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Subordinating Speech and Speaking Up

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When we encounter speech that we judge to inappropriately denigrate others, we sometimes wonder whether we should try to counter it with speech of our own—a response that I’ll call “speaking up.” When we hear groups of our colleagues unfairly criticized, racist or sexist jokes told, misleading aspersions cast on victims, or the poor maligned, many of us wonder whether we should say something, and some people speak up more readily and with more confidence than others.

But whether we speak up or not, is also common to have doubts about speaking up. Some worries concern outweighing pragmatic reasons—as when a bystander suspects that speaking up could provoke physical violence. Others—the ones this paper is concerned with—are about the value and effectiveness speaking up has in the first place. People worry that professing their support for an oppressed group on social media might merely serve to advertise their own virtue. Some worry that even if it would be good for *someone* to speak up, they might not be the best person to do it; perhaps it is better done by a member of the denigrated group themselves? Others suspect that they will do a poor job of arguing against a belligerent speaker, something that could be worse than saying nothing at all. Finally, we might have quite general worries about what speaking up can be expected to achieve; a skeptic about the value of speaking up might argue that speaking up is simply contributing more *talk*, and that something concrete—perhaps “real action” or a monetary donation—ought to be favoured instead.

These uncertainties can lead to inhibition and ambivalence about speaking up. Someone might post something on social media in support of a marginalized group, but later feel ashamed and embarrassed by their post, suspecting that it was self-serving. They might even be told that it was self-serving by others, and feel unsure whether the charge is just. Or they might attend a protest against a sexist billboard erected in their state but later wonder whether their protest was worthwhile: people are free to post what they like on billboards, so what good could the protest hope to achieve?

The goal of this paper is to expand on a model of denigrating speech that has been taking shape in the literature on subordinating speech, and use it to answer some of these questions about the effectiveness and value of speaking up.¹ According to the model I have in mind, some denigrating utterances are a special kind of speech act: an act of subordination. Assuming this model of denigrating speech, one might suspect quite generally that if “mere” speech is powerful enough to subordinate, then speech might also be powerful enough to undo subordination, or prevent it from taking effect. My thesis in this paper is that it can, and in ways that exploit mechanisms already recognized in mainstream philosophy of language, such as Stalnaker (1999)’s notion of a Context Set, and Lewis (1979)’s Rule of Accommodation.

Section 7.1 of the paper introduces the idea of a speech act, and section 7.2 the more specific category of subordinating speech acts. Section 7.3 then looks at how the mechanisms of presupposition and accommodation can be used to solve the standard Authority Problem for subordinating speech acts, and then with this set-up behind us, section 7.4 proposes five ways in which speaking up can be effective against subordinating speech—while noting some important limitations.

7.1 Speech acts

In this paper I will use the word ‘speech’ quite broadly, so that it covers the following:

1. spoken utterances (where this is intended to include utterances in both oral and sign languages);

¹ See e.g. Langton 1993; Maitra 2012; Saul and Diaz-Leon 2017.

2. written and otherwise recorded utterances;
3. signals and symbols which are used with a conventional meaning.²

Denigrating speech might take the form of abuse shouted at passersby (spoken), protest signs, graffiti, billboards and commercials (written or otherwise recorded), as well as acts like the burning of a cross on someone's lawn, putting a brick through the window of a religious building, or swastikas drawn around a college campus (conventional or symbolic but not strictly linguistic). Examples of speaking up in response might include objecting during a live conversation, posting a dissenting opinion online, writing and publishing newspaper editorials and open letters, signing petitions, writing blog posts, displaying bumper stickers, and organizing and attending protests carrying signs whose message contradicts that of the denigrating speech.

J. L. Austin's early work on speech acts noted that speech can be related to an action in three different ways: it can describe an action, cause an action, or be an action (Austin 1962, 2013). My utterance of "Jane hit the ball" describes an action. My saying "The bank closes at 4pm" causes Hannah and Sara to rush out of the door. But my utterance of the words "I promise I'll pay you back" (under the right circumstances) just is the act of promising—or so Austin held.³

Not every kind of action can be performed through speech. Speech acts might allow the speaker to give someone a name, to change their marital status, or to revoke their legal entitlement to certain goods, but there is no speech act of destroying a bridge, pouring a drink, or putting bookshelves together.⁴ But while this places limits on the kinds of speech acts that can be performed, it would be a mistake to conclude that speech acts never make important differences to the world. Actions which depend on the

² The literature on subordinating speech owes much to Langton (1993)'s defence of the claim that pornography is subordinating speech, but classifying pornography as speech has felt like a strain to some (Mikkola 2017; Bauer 2015; Saul and Diaz-Leon 2017). The thesis and argument of this paper do not require us to take a stance on whether pornography is speech. In including symbols and symbolic acts as speech, however, I follow Maitra 2012.

³ There is of course a trivial sense in which every utterance is an action: the act of uttering any sentence *S* is an act of uttering that sentence *S*. I'll assume for the purposes of identifying the category of a speech act that trivial acts like this don't count.

⁴ Of course speech may be causally efficacious in bringing about the destroying of a bridge, but this relationship is merely perlocutory. Saying "I hereby destroy this bridge" is never identical with the act of destroying a bridge, as saying "I promise I'll be there" is identical with the act of promising.

presence of linguistic and social conventions—such as renouncements, promotions, debarments, bequeathals, adoptions, gifts, deals, certifications, and marriages—may be quite significant.

Austin observed that speech acts usually require that prerequisites are met. I cannot marry just anyone by saying “I hereby take you to be my lawful wedded spouse.” I must have my target’s recent spoken consent, in the presence of a suitable official. They must be of age and of sound mind and perhaps I even need the tacit consent of an audience (“If anyone here knows of a reason why these two may not be joined in matrimony . . .”). Similarly, “I bet you \$5” requires the bet to be accepted by an audience member and “I hereby bequeath . . .” that I am recording the action in some way; it won’t work if I merely say it to myself in the shower. Austin called the prerequisites of a speech act its “felicity conditions.” If the felicity conditions are met, the utterance of the sentence is the appropriate speech act.⁵

7.2 Subordinating speech acts

Suppose Austin is right: there are speech acts. A subordinating speech act would be one which was itself an act of subordination, much as uttering “I promise to be there” is an act of promising. What is it to subordinate someone? I will use Langton’s definition: to subordinate someone (or a group of people) is

1. to rank them lower than some other person (or group of people)
2. to deprive them of rights, and
3. to legitimate discrimination against them.

⁵ On Austin’s original account, performing a speech act is contrasted with describing or stating that something is the case, and since Austin thought that speech acts were not descriptive, he also thought that they had no truth-value. This aspect of his view is now known to be problematic (Soames 2003: 115–34). For example, when the same sentences are embedded in conditionals, negations, and other more complex linguistic contexts, they need not perform speech acts and seem to have descriptive, truth-apt content. Consider e.g. “If I promise to pay you back tonight, then you can lend me five dollars without worrying about the rent.” The most unified account of “promise”, “bet”, “name”, et al., allows that sentences containing these verbs may describe a situation, take a truth-value, and in addition perform a speech act. I will thus drop Austin’s commitment to exclusivity and allow that even performative utterances may describe and take truth-values: thus when I say “I bet you \$5 they will” my utterance is both an attempted speech act, and a description of what I am doing that may be true or false.

To rank a set of things is to order them. We might order a set of people alphabetically by surname. We might also order groups of people this way, e.g. the first group is the group of people whose names start with an A, the second group is the group of people whose names start with a B etc. . . . Such an ordering need not place everyone; people whose names do not begin with a letter of the Roman alphabet are not covered by this criterion. Moreover, even when the ordering says something about the relation of group A to group B, and A to C, it need say nothing about how A and C are related; a racist ranking might put white people before everyone else, but say nothing about whether the Hoopa Valley Indians come before the Sami peoples. This suggests that a ranking need not be a total order, in the mathematical sense (total orders require comparability between all elements). Perhaps it could be a partial order then, but we might not want to require even this because partial orders are anti-symmetric and we might like to allow for explicitly egalitarian rankings, on which everyone is ranked by our binary relation, but ranked equal to everyone else. (Think of the ranking relation as \leq : we can either say nothing about how A and B stand with respect to each other, or we can say just that $A \leq B$ (but not $B \leq A$), or we can say $A \leq B$ and $B \leq A$. The last amounts to an explicit equality ranking.) This suggests that we think of a ranking relation as a pre-order—a transitive and reflexive relation on a set. Some pre-orders are anti-symmetric (the partial orders) and some might be total (either $A \leq B$ or $B \leq A$) but they need not be.

Still a ranking, in the sense required for our definition of subordination, is more than a mere mathematical ordering; we don't subordinate people whose names begin with an A when we propose to list the kanji characters ahead of the Roman ones, and that is because we are not thereby saying that one group of people is better than another. A ranking is an ordering with an evaluative direction: it orders from good to not-as-good. In the metaphor of Langton's definition, subordination requires ranking someone lower than another person, where the good direction of the scale points up. Ranking is what I do (for better or worse) when I assign grades to student essays. Since the grades are ordered (e.g. A+ to F), and each essay gets exactly one grade, grading induces an order on the essays. This ordering is not evaluatively neutral, rather: the closer to an A+ the better, and the closer to F, the worse. Hence the essays are not merely ordered but ranked: they are placed in an evaluative pre-order.

The second clause in the Langton's definition says that the targets are deprived of rights. A clear example would be the legal right to vote, a right enshrined in very explicit social norms—laws. But the situation will often be less explicit and less formal. It might be an unstated rule in a family that the parents have the right to decide whether or not the family goes out for dinner. The children petition for particular options, and one or more parent might even go with a child's choice more or even all of the time, while it is still understood that the right to decide lies with the parents.

Not all rights losses should be considered sufficient to meet criterion 2. The abolition of slavery took rights away from slave owners—they were no longer permitted to own slaves—but it seems wrong to say that this subordinated them. So when is the removal of a right sufficient to meet criterion 2? One option would be to say that subordination is always relational—a person or group is not merely made subordinate, but subordinate *to* another person or group, e.g. the persons or groups that were ranked higher than them by criterion 1. The deprivation of a right counts as sufficient to meet criterion 2 if it results in the targeted group not having rights that a higher ranked group has. When blacks are deprived of voting rights that whites retained, this met criterion 2. When slavery was abolished, slave owners were no longer permitted to have slaves, but then no one was permitted to have slaves, and so there was no higher-ranking group of citizens for slave owners to be subordinate to.⁶

The third and final clause in the definition of subordination also concerns permissions. When people are newly licensed to discriminate they have permission to discriminate where they did not have it before. As one group loses the legal right to vote, poll-stuffers gain permission to discriminate against them. Thus we can think of both the second and third criteria of subordination as involving a shift of the boundaries between permissible and impermissible actions. For the subordinated, actions which were once permissible become impermissible. For others, discriminatory actions which were once impermissible become permissible.

⁶ There is a question about whether slave owners were nonetheless subordinate to the government, in that the government took away their power to decide whether or not to own slaves, and assumed it for itself. But abolition didn't subordinate them to other citizens.

So this is what a subordinating speech act would be: an utterance that is identical with an act of lowering someone's rank (or the rank of their group) with respect to others, which deprives them of social rights which the higher ranked groups have, and which gives others social permission to discriminate against them. Are there any such speech acts?

A skeptic might point out that claiming to subordinate someone will not make it so; one cannot simply say to someone "I hereby subordinate you" and expect to be successful. Yet this truism is compatible with the existence of subordinating speech acts, since all speech acts have felicity conditions which must be met for their success. As we noted above, I cannot say "I hereby take you to be my lawful wedded spouse" to any stranger, and expect to be successful. Claiming to marry someone does not make it so either.

Langton's case of the South African legislator is often put forward as a kind of proof of concept for subordinating speech acts. A legislator in apartheid era Pretoria enacts legislation by uttering (SAL):

(SAL) Blacks will no longer be allowed to vote.

It seems reasonable to think that this is an act which subordinates blacks: it ranks them below other groups of people (the ones with the power to vote), deprives them of rights which they had previously (the right to vote), and legitimates discrimination against them (staff are now entitled to turn them away at the polling booths).⁷ Still, there is a skeptical objection to the very idea of subordinating speech acts which threatens even Langton's example. I call this the Magic Objection, and I will address it before moving on to even trickier problems.

7.2.1 *The magic objection*

One might suspect that the rank of one group with respect to another is not something which *can* be changed by speech alone—this is a worry that threatens the very possibility of subordinating speech acts. Ranking relations on groups of people, one might think, are objective matters which hold in virtue of the groups and their properties. If so, one can no

⁷ Langton 1993: 302–3.

more have a speech act of changing that ranking than one can have a speech act of destroying a bridge.⁸

I am sympathetic to the idea that speech by another person cannot change a person's worth—in some sense—but I also hold that this does not undermine the thesis that there can be subordinating speech acts. Whatever one's view about the objective ranking of persons, there can be little doubt that social organizations—corporations, countries, communities, clubs, schools, militaries, etc.—attribute rank to people, and afford them powers and discriminate among them on the basis of the rank they have attributed—regardless of the match up between that conferred rank, and any objective ranking. Such socially conferred rank can be altered with speech acts (consider promotions, knighthoods, debarments, and expulsions).

To illustrate, we might start with “low temperature” (i.e. less morally significant and contentious) examples and consider the status of everyday objects, rather than people. There are many categories, values, ranks, and statuses which are socially conferred on objects. US bank notes with \$10 printed on them are worth ten times as much as US bank notes with (just) \$1 printed on them. This ranking is partly determined by social facts which are subject to change: people's faith in the stability of US society, banks' practices in exchanging these notes freely, etc. These facts are fairly sturdy, but they could be changed by a nuclear war or by certain speech acts, such as an announcement from the Federal Reserve that they are abolishing the \$1 note. These ranking facts are also compatible with particular individuals occasionally valuing one \$10 note more highly than another: perhaps you don't want an old, dirty note when you could have a crisp, clean one.

Similarly, the plastic cards in my wallet have different worths and powers. Consider my credit card, my debit card, a driving license, my dental insurance card. The cards possess their worths and powers partly thanks to physical facts about the cards (my credit card has a metallic strip that my dental insurance card doesn't) and partly thanks to complex

⁸ That is not to say that one's utterances might not cause acts of subordination, as when one's sneering comment causes the Prince to abdicate and join the Foreign Legion, or causes a student's grades to slip, or causes one's cousin to lapse into alcoholism. But it is not the thesis that an utterance can cause acts of subordination that requires defence, but rather the thesis that an utterance can be an act of subordination.

social relations to laws, companies, government institutions, and their databases. Some of these facts can be created, changed, or destroyed by announcements (e.g. President Obama signing the Credit Card Act of 2009 into law).

As of objects, so of people: US citizenship is a legal status which comes with powers (legal rights) which non-citizens do not enjoy—for example, the power to remain and work in the US indefinitely. A US tourist visa confers some powers, usually to enter the US and remain for a certain length of time—and in between those points are various non-immigrant and immigrant visas and penultimately the status of permanent residency. These statuses vary in the length of time they persist, the powers they afford (e.g. to work or not) and their condition-dependence; some statuses are automatically lost if one ceases to work for the sponsoring employer. Achieving these statuses requires ceremonies of sorts—the filling in of various forms with the right answers, biometrics appointments and formal interviews, and the signing of statements in order to certify one's claims as true.

Even granting that all these things—cards, bills, and yes, people—have a worth which is independent of the worth afforded them by society, to stop there would be to miss important other facts about status and ranking which are afforded socially. To take an extreme but realistic example: whether or not it is genuinely metaphysically possible to lose one's status as a free person and become the property of someone else, it remains of crucial practical importance to one's life whether or not one lives in a country where slavery is permitted by the law and whether or not one is currently regarded as having the legal and social status of a slave. Such a social status might not affect your objective worth, but it will affect whether others provide help or resistance when you attempt to do, or not do, certain things—such as move or retire—and it will affect what you are (socially) permitted to do. In a less extreme example, whether or not one is a permanent resident or an F1 (student) visa holder affects one's legal entitlements and may legitimate certain kinds of discrimination against one. Permanent residents are permitted to accept full-time paid work off campus, and F1 visa holders may not be. Permanent residents may join the line for “US passports” when returning to the US, while F1 visa holders are sent to the longer “other passports” line. The same goes for institutional and less formal social statuses: students are ranked by GPA, borrowers are ranked by credit scores, martial artists are

ranked by belt color, soldiers by (literally) rank, and all these things affect what one is socially permitted to do: attend graduate school, borrow money, be taken seriously, give orders, reprimand, punish with impunity.

Such socially conferred rankings can be changed with speech acts. For this reason, we can take Langton's South African legislator as a genuine example of a subordinating speech act, even while conceding that there might be an important sense in which persons have value that mere speech could never change. If subordinating speech acts are magic, then they are a familiar kind of "social magic" which we see all the time.

7.2.2 *The Authority Problem*

Henceforth I'll assume that the South African Legislator example shows that subordinating speech acts are possible. But as Maitra (2012) notes, it is a further step to show that everyday denigrating speech can constitute a subordinating speech act. The problem is that the South African legislator seems to have a special role in society which gives him the authority to subordinate. With everyday denigrating speech, the speaker is unlikely to have such special powers. Consider the following three examples:

Subway Rider

An Arab woman is on a subway car crowded with people. An older white man walks up to her, and says, "Fuckin' Terrorist, go home. We don't need your kind here." He continues speaking in this manner to the woman, who doesn't respond. He speaks loudly enough that everyone else in the subway car hears his words clearly. All other conversation ceases. Many of the passengers turn to look at the speaker, but no one intervenes.⁹

Billboard

A billboard is put up in North Carolina with the slogan: "Real men provide. Real women appreciate it."¹⁰ Many people see the sign when they are driving by, and in news reports about the billboard.

Cross-burners

A working-class black family has recently moved into an overwhelmingly white and relatively well-to-do community. Through a variety of small gestures, their neighbors make it clear that they are not welcome in the community. One night,

⁹ This example is taken from Maitra 2012: 100.

¹⁰ This example is taken from an article on NPR's website: <http://www.npr.org/2017/02/28/517720434/billboard-about-gender-roles-sparks-debate-protest-in-north-carolina>

the family wakes up to find that a cross has been left burning on their front lawn. Whoever left the cross is long gone, so the family has no way to know who the culprits might be.¹¹

Each of these examples features an attempt to subordinate. In *Subway Rider*, the speaker tries to lower the status of his target by identifying her with an already disparaged group—terrorists—and orders her to leave the country (in the process implicating that she does not have permission to stay). In *Billboard*, the poster asserts that real (highly ranked) men play a certain role and implies that real (highly ranked) women do not, and should simply be grateful for the men. Against the background assumption that providing is a good thing, this attempts to rank providing men above non-providing men, but also providing men above women. Against the background assumption that everyone is supposed to stay in their assigned gender roles, it ranks non-providing women above providing women and women who are grateful to men above women who are not. The *cross-burners* use a conventionally racist symbol in an attempt to intimidate the family into moving, sending a clear message that—in virtue of their skin-color—the family do not have permission to live where they do.

But we have no reason to think that the speakers in these three examples of everyday denigrating speech speak with the authority of the South African legislator. In *Subway*, the speaker has no special authority to determine his target's rank or permission to stay in the country—he is not a judge, or a USCIS official. In *Billboard* and *Cross-burners* we don't know who the speakers are, and hence do not know whether they have authority. So how can such everyday attempts at subordination be successful subordinative speech acts? Maitra calls this the Authority Problem (Maitra 2012: 95). If everyday denigrating speech is to count—at least sometimes—as subordinating speech, then either (i) it must be possible to subordinate without authority or (ii) it is possible for ordinary speakers to acquire the requisite authority.

I hold that (ii) is the right answer here; subordinating speech acts require the speaker to have authority. One reason to think this is that subordination of the kind we are interested in here is a social activity. For someone to be subordinated it is not sufficient that an individual convey to them their subjective opinion that they are deserving of lower status.

¹¹ This example is taken from Maitra 2012: 101.

Such a declaration of the speaker's views may distress the target,¹² but it will not succeed in subordinating them any more than my preference for one \$5 note and five \$1s makes that combination worth more than a \$10 note (or someone who was neither a judge nor the owner of a slave could succeed in freeing one by uttering the words "you are now a free person" to them). Subordinating speech does not merely report on the *speaker's* preferences or personal opinions, rather it makes it the case that the target is lower ranked *in the relevant social grouping*.

A second reason to think authority is necessary is that subordinative speech acts are exercitive and verdictive (to use Austin's terminology). Exercitive speech acts set the permissibility of actions. If a kindergarten teacher says "Alice, you are to collect up everyone's drawings and Robbie, you may select the book for storytime" his utterance determines what Alice and Robbie are permitted to do. Since subordination revokes permission for activities and grants others the permission to discriminate, subordinative speech acts would be exercitive too.

Verdictive speech acts declare a verdict, as when an umpire shouts "out" when the ball bounces very close to the white line. When this happens, the ball is classified as out for the purposes of the game. Subordinative speech acts also declare a verdict—that the target is lower ranked than they were.

Both exercitive and verdictive speech acts generally require the speaker to have authority. If a team player shouts "No it wasn't!" after the umpire has shouted "out", the player's shout has no effect on the official scoreboard. The umpire's verdict stands, because she is the person with authority. Similarly, if Alice had replied "No! Maria can choose the story book!" this would not have been effective in determining who is permitted to perform which actions. In both verdictive and exercitive speech acts, the speaker requires authority. Subordinating speech is verdictive and exercitive, so the speaker requires authority.

7.3 A model for subordinating speech

Speech acts take place in conversations, broadly construed. There is a speaker, and an audience. Sometimes the audience is the speaker's intended

¹² Maitra reports on studies which confirm what is antecedently plausible: that denigrating speech can cause significant harm to its targets (Maitra 2012: 91).

audience—as in Subway—but the conversation might grow beyond that—as when parents, principals, or prosecutors come to see online postings. Sometimes a speaker is uncertain or unaware of their audience—as when one speaks on a radio show, or when one’s words are read hundreds of years later by an audience with very different social norms.

Using the word ‘conversation’ suggests that the audience will be able to reply, and they may be able to if they are face-to-face with the speaker, or if the thread of the conversation is preserved by written means. In other cases there is a danger that any reply will feel like a discussion about a past conversation, as when one says “I’ve been thinking about something you were saying last week . . .” In still other cases the audience may not know the identity of the speaker, so that the only possible method of reply is a public message that is perhaps more easily seen as addressed to the world at large. Examples of this last kind include open letters, written signs at protests, and other responses that one might expect to receive news coverage.

Conversations take place in a context. The context influences the conversation, and is influenced by it in turn. Context influences the conversation when it plays a role in determining the content of utterances (such as those containing indexicals), or the information communicated more broadly (as with conversational implicatures). It may make it the case that felicity conditions are satisfied, or not.

But the influence goes both ways. One feature commonly supposed to be a part of the conversational context is the *common ground*—the set of propositions which participants are presupposing for the purposes of the conversation (or at least behaving as if they do), and assuming (or behaving as if they assume) that other participants presuppose as well. Stalnaker (1999) calls this set of conversational presuppositions the Context Set and it helps to determine what will and won’t be an inappropriate conversational move.

One might initially imagine that one should only utter sentences all of whose presuppositions are already in the Context Set. But conversations are much more forgiving than this, thanks to what Lewis called the 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 *r*, then—*ceteris paribus* and within certain limits—presupposition *P* comes into existence at *t*” (Lewis 1979: 340).

Think of a presupposition “coming into existence” as that presupposition being added to the Context Set of the conversation. Then when we say something like “Even George liked the talk”, if the presupposition that George was less likely than most to like the talk is not already in the context set, then—*ceteris paribus* and within certain limits—that proposition is added to it.

Accommodation makes it harder than one might expect to say something which is inappropriate due to presupposition failure, because the fact that one’s assertion presupposes a proposition P is frequently sufficient for it to be added to the Context Set. Still, all this happens, as Lewis says, within certain limits. An important limit is that the presupposition is not contested. If someone says:

“Whadda ya mean, ‘even George?’” (Lewis 1979: 339)

then the presupposition is not accommodated and is not added to the context set. For present purposes it is worth emphasizing that the conversational participant who contests the presupposition need not justify their skepticism for accommodation to fail. The Context Set is a set of propositions uncontroversial among the participants of the conversation. Signaling one’s doubts is sufficient to keep a proposition out—you don’t need a good or persuasive argument.

Two of Lewis’s more famous examples of accommodation are especially suggestive: the first concerns the permissibility of actions, and the second the ranking of possible worlds with respect to similarity. In his Permissibility example Lewis outlines a scenario in which there is a master (who sets which actions are permissible) and a slave (whose actions are to be permissible or impermissible). Sometimes the master announces that certain actions are permissible or impermissible, and when he does, the truth of that utterance depends on where the boundary between permissible and impermissible actions is drawn. But the master is not merely describing the position of that boundary with his announcements; he can use the announcements themselves to shift the boundary:

“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". (Lewis 1979: 340).

Accommodation applied to permissions is relevant to our present topic because—as we noted before—a shift in the boundary of what is permissible is a key element in subordination.

The second example from Lewis that I want to remind you of is from (Lewis 1973: 67), where he suggests that the ranking of possible worlds with respect to similarity (which is required in order to evaluate Lewisian counterfactuals for truth) might be given by the context and, moreover, might be shifted by conversational participants in accord with the rule of accommodation. Lewis uses Quine's two counterfactuals about the Korean war to illustrate:

- (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.

Assume (simplifying a little) that a counterfactual is true just in case at the possible world most similar to the actual world at which the antecedent is true, the consequent is true. Now is the possible world most similar to ours in which Caesar is in command one where he uses the atomic bomb, or one where he uses catapults? Lewis observes that it depends on how we "resolve the vagaries of comparative similarity." On one approach, we focus on keeping Caesar's character similar, but put less emphasis on his knowledge of weapons—then the closest world with Caesar in command is one where he uses the atomic bomb. On another approach we emphasize Caesar's knowledge and familiarity (or lack of it) with particular kinds of weapons in our rankings with respect to similarity. Then the closest world with Caesar in command is one where he uses catapults. Given the first similarity ranking, (1) is true. Given the second, (2) is.

This ranking can be determined through accommodation. Suppose that we are in a conversation about the Korean war, and the vagaries of similarity are as yet unresolved. I opine:

- (3) If Caesar had been in command, he would have used the atomic bomb.

My utterance presupposes that the ranking on which Caesar's character is key is in place. You might respond in a way that accommodates that presupposition:

- (4) Yes, of course, but I don't think that means that the US should have been so ruthless; atomic bombs kill millions of civilians.

Here my presupposed ranking is allowed to stand, and becomes part of the context set of the conversation. But things would have been different had you been less inclined to accommodate my presupposition. Suppose you had scathingly replied:

- (5) Oh, you think Caesar would have used a weapon he didn't even know about, do you?

Then you would have contested my attempt to add my preferred similarity ranking to the conversation, and hence it would not have been added to the Context-Set after all. This second Lewisian example of accommodation is relevant because the remaining criterion for subordination involves ranking too—only this time of people, rather than possible worlds.

7.3.1 *Subordination, common ground, and accommodation*

RANKING

As with worlds, so with people. Suppose that in addition to containing an ordering of possible worlds with respect to closeness, the conversational context contains an ordering of people with respect to status—a ranking—on which higher status is better, lower status worse.

In principle we could think of adding a ranking of persons to a conversational scoreboard as simply adding a set of propositions describing the ranking to the Context Set. But I find it much more vivid to think of it as adding a pre-ordered set (Γ, \leq) : the elements of the set are people (or groups of people) and $a \leq b$ iff a is ranked lower than b . If the context starts out silent on the relative rankings of the elements, then the second element of the pair—the relation—is the empty set. Contrast this with one kind of inegalitarian context, in which people in one group are ranked higher than all others, and also with what I'll call an equality

context, in which every group is explicitly ranked equal. The basic idea is easy to visualize:



Figure 1. Silent Inegalitarian and Equality rankings

Here is an example of how ranking might be changed by exploiting the rule of accommodation:

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."

Theo's utterance is superficially a compliment, but it presupposes that people differ in ability at logic by gender, and that girls are lower ranked in this respect than non-girls (if things were otherwise "for a girl" would be redundant). If this presupposition is accommodated by Dani and Kirsch (perhaps Dani says awkwardly "ah, thanks, you're really good too. What did you get for number 4?") then the presupposition is added to the Context Set, even if neither Dani nor Kirsch actually believes it. More formally, the following ordered pair of sets becomes part of the context-set: $\{\langle g,n \rangle, \langle g,n \rangle\}$, where g is the set of girls and n the set of non-girls. More pictorially:



Suppose instead that Kirsch speaks up:

- (6) Whadda ya mean for a girl, Theo? All the girls in this class are better than us!

In this case the presupposition is contested and so the new ranking is not added to the common ground. This is an example of speaking up to resist the imposition of a new ranking on the context.

PERMISSIONS

Accommodation can also be a mechanism for settling the boundaries of permissibility. In Lewis's famous example, the two interlocutors are antecedently established as master and slave, so that one person already has authority to set the boundaries of permissible action, while the other does not.

"For some reason—coercion, deference, common purpose—two people are both willing that one of them should be under the control of the other. (At least within certain limits, in a certain sphere of action, so long as certain conditions prevail.) Call one the slave, the other the master" (Lewis 1979: 340).

But we need to consider cases in which such an agreement has not been reached. It won't in general be true that the subordinated have agreed to be under the control of their subordinators! So here we need to solve the Authority Problem: how can speech make it the case that one participant has the authority to shift the boundaries of permissibility for another, if this is not antecedently established?

AUTHORITY AS HIGHER RANK

One solution to the Authority Problem is to note that authority (over someone) is itself a kind of ranking relation. To say that the referee has authority to decide whether or not the ball counts as out is to rank the referee higher than others. To say that the teacher has the authority to tell the children what they are and are not permitted to do is to rank the teacher higher than the children. And as we already noted, ranking relations can be presupposed as a part of conversational context, and can be shifted through accommodation.

Street Football

Some children are playing football in the street outside my house. They're using their coats to mark the goals, and they all play the game at school, but there hasn't been a lot of explicit talk about the rules for the current, informal game. Four of the children are playing, and three are sitting on a nearby wall, watching. One of the players, JP, misjudges a kick and sends the ball far off to one side, into a nearby garden. One of the watchers, Alice, calls "Out!" just as the referee normally does at school.

Alice's utterance presupposes that she has the authority to decide when the ball is out. The other children can either accommodate this presupposition ("Yeah," says JP defensively, "my lace was untied") or contest it ("You don't get to say when the ball is out. You aren't a teacher,

Alice”) But—within certain limits—if no one speaks up, Alice will be assigned the role (and subsequent authority) of referee and this will have consequences for later events in the game. Suppose, towards the end of the game, there is a question of whether JP’s hand touched the ball before he scored a goal. If Alice calls “Handball!—that didn’t count” this is more likely to be respected in the case where her initial assumption of the referee’s authority was allowed to stand throughout the game, than in the case where the players spoke up against her attempts to make herself the referee at the beginning.

I said “within certain limits.” Two limits come to mind. The first is that Alice must not already be so low in the hierarchy that no one takes her attempt to assume authority seriously. This might happen if Alice is a small child and the other players are in their teens. Tiny Alice calls “out”, and the other players smile (“Look at Alice pretending to be the referee! She’s such a cutie!”) but ignore her. One interpretation of what happens in such a case is that Alice’s presupposition (that she has verdictive authority) is in conflict with a ranking assumption already in the common ground (namely that she is too subordinate to referee). Her initial speech act thus fails for lack of authority.

There is a second way things can go wrong for Alice: the players can revolt later in the game. At the beginning they took Alice’s refereeing seriously and Alice is treated as the *de facto* referee. But then she makes a particularly difficult and controversial call and this leads to her authority being questioned. “My hand was nowhere near the ball!” JP protests. The other players and spectators agree. One of the spectators steps in to contradict Alice: “OK, that was a goal. 6-12. Shirts have the ball” and the game continues from there. Here Alice succeeded in assuming authority, but it was later revoked by the group as a whole.

We might expect this withdrawal of authority at a later stage to take more effort and more consensus than refusal to accommodate would have taken at the start of the game. This is especially true for JP and the players on JP’s team. At the beginning of the game, when Alice first says “Out”, they can prevent her having the requisite authority simply by saying “You don’t get to say when the ball is out. You aren’t even that good at football, Alice.” But once Alice’s role has entered the common ground, if JP alone refuses to accept her call when it goes against him, he looks like a bad sportsman, resisting Alice’s authority merely because it suits him now. The other players and spectators are more likely to allow his rejection of

Alice's first call than they are to allow it later, though if he gets the other players on his side he might.

The ineffectiveness of JP's later objections is surprising given that we normally think of the common ground as presupposed by everyone in the conversation. Why in the imagined scenario, is it harder (though not impossible) for JP to get Alice's rank with respect to him revoked later in the game than it is at the beginning?

One mechanism that would explain this would be if authority—higher rank—also tended to bestow the ability to change the permissibility of making changes to the common ground. This would be a special case of the fact that high rank makes more actions permissible and fewer impermissible. Having high rank would also make more changes to the context set permissible for a speaker, in addition to making new exercitive and verdictive speech acts possible. Having low rank tends to lower one's right to change the context set—especially when the change is contested by someone with high rank. Consider one final example:

Snow day

Parent: OK, it's time to put our shoes on now.

Small Child: No. Not putting my shoes on!

Parent: You have to put your shoes on if you're going to go out in the snow.

Child: No I don't!

In the wake of this conversation, is the child *permitted* to go outside in the snow without their shoes on? I think the answer is clearly "no," even though the child vociferously resisted the parent's attempt to draw the boundary of permissibility so that it made the action impermissible. If the speaker's rank is sufficiently high compared to that of the person who is trying to resist their attempts to change the context set—teacher vs. student, referee vs. supporter, legislator vs. protester—the higher ranked person is permitted to change permissions without the lower ranked person's accommodation. What we have seen in football is that high rank can be determined through accommodation if everyone else plays along at the beginning. And if people play along for long enough, high rank can become very hard to revoke.

So here is where we are: the project of construing everyday denigrating speech as a subordinating speech act faces the Authority Problem. That the speaker have sufficient authority to subordinate is one of the felicity conditions of subordinating speech acts. But it is hard to see how people

with no antecedent authority—everyday speakers—come to have that. What I've proposed above is that the everyday speaker utters a sentence with two kinds of presupposition: (i) that the target is subordinated and (ii) that the speaker has sufficient authority to subordinate them. Presuppositions of the first kind speak to the target's low rank, restricted permissions, and the permissions of others over them. Presuppositions of the second kind speak to the speaker's high rank—their authority to subordinate. Both rank and permission boundaries can be determined through accommodation, so if no one in the audience objects, these presuppositions become part of the conversation's Context Set. Once it is a part of the context set that, say, participant A has high rank and participant B has low rank, it becomes much harder for B to change this aspect of the Context Set, because one of the permissions that is restricted by subordination is permission to change the presuppositions of the conversation.

The presuppositions of one conversation are just that. Being subordinated on the subway does not mean that your citizenship is revoked. The unopposed speaker in Subway changes the presuppositions of the conversation they are in, so that the conversational scoreboard presupposes that the target does not have permission to stay. Since the target will leave that conversation behind and keep their citizenship, one might think that no real or lasting harm is done. But against this consider, first, that people are commonly unable to leave behind conversations in which they are subordinated, for example, when the subordinator is a colleague or a family member or a classmate. If the subordination is not stopped today, they will live with it tomorrow, and next week, and next year. And second, socially-determined permissions are, in the end, determined by a group's beliefs and decisions about what others are and aren't permitted to do. The laws of citizenship are in place because of decisions based on a group's conversations about what those laws should be, and if they were ever to change—if, say, the US decided to revoke citizenship from Muslims as Germany revoked it from Jews in 1935—it would be because a larger group of people—participants in what one might think of as a national conversation—had agreed that the targets had no entitlement to citizenship. Subordination within one conversation on the subway is subordination on a much smaller scale but when it happens it confronts us with the evidence that it can happen, and it makes us wonder whether it is happening elsewhere. Perhaps our fellow citizens are gradually adding to their conversational scoreboards—in many places, talking

with many others—the claim that we are worth less, that we are permitted less. That matters.

7.4 Understanding speaking up

We can finally ask and answer a more focused version of the question that opened this paper: what are some of the ways in which speaking up can make it the case that all is not equal, and that subordinating speech fails?

7.4.1 *Refusal to accommodate*

The most obvious way in which speaking up can thwart subordinating speech is by constituting a refusal to accommodate. If a bystander is already a part of the conversation, they may challenge the presuppositions of the subordinating utterance and this will often be sufficient on its own to prevent the speech act from succeeding.

The subordinator is, we noted, making two different kinds of presupposition; one about their own ranking (sufficient to subordinate) and one which will change the ranking of the target and the permissions of the target and others relative to the target. We might call these the authority presupposition and the subordinating presupposition. To prevent accommodation on the authority presupposition, Third Party might say something like:

- (7) Sit down! You don't get to tell other people what to do!

This challenges Denigrator's authority to subordinate—which can cause their subordinative speech act to fail—but it doesn't directly address the other presuppositions about the rank of the target or what they are allowed to do. For all Third Party has said they might agree that Target should “go home.”¹³

On the other hand, if Third Party wants to intervene on the Subordination Presupposition instead, they might say:

- (8) What the hell, man? She's not a terrorist and she's got just as much right to be here as you do!

¹³ Compare: Augustine: “Sit down, Arabella.” Nevada: “You don't get to tell my children what to do. (Pause) Sit down, Arabella.” This challenges Augustine's attempt to assume authority, but makes it clear that this is consistent with Arabella's subordination.

This thwarts the attempted down-ranking and the attempted shifting of permissions (she's allowed to live anywhere she likes without justifying herself to you). It thus prevents the subordination. Moreover, in doing so it also presupposes that the speaker lacks the authority to make those changes, and so indirectly prevents the speaker from acquiring the necessary authority to subordinate.

Of course, one act of speaking up could directly challenge both kinds of presupposition, as in

- (9) She's not a terrorist, you idiot, she's allowed to live anywhere she likes.

At this point we should note two things which pull in opposite directions—one in favor of speaking up and one against. First, the interventions in the case above are very easy for Third Party. Third Party does not need to have a carefully worked out argument against Subordinator's presuppositions; they do not need to be able to argue Subordinator to a standstill on the finer points of immigration reform or the advantages and disadvantages of reasoning with stereotypes. All they need to do to prevent the accommodation in this case is to add their refusal to take this presupposition for granted to the conversational record.

But the second point is that while this is enough in the case above, prevention of subordination can be harder in other cases. Suppose, for example, Third Party is present when the South African legislator in Langton's case says "Blacks will no longer be allowed to vote." Could Third Party have prevented the subordination simply by saying (10) and/or (11)?

- (10) That isn't up to you!
 (11) Everyone is allowed to vote!

No. Here Third Party's problem is a more entrenched version of JP's attempt to revoke the referee's authority a long way into the football game; the South African legislator already has authority—he didn't acquire it through this speech act—and Third Party's rank is insufficiently high to change that. Preventing subordination here requires, as we noted in the football case, something more like an organized revolt among many of the people over whom the legislator claims authority.

In other cases there might be a more strategic decision to be made about whether resisting the speaker's presupposition concerning their

own authority, or resisting any subordinating presuppositions, is more important.

7.4.2 *Broadening the conversation*

Refusal to accommodate—where accommodation is required by the subordinator—is one way that speaking up can be effective. In fact this can work even if one is not a participant in the conversation in which the subordinating speech act occurs, so that it is, in the first place, only the accommodation of *other people* that is expected.

Suppose Kirsch is—unknown to Dani and Theo—in the next room. Kirsch overhears Theo's sexist comment to Dani, "You're really good at logic, for a girl." Since Dani and Theo are unaware of Kirsch's presence, it seems unlikely that Theo requires anything from Kirsch in order for his subordinating presupposition to re-rank the Context Set. Kirsch is not, at the outset, a conversational participant.

Still, it is easy for Kirsch to change this. He can call out loudly enough that Theo and Dani hear him, and in a way that makes it obvious that it is their conversation he is joining. Then his response will leave a mark on their conversational scoreboard. If he shouts "Yeah, and she's pretty good at Latin too," then he straightforwardly accommodates the subordinating presupposition. If he shouts "Whaddya mean 'for a girl' Theo?" then the presupposition is resisted and the attempted subordinative act is unsuccessful.

Is it always possible to join a conversation? It is usually very easy. There are few situations (after elementary school) in which "We weren't talking to you" will be effective in keeping someone out of a discussion. Indeed, it can be very difficult for the original conversational participants to prevent the broadening of a conversation, though they may well want to, given that the presence of new people will tend to shrink the common ground. The participation group of a conversation, we might say, tends to be open—there is no barrier to others joining.

Are there any exceptions? We might get some in cases of very clear hierarchy. That hierarchy might be clear because it is extreme and robust—prison guards might effortlessly ignore an inmate's attempt to join their conversation concerning the merits of various football teams. Or the hierarchy might be clear because it is very formal and explicitly codified in official rules. The performance of certain legal acts requires having appropriate standing, and who has it is determined by the rules.

The legitimate tennis referee's verdictive speech act will not fail because of a fan's interjection.

This suggests that this second method of speaking up is often available, but that possible barriers can include a potential speaker-upper's inferior rank in the conversational ranking.

7.4.3 *Questioning the context set*

Successful speaking up will be much harder if the subordinating presupposition is already a part of the conversation's common ground. (Think of this as analogous to arguing that a current law ought to be changed, vs. arguing that we ought not to adopt a new law currently under consideration.) Examples might include challenging a sexist statement made in a conversation taking place in a highly sexist society, challenging a racist statement while attending a white supremacist rally, or confronting your family on their common prejudices over a holiday meal.

Take the white-supremacist rally case. Suppose a protester holds up a sign, "Many colours, one working class! Smash racism!" It's common ground that most of the rally-attendees are white supremacists, and because of this the written sign will have quite different effects than e.g. a picture of the same poster posted on your Facebook page (assuming most of your friends aren't white supremacists) or featured in a newspaper story about the rally.

Let's think of holding up the sign at the rally as an assertion expressing a "We're all in this together" kind of sentiment—an attempt to add an equality ranking to the context set. It seems unlikely that the sign will succeed in adding that equality ranking to the context.

But why isn't this just a case like Kirsch joining Theo and Dani's conversation above? The Context Set is supposed to be common ground, and the protester clearly doesn't accept the white supremacists' ranking. I think it is helpful to think of the rally as a context in which white supremacists are ranked over others, and that simply by expressing a view which is at odds with that, the protesters reveal themselves as being non-white supremacist and moreover anti-white supremacist, and hence of very low rank in the social context of the rally. Given our working hypothesis that the authority to change the Context Set is associated with rank in that Context Set, we can see why the protesters are unable to alter the subordinative ranking in the common ground—they don't have sufficient rank at a white-supremacist rally.

So, is there any point in attending a white-supremacist rally with a protest sign—perhaps at some danger to oneself—given that anti-subordinative speaking up is less effective here? There are non-speech-act-related ways in which a protest might be able to make a difference: any rally attendees who are having doubts will learn that there are people whom they can contact to talk about transitioning out of the group. The presence of protesters dispels any illusions the rally attendees might have harbored that their views are held by all. People who read the newspapers and see an image of the sign might be pleased or relieved to see that some protesters attended. The protesters might also feel that it is right to stand up and object to white supremacism regardless of whether it will make a difference.

But there might be a small speech-act-related effect too. Ordinary conversational contexts—unlike the rally—don't generally presuppose that anyone who challenges white supremacy is so lowly that they may be ignored. And if a subordinating claim is made in a broader social context, the people who object to it may have high social status: it could be your boss, your professor, or your elected representative. Even your head of state. To the extent that the supremacists want their beliefs to be held more widely, they will need to express them outside of their own rallies, in broader conversations. And in broader conversations, protesters are not automatically ranked so low that they may be ignored. Within a broader context the protesters would be able to prevent the supremacist's desired ranking from being added to the common ground. Hence the protesters are a reminder to the supremacists that arguments that work on your allies—or in situations where you have authority—won't always work on the world at large.

7.4.4 *Adding equality to the context set*

There were two features of the Protesters at a Rally case that reduced the effectiveness of speaking up. The first was that common ground already contained a ranking. The second was that that ranking subordinated those who protested it—in virtue of their protesting it. But these same two mechanisms can also be made to fight subordination. Suppose we can engineer things so that the Context Sets of our conversations are equality contexts, where the common ground includes a ranking that makes e.g. all races equal, or all genders equal, or ranks people equally regardless of disability. Then any attempt to introduce a different

ranking has to contend with the fact that an equality ranking is already in place. Consider the following example:

FEMINIST DEPARTMENT CHAIR

Dave, a middle-aged white man, becomes the chair of his university department. He's aware that the society in which his department is embedded works against women succeeding in the workplace in a variety of ways, but he also believes—accurately—that many of his colleagues regard this as an injustice, and would be pleased to see things change. He decides to make department meetings and events—which he respectively runs, and often gives short speeches at—a place where he will be careful to be explicit about assuming that all genders are equal. For example, during the first faculty meeting he tells his colleagues:

“I know that we've often had the newest member of the department take the minutes, but this year we're also very excited that our two newest faculty members are women. One of the ways in which women are sometimes treated unfairly in academia is by being given additional administrative tasks. And to be honest, I don't want to use two of our assistant professors to do a job that can be capably done by one of our administrative staff. So starting today the minutes will be taken by our departmental office assistant, Mike.”

And then later in a talk to the graduate students: “One thing that I want us to do better on this year is not leaving the department common area in a mess. I think what has tended to happen is that some of us leave our mugs in the sink, or don't empty the dishwasher when it's clean—and then, in part because of gendered norms in our society—it's always Mindy and Tamara (for those of you who don't know that's our undergraduate secretary and department manager) who end up cleaning up after us all. But I'm sure I speak for all of us when I say that we don't want our department to be an environment where that happens. We can do better than that. So I'm not going to put up a note or anything, but what I'd like to happen is that any time Mindy or Tamara come into the kitchen there's just no work like that for them to do. So maybe that will mean never leaving your cup in the sink. Maybe that will mean occasionally emptying the dishwasher and maybe it will occasionally mean putting someone else's forgotten mug in the dishwasher. Everyone get that?”

The chair's intention, with these utterances and others like them, is to create a context within the department within which it is generally assumed that women are socially equal to men, and in which discrimination on the basis of gender is not permitted. In particular it can't be assumed to be otherwise just because things have been different in the past, or because it is otherwise outside of the department. There's nothing special about the minutes or common area examples—they are simply used to signal that gender issues matter, that the chair of the

department takes them seriously, and that he is trying to create a community that is better than the default. If things go well—if the efforts are consistent, if the chair is respected, if other department members are not too sick or too stressed to care—it can come to be presupposed more generally around the department that gender issues are taken seriously, that we are a department that tries to do better than they have in the past and better than the society in which they are embedded, and that women are equal to men. And this presupposition can block attempts to make subordination work through the mechanism of accommodation.

But it can be quite tricky to change a social context like this. One way a group might go about it is by developing an official, written policy. The US declaration of independence begins “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal . . .” and many corporations, universities, and other organizations develop official policies and handbooks intended to ensure the equal. Society as a whole might even regard its laws as a statement of “policy” on the treatment of persons, including what kind of discrimination is forbidden on the basis of membership in various classes.

But it would be a mistake to assume that the adoption of an explicit written policy is sufficient to make that policy something that is presupposed in conversations among the groups to whom the policy applies. There can be great variation in how seriously official policy is taken. If the policy says that discrimination on the basis of gender is not allowed, but the actual culture of an organization involves widespread discrimination based on gender, then the official policy may widely be seen as “bullshit” (to use Frankfurt (1988)’s memorable phrase). That is, it might be up on a website somewhere, or in a rarely-read employee handbook, but people do not think it follows that the group, or the leaders of the group, are assuming (even for the sake of the conversation) that it is *true*. Rather, it may widely be regarded as something the company has to do for instrumental reasons (e.g. to protect themselves against lawsuits) rather than anything aimed at truth.

7.4.5 *Subordinating subordination*

Here is a fifth way in which speaking up can have consequences for subordinative speech acts: it can be used to preemptively subordinate the subordinators. Suppose a context is such that people are not ranked by race, but they are ranked based on other characteristics. One of the

characteristics that lowers one's rank is *racism*. Racists are regarded as worse than non-racists, and discrimination against them (e.g. in hiring, or in invitations to holiday dinners) is permitted. Calling someone a racist is an insult, and people go to some lengths to avoid being thought of as racist. Such a context makes it harder for racist subordinative speech acts to succeed, because just by uttering the words, the speaker downranks themselves and reduces their own ability to influence the Context Set. We might call such a context anti-racist.¹⁴ The question of how one creates an anti-racist context is complex, but our model suggests that subordinating speech acts that target racism could work. Indeed, some protest posters provide illustrations: in one, Nazis are compared to spiders crawling over Europe ("One by one, his legs will be broken") in another, an image of a person placing a swastika in a trashcan is accompanied with the slogan "Put Nazis in their place!"

7.5 Conclusion

Each of the strategies above raises many more questions. The last strategy, for example, employs the subordinator's tools against them, and one might wonder whether these are tools that the good guys should use. However, the focus of this paper was not on what we ought to do, but rather on the more modest question of whether and how speaking up can be effective. It developed—starting with the work of Langton and Maitra—and then assumed, a certain model of subordinating speech. On this model, persons, or groups of persons, can feature in a ranking in the context set. Ranking affects one's permissions—what one is socially entitled to do—and other people's permissions to discriminate against one. It also grants or denies authority to subordinate and prevents subordination by giving or withholding permission to change the context set. Section 4 then showed that on this assumption there are five ways in which speaking up can make a difference: it can prevent accommodation (both in conversations in which one is already a participant, and in conversations which one merely overhears and then joins); it can alter an already established context set; it can add an equality ranking to the context set; and it can subordinate specific subordinators, such as racists or

¹⁴ It is not anti-subordinative in general because it subordinates racists.

sexists, thereby undermining their ability to subordinate. The model also revealed certain features and limitations of these strategies. For example, it showed that the first strategy—preventing accommodation—does not require one to have a well-worked-out argument against the subordinator, but merely to disagree in a way that would be recognized as such by the other participants in the conversation. But the model also suggests that in a context in which one's ranking is very low, it may be impossible to undo subordination, because one's low ranking denies one the authority to change the context set. In these circumstances one might think that there is a special onus on higher ranked individuals to do the work of undoing unjust subordination.

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