one attitude toward a proposition in common ground, rather than another? Our answer is to posit yet another kind of recurring element within conversation plans—a shared intention about which kinds of attitudes to take toward the propositions in common ground, which we will call the "presupposition intention."[23] The conversational genre of make-believe is defined, on this view, in terms of speakers' shared plan to presuppose a body of information which includes make-believe propositions.[24]

Our proposal is related to Yalcin's (2007) idea of "conversational tone": "An attitude is the conversational tone of a group of interlocutors just in case it is common knowledge in the group that everyone is to strike this attitude towards the propositions which are common ground." But we depart from Yalcin in two respects. First, the attitude that interlocutors take toward a certain proposition is something that they can choose, normally as a means to their other goals, and in a way that shapes subsequent decisions within the conversation. This gives us a reason to make it explicit that the interlocutors' shared intentions are what set the tone. Second, following Berstler (2025), we reject the idea that there is any single attitude that the interlocutors in a conversation must take toward all the propositions in the common ground. Some make-believe conversations presuppose a whole universe of fiction, while others merely introduce a few fictional elements against the background of mostly factual presuppositions. This makes the factual–make-believe distinction a gradable one.

Often, we choose what sort of common ground to work with first, and then adopt QUDs as subplans: we ask questions as "strategies of inquiry" to pursue the facts (Roberts 2012, 6–7), or as a means to the end of finding out about a shared fiction, or what follows from a supposition. But things can also be the other way around: we sometimes temporarily treat make-believe information as common ground as a means to the end of answering a factual question, as in reductio arguments, conditional proofs, or when counterfactuals have a bearing on questions about actuality. This point is closely related to the idea that we sometimes operate temporarily with "local" or "derived" contexts, often (but not always) in ways that are signaled linguistically (Roberts 1989; Stalnaker 2014, §4.2). One way to think about conversations of this kind is that they are factual conversations with make-believe sub-conversations nested within them. One benefit of the idea of conversation plans is that it allows us to make sense of these different kinds of instrumental relationships that QUDs can bear to our choice of what to treat as common ground.

7 | Adversariality as Conflicting Intentions

Finally, consider the distinction between cooperative and adversarial conversations. Cooperation is a stew with many ingredients, and will tend to drop off when, for example, agents are in certain kinds of emotional states, do not trust each other, and lack pro-social dispositions and shared background information. We will not claim to explain all of these aspects of cooperativity. Our claim here is only that one important component of cooperativity in conversation can be explained in terms of the degree to which the interlocutors prior plans cohere, and the degree to which they are aware of this (in)coherence.

By "prior plans," we mean the background intentions of each interlocutor that they do not share with the others, but which have led them to engage in conversation in the first place, and of which the shared components of their conversation plan are therefore subplans. For example, suppose that A and B are discussing which restaurant to go to. Each has their own reasons for engaging in this conversation in the first place. For any pair of two agents' prior plans, we can say that they conflict (e.g., A intends to eat out and B intends to cook dinner at home), that they are minimally compatible (e.g., A intends to spend time with B, and B intends to try a new restaurant), or that they are mutually supportive (e.g., each intends try the same new restaurant).[25] Interlocutors may also be more or less aware of these relations between their prior plans. If their plans are compatible or supportive, and they are aware of this, our prediction is that their conversational moves will tend to be cooperative, in the sense that they will be backed by communicative intentions that coherently further these plans. If they are aware that their prior plans conflict, this will tend to make it difficult for them to adopt coherent relevant subplans, and will tend to make their moves more adversarial, in the sense that they will be backed by communicative intentions that do not cohere with other interlocutors' plans. If they are unaware of the relationships between their prior plans, this will make it difficult for them to cooperate, and can also lead to unexpected conflicts.

This goes for joint activities in general, and not just conversations. Recall Ruth and Tim from Section 5, who are planning a dinner party. Suppose that Ruth is planning the party because she intends to introduce two friends whom she thinks would make a good couple, but Tim thinks that this would be a terrible idea, and intends to prevent these friends from meeting. This conflict might not impede some of the decisions they face, such as those concerning the party's time and location, but when they have to decide whom to invite, it could lead to an impasse, as Ruth and Tim will struggle to find shared subplans of their conflicting

[23] In his more recent work, Stalnaker (2014, 4) seems to agree: "In simple straightforward serious conversations, what is accepted will coincide with what is believed, but some conversations will involve some mutually recognized pretense about what is believed, or some tacit suppositions that are made in order to further the mutual aims of the conversation." We propose to take this claim about "mutual aims of the conversation" seriously, and incorporate it into our theory of conversation plans.

[24] Within the vast philosophical literature on the nature of fiction, some theories focus on individual speech acts, sometimes called fictive or fictionalizing utterances (see Bergman and Franzen (2022) for a recent discussion). Like Friend (2012), we think that fictional discourse is better understood at the level of the genre of the whole conversation, although she operates with a different conception of genre.

[25] On the distinction between minimal compatibility and mutual supportiveness, see Fogal and Risberg (2025), who refer to these relations as "neutrality" and "coherence."

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prior intentions. When this source of adversariality is taken to extremes, it may be impossible for agents to act together at all. But, in less extreme cases, conflicting intentions will merely constrain and add friction to the process of forming shared plans.[26]

Each agent may intend to achieve a whole range of goals in a conversation, any one of which may be compatible or incompatible with any one of their interlocutors' intentions. Moreover, the degree of compatibility of some pairs of intentions may be more relevant than others. The cooperative–adversarial distinction is therefore graded and multidimensional: adversariality will tend to increase with both the number of conflicts and with their degree of relevance to the interlocutors' shared plans. In some cases, it will be risky to use ambiguous expressions or to communicate indirectly, as an addressee will be less likely to attribute the intended meaning and more likely to attribute an unintended one. In some adversarial contexts—typically, those in which everyone knows about the sources and nature of the conflict—we are less likely to treat an utterance as carrying an implicature. For example, consider the following exchange:

14. A: Were you at the Tipsy Elf at noon yesterday?

    B: No.

In a cooperative conversation—say, one in which friends are casually chatting about what they had done on the previous day—it would be natural for A to interpret B as implicating that they weren't at the Tipsy Elf at any time close to noon yesterday. After all, if B had been there at half past noon, and they think that this might be relevant to A's reason for asking their question, they probably would have volunteered this information, as in (15):[27]

15. B: No. But I was there at half past noon.

By contrast, in at least some transparently adversarial contexts, B will not be taken to have implicated anything by their utterance. For example, suppose that (14) occurs in the context of A's heated deposition of B, and both know that A's goal is to uncover evidence that B committed a crime. Here, nobody is expected to volunteer more information than strictly necessary. And so it is not tempting to understand B as implicating that they have no closely related information to offer.

Our explanation will crucially depend on the idea that interlocutors reason not only about what is relevant to their shared plans, but also about what is (or might be) relevant to each other's prior plans. A is asking about B's whereabouts at noon yesterday, and thereby proposing a new QUD, *for a reason*—that is, in order to further some prior plan. First, consider the cooperative case: suppose that B knows, or can infer, what A's prior plan is, and that it would be served by information other than an answer to the QUD. For example, perhaps B can infer that A asked their question as a way of finding out about B's day more generally, or as a way of finding out about whether B bumped into a mutual friend who had also been at the Tipsy Elf. Even if B cannot infer A's specific motive, B might guess that it is likely to be some intention that could be furthered by the information that they were at the Tipsy Elf at some time close to noon. In these scenarios, B recognizes that they could cooperatively further A's prior plan by offering an over-informative answer to A's question, as they do in (15). And, if all of this is sufficiently obvious to A and B, but B does not share any additional information that would be relevant to B's plans, as in (14), A might understand B as implicating that they have no further information that would be relevant, and so were not at the Tipsy Elf at any time close to noon.

The inference by which this implicature is calculated is straightforward: given that B is cooperative, if they had relevant information, they would have offered it, and so they must not have any. This is similar to other relevance-based reasoning. But notice that in this case, we are not talking about relevance to the QUD, as in the cases that we discussed in Section 3, or even relevance to shared plans more generally. In this case, it is what's relevant to A's prior plans that guides the pair's pragmatic reasoning. In Section 5, we suggested that the concept of relevance that plays a role in pragmatic reasoning can be reduced to plan coherence: we judge speech acts relevant insofar as the communicative intention behind them is a constructive and coherent subplan of the interlocutors' shared plans. But as we have just seen, cooperative speakers seek to further not only their shared plans, but also their interlocutors' unshared prior plans, insofar as they know or can guess what those plans are. If we are right, then what Grice called "the accepted purpose of the talk exchange" can be quite complex, and can involve both shared and unshared components of the interlocutors' conversation plan.

Things would be different in the deposition variant of our scenario, in which A and B have relevantly conflicting prior plans, and are aware of this. In that case, it would be irrational for B to offer anything beyond a simple "No," as in (14), and A would be unlikely to understand them as implicating that they were not there at any nearby time.[28] In the cooperative scenario, B wanted to help further the prior plans that lay behind A's question, and so the best explanation of why they did not volunteer extra information was that they did not have any. But in the uncooperative case, both A and B know that B is motivated *not* to help further A's prior plans, and so a good explanation of their silence is that they are simply withholding information that would further A's aims, but not B's. Therefore, we get no implicature.

On our view, because cooperativity is a multidimensional relationship between numerous elements in interlocutors' complex plans, it follows that there is no single element in a speaker's plan with which their addressee must always cooperate in order to calculate implicatures. We can illustrate this point using an example from Asher and Lascarides (2013), in which adversarial

[26] In some extremely adversarial scenarios, such as cross-examination in court, we have to rely on incentives to cooperation, such as contempt-of-court and perjury laws, which function as artificial substitutes for the usual sources of cooperativity. However, we take the grueling, slow, and often painstakingly explicit nature of court testimony to be evidence that these substitutes lack some of the power of the real things.

[27] See Clark (1979) and Hawkins et al. (2015) for relevant experimental evidence and an argument that we often offer over-informative answers to questions, based on our assumptions about the questioner's underlying goals in asking.

[28] One source of indirect support for this claim is that defense lawyers typically coach their clients to offer minimally informative answers, resulting in higher rates of acquittal (Boccaccini et al. 2005).

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interlocutors are able to communicate via implicature. Suppose that Janet intends to mislead her jealous partner, Justin, into thinking that she has not seen Valentino:

16. a. Justin: Have you been seeing Valentino this past week?

    b. Janet: Valentino has mononucleosis.

Asher and Lascarides (2013, 4) claim that Grice's account of implicature interpretation depends on "strong cooperativity," which they formulate as follows: "Normally, if A [communicatively intends] that ϕ, then B should intend that ϕ." Justin and Janet do not meet this condition: Justin knows that Janet is being dishonest, and so does not intend to believe her. But Janet nonetheless implicates that she has not seen Valentino. Thus, Asher and Lascarides argue that communication via implicature does not depend on Gricean, "strong" cooperativity, but merely "rhetorical" (i.e., feigned) cooperativity. We see two problems with this argument, both arising from the overly narrow notion of strong cooperativity. The first problem is that communicative intentions are themselves complex plans, which have several component intentions as parts, including at least (i) the intention to produce an effect (e.g., a belief) in an addressee, and (ii) the intention for one's addressee to recognize intention (i).[29] Although Justin's plans conflict with component (i) of Janet's communicative intention (i.e., he does not intend to believe what she says), his plans cohere well with component (ii) (i.e., he intends to recognize what she intends him to believe). For example, if Justin knows that Janet is trying to mislead him, but thinks that she does not realize that he knows, he can still model her point of view in order to recognize the deceptive intention. The second problem is that communicative intentions are themselves components of even larger conversation plans, and it is possible for interlocutors to cooperate with respect to some of the other elements in these plans without cooperating at the level of communicative intentions. Consider a version of (16) in which it is common knowledge between Justin and Janet that she does not intend to answer Justin's question honestly. In this case, we need to explain why Justin would bother asking the question, and why Janet would bother responding. One possible answer is that each hopes that the other will irrationally cooperate out of habit—something that we know that people do, from the fact that witnesses and jurors need to be explicitly trained not to. A second possibility is that Janet intends Justin to be motivated by politeness or conflict-avoidance to *pretend* that she is being cooperative, thereby effectively shifting the conversation from a factual one to a make-believe one (cf. Berstler 2024). Notice that each of these interpretations of (16) appeal to cooperativity with respect to *some* component of the conversation plan. This is one way of fleshing out Keiser's (2022) point that a Gricean theory must appeal to "cooperative elements" to explain Asher and Lascarides' cases (see also Ellefson 2021, 567–569).

This theory clarifies the special role that cooperativity has often been held to play in human communication. Transparently cooperative conversations, built around rich networks of mutually understood and mutually supportive plans, give us ample resources for inferring our interlocutors' communicative intentions and making our own communicative intentions known. This allows us to communicate more things more efficiently than we otherwise could. By contrast, when interlocutors enter conversations with conflicting intentions, this limits the kinds of conversation plans that they can rationally construct, with the result that they have to work harder to be understood, and sometimes with the result that indirect communication requires more effort, making communication less efficient in a concrete way.

8 | Genre, the Cooperative Principle, and the Maxims

From the foregoing discussion, we can generalize Roberts' account of relevance—itself a precisification of Grice's maxim of relation—to the following principle:

> Conversation-Plan Relevance
>
> A speech act is conversationally relevant only to the extent that the speaker's communicative intention is a coherent and constructive subplan of either (i) the interlocutors' shared plans, or (ii) unshared plans of the addressee(s) that are compatible with the speaker's own plans and that the speaker is aware of and disposed to further.

We think that this principle goes some way toward clarifying several key concepts in Grice's theory of conversational implicature. Consider the Cooperative Principle (Grice 1989, 26):

> Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

What is the "accepted purpose or direction" of a talk exchange? This is a vague but important element in Grice's theory. Our answer is that it is the interlocutors' conversation plan. On this view, the Cooperative Principle is just a structural requirement to adopt and act on coherent and constructive subplans of the conversation plan, whatever it is.

By contrast, several of Grice's maxims of conversation carry substantial presuppositions about more specific conversational goals, and so about the genre of conversation.[30] Consider the maxim of quality (Grice, 1989, 27):

> Try to make your contribution one that is true...:
>
> 1. Do not say what you believe to be false.

[29] Strawson (1964, 446), Grice (1969), Sperber and Wilson (1995, 2015), Unnsteinsson (2022, 88–89), and Harris (2025, 92).

[30] Grice (1989, 28) recognized this: "The conversational maxims, however, and the conversational implicatures connected with them, are specially connected (I hope) with the particular purposes that talk (and so, talk exchange) is adapted to serve and is primarily employed to serve. I have stated my maxims as if this purpose were a maximally effective exchange of information; this specification is, of course, too narrow and the scheme needs to be generalized to allow for such general purposes as influencing or directing the actions of others." Surprisingly little work has followed up on these remarks.

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2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Grice formulated this maxim to apply only to assertoric speech acts performed in the context of conversations that are informative, committal, and factual—those whose conversational aim is to exchange true and justified information. Practical, exploratory, and make-believe conversations are organized around goals that diverge from this aim in different ways, and so it does not make sense to evaluate the speech acts native to these genres by using the maxim of quality.[31]

The maxim of manner is likewise formulated in a way that presupposes certain conversational aims. It enjoins us to "avoid ambiguity," "obscurity of expression," and "unnecessary prolixity," and to "be orderly"—all good things to do if our aim is to efficiently share information, but less so if our shared plan is (e.g.) to satirize a long-winded and ineloquent colleague. Grice (1989, 26–27) explicitly relativizes the maxim of quantity to "the current purposes of the exchange," making it flexible enough to apply to any genre in which the conversation's goals place some limits on how much or little information it would be appropriate to offer, but allowing those limits to vary depending on the goals. (We need not violate the maxim of quantity by sharing very little information in conversations where we have a shared plan to demonstrate riddles, for example.) Still, it seems possible to imagine a genre of conversation—perhaps a game, or a kind of performance art—in which the participants explicitly adopt the goal of being informative to an unpredictable degree, randomly oscillating between highly informative and cryptic utterances, and everywhere in between. Such a genre would be one in which the maxim of quantity, as stated, would be either inapplicable or vacuous. In this sense, Grice's maxims of quality, manner, and quantity are all instrumental norms that rest on presuppositions—albeit, of varying specificity—about the contents of interlocutors' conversation plans.

If what we have said here is correct, the maxim of relation has a different status. Grice's own formulation ("Be relevant.") is unhelpfully vague. As we have shown, the most influential attempt to sharpen it up—namely, Roberts' theory of QUD-relevance—made it more genre-specific, so that we have had to generalize it to account for the ways in which variation in conversation plans beyond the QUD can affect what is relevant. In formulating our generalized principle of Conversation-Plan Relevance, we have taken it to be a purely structural principle, which enjoins speakers to adopt coherent and constructive subplans of the conversation plan, but which makes no assumptions about the contents of those plans. In this sense, it turns out to be a precisification of the cooperative principle itself, as we have interpreted it.[32]

According to Grice, we signal implicatures by flouting maxims—that is, by intentionally making an utterance that, if taken literally, would violate a maxim and therefore be uncooperative. If we are right, then the more general notion is that of flouting the conversation plan, which one does by intentionally making an utterance that, if taken literally, would indicate that one's communicative intention fails to cohere with the conversation plan. The search for a conversational implicature, on this view, is the search for an additional or replacement communicative intention that *would* cohere with the conversation plan. The maxims of quality, quantity, and manner as Grice formulated them are merely shorthands for common conversational goals, or categories thereof, whereas the maxim of relation enjoins us to obey the requirement for coherence itself.

9 | Conclusion and Future Directions

We have argued that many conversations belong to recognizable genres, and that genre distinctions reduce to different dimensions of variation within conversation plans. The plans put pressure on rational, cooperative communicators to form certain kinds of communicative intentions, thereby making these intentions more predictable and scrutable, and communication more efficient.

If we are right, then conversational genre turns out to be interesting not only for its own sake, but also because it gives us a window into the inner workings of conversation plans more generally, which in turn suggests powerful generalizations of some of our most venerable pragmatic theories.

What we have said here raises many questions. Which other genres deserve theoretical attention, and can they also be understood as types of conversation plans? Can our theory be turned into a formal-pragmatic model that generates precise predictions?[33] How does a conversation's genre influence how it ought to be conducted—for example, by altering the norms governing speech acts? Who gets to choose a conversation's genre, and how does this interact with interlocutors' social power? We cannot address these questions here, but we are optimistic that the framework that we have developed can help, since it suggests that they may be special cases of more general questions about the nature of plans.

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[31] Similarly, Williamson's (2000) knowledge norm of assertion would appear to be an instrumental requirement arising only in conversations where interlocutors have a shared intention to exchange knowledge (cf. Carter 2025). However, we do not have space to offer a detailed defense of this view here.

[32] We thus follow both Sperber and Wilson (1995) and Roberts (2012) in taking relation to have a special status among the maxims, although the details and explanatory ambitions of our account differ from theirs in a number of ways.

[33] If we were to do this, we would draw inspiration from Bledin and Rawlins (2014) and Vesga and Starr (2025).

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