

Structures for Subordination

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Introduction

- this is very very new work
- a lot of the more developed projects in the philosophy of logic that I'd been working on—and giving as papers—got accepted or came out recently and I didn't want to give a paper here that was already published
- it's definitely going to help me to have to force some of these ideas into a sequential form that I can communicate to others, and I know it will help me to get your feedback.¹
- in any case, I think there is much of interest here, even if I'm not at the point where I have a very polished paper. So I have some hope of making the next 40 minutes rewarding for anyone who has shown up to listen to me too.

¹ In particular I'm not very happy with the title right now. Let me know if you have any ideas!

Subordinative Speech

- OK, one way into this topic is through *subordinative speech*.
 - by *speech* I just mean the use of language (could be spoken, signed, written, perhaps even an action with a highly conventional meaning)
 - by *subordination* I mean roughly² what (Langton, 1993) means: something (e.g. an action, an utterance) subordinates a person or group of people if it
 1. ranks a person or group of people below others
 2. deprives that person or group of people of rights or entitlements
 3. entitles others to discriminate against person or group of people.³
- Subordinative speech is speech that subordinates.
- By way of illustration of the definition (which I think makes the idea easier to understand if you are new to it), we can take Langton's example of the South African Legislator (SAL). The (SAL) announces a new law (in apartheid era Pretoria) with the words:

² I say "roughly" because I'll do some re-writing of this definition to bring out some things that I want to emphasise later on. It will still be more or less Langton's idea though.

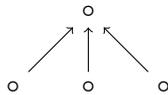
³ I think the idea is that each of these three criteria is necessary for subordination.

“Blacks will no longer be permitted to vote.” Langton contends—and I think she’s right—that this lowers the status of black with respect to non-blacks, deprives them of the right to vote, and entitles others to discriminate against them, for example, the poll workers will now be entitled to turn blacks away on election day, whereas they will not be permitted to do this to others.

- One question about subordinative speech is whether it always or ever constitutes a subordinative speech *act*, that is, a speech act in Austin’s sense: an utterance whose *illocutionary force* is to subordinate, e.g. the utterance is *itself* an act of subordination. Or—alternatively—whether subordinative speech merely has *perlocutionary* power to subordinate, i.e. they *cause* subordination, even though they aren’t themselves acts of subordination.
- I’m going to totally ignore this speech act question today. I quite like the speech act picture, but everything I’m want to say today is compatible with the idea that the utterances we’re considering (such as the SAL’s “blacks are no longer permitted to vote”) merely *cause* or result in subordination.
- now I’m going to pause to go into the three clauses of the definition in a little more detail

Ranking

- The first clause in the definition of subordination talks about ranking people. It’s natural to think of this as a way of ordering them (from best to worst?)
- Yay! Ordering is something that logicians do. What kind of ordering shall we have?
- Some ideas: requiring a *total* order (i.e. one which doesn’t allow ties) would be too strict. Presumably a racist social order could place White People above the Hopi Valley Indians, and White People above the Sami People’s of Finland, and yet say nothing about the relations between black people and native American people, something like this:⁴



⁴ Think of the arrows in these diagrams as representing the relation ‘x is at least as low in rank as y’ which we might write $x \leq y$.

- So we might have the looser requirement of a *partial*-ordering, where the relation expressed by the arrow in the diagram is intended to be *transitive*, *reflexive*, and *anti-symmetric*.

- I'm going to suggest that we drop the anti-symmetric requirement too, leaving us with a transitive reflexive relation: a *pre-order*. The reason is that I think we might want to distinguish between a social situation where nothing at all is assumed about the ranking relations between people, and one where they explicitly all assumed to be equal. If an arrow drawn from x to y represents $x \leq y$, then the former is:



We might call that a 'silent' ranking. And the latter is:



We might call situations where the ranking relation is empty 'silent' and situations where it is universal 'explicit equality' rankings.

- We don't lose anything requiring only that the ranking relation to be a pre-order, since pre-orders induce partial-orders, that is, we can define a new relation:

$$x < y \quad \Leftrightarrow \quad x \leq y \text{ and } y \not\leq x$$

and this new relation $<$ will be anti-symmetric.

- There's one last thing I should say about the first clause in the definition of subordination. Ranking people is *more* than just ordering people—there is some evaluative dimension to it. If I order everyone in this room alphabetically by last name, I don't thereby *rank* them in the sense required for subordination. Whereas if I collect your notes and doodles on the side of the handout, and give them a grade from A–F, and this is a *ranking* of those notes, because (I'm assuming) closer to A is *better* and closer to F is *worse*. In Langton's metaphor, subordination involves ranking people *below* others, where the down direction is assumed to be worse. Still, a lot more needs to be said about what the relation amounts to. In particular, does x being higher ranked than y represent x 's being *better* than y or, as one alternative, does it represent their being more *powerful* than y ? I don't know that I can answer these questions today but I'll return to them later.

Permissions

- OK let's move on to clauses 2 and 3 of the definition of subordination, which you'll recall talked about depriving the subordinated of

rights—(2)—and granting rights to others to discriminate against them—(3).

- Langton’s example is nice and clear because it involves the granting and revoking of *legal* rights. Legal rights seem like the clearest and most explicit examples of social rights, because they are enshrined and described, often explicitly, in laws.
- But it seems right to think that subordination will often be more subtle and less explicitly encoded than this. It will involve things like who has the right to speak in certain situations, or set the agenda, or dismiss others, or pay for dinner, or ignore complaints or retaliate with impunity.
- I think we can think of both clauses (2) and (3) as involving changes in what people are permitted to do. In (2) it’s what’s the subordinated is permitted to do. In (3) it’s what others are permitted to do to the subordinated.⁵
- (Subordinated are often frustrated by others failure to discriminate against those who violate their rights.)
- Anyway, you can think of clauses (2) and (3) this way: there is set of actions. Some of those the target is permitted to perform, some of those they are not. When they are subordinated, some of the actions go from being permissible to impermissible.
- Actions are a lot like possibilities. E.g. there could be two actions, both permissible, but jointly impermissible.
- So we might model this using sets of actions and an accessibility relation (relative to an agent.)
- When someone is subordinated, the new accessibility relation is a proper subset of the old—some of the previously permissible actions are no longer permissible.
- Question I’d like to know the answer to: How do these two things fit together? The ranking relation and the accessibility relation on actions.

⁵ I’m not sure, but these clauses (2 and 3) might end up being equivalent. Perhaps to say that someone is (socially) permitted to do something is just to say that *if* they do it, others won’t discriminate against them for it (by punishing them, trying to prevent them etc.) Similarly, to say that discrimination against someone is socially legitimated is just to say that they (the others) are permitted to do it—others won’t sanction them for their actions.

Subordination and Conversation—some background

- If there is subordinating speech, it takes place in conversations (broadly construed.)
- Conversations take place in contexts. The contexts affect the conversations. They contribute things like the referents for indexicals

(thus affecting the conversation by affecting the content of some utterances.) They determine whether the felicity conditions are met for speech acts. They determine an audience and a speaker.

- But the influence goes both ways. The conversation affects the context. One standard way of thinking about this (due to ⁶) involves representing the context as determining a set of propositions—the Context Set. You can think of this as the set of propositions that are being assumed for the purposes of the conversation.
- It might include things that were agreed upon earlier in the conversation, or things that are really obvious, things that are common knowledge or have just recently been made salient by the environment.
- Examples: that we're at a conference, that we are people, that the lights are on, that it is a morning session, that speakers get about 40 mins (I assume that was asserted by the chair earlier), that Juliette is going 2nd etc.
- In making and adding propositions about the environment to the context-set, we will no doubt be interesting in including propositions about our social environment, including the social status of conversational participants and others, and what they are (socially) permitted to do.
- Some of those statuses and permissions will be long standing and persist outside of our conversation. We might make assumptions about who is a graduate student and who is a distinguished professor. We might make assumptions about who is an expert on Frege's logic. We might also have some background knowledge about our general status and rights as humans. Who is permitted to murder one of the other participants and take their stuff (hopefully no-one) and who is permitted to work and remain in the country without a visa (perhaps not everyone.)
- Some of those statuses and permissions might be local to our conversation: we're in a conference session at the APA, and certain people in the room have special status—most obviously the chair of the session, Alexei here. They have (putatively) the power to organise the session, tell people to stop talking because it's time to get started, decide who gets to ask a question, and when, and when it's time to move on to a new topic. (Of course the rest of us grant them this temporary power for good practical reasons—it helps our session run more smoothly.)
- Similarly, during the initial presentation part of a speaker's session, we might assume that they get to speak unhindered and

⁶ Stalnaker, R. (1999). *Context and Content*. Oxford University Press, Oxford

(mostly) un-interrupted. (In practice these assumptions might need to be reinforced or renegotiated.) I'm just giving them as examples. Examples where we make assumptions about people's relative status, and what they are permitted to do.

- it isn't actually necessary that the conversational participants all *believe* these propositions, as long as they are willing to go along with the assumption for the purposes of the conversation. (In a famous Donnellan paper someone asks whether the King is in his counting house. The addressee doesn't believe that the person the speaker is referring to is the legitimate King—he's a usurper—but they are willing to go along with the assumption for the purposes of the conversation (perhaps they don't want to reveal themselves as a rebel just yet.) So they say "Yes, I think he's in there." Allowing the presupposition (that X is the King) to stand.

Subordination and Conversation—some more focus

- People don't often like to talk about rank explicitly, even in cases where it's relatively clear and uncontroversial. (Why? Perhaps because as soon as we bring it up it is "at issue" content and so appropriate to ask whether it is just or appropriate or earned. Perhaps people in power would prefer for their high rank to be simply accepted and rarely explicitly articulated?)
- Octavia Butler's *Kindred*.⁷
- More often expressed through permissibility claims, or the enforcement of social norms about what various people are permitted to do. (You can't use that water-fountain, or that bathroom, board first, or order in that part of the bar.)
- So an important phenomenon is the making of utterances, in conversations, that convey information about rank or perhaps permissions—the two things that are key to subordination—without explicitly asserting it. So here we are in the domain of modeling and understanding pragmatics.
- "Scorekeeping in a Language Game" has examples of the Context Set being changed with respect to what people are *permitted* to do through the mechanism of *accommodation*.
- Lewis' Rule of Accommodation: "If at time *t* something is said that requires presupposition *P* to be acceptable, and if *P* is not presupposed just before *t*, then—*ceteris paribus* and within certain limits—presupposition *P* comes into existence at *t*."⁸

⁷ Butler, O. E. (2004). *Kindred*. Beacon Press, Boston

⁸ Lewis, D. (1979). Scorekeeping in a language game. *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 8:339–359

- Lewis on shifting the boundary of permissibility: “Here is how the master shifts the boundary. From time to time he says to the slave that such-and-such courses of action are impermissible. Any such statement depends for its truth value on the boundary between what is permissible and what isn’t. But if the master says that something is impermissible, and if that would be false if the boundary remained stationary, then straightway the boundary moves inward. The permissible range contracts so that what the master says is true after all.”
- He also has examples of how *rank* can be altered through the mechanism of accommodation. It’s just in Lewis’ example it’s not the rank of persons that is altered, it’s the rank of possible worlds.

Lewis on Counterfactuals, Rank, and Accommodation

- (1) If Caesar had been in command, he would have used the atomic bomb.
 - (2) If Caesar had been in command, he would have used catapults.⁹
- Which of these counterfactuals is true? Lewis says it depends on the vagaries of similarity and these have not yet determined.
 - But they can be—through accommodation.
- (3) (Accommodation): Yes, of course, but I don’t think that means that the US should have been so ruthless; atomic bombs kill millions of civilians.
 - (4) (Non-Accommodation): Oh, you think Caesar would have used a weapon he didn’t even know about, do you?

⁹ Lewis, D. (1973). *Counterfactuals*. Blackwell, Oxford

Lewis’ “Ptolemaic Astronomy”

- Lewis has a very famous formal system for thinking about counterfactuals and the rankings of possible worlds.
- My project here: let’s look at that and see if we can find anything useful for thinking about subordination and the ranking of people.
- Lewis argues (9–13) that we need, for each possible world, is a *set* of spheres of accessibility, $\$w$, some larger, some smaller. So let $\$$ be a function from each world w to a set of sets of possible worlds, $\$w$. Then we require $\$$ to meet the following four conditions:

C) $\{w\} \in \$w$ ¹⁰

¹⁰ C) could be dropped for non-centered systems of spheres.

- 1) $\$w$ is **nested**. (for $T, S \in S_w$, either $S \subseteq T$ or $T \subseteq S$)
- 2) $\$w$ is **closed under unions**. (for any set of sets $\mathfrak{S} \in \$w$, $\bigcup \mathfrak{S} \in \w)
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- 3) $\$w$ is **closed under (non-empty) intersections**. (for any set of sets $\mathfrak{S} \in \$w$, $\bigcap \mathfrak{S} \in \w)

¹¹ Given (1), (2) and (3) are only needed if there are infinitely many spheres. We will ignore them today and focus on (C) and (1).

- The system of spheres is designed to carry information about the comparative overall similarity of worlds.
- Intuitively, the smaller the sphere, the more similar to w a world has to be to be a member. (We might say, foreshadowing what is to come, that the system of spheres *ranks* the worlds in terms of similarity.)
- We justify the structure of $\$$ by thinking about the properties of the similarity relation.
 - (C) is in there because presumably every world is more similar to itself any other world is.
 - 1) makes sense because if we had a violation, then we would have spheres $T, S \in \$w$ such that neither $S \subseteq T$ nor $T \subseteq S$, i.e. there is $w_i \in S$ but $\notin T$ and $w_j \in T$ but $\notin S$. Then we'd have both that w_i is more similar to w (because it is in a sphere that w_j is not in, but also that w_j is more similar to w (because it too is in a sphere that w_i is not in.) The nesting condition prevents this unhappy situation.
- Lewis then uses what he dubs his ‘Ptolemaic astronomy’ to give truth the truth-conditions for counterfactual conditionals:
 - $\phi \Box \rightarrow \psi$ is true at a world w (given $\$w$) if and only if either
 1. no ϕ -world belongs to any sphere S in $\$w$, or
 2. some sphere S in $\$w$ does contain at least one ϕ -world, and $\phi \rightarrow \psi$ holds at every world in S .

Spheres for Subordination

- Suppose we were to try to use something like Lewis’ system of spheres to represent ranking relations among people or groups of people—the kind of thing we would need to model subordination
- We might try reinterpreting the system of spheres to represent social rank, as opposed to similarity.
- In doing so we might want different constraints or formal features.

- For example, similarity is always similarity to a particular possible world—each system of spheres is relative to a world w .
- But we wouldn't normally expect to represent social rank as a kind of comparative closeness to a particular person—unless, say, that person is the Empress and social rank is a matter of being included in a number of nested spheres around the Empress—the inner court, the outer court, the hereditary nobles, the merchants, the serfs, say.
- But let's not tie our hands by assuming that. Social rank needn't have a "top (person)" the way similarity to a particular world has a top (world).
- Nor need social rank be relative to a particular person or group of people.¹² And that suggests that social rank might be better represented as a system of horizontal sets, like a sandwich (possibly having a top layer, but also possibly going up indefinitely). We'd keep the equivalent of the **nested** condition: Every member of an upper layer is a member of every layer below it. This would be justified in the same way **nested** was justified by Lewis: the system is supposed to represent social status. The more layers you are a part of, the higher your social status. If there were layers S, T such that neither $S \subseteq T$ nor $T \subseteq S$ then there would x in T but not in S and y in S but not in T . This means x is higher in social status than y (because in a set y is not in) but also vice versa—the nested condition rules out such an unhappy situation.
- OK, so this system would convey information about social rank in the following way: for two persons (or groups of persons) x and y , if there is a set $S \in \mathcal{S}$ (in the system of layers) such that $x \in S$ but $y \notin S$, then x is ranked higher than y .
- This relation will be transitive and reflexive?

¹² We might want to complicate things by allowing for that later. Maybe social rank for Americans and social rank for English people are very different orderings. Maybe social rank for teenagers and social rank for middle aged people are very different orderings. But things are complicated enough for now. Let's leave unnecessary relativising until after we have the basics sorted out.

Reservations about the Ptolemaic Approach

- it loses some of the information that we wanted to capture about rank:
 1. e.g. that someone might want to represent group x as higher than group y or z but say nothing about how x and y are ranked with respect to each other.
 2. it doesn't distinguish silent from equality contexts.
- what is it actually for? Lewis can use his system for giving truth-conditionals for counterfactuals, and other stuff. What can we *do* with this approach to ranking?

- How is all this connected to *permissions*? Isn't there supposed to be some tight connection between rank and what one is entitled to do?
- OK, so now we have our work cut out: so the project is to give satisfactory responses to these reservations/questions. We can handle the first ones by changing our representation a little. (next section)

An Alternative to the Sphere System

- In later chapters of *Counterfactuals*, Lewis looks (sympathetically) at alternatives ways of giving truth-conditionals for counterfactuals. In particular, he looks at one method that would allow more fine-grained distinctions.

"Our system of spheres is nothing but a convenient device for carrying information about the comparative similarity of worlds. We could do away with the spheres, and give the truth conditions for counterfactuals directly in terms of comparative similarity of worlds, together with accessibility."¹³ (48)

¹³ Lewis, D. (1973). *Counterfactuals*. Blackwell, Oxford

- Let's introduce the notation

$$j \leq_i k$$

to mean j is at least as similar to i as k is. Then we use this to define a strict relation which holds iff the reverse doesn't hold to (i.e. $j \leq_i$ and $k \not\leq_i j$).

$$j <_i k$$

- So now we assign to each world i a 2-place relation \leq_i —this is relation of comparative similarity to i , and a set S_i of worlds, regarded as the set of worlds accessible from i .
- Lewis then stipulates that \leq has certain properties. It's
 1. transitive
 2. strongly-connected (for any j, k , either $j \leq_i k$ or $k \leq_i j$)
 3. i is self-accessible ($i \in S_i$)
 4. i is strictly \leq_i -minimal (for any non- i k , $i <_i k$)
 5. inaccessible worlds are \leq_i -maximal (If $j \notin S_i$, then $k \leq_i j$)
 6. accessible worlds are more similar than inaccessible worlds
- Then we can use *this* system to give truth-conditions for counterfactual conditionals:

$\phi \Box \rightarrow \psi$ is true at a world i if and only if

1. no ϕ -world belongs to S_i (the vacuous case), or
2. there is a ϕ -world k in S_i such that, for any world j , if $j \leq_i k$ then $\phi \rightarrow \psi$ holds at j .

— Then Lewis says:

“The present formulation is exactly equivalent to the original formulation by means of spheres, without any restrictive assumptions.”
(49)¹⁴

¹⁴ Lewis, D. (1973). *Counterfactuals*. Blackwell, Oxford

— Let’s try translating this to the social case, and see which of the above conditions on \leq_i we might want to change.

1. We can drop the relativity to i for now and just talk about the relation $j \leq k$
2. transitive (we’ll surely keep this—we still want ranking to be an ordering.)
3. strongly-connected (for any j, k , either $j \leq k$ or $k \leq j$) This is one of the assumptions we wanted to drop. But we do want our relation to be reflexive, so let’s add that as a weaker criterion: for all i , $i \leq j$
4. i is self-accessible ($i \in S_i$) (We will drop this, since we don’t need a special world i —it’s not clear we need a sphere of accessibility—so we can drop the remaining criteria too.)
5. i is strictly \leq_i -minimal (for any non- i k , $i <_i k$) (We’ll drop this)
6. inaccessible worlds are \leq_i -maximal (If $j \notin S_i$, then $k \leq_i j$)
7. accessible worlds are more similar than inaccessible worlds

— what that leaves us with is just the pre-ordering \leq in terms of which we can also define a strict relation: $j < k$ iff $j \leq k$ and $k \not\leq j$.

— now we’re free to have incomparable items and distinguish silent from equality rankings.

What is this good for?

So now we have a structure. It is a variant on Lewis’ structures for similarity and counterfactuals. Lewis’ structures served various roles and made various things possible. They weren’t just a pretty mathematical way of thinking about possible worlds. What purposes could social rankings serve?

Let’s start by making a list of the purposes to which Lewis puts his structures in *Counterfactuals*:

— giving truth-conditions for modal claims like $\Box p$ and $\Diamond p$

- giving truth-conditions for counterfactual claims like $p \Box \rightarrow q$ and $p \Diamond \rightarrow q$.
- identifying counterfactual fallacies, e.g. strengthening the antecedent, transitivity and contraposition.
- explaining the pragmatics of counterfactual conditionals in conversation (e.g. "If Caesar had been in charge,....")

In looking at what we can use social ranking structures for, it seems easiest to start at the bottom of this list:

Example: Logic

Dani, Kirsch, and Theo are in the same undergraduate logic class and are talking afterwards. They don't know each other well (and so let's suppose that the person-ranking set of the conversational context starts out silent.) Theo says to Dani: "You're really good at logic, for a girl."

- (5) (Accommodation) (Dani) Er, thanks, what did you get for question 2?
- (6) (Non-accommodation) (Kirsch) Whadda ya mean *for a girl*, Theo?
All the girls in this class are better than us!

Question?

- Why do this? Isn't this going to be too clunky a mechanism for thinking about a social phenomenon like subordination? "Clunky" in two ways.

1. The social phenomenon is vague. This is too much precision for capturing it.

Here I'm struck by something that David Lewis said when people made similar complaints about counterfactuals. "That is not altogether wrong, but it is defeatist. It consigns to the wastebasket of contextually resolved vagueness something much more amenable to systematic analysis than most of the rest of the waste in that wastebasket." (13)¹⁵

¹⁵ Lewis, D. (1973). *Counterfactuals*. Blackwell, Oxford

2. The social phenomenon is complicated. This is too simple a way of thinking about it.

I think the way to understand complex phenomena is often to begin by developing simple models.

- Also, who is this for? It's unclear that talking about either mathematical properties or the mechanisms of pragmatics is useful to people who are actually subordinated.

Here my thought is that discrimination and illegitimate uses of power are often protected by vagueness, unclarity and things like plausible deniability.

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