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ABSTRACT
In this paper I identify a distinctive kind of gaslighting: communicative gaslighting. Communicative gaslighters intentionally misrepresent the communicative properties of an utterance—their own or their target's—in a way which functions to undermine the target's confidence in her abilities as a communicator. I argue that we can gaslight people as both speakers and hearers, and about (among other properties) the locutionary, perlocutionary, and illocutionary dimensions of utterances. Communicative gaslighting is concerning because not only does it undermine targets' communicative agency, but also it can contribute to a general decay of communicative conventions.

> "Oh, my Lolita, I have only words to play with!"
> Humbert Humbert, *Lolita* (Nabokov, 1959)

1. Introduction

Humbert Humbert, the unreliable narrator of Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1959), is an expert at gaslighting, a kind of manipulation which involves encouraging someone to doubt their memories and perceptions in a way that undermines their self-trust. As well as gaslighting adolescent Dolores ('Lolita'), Humbert also gaslights his readers, telling us that it is Dolores who seduces him. He commits grotesque crimes against a child, yet spins an artful narrative alienating us from our gut responses and making us doubt our powers of interpretation.

One can gaslight not only *with* words, as Humbert does masterfully, but also *about* words. Humbert offers a demonstration of this, too. Early in the novel, Charlotte, mother of Dolores, discovers Humbert's diary, in which he describes his paedophilic desires for her daughter. When confronted, Humbert tells her that it is all a hallucination, that she is crazy, and that the diary is a draft of a novel. He tells her that her name and Dolores's name are used in the text 'by mere chance' (1959: 90).

By encouraging Charlotte to doubt her interpretations of his words, Humbert undermines Charlotte's trust in her communicative competencies. I propose we call

this practice 'communicative gaslighting'. A person engaging in communicative gaslighting intentionally misrepresents the communicative properties of an utterance in a way which functions to induce self-doubt in the target about her abilities to use and interpret language. The gaslighter might misrepresent, for example, the semantic content of the utterance, its illocutionary force, or its perlocutionary effect. The target can be encouraged to doubt her interpretation of not only the gaslighter's utterances, but also her own utterances.

In §2, I offer an account of gaslighting simpliciter, and in §3 I delineate communicative gaslighting in particular. In §4, §5, and §6, I explore some of the forms communicative gaslighting can take. In §7, I show that paying attention to communicative gaslighting has two significant pay-offs. Firstly, it facilitates a more fine-grained explanation of how gaslighting undermines epistemic agency. Different kinds of gaslighting undermine different kinds of epistemic agency, and communicative gaslighting undermines communicative self-trust in particular. Secondly, it draws our attention to an underappreciated hazard of gaslighting. Communicative gaslighting, especially when practised by influential figures like Donald Trump, can undermine belief in linguistic conventions and thereby erode those conventions themselves, rendering communication more challenging.

2. What is Gaslighting?

Gaslighting is so-called due to Hamilton, Patrick (1939) Gas Light Constable. In the 1944 film adaptation (Cukor 1944), Gregory marries Paula with the secret goal of acquiring her jewels. When he searches for these jewels in their attic, his use of the attic lights makes the gas lights elsewhere in the house grow dimmer. Paula notices this dimming, but Gregory tells her that she is imagining it. His long-term strategy is to convince her that she is going mad.

Manipulative behaviour similar to Gregory's treatment of Paula is now typically characterised as 'gaslighting'. Psychologists and domestic abuse charities encourage us to be alert to gaslighting in relationships, where partners may accuse us of imagining things or feign ignorance of past behaviours.[1] Politicians are sometimes accused of gaslighting the public, too, by encouraging us to doubt our memory of cultural events and the role politicians played in them (Carpenter 2018).

Despite its buzzword status, 'gaslighting' is tricky to define. Philosopher Kate Abramson defines it as 'a form of emotional manipulation in which the gaslighter tries (consciously or not) to induce in someone the sense that her reactions, perceptions, memories and/or beliefs are not just mistaken, but utterly without grounds' (2014: 1). I will use this account as a starting point for answering several questions about gaslighting.

Firstly, does gaslighting require an intention to produce a specific effect? Abramson thinks so: she claims that the gaslighter 'aims to destroy the possibility of disagreement by so radically undermining another person that she has nowhere left to stand from which to disagree, no standpoint from which her words might constitute genuine disagreement (2014: 10). Unlike mere dismissals or denials, gaslighting is marked by a 'destructive impulse' (2014: 12)—the gaslighter seeks to destroy the victim's self-trust.

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[1] See Stern 2018, and 'What is gaslighting?', National Domestic Violence Hotline, https://www.thehotline.org/resources/what-is-gaslighting/, accessed July 7, 2023.

Similarly, Andrew Spear attributes to the gaslighter a 'strong desire to neutralise his victim's ability to criticise him' (2020: 230).

Yet Abramson and Spear also observe that some people who are aptly described as gaslighters may not report such intentions. Abramson therefore suggests that a gaslighter may have these intentions subconsciously, as 'basic or underlying desires' (2014: 8). I am wary that our underlying desires are rather inaccessible, both to ourselves and to observers, which will make it difficult to adjudicate on whether someone has engaged in gaslighting. I suggest instead that we think of gaslighting in functional terms—it typically functions to undermine the target's trust in her epistemic faculties. Gaslighters might also consciously aim at producing this effect, but they need not. Utterances with this function will typically involve accusations that the target is defective in some way—crazy, paranoid, etc. Humbert Humbert, for example, tells Charlotte not just that she is wrong, but that she is hallucinating and crazy.

Secondly, do gaslighters necessarily misrepresent the world? Gregory certainly does. The lights are dimming, but he denies this. So too does Humbert, who misrepresents the nature of the reflections in his diary. Yet Abramson thinks that the mechanism of gaslighting need not be misrepresentation. If gaslighting is behaviour which functions to undermine someone's self-trust, there are many ways to do this—one could also threaten the target or refuse to engage with them until they change their position. Note, for example, that Humbert not only tells Charlotte she is crazy, but also warns her that her accusations will ruin her life (1959: 90).

However, cases of gaslighting typically regarded as paradigmatic—like Gregory's treatment of Paula—do involve misrepresentation, and indeed, this misrepresentation is a central feature. Spear, similarly, characterises gaslighting as paradigmatically an epistemic phenomenon, whereby gaslighters provide fabricated evidence to the victim that their epistemic and perceptual capacities are defective, so as to erode the victim's self-trust (2020). Henceforth, I will assume that gaslighting involves misrepresentation.

This leads to a related third question. If paradigmatic gaslighting involves misrepresentation, must this misrepresentation be deliberate? Gregory and Humbert certainly both say things they know to be false. Yet Abramson claims that some gaslighters may believe their own false assertions (2014). Paul-Mikhail Catapang Podosky, similarly, describes a 'cut and dry' case of gaslighting in which a woman reports a man brushing up against her bottom, to which a colleague responds, in good faith, 'I'm sure it was innocent' (2020: 210). This colleague does not deliberately misrepresent the world, yet Podosky claims his behaviour is appropriately described as gaslighting because repeated experiences of responses like his are apt to cause the woman to doubt her epistemic capacities.

Podosky therefore proposes a disjunctive account of gaslighting, according to which gaslighting can sometimes be in good faith, that is, a gaslighter can lack intentions to deceive or undermine. For good faith behaviour to qualify as gaslighting, it must satisfy the additional criterion of being likely to cause the hearer to doubt her interpretive abilities on account of her being pre-disposed to do so due to being a member of a socially marginalised group (2020). Podosky holds that only some people can be victims of unintentional gaslighting—those whose social position render them disproportionately likely to experience self-doubt.

One may have reservations about a definition of gaslighting which allows that a person who misguidedly but in good faith attempts to correct someone's beliefs

could be engaging in gaslighting. These reservations might stem from an inclination to think of gaslighting as an action for which individual agents are blameworthy. Provided they have not been negligent or reckless with regards to learning how their utterances might reinforce self-doubt in people from marginalised groups, it seems possible that a person who engages in gaslighting, as per Podosky's account, could fail to meet the epistemic and control conditions for blameworthiness. This could be so even if their actions, combined with the actions of many other people, contribute to the reinforcement of oppressive structures.

I think we should infer from this that there are different kinds of gaslighting, with different moral profiles. For the rest of this paper, I will use 'gaslighting' to refer to intentional misrepresentation which has the function of undermining the target's epistemic self-trust. I consider this the paradigmatic form of gaslighting. Such gaslighting is intentional with respect to it being misrepresentation, but it is not necessarily intentional with regards to it undermining the target's self-trust. A virtuous communicator cannot accidentally engage in gaslighting: if you abstain from intentional misrepresentation (be that lying, misleading, or some other form), you cannot qualify as a gaslighter on this account. But for a communicator who does engage in misrepresentation, there is always a possibility that they could end up gaslighting someone, even if they do not intend to undermine the target's self-trust.

One might gaslight someone in this way by denying their accurate reports of events and states of affairs, or by telling them events happened when they did not. These statements will typically include accusations or implications that the victim's mistake was not by chance, but rather a symptom of their epistemic deficiencies. Such gaslighting is often extended over time, consisting of multiple incidents, and the moral valence of a single act of gaslighting is best understood in the context of this pattern.

Gaslighting has serious political and psychological ramifications. It is deployed disproportionately against oppressed groups, and likely harms these groups more severely, on account of their having diminished self-trust to begin with. It is also an effective means of discouraging and suppressing complaints about oppression, and thereby of preserving oppressive practices—one way to shut down complaints about sexism and racism, for example, is to convince complainants that they are imagining things.

Regardless of the target's social position, gaslighting can cause immediate and long-term psychological harm. Being encouraged to doubt her basic epistemic faculties can cause a person considerable distress, and over time can psychologically destroy her by leaving her with no trust in her abilities to perceive and understand the world. Gaslighters also often exploit bonds of trust, like those in intimate relationships. Paula, for example, trusts that her husband will tell her the truth, and he exploits this. Domestic abusers often exploit their victim's trust to trap them in the abusive relationship—by diminishing the victim's confidence that she can navigate and interpret the world independently, they render her dependent on her abuser.

3. Gaslighting and Communication

Different kinds of gaslighting function to undermine different aspects of a person's self-trust. Some forms of gaslighting encourage the victim to doubt her abilities as a perceiver. Gregory, for example, induces Paula to doubt her ability to see whether the lights are dimming, that is, whether she has adequate perceptual capabilities.

Other forms encourage the victim to doubt her abilities as a thinker. Abramson discusses a case where a woman reports leaving philosophy due to repeated sexist micro-aggressions, only to be told by fellow students that she had misinterpreted or overreacted to these incidents (2014: 5). These students do not deny that the events happened, and as such do not challenge the victim's perceptual abilities; rather, they claim that she erred in assuming that these experiences formed a pattern and could be attributed to the same cause. They imply that she lacks the ability to interpret the world accurately.

Finally, some kinds of gaslighting, like Humbert's interaction with Charlotte, encourage victims to doubt their abilities as communicators.[2] This kind of gaslighting has received rather less attention in the gaslighting literature. Sometimes a gaslighter encourages their target to doubt not whether she perceives or interprets the world correctly, but rather whether she grasps the rules and conventions of language.

I am not the first to draw attention to gaslighting about communication. Podosky draws a helpful distinction between first-order and second-order gaslighting (2020). An utterance qualifies as first-order gaslighting, on his view, if it is 'apt to cause hearers to doubt their interpretive abilities without doubting the accuracy of their concepts' (2020: 208). For example, a gaslighter might deny that an instance of sexual harassment is appropriately described as such on the grounds that, contrary to the victim's belief, the behaviour was actually accidental. This involves challenging the victim's ability to interpret the experience, but not her understanding of harassment.[3]

Podosky contrasts this with second-order gaslighting, which occurs when an utterance is 'apt to cause hearers to doubt their interpretive abilities in virtue of doubting the accuracy of their concepts' (2020: 208). For example, a second-order gaslighter might respond to a woman's report of sexual harassment with, 'That's not sexual harassment. It's so trivial' (Podosky 2020). This gaslighter does not reject the victim's account of what took place. Instead, they reject her understanding of sexual harassment, claiming it is not appropriately applied in this context.

Podosky's distinction helps us see that gaslighting can occur at different linguistic orders. First-order gaslighting leaves a target's grasp of language unchallenged, but second-order gaslighting does not. When a gaslighter casts doubt on their target's grasp of a concept, they can undermine that target's confidence in herself not only as a thinker, but also as a communicator, since we can think of concepts, roughly, as the meanings of words. If you do not grasp a particular concept, you do not understand a particular word and are thus defective to some extent as a communicator.

However, we can undermine a person's confidence in their abilities as a communicator in many ways, not just by challenging their grasp of concepts. We can challenge, for example, their ability to interpret or deploy the rules of syntax and grammar, or speech act conventions. As such, we can expand on Podosky's insight by positing a distinctive category of gaslighting which I call 'communicative gaslighting'. Communicative gaslighting is intentional misrepresentation of the communicative properties of an

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[2] Perhaps gaslighters can undermine someone's moral self-trust, too. Kate Manne has recently outlined a concept of 'moral gaslighting', where a person is 'made to feel morally defective—for example, cruelly unforgiving or overly suspicious, for harbouring some mental state to which she is entitled' (2023: 123).
[3] Podosky's concept of first-order gaslighting cuts across my distinction between gaslighting qua perceiver and gaslighting qua thinker, since one could challenge a person's application of a concept on perceptual or cognitive grounds—maybe they misperceived the world, or maybe they misunderstood it.

utterance, which functions to undermine the target's trust in her communicative faculties. This category includes second-order gaslighting, but also other kinds of gaslighting which undermine other communicative competencies, besides just the target's grasp of particular concepts.

Communicative gaslighting can cast doubt on both the victim's ability to speak, and her ability to interpret other people's speech. Humbert, for example, encourages Charlotte to doubt her ability to interpret Humbert's use of language. But he could equally well cast doubt on her ability to use language herself—to express herself meaningfully.

While making our account of gaslighting more fine-grained is valuable in its own right, I will show later in the paper that being able to identify instances of communicative gaslighting enables us to engage in valuable ethical and explanatory analysis. Different kinds of gaslighting, I will argue, undermine different kinds of epistemic self-trust. Communicative gaslighting undermines a person's trust in her communicative aptitude in particular. In addition, communicative gaslighting undermines the communicative abilities of more than just its immediate targets. It does this by undermining linguistic conventions themselves.

4. Locutionary Gaslighting

Communicative gaslighters intentionally misrepresent the communicative properties of an utterance. To illustrate this phenomenon, I will focus on three familiar properties of an utterance, identified by J.L. Austin in his work in speech act theory (1976). These are the utterance's locutionary content, its perlocutionary effect, and its illocutionary force. In subsequent sections I will show that we can distinguish between locutionary, perlocutionary, and illocutionary forms of communicative gaslighting. I stress that these do not exhaust the forms communicative gaslighting can take—there are many communicative properties an utterance could have, which a gaslighter could misrepresent. For example, they could gaslight a target about conversational implicatures, presuppositions, and insinuations. However, Austin's taxonomy offers a good starting point for identifying some of the forms communicative gaslighting can take.

I will begin by thinking about the locutionary content of an utterance. When we perform a locutionary act, we utter a string of words, typically a sentence, with a 'sense and reference' (Austin 1976: 109). We can locutionarily gaslight someone by rejecting their correct interpretation of either our utterance's locutionary content or their utterance's locutionary content.

4.1 Hearers

First consider how a speaker might gaslight a hearer concerning the locutionary content of the speaker's utterance. We find an example in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1960). After revolting, the animals of Manor Farm agree on a set of commandments and write them on the barn wall. Over time, the farm's governance, comprised of pigs, becomes corrupt. One day the worker animals learn that pigs are sleeping in the farmhouse beds, despite an original commandment that 'No animal shall sleep in a bed'. When they check the barn wall, they see that the commandment now reads, 'No animal shall sleep in a bed with sheets'. Squealer the pig then addresses them:

'You have heard, then comrades,' he said, 'that we pigs now sleep in the beds of the farmhouse? And why not? You did not suppose, surely, that there was ever a ruling against beds? A bed merely means a place to sleep in. A pile of straw in a stall is a bed, properly regarded. The rule was against *sheets,* which are a human invention […]' (1960: 60)

Squealer is engaging in two kinds of gaslighting. Firstly, he engages in non-communicative gaslighting. By surreptitiously changing the written commandments, then maintaining that they were always this way, he makes the animals doubt their powers of recollection. Secondly, he engages in locutionary gaslighting by disingenuously rejecting the animals' understanding of 'bed'. When the commandments were drawn up, it was agreed that 'bed' meant 'human bed'. Yet Squealer now reproaches the workers for understanding the word in this way, telling them that a bed is merely a place to sleep.

Speakers accused of harmful speech often engage in this kind of locutionary gaslighting—after deliberately using an offensive term, they deny that the term has any offensive meaning or associations. Ian Haney Lopez describes this manoeuvre in his discussion of dog-whistles. He writes that after speakers are criticised for using terms like 'welfare cheats' and 'illegal aliens' to make 'thinly veiled references to threatening non-whites', they often respond with 'a parry that slaps away charges of racial pandering, often by emphasizing the lack of any direct reference to a racial group or any use of an epithet', followed by 'a kick that savages the critic for opportunistically alleging racial victimization' (2014: 4). This manoeuvre functions to undermine hearer's faith in their grasp of word meanings.

4.2 Speakers

A hearer can also locutionarily gaslight a speaker by denying that their utterance had the locutionary features they took it to have. Consider the 'Black lives matter' protest slogan. This slogan is often wilfully misrepresented by hearers as expressing the proposition that 'Only black lives matter'.

These hearers typically misrepresent the slogan in this way by responding to it with the competing slogan, 'All lives matter'. Jessica Keiser uses Craige Roberts's notion of a 'Question Under Discussion' ('QUD') to explain this kind of manoeuvre (Roberts 2015; Keiser 2021). The QUD is the aim or focus to which all interlocutors are oriented, and it determines how conversational moves are interpreted. When activists say, 'Black lives matter', Keiser argues, they take the QUD to be 'Do Black lives matter?'. When someone responds with 'All lives matter', however, they characterise the QUD as '*Which* lives matter?' (2021). If this is the QUD, then the activists' utterance of 'Black lives matter' could be interpreted as implicating that other lives do not matter. This response thereby 'stirs up confusion and divisiveness by systematically distorting affirmations of the value of Black lives as expressions of threat to the value of the lives of others' (Keiser 2021: 8478).

Admittedly, some 'All lives matter' folk are responding to the BLM slogan in good (albeit misguided) faith, and hence do not qualify as communicative gaslighters, on my definition—though that is not to say that their responses are harmless. But many understand perfectly well what BLM activists seek to convey, and wilfully misrepresent them nonetheless, thereby casting doubt on their grasp of language.

A hearer can also locutionarily gaslight a speaker by acting as if the speaker said something meaningless. Matthew Cull calls this 'dismissive incomprehension' (2019). A hearer engaging in dismissive incomprehension might grasp the locutionary

content of a speaker's utterance but pretend to find it incomprehensible. They do this in a way that implies not that they are poor interpreters, but rather that the speaker is a poor communicator, unable to string words together in a meaningful way. Cull offers as an example a journalist characterising a talk given by then Labour party leader Jeremy Corbyn as 'gibberish'.[4]

When an agent engages in locutionary gaslighting about particular words (rather than about sentence meaning as a whole), they seem to be initiating what David Plunkett calls a metalinguistic disagreement, whereby interlocutors disagree about what a word means or how it should be used (Plunkett 2015). Yet not all cases of meta-linguistic disagreement qualify as locutionary gaslighting. On my definition, a gaslighter intentionally mispresents reality. A locutionary gaslighter must deliberately deny what they believe is a true proposition about the extension or intension of a term. There are many cases of metalinguistic agreement, in contrast, where all interlocutors' claims are in good faith. For example, we might have a disagreement about the meaning of the word 'torture', where each of us utters only propositions we believe are true. As such, locutionary gaslighting is often a bad-faith form of meta-linguistic disagreement, where the gaslighter acts disingenuously—they actually hold the belief they are ostensibly rejecting and are not offering a sincere proposal concerning the meaning or use of a word.[5]

5. Perlocutionary Gaslighting

I turn now to gaslighting about the perlocutionary dimensions of an utterance. To perform a perlocutionary act is 'to produce certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons' (Austin 1976: 101).

5.1 Hearers

Assume that a speaker's utterance had some distinctive perlocutionary effects, plain to all. That speaker could gaslight a hearer about these effects by denying that these effects were caused by the speaker's utterance, or that the speaker intended to produce them.

Trump's response to criticisms of his role in the United States Capitol attack offers an example of both kinds of perlocutionary gaslighting. In 2021, following his electoral loss, Trump gave a speech to supporters, during which he said, 'If you don't fight like hell you're not going to have a country anymore'. He told the crowd:

> We're going to walk down to the Capitol, and we're going to cheer on our brave senators and congressmen and women, and we're probably not going to be cheering so much for some of them, because you'll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength, and you have to be strong.[6]

Following these words, over two thousand people stormed the Capitol building, at great human and material cost. While I set aside the question of whether Trump's

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[4] https://twitter.com/JohnRentoul/status/939055585894522881, @JohnRentoul, Dec 8, 2017.
[5] However, metalinguistic disagreements can be sites of injustice even if they are not instances of locutionary gaslighting. See Podosky 2022.
[6] Donald Trump, 'Save America Rally', January 6, 2021, transcribed by CNN, February 8, 2021, https://edition.cnn.com/2021/02/08/politics/trump-january-6-speech-transcript/index.html.

speech constituted incitement in the legal sense, I will assume that it was a significant causal contributor to the riot, and that Trump intended for it to cause the riot.[7] Interpreted in this light, his defence team's subsequent statements are paradigmatic examples of perlocutionary gaslighting.

One of Trump's lawyers stated that 'You can't incite what was already going to happen', and that 'to claim that the president in any way wished, desired or encouraged lawless or violent behaviour is a preposterous and monstrous lie'.[8] These claims deny both that Trump's utterance had the perlocutionary effect of causally contributing to the riot (because it was already going to happen), and that Trump had the perlocutionary aim of causing the riot (instead, Trump intended to encourage peaceful protest). These denials have already been described as gaslighting.[9] The conceptual tools I am developing enable us to be more precise: Trump and his team engaged in communicative gaslighting, specifically with regards to the perlocutionary effects of his speech.

5.2 Speakers

A hearer can also perlocutionarily gaslight a speaker, by denying that the speaker's words had the perlocutionary effects that the speaker took them to have had. One example is the phenomenon of men repeating what women have already said in meetings (sometimes known as 'hepeating'). Often, a woman's utterance gives her male colleagues new ideas: it has the perlocutionary effect of inspiring them. When one of these colleagues then repeats these ideas, claiming them as his own, he is denying that the cause of his idea was the woman's utterance, instead chalking it up to his own creativity. This will not only lead to inappropriate allocation of credit, but it may also make the woman doubt herself.[10]

6. Illocutionary Gaslighting

Agents can also gaslight one another about the illocutionary force of utterances. For an utterance to have a particular illocutionary force is for it to constitute a particular illocutionary act, which is an act performed in speaking, like promising, ordering, or refusing.

Opinions differ on the nature of illocutionary acts and how one performs them. For the time being, let us assume firstly, with Peter Strawson (1964), that to perform a particular illocutionary act, a speaker must express a *communicative intention* to perform that act. Roughly this is an intention to perform that act and to have the audience recognise this intention. For example, to perform a promise you must express an

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[7] To be clear, I do not claim that Trump's speech was the sole cause of the riot.
[8] Michael van der Veen, quoted in 'Trump impeachment: Insurrection incitement charge a "monstrous lie"', BBC, February 12, 2021, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-56038765.
[9] Chris Cillizza, 'Donald Trump is gaslighting us on the January 6 riot', CNN, September 17, 2021, https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/17/politics/donald-trump-september-18-january-6/index.html.
[10] I do not claim that all instances of hepeating constitute perlocutionary gaslighting—unintentional hepeating (where the hepeater does not realise his colleague had the idea first) would not qualify as such. Nor do I claim that, even in intentional cases, perlocutionary gaslighting is all there is to hepeating. The phenomenon is much more complex. Claire Horisk (2021) argues that the hepeater violates the conversational norm enacted by the initial speaker, according to which it is impermissible for anyone to repeat her assertion. See also McGowan 2021.

intention to perform a promise and an intention that your hearer recognise that you intend to perform a promise. And let us assume, secondly, with Austin (1976), that to perform a particular illocutionary act a speaker's utterance must satisfy a range of conventions (or what Austin called 'felicity conditions') for that kind of act. For your utterance to constitute an order, for example, it is necessary that you have sufficient authority over your hearer.[11]

Illocutionary gaslighting, I propose, can take the following forms. A speaker can illocutionarily gaslight a hearer by denying that they performed the act they in fact performed. And a hearer can illocutionarily gaslight a speaker by denying that the speaker performed the illocutionary act they in fact performed.

6.1 Hearers

One way a speaker could illocutionarily gaslight a hearer is as follows: after successfully performing a serious illocutionary act, the speaker could deny that they were speaking seriously, instead claiming that they were joking. Here is an example. At a 2016 news conference, Trump appeared to ask Russia to hack electoral rival Hilary Clinton's emails:

> Russia, if you're listening, I hope you're able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing. I think you will probably be rewarded mightily by our press.[12]

The utterance was delivered in a serious tone and the audience did not laugh. Later, Trump stated that he made the utterance 'in jest and sarcastically', and that this was 'apparent to any objective observer'.[13] This response characterised those who interpreted him as making a serious request as having defective powers of interpretation.

There are different ways of theorising what it means to speak in jest. Firstly, we might think that when joking, we are not performing proper illocutionary acts. This is Austin's view. Austin draws a sharp distinction between serious and non-serious speech, where the latter includes joking, acting, or writing poetry. He characterises non-serious speech as 'parasitic' or 'aetiolated' uses of serious speech, and thinks that an order made in jest is not an order proper, but rather is defective or hollow in some way (1976: 104). If this is right, then by characterising his utterance as a joke, Trump misrepresents the mode of communication he was engaged in—he was engaged in serious speech, and performed an illocutionary act, but misrepresents himself as having been engaged in an entirely different communicative enterprise, in which he was not performing proper illocutionary acts.

Secondly, and alternatively, we might think that joking is itself an illocutionary act, in which case Trump is misrepresenting not the kind of conversation he was engaged in, but rather the kind of act he performed: a request, but he misrepresents it as a joke.

On either interpretation, a speaker engaging in this 'just joking' form of illocutionary gaslighting encourages their hearer to doubt her powers of interpretation. She is led to doubt either whether she can adequately distinguish serious communicative modes

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[11] These positions can also be held independently of one another.
[12] Donald Trump, Road to the White House Press Conference, July 27, 2016, https://www.c-span.org/video/?413263-1/donald-trump-urges-russia-find-hillary-clinton-emails-criticizes-record-tpp.
[13] Donald Trump, quoted in 'Full text of Mueller's questions and Trump's answers', AP News, April 18, 2019, https://apnews.com/article/elections-donald-trump-russia-ap-top-news-robert-mueller-98f22511be924ced895ce5c0bfedfe37.

from non-serious modes, or whether she can distinguish one illocutionary act (a joke) from another (a request).[14]

Illocutionary gaslighting can also be simpler than this. A speaker and a hearer might agree that the speaker was speaking seriously, but the speaker could intentionally misrepresent the illocutionary act they performed. They might perform an order and claim it was a request or make an assertion and claim it was a suggestion. To engage in such gaslighting, the speaker likely must misrepresent their own intentions—they claim that the order was expressed as an intention to perform a request, not an order. Their behaviour will therefore cast doubt on the hearer's ability to recognise speaker's communicative intentions.

These cases become more complex, however, if we think that for an illocutionary act to succeed, the hearer must recognise the speaker's communicative intention, that is, provide uptake.[15] For example, we might think that for an order to succeed, the hearer must recognise it as an attempted order. Illocutionarily gaslighting a hearer then involves denying that what was in fact correct uptake was correct after all. Upon having her (initially correct) interpretation of the utterance rejected, the hearer may then change her belief about what act the speaker intended to perform. If she does this, it seems the attempted illocutionary act no longer has uptake, and so has failed. And if it has failed, then the gaslighter is in some sense right to claim that they did not perform the act the hearer attributes to them.

This may seem like a problem for my account of communicative gaslighting, which stipulates that gaslighters must misrepresent reality in some way. Yet there is still a degree of misrepresentation involved here. The gaslighter misrepresents either their intentions at the time of utterance, their seriousness, or the conventionality of their utterance; these facts cannot be changed by their subsequent manipulation of the hearer's beliefs. In addition, if we want to preserve the intuition that they also misrepresent the nature of the act performed, we might stipulate that illocutionary success requires merely that uptake occurs at some point in time. Let us assume that a gaslighter successfully convinces their hearer that the utterance they intended as an order and which the hearer interpreted as an order was in fact intended as a request. Because the hearer initially recognised the utterance as an order, that is, provided uptake, it is an order—regardless of any *post facto* manipulation by the speaker. That the hearer later changes her mind does not alter the force of the utterance.

6.2 Speakers

A hearer can illocutionarily gaslight a speaker by denying that the speaker's utterance had the illocutionary force it appeared to have. Just as a speaker can gaslight a hearer about the speaker's illocutionary intentions, so too can a hearer gaslight a speaker about the speaker's illocutionary intentions. Here is an example of this phenomenon. Quill (writing as Rebecca) Kukla observes that sometimes when women attempt to make assertions about the existence of sexism, they are characterised as merely expressing emotions like discomfort or anxiety (2014). That is to say, their attempted

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[14] Encouraging someone to doubt whether they can identify jokes can also play into stereotypes about minority groups who complain about discriminatory and dangerous speech having no sense of humour.
[15] For arguments that uptake of this kind is necessary for illocutionary success, see Strawson 1964, Searle 1969, and Hornsby and Langton 1998.

assertions are characterised as expressives. To perform an assertion is to commit oneself to the truth of a proposition, and to perform an expressive is to express non-truth-apt emotional or affective states.

Let us imagine a case of this kind in which the misrepresentation of a women's attempted assertion as an expressive is deliberate. A man hears a woman making an assertion about sexism, but he wilfully mischaracterises that utterance as an expression of her frustration. By doing this, he can downgrade the significance of the utterance: the woman need not be thought of as offering up a proposition for serious consideration. This kind of gaslighting will likely undermine the woman's confidence in herself as a communicator. She may be led to wonder whether she expressed herself poorly, and whether she should have spoken more forcefully.

There are at least two alternative ways to interpret this instance of gaslighting. As Mary-Kate McGowan shows (2017), there are different ways one can fail to perform an illocutionary act successfully. One way involves failing to have one's intentions recognised, and another involves failing to satisfy relevant conditions for the illocutionary act one intended to perform. For example, one might fail to order if one is not recognised as having sufficient authority to do so. In our attempted assertion case, the gaslighter might act as if they have failed to recognise the speaker's intention to assert, but alternatively they might act as if the speaker lacks the epistemic authority to make an assertion, when in fact she does. Or, in a mirrored version of Trump's 'just joking' gaslighting, they might disingenuously act as if a speaker who makes an assertion is not being serious. McGowan notes that that in sexual contexts, for example, women are often misrepresented as not seriously intending to refuse sexual activity (2014). All these forms of misrepresentation will likely function to undermine the speaker's confidence in herself as a communicator.

When hearers illocutionarily gaslight speakers, they act as if the speaker's utterance has failed when it has in fact succeeded. The hearer might deny that they have recognised the speaker's intention (that is, provided uptake, on the dominant construal of uptake), when in fact they have, or they might deny that the act has satisfied relevant conventions when in fact it has. However, matters are complicated by a competing understanding of uptake, according to which illocutionary success requires from the hearer not just intention recognition, but also, (or alternatively) certain behavioural responses (Sbisà 2009; Kukla 2014; Tirrell 2019).

For example, Kukla argues that for an utterance to constitute an order, the hearer must actually respond to it as if it were an order; it does not suffice that they merely recognise the speaker's intention to order, or that the utterance satisfies conditions for ordering (2014). If the hearer fails to *treat* the utterance as an order—for example, if they fail to do as ordered or to offer a justification or excuse for not doing so—Kukla would say that the utterance failed to constitute an order. On this construal of uptake, if a gaslighter recognises a speaker's intention, but fails to act as if they have recognised it, then the speaker's attempted illocutionary act has in fact failed, since it did not yield the right behavioural response.

Again, we might worry that this has the consequence that the gaslighting hearer isn't actually misrepresenting anything in such cases, since they are technically right that the utterance was not what the speaker intended it to be: they are right because the hearer's behavioural response, or lack thereof, to the utterance made this the case. However, the gaslighting hearers will still need to misrepresent some feature of the utterance in question to explain their response. The hearer will have to

misrepresent the speaker's expressed intentions, the speaker's sincerity, or the conventionality of the utterance.

7. The Significance of Communicative Gaslighting

7.1 Communicative Gaslighting and Epistemic Agency

Gaslighting of any stripe (communicative or non-communicative) functions to undermine the target's epistemic self-trust, which is, as Andrew Spear puts it, her conception of herself as 'an independent locus of experience, thought, and judgement' (2023: 69), whose faculties are reliable and aimed at the production of true beliefs. The gaslighter gives their target a reason to doubt that the judgements she arrived at through reliable methods are in fact correct and encourages her instead to view herself as 'deficient or completely incompetent concerning her ability to understand, interpret situations, think, and choose for herself' (Spear 2023: 74). Without this self-trust, Spear argues, the target is 'no longer able to meaningfully go forward as an agent (2023: 84).

Epistemic self-trust, I propose, has several components. We must have trust in our perceptual abilities, for example, and we must have trust in our cognitive abilities. We must also have something like communicative self-trust; trust that we are capable of receiving and transmitting information via speech. Communicative gaslighting seems to target this kind of self-trust in particular.

When someone experiences communicative gaslighting, not only can she not be sure that an asserted proposition is true, or that she has the abilities to detect whether it is true—she also cannot be sure whether the proposition asserted is what she took it to be. She might be led to doubt whether the speaker really asserted p— perhaps they actually asserted q, or perhaps they were not making an assertion at all. These are higher order doubts, and they throw into question her very grasp of communicative conventions and her abilities as a communicator. That is to say, they undermine her communicative self-trust, which is essential to functioning as an independent and autonomous epistemic agent.

To have full epistemic agency we must have several kinds of epistemic self-trust, including trust in our abilities as communicators. If, in our thinking about gaslighting, we focus only on gaslighting people about their perceptions and understandings of the world, and not on gaslighting people about their interpretations and use of language, we will overlook an important way in which epistemic agency can be undermined.

It is interesting to consider how communicative gaslighting relates to epistemic injustice, a communicative pathology already much studied in philosophy. This is defined by Miranda Fricker as 'a kind of injustice in which someone is wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower' (2007: 12), where this wronging arises from an identity-prejudice towards the victim. I have already established that communicative gaslighting can harm someone in their capacity as an epistemic agent, specifically by undermining their communicative self-trust. In cases where communicative gaslighting is caused in some way by identity-prejudice towards a speaker, then we can say that it constitutes epistemic injustice.

It is interesting to note, though, that such communicative gaslighting is not easily classified as either hermeneutical injustice or testimonial injustice, which are the two forms Fricker thinks epistemic injustice can take. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when a marginalised group is prevented from articulating and understanding

their experiences due to a gap in conceptual and communicative resources, where that gap is attributable to structural inequalities. Communicative gaslighting does not seem to involve any conceptual lacunae.

Testimonial injustice, meanwhile, occurs when a hearer affords a speaker less or no credibility because they are prejudiced towards a feature of their identity. For example, a woman's complaint might be taken less seriously than a man's, due to stereotypical beliefs that women are over-emotional and prone to paranoia. Communicative gaslighting is not easily classified as testimonial injustice for two reasons. Firstly, the person who enacts testimonial injustice usually acts sincerely—they do genuinely afford the woman's complaint less credence. In contrast, the communicative gaslighter is disingenuous; they might recognise the meaning and significance of a woman's utterance but act as if they have not. Their behaviour may still be attributable to identity prejudice, but it involves more deceit.

Secondly, not all forms of communicative gaslighting involve agents casting doubt on other people's testimony. It would be inapt to describe a speaker gaslighting a hearer about the meaning and force of *the speaker's own words* (like Squealer 'explaining' the word 'bed', or Trump discussing his 'joke') as an instance of testimonial injustice, for example. The hearer in such cases is not giving testimony—they are instead having their understanding of someone else's testimony undermined. And on Fricker's account, testimonial injustice is experienced by speakers, not hearers. These differences indicate that Fricker's taxonomy of epistemic justice could perhaps be expanded to include disingenuous interpretations of testimony, as well as injustices committed against agents in their capacity as *receivers* of testimony, rather than as testifiers.

7.2 Communicative Gaslighting and Conventional Decay

When a person engages in non-communicative gaslighting, they undermine their target's epistemic agency in a way that typically leaves other people's epistemic agency intact. When Gregory undermines Paula's trust in her ability to detect whether the lights are dimming, he does not, by and large, affect anybody else's trust in their ability to do the same. A distinctive feature of communicative gaslighting, however, is that its effects on agency can scope out in concerning ways, by eroding linguistic conventions themselves.

Languages can be thought of as large, elaborate sets of conventions. Each convention is a behavioural regularity that everyone both conforms to and believes that everyone else conforms to. One's belief in others' conformity gives one good reason to conform oneself (Lewis 1983; 2002). Take the word 'dog'. We have a convention whereby we all use the word 'dog' to refer to an animal of the species *canis familiaris*. We expect and believe that others are using 'dog' to refer to such animals, and this gives us good reason to use 'dog' to refer to such animals. Some other word would likely fulfil the same function just as well, but it suffices for effective communication that we co-ordinate our behaviour to use one particular word in the same way.[16]

The communicative gaslighter undermines their target's belief in the existence of linguistic conventions, which contributes to the erosion of the conventions themselves. Locutionary gaslighting throws doubt on conventions of word and sentence meaning.

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[16] Conventions, for Lewis, offer arbitrary solutions to co-ordination problems, which occur when agents can choose from several ways of co-ordinating their behaviour in order to bring about mutual benefit (1983).

For example, in *Animal Farm*, the animals' understanding of 'bed' depended on their beliefs and expectations about how other people used the word. Until their interaction with Squealer, they thought and expected that everyone used the word 'bed' to refer to a piece of furniture designed by humans to sleep on. Squealer's gaslighting gives them reason *not* to believe that others are using 'bed' to mean a piece of furniture designed by humans to sleep on. And without this belief, they may themselves stop using 'bed' in this way, which means that there will cease to be a strong behavioural regularity of using 'bed' in this way. Ultimately, the convention may break down.

Illocutionary gaslighting, meanwhile, can undermine illocutionary conventions.[17] For each illocutionary act, there is an associated set of rules or conventions. For example, to make a promise to perform act *x*, one is expected to say something like 'I promise to *x*', where *x* is some act that is within the speaker's powers and has not yet occurred, and which the hearer would like the speaker to perform. It is expected and believed that a speaker who intentionally satisfies the criteria for promising takes on a commitment to do *x*. If I utter the words 'I promise to pay you back', then immediately deny that by uttering these words I was taking on a commitment to pay you back, I undermine the conventions of promising.

We might think that illocutionary conventions make illocutionary acts possible, in the same way that the rules of chess make castling possible (Searle 1969; Austin 1976). This would mean that undermining an illocutionary convention through communicative gaslighting may eventually make the performance of the illocutionary act impossible. One of the beliefs constitutive of the convention of promising—that speakers who say 'I promise' are taking on commitments—will be weakened, and if further down the line the hearer herself decides to stop using 'I promise' in this way, because she is unsure others will interpret her correctly, there will cease to be a behavioural regularity of using 'I promise' in this way, and promising as we know it may cease to exist.

Alternatively, we might think that conventions merely make illocutionary acts easier to perform. Perhaps to perform an illocutionary act it suffices that your hearer recognise your communicative intention, but the utterance's satisfaction of conventions helps the hearer achieve that recognition. If this is right, then illocutionary gaslighting, by undermining illocutionary conventions, makes it more difficult to perform illocutionary acts, forcing us to rely more on deciphering idiosyncratic behaviours to ascertain speaker's intentions.

Because communicative gaslighting can have such effects, it is particularly concerning when influential public figures engage in it, because they can bring about a more radical and rapid decay of communicative conventions. They can make a large number of people unsure whether others are using words in the way they expect them to, or indeed whether they are using words correctly themselves. Some audiences might conclude that if it is permissible for public figures to run roughshod over conventions, it is permissible for them to do so as well. Others might forego attempts to communicate altogether or choose to communicate only with those closest to them, whom they can trust to use and interpret words as they expect them to. Such gaslighting can ultimately foster a climate of communicative disorientation.

This is arguably the effect the Trump administration's linguistic manoeuvrings had on American social discourse. James Slotta argues that they undermined 'a vision of

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[17] It is harder to see how perlocutionary gaslighting could erode linguistic conventions, since perlocutionary effects are not conventional.

the United States as a political community forged through participation in a common national conversation' (2020: 53) and caused people to retreat to isolated communicative 'bubbles' or 'silos', which preclude valuable democratic deliberation and may lead to increased polarisation. Repeated communicative gaslighting by the administration undermined communicative conventions and thereby inhibited communication.

The wrongness of communicative gaslighting, then, seems attributable to more than just its treatment of the proximate victim. Seana Shiffrin makes a similar claim about lying (2014). In order to enjoy valuable relationships with one another, she argues, we must be able to trust that when speakers assert propositions in contexts where sincerity is expected, the speakers believe those propositions to be true, such that we are thereby warranted in believing those propositions, too. When you tell a lie in such a context, Shiffrin argues, you are 'contaminating the warrant the recipient should have that would enable her to relate to you fully as a moral agent' (2014: 26). In the same vein, I suggest that effective communication, and hence meaningful relationships, also require that we trust others are abiding by linguistic conventions in contexts where we expect them to. Mutual understanding requires not just a norm of truth-telling, but also a norm of abiding by linguistic conventions. Communicative gaslighting undermines this norm.

8. Conclusion

Gaslighting has recently risen to widespread popular consciousness. I have proposed that we take seriously a particular form of gaslighting, which involves undermining someone's confidence in their abilities as a communicator, be it their ability to use words in meaningful ways, or their ability to interpret others' use of words. This can erode not only the epistemic agency of the immediate target (which is especially concerning when they are already socially disadvantaged), but also communicative conventions more generally. Conventions rely for their existence on each person's belief that other people are conforming to them, and communicative gaslighting gives us reason to doubt that there is such conformity. Repeated communicative gaslighting arguably disorients us as communicators and makes mutual understanding harder to achieve. Humbert Humbert may lament that he has 'only words to play with', but I hope to have shown that playing with words can in fact wreak great havoc.

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