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Presupposition and Propaganda: A Socially Extended Analysis

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ABSTRACT. Drawing on work from Marina Sbisà's "Ideology and the Persuasive Use of Presupposition," Rae Langton has developed a powerful account of the subtle mechanisms through which hate speech and propaganda spread. However, this model has a serious limitation: it focuses too strongly on individual speech acts isolated from their wider context, rendering its applicability to a broader range of cases suspect. In this paper, I consider the limits of presupposition accommodation to clarify the audience's role in helping hate speakers, and claim the necessary mechanisms are much more active and social than Langton suggests, with effects not capturable in the analysis of isolated speech acts. I revisit Sbisà's work on presupposition and develop an alternative model that (1) improves upon the Langtonian model for explaining the power of hate propaganda, and (2) is more in line with Sbisà's original approach to ideology and the normative aspects of presupposition.

INTRODUCTION

There is a tendency within some strains of social philosophy of language to focus on the more subtle forms of subordinating speech. We see this in the recent explosion of work on concepts like microaggressions, code-words, dogwhistles, and more.¹ And while there is certainly important philosophical work to do on these harmful uses of language, we should not lose sight of the fact that much of the speech that oppresses is not of this subtle kind, but is explicit, direct, and unmistakable.² The philosophical literature, however, has been concerned largely with the subtle side of this story, and for understandable reasons. The phenomena at play here interest philosophers and linguists even outside of their morally charged uses. The mechanics of not-at-issue content, accommodation, generics, and more, are complex, and when put to use in social/political contexts, deserve scrutiny.³

¹ On microaggressions, see: Rini (2021). On code-words, see: Khoo (2017). On dogwhistles, see: Saul (2018).

² For work on these more explicit instances of oppressive speech, see: Tirrell (2012), Waldron (2012), among others.

³ See Stanley (2015) for an analysis of the role of not-at-issue content in propaganda. See Leslie (2017) for discussion of the harmful effects of generics. Accommodation will be discussed throughout this chapter.

A related tendency lies in the focus on *bystander silence* as a mechanism for empowering hate speakers and propagandists. According to several recent theorists, the silence of bystanders can, in some cases, confer greater social power to a public hate speaker than they might at first seem to have. This is because the uptake given by hearers can, under certain conditions, play a significant role in constituting or securing *the authority* of a speech act, and silence—the failure to interject—can provide this uptake. So, if someone shouts racist remarks at a Black woman on the bus, uses slurs and tells her to “go home,” because she “doesn’t belong here,” and every other passenger averts their eyes or otherwise fails to express condemnation, those bystanders may be complicit in a subordinating (speech) act, partly because they contribute to the authority that backs up that speech act, even if unwillingly.⁴

The concept of authority plays a large role here, and building off Marina Sbisà’s (1999) suggestions, Rae Langton argues that it is through presupposition accommodation that authority may be accrued by hate speakers and propagandists (Langton 2018a; 2018b).⁵ “Authority,” she claims, “can be obtained by *accommodation*, a default adjustment that occurs, without fuss, when hearers take on board what speakers presuppose” (2018a, 126). In this manner, accommodation “has the power to alter the illocutionary force of an utterance” (144), and “hearers routinely accommodate what speakers presuppose, and the hearer’s omission is a quiet engine of the speaker’s success” (127).⁶

⁴ For various forms of this example, see Maitra (2012), Langton (2018a), McGowan (2012), Ayala and Vasilyeva (2016), Bianci (2019); and see Barnes (2016) and Brown (2019) for critical elaborations on this example.

⁵ Langton cites Sbisà (1999) as one source of inspiration for this approach to presupposition, as she argues that “presupposition is suitable for transmitting a kind of content which might be called ideological” (1999, 493), as well as the attention she gives to blocking and explication as a means of resistance. See also, Sbisà (2002, esp. pp. 430–31), which offers an early explanation of the attribution of speakers’ authority via accommodation.

⁶ This builds on the influential work by David Lewis (1979), who argued that conversations follow a “rule of accommodation.” The speech act theory of J.L. Austin (1962) is another crucial conceptual ingredient.

While insightful, I argue Langton's model focuses too strongly on individual speech acts isolated from their wider context, and for this reason cannot explain the authority of the bulk of propagandistic hate speech. I consider the limits of her conception of presupposition accommodation to clarify the audience's role in helping empower a hate speaker. While Langton and other theorists tend to emphasize the role that bystander silence plays in these cases, I claim there are necessary mechanisms at play in multiple audiences that are much more active, and much more social. In other words, in addition to silently—and perhaps reluctantly—helping hate speakers via an omission, hearers also have a range of actions at their disposal that, when combined with other background conditions, are important to the conferral of authority to hate speech.

My interest here is in speech acts whose subordinating force is secured by being a part of a broader group-practice. The point I aim to make here is distinct from—though certainly related to—the more general one about oppression itself being a systemic practice (Young 2011). In previous work (Barnes 2016), I criticized the tendency to isolate (oppressive) speech acts from the broader practices within which they are a part. Here, I elaborate on how these broader practices take shape, focusing on speech acts whose distinctive capacity to oppress—whose subordinating authority—depends on the utterances performed by *other* subordinating speakers. I sketch a conception of *collective subordinating authority* that puts an audience's active participation at the center of an overall social, and not simply linguistic, phenomenon. Overall, my aim is to show how the entitlement to subordinate is not always located in individual speakers, but is more diffuse. This begins to fill an explanatory gap in the literature that, I believe, has had an unduly narrow focus so far.

I begin by explaining the role of authority in hate speech and motivate the search for a stable form of informal authority (section 1). I clarify the sort of nonideal authority

at issue here (section 2), and then examine Langton's proposal that presupposition accommodation can supply this authority to hate speakers (section 3). I then propose a model that has a more *active* role for some conversational participants and explain how this is more in line with Sbisà's original approach to the normative aspects of presupposition, as well as her attention to the complexities of real-world communication (section 4).

1. AUTHORITY IN HATE SPEECH

"Discursive authority," Lynne Tirrell (2018, 15) writes, "is a situational power to make felicitous speech acts and gain a range of appropriate uptakes. A speaker's discursive authority renders her speech acts socially meaningful." Speaker authority, therefore, is what explains how some speakers can perform certain acts—do certain things with their words—that others cannot. Plausibly, one speech act that requires authority is *to subordinate* with words, including hate speech (Langton 1993). To be useful however, this notion of authority must be clarified. An initial distinction between formal (or institutional) and informal (or situational) authority helps to set the stage for the exploration of this tricky concept.

A conception of *formal* authority can explain why the current President has some significant powers, and why their (executive) orders have the force to compel action that they do. This type of authority is properly recognized as *institutional authority*, and it's by inhabiting institutional roles that some speakers are authorized to perform certain kinds of speech acts. Once we identify what role within a given institution a speaker occupies, we learn a great deal about their ability to perform authoritative speech acts. And, of course, this kind of authority can be used to subordinate. Indeed, this is the type of authority demonstrated in classic examples such as the South African legislator prohibiting Black citizens from voting (Langton 1993, 302–302), along with other cases

where the legal rights and permissions are at issue—e.g., slavery laws (Langton 2018a, 123-124).

But when we're considering informal, or non-institutional, conceptions of authority, things are much less clear cut. The mechanisms by which speakers gain authority, along with the specific contours of the scope of its domain or the strength of its edicts are less obvious. This lack of clarity, however, sits alongside oppressive effects that remain clear. The harmfulness of more 'everyday' hate speech is evident despite this lack of institutional authority.

One promising direction is to understand informal authority as something that an audience can bestow on a speaker. Speakers make utterances whereby they attempt to move themselves into a position of authority and at the same time exercise this authority via the same utterance.⁷ How a speaker's audience responds plays a significant role in whether such a move—and moreover, the exercise of authority—succeeds. If the audience goes along with the speaker, through their acts and omissions, it can appear that the speaker has effectively given orders, ranked options, and so on. Ishani Maitra (2012) uses examples like these to show how one path for gaining informal authority may occur via what she calls "licensing." To explain this idea, she asks us to consider a group of friends trying to plan a hike together. As no one expresses any strong preferences in the logistics of the trip, they fail to make much headway in planning the outing. After having enough of this, one friend, Andy, decides to take charge and make decisions. He assigns specific tasks to each of the different members of the group. No one objects, the tasks are all completed, and the hike later takes place as Andy planned.

⁷ See Kukla and Lance (2013, 473–475), who explain how a single speech act can "do double duty" and function both as a *meta-call* that restructures "normative relationships and possibilities for making first-order calls" and as a first-order call at the same time.

Maitra's claim here is that in this case Andy comes to have the authority to assign tasks to the group, and that his “instructions, moreover, are authoritative speech” (2012, 106).

In this way Maitra argues that a speaker who lacks authority prior to speaking may gain it when their speech acts go unchallenged. And this can play out in both innocuous situations (e.g., planning a hike, choosing a restaurant), and insidious ones. Consider the following example of ordinary hate speech, drawn from Maitra (2012, 100–101):

An Arab woman is on a subway car crowded with people. An older white man walks up to her, and says, “F***in’ 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 in the car hears his words clearly. All other conversations cease. Many of the passengers turn to look at the speaker, but no one interferes.

Using examples like this, Maitra argues that ‘licensing’ is one route ordinary hate speakers can gain the authority they need for their subordinating speech acts to succeed.⁸

But notice the type of authority in these cases is *situational*, and as such is not stable across contexts. Andy may be able to give instructions relevant to the hike, but not outside of this narrow domain (Barnes 2016, 253). And while the hate speaker may possess the authority to subordinate in one moment, he may lose it as soon as he steps off the bus—or someone speaks up. So, unlike the President who retains their *institutional* authority from one day to the next and despite some challenges, speakers with this type of situational authority might lose it soon after they acquire it.

⁸ While there are relevant differences, Langton adapts this example from Maitra to explain her own model of the presupposition and accommodation of authority.

The possibility of *stable informal authority*, however, deserves our attention. While the case of a random man on a bus may be explained by the situational authority afforded by something like licensing, other cases seem different. Successful propagandists and conspiracy theorists, who regularly and reliably spread hate, have distinct speech act powers. Whether their topic is the dangers of vaccines, the globalist plot around us, the threat of refugees and immigrants, or the gay and/or trans agenda, fringe speakers can cultivate a following and influence public discourse in ways that reveal the power of their speech. Not hindered by a lack of formal authority, these speakers nevertheless achieve a type of informal authority that is more stable than the situational kind, at least on certain—often controversial—topics.

This points towards the importance of clarifying the *domain of authority* in question, as this explains why there are some topics within, and many beyond, a speaker's authority.⁹ And once we recognize the importance of domain in anchoring authority, we can notice a type of informal authority that is nonetheless fairly *stable* across contexts. For a first pass at this idea, consider a case where there is a distinct lack of rivals in a particular domain.¹⁰ Given a complete lack of sexual education in some schools, pornography may take on authoritative status in the domain of sex for adolescents. That is, absent rival candidates for authority, a speaker's words might have the performative force of authoritative judgments. And this may be true for pornography as well as hate speakers. "If hate speakers are the *only* local voices," Langton suggests,

whether because of state-imposed restrictions, or technology-imposed echo-chambers, then hate speakers will have the authority of a monopoly.

⁹ Nearly all authority is limited to a domain, and so specifying its domain is a crucial task. The one exception is (perhaps) God's authority in some religion. As Tirrell notes, "Theists ascribe *perfect* authority to God, who, as the original speaker of performative utterances, has creative as well as absolute coercive power" (2018, 16).

¹⁰ Langton explores the notion of authority's relativity to comparative rivals in her (2017) and (2018a).

... So a speaker may have authority relative to one field, where there are no rivals, but ... the speaker's authority may be invisible to those looking from outside the bubble. (2018a, 140)

However, appeals to domain only go so far. It may make some sense to claim that pornographers have (stable informal) authority because of their near-monopoly status for many adolescents (Langton 2017; 2018a, 139). But it strains meaning to say that bigoted propagandists—like the one-time ubiquitous white supremacist Richard Spencer, for example—have authority in a domain like *immigration* because of an absence of comparative rivals. Here, there are rivals, and it's not the case that his racist views are the only ones his audience has encountered. Indeed, it's often *because* these views push back against what his audience sees as 'the liberal orthodoxy of the elites' that he—or speakers like him—are given the uptake they do from a subset of their audience. Yet, since a not-insignificant portion of their audience treats them as authoritative in this way, there is clearly something to be said here.

Getting clearer on the sort of *stable informal authority* that hate propagandists like this wield, and how they accrue it, is my task below. And to begin, it's useful to reflect on how this authority is—in more ways than one—a sort of *nonideal* authority. I turn to this in the next section.

2. NONIDEAL AUTHORITY

Distinguishing between practical and epistemic authority is a helpful way to reveal the decidedly *nonideal* nature of the authority that concerns us. Practical authority is authority for action, while epistemic authority is authority for belief.¹¹ While

¹¹ The following discussion has its origins in Raz (2009, 9), who introduced the distinction between practical and epistemic (or 'theoretical') authority. Tirrell, in a similar though distinct way, distinguishes between "positional authority," and "expertise authority" (2018, 17).

analytically separable, practical and epistemic authority are usually exercised together. As Langton, borrowing an example from Joseph Raz, puts it: “doctor’s orders have their status as directives, in part because of what your doctor knows, or is taken to know: his practical authority has its source in his epistemic, or ‘theoretical,’ authority” (2018a, 141). But the distinction between practical and epistemic authority helps to reveal something interesting about this sort of authority. This is because the conception of epistemic authority we’re interested in is more about *credibility* than it is about actual *expertise*. And while one does not become an expert simply because some people take them to be one, being taken *as credible* is often enough to get others to believe and act on those beliefs. Large swaths of the wellness industry would not exist were it not for the credibility—not expertise—of those who promote a variety of cures with little to no actual evidence. And this reliance on a receptive audience carries over to—and is perhaps even more straightforward in the case of—practical authority, since, as Langton (2018a) notes, “being put ‘in charge’ may be enough for being in charge.” In this way, the distinction between credibility and expertise clarifies that *de facto* authority is often enough.

Our topic, in other words, is not authority as it ought to exist, but authority as it works in the real world.¹² Credibility, not expertise. De facto, rather than de jure authority. This means moving away from the restrictive conception of formal speaker authority as it is depicted in Austin where, as Langton notes, “authority is often a formal matter: it is the authorized official who can name the ship, conduct the wedding, issue the sentence.” In contrast to this, Langton correctly notes, “the workings of informal authority are more subtle” (2017, 33–34).

¹² As Langton says, and I concur: “Our topic is not idealized authority, but something closer to home: structures of social authority, relative to practices, which enable the enactment of norms and hierarchies that are socially real—whether or not they exist in Plato’s heaven, or the better neighborhoods of Earth” (2018a).

As we've already noted, authority is most often relative to a certain domain. Authority being further relative to a certain *jurisdiction* amounts to noting how it may be limited to certain *audiences* too. So, some, but maybe not all who hear its call will feel its normative pull. What the Pope or a local pastor says may have no grip on the atheist, but it can amount to a clear directive with clear authority to the devoted. Appealing to the idea of a relativity to jurisdiction is helpful because it "explains how a low type relative to one hierarchy could be, so to speak, a high type relative to another" (Langton 2018a, 139). And this is what a more on-the-ground, nonideal conception of authority permits. It is, in a sense, a descriptive account of who takes some speakers to be authoritative, rather than a prescriptive account of who ought to have authority.

What we are attempting to describe, then, is a stable type of informal authority that recognizes that an anti-vaxxer blogger can be an authority for millions of parents, even though the blogger lacks all traditional markers of expertise on the subject.¹³ It is the fact that their speech *functions* like more traditional, authoritative speech for a portion of its audience that is the chief reason to still label this capacity 'authority.' In other words, if some people take the 'quack' doctor's advice as credible, and shape their actions in accordance with their directives, we ought to understand their actions as responses to authoritative utterances, just like the person who takes the 'legitimate' doctor's words as sufficient reason for belief and action. In both cases, someone "grants authority to experts' speech acts by taking up the licenses they issue, while deferring responsibility for justification back to them" (Tirrell 2018, 19).¹⁴

¹³ The mechanisms at play here are related to the social epistemic notion of an 'echo chamber,' which is aptly described by Thi Nguyen (2020, 146) as "an epistemic community which creates a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members. This disparity is created by excluding non-members through epistemic discrediting, while simultaneously amplifying members' epistemic credentials." While Nguyen is primarily interested in beliefs, and how these are impacted by idiosyncrasies of trust at play in certain communities, I have a slightly more expansive target in mind, owing partly to the fact that I'm interested in practical authority as well as theoretical authority.

¹⁴ That is, the perlocutionary effects of some speech provide evidential support that these speech acts are of a certain illocutionary kind. This sort of methodology goes back to Langton (1993, 309), at least.

And what explains the authority of ‘quack’ doctors may also explain the authority of some speakers of hate propaganda. The authority the bigot sees in the white nationalist’s words may be as ineffective to the non-bigot as the Pope’s words are to the atheist, and just as invisible. And yet, within a certain community, that speaker might have real authority over these subjects. This may be most evident in propagandistic hate speech as it functions as *ingroup* speech, which occurs when one group is speaking to its own members, in the attempt to gin up hate for outsiders. However, its impact on outgroups is also significant.

At this point, it’s helpful to remember that authority is satisfied with acquiescence, not necessarily (explicit) agreement. Speech, and especially authoritative speech, is about shaping the normative landscape for one’s audience—and, as I’ll elaborate, other third parties as well—and this can occur without explicit agreement.¹⁵ Rather, what it requires is an adjustment that takes on board what speakers do with their speech acts along with what they presuppose, whether this be the authority of the speaker, the content of their utterance, or both—that is, their uptake. And instead of explicit agreement, as Sbisà reminds us, “uptake consists in a tacit agreement,” and that this may be “made manifest in the audience’s response (insofar as people act and speak upon what they take has been done up to that point)” (2009, 50).¹⁶

Moreover, as Langton notes, “the social world can sometimes be accommodating, *especially when helped along by background expectations*” (2018a, 134, emphasis

¹⁵ See, for example, Sbisà (2007, 466), where she notes that “in most cases implicit or even tacit agreement is enough” to bring about the conventional effects of an illocutionary act.

¹⁶ Earlier in that same paper she clarifies this process by appealing to the realm of norms rather than natural events, using the example of naming. “The effect of the naming of a ship consists of a change not in the natural course of events but in norms, that is, in something belonging to the realm of social conventions: *a new norm is enacted, as it can be seen from the assessments of people’s relevant behaviour that may stem from the norm.*” See Sbisà (2009, 45, emphasis added).

added).¹⁷ And given background conditions of racism, sexism, and much more, the social world is often far too accommodating to subordinating speech, as many in its audience acquiesce to its authority. As the large and passionate following of many hateful speakers—like those of Richard Spencer, Alex Jones, etc.—show, there is often a significant portion of people who play the part of a willing, and compliant audience, who happily alter their corner of the social world. And this also impacts those around them. By responding in *this way*—by giving *this uptake*—an audience can demonstrate how a hate speaker’s words are backed up by authority, as this authority is embodied in their uptake. As Tirrell (2018, 21) puts it: “Authority is largely constituted by audience uptake, which is a matter of next moves.”¹⁸ If this is the case, then our target of analysis are the broad features of a situation that together inform what next moves occur. That is, in other words, “the total speech situation” that Austin (1962) concerned himself with. And as Sbisà (2007, 471) notes, this is not generally about information, but about roles. Austin, she points out,

gives us insights into the capacity of mankind for creating shared environments through language, not as a matter of transmitting anything from one head to the other or of causally influencing each other’s mental states, but as a matter of establishing situations and roles and attributing local statuses to participants.

But, as I argue in the following section, the approach Langton uses to address these issues—where presupposition accommodation is the main mechanism—is focused too narrowly on audience *silence* as the main constitutive element that determines

¹⁷ Langton goes on: “Accommodation is only a tendency, as Lewis said. It does not always work, and whether it works is itself sensitive to background social hierarchies” (2018a). This sensitivity to background social hierarchies is what I am attempting to investigate.

¹⁸ Tirrell directs us towards Bourdieu (1991, 116) who explains: “The symbolic efficacy of words is exercised only in so far as the person subjected to it recognizes the person who exercises it as authorized to do so, or, what amounts to the same thing, only in so far as he fails to realize that, in submitting to it, he himself has contributed, through his recognition, to its establishment.”

authoritative uptake. And, as I will go on to claim, there is much more besides this that our attention must turn to as well.

3. PRESUPPOSITION ACCOMMODATION OF AUTHORITY

Presupposition accommodation is the default adjustment that occurs when a speaker says something that requires a change in the shared assumptions guiding the conversation.¹⁹ A classic example of this sort of accommodation occurs when a speaker says, ‘Even George could win,’ and “straightway” the presupposition that George is an unpromising candidate “springs into existence, making what [the speaker] said acceptable” (Lewis 1979, 339). When this occurs, the hearer takes on board this new information, and future moves within this conversation are explained by the fact that hearers passively accept this low ranking of George.

Langton’s intriguing suggestion is that this model may be straightforwardly applied to authority as well, including the authority of hate speech. “Speech acts,” she says, “including directives generally, and hate speech specifically, can acquire authority by an everyday piece of social magic: authority gets presupposed, and hearers let it go through, following a rule of accommodation” (Langton 2018b, 152).²⁰ But extending this idea to the accommodation of the authority of hate speech is more difficult than Langton suggests,²¹ especially if we want to capture a wider set of cases beyond those like the subway example, which as I noted lacks stability.

¹⁹ With some qualifications, these shared assumptions form the *conversational score* which can be thought of as “an abstract entity that tracks whatever is relevant to the proper development of the conversation (e.g., relevant topic, presuppositions)” (Ayala and Vasilyeva 2016, 257). For the original expression of this notion, see Lewis (1979). A related but distinct notion is that of the *common ground*, which tracks the participants of a conversation’s shared beliefs and other psychological states. See Stalnaker (1973; 1974; 2002).

²⁰ See also: “Accommodation supplies a straightforward way for hate speech to gain authority” (2018a, 127). A similar account is developed by Ayala and Vasilyeva (2016).

²¹ Langton does acknowledge important differences between these two types of accommodation, but for her it is mainly a difference in effect (acceptability vs. truth), and the mechanism is largely the same. See: “When authority is what is presupposed, default uptake allows it to go through, and the speaker actually obtains authority,

To be fair, Langton may not be interested in the wider set of cases that I aim to uncover, and her work is indeed focused most explicitly on the ‘back door’ cases of hate speech that demonstrate the more sneaky and passive mechanisms of establishing an authority. So, I could (justly) be accused of changing the topic. It is, as she says, less controversial how active endorsement contributes to authority (2018a, 133). But I believe my point remains, and that the phenomenon that I’m interested in is something that should concern social philosophers of language. How chants of ‘No more refugees!’ in one context contribute to the power of silence in another are part of the messy mechanisms that shape our discourse. My claim is that these are mutually sustaining practices. That the *active* support for hate speech by some enables the passive accommodation of others that Langton depicts.

What’s required to capture the wider phenomena I’m pointing toward is a more complex understanding of the *multiple* audiences a speech act can have, along with greater appreciation for how (part of) an audience can itself *actively* aid in the construction of authority, and not simply passively accept it. Once we acknowledge these features and modify the conception of accommodation to properly capture what is occurring in these cases, we are led to a novel type of speaker authority that I call *collective subordinating authority*.

Consider Richard Spencer again, who rose to prominence by spearheading an unabashed white supremacist ideology. At the height of his popularity, he had legions of followers, some of whom he led in a Sieg Heil salute while he *and the crowd* chanted,

empowering the speaker to perform speech acts whose felicity requires authority. ... Their felicity depends on presupposed authority that becomes real, when passive hearers let it through. Observe here a difference between presupposed authority and other presuppositions. Unblocked presuppositions tend to become acceptable rather than true: ‘George is an unpromising candidate’ may become acceptable, if unblocked, but that would not make it true. Authority is different. A presupposition of authority can become, not just acceptable, but true, because its existence, not only its acceptability, depends in part on what hearers do, or fail to do.” (Langton 2018b, 155). And: “Authority’s existence comes into being through accommodation, not only its acceptability” (Langton 2018a, 144). See also (Ayala and Vasilyeva 2016, 261) and (Witek 2013).

“Hail Trump!”²² In my assessment, this utterance can be interpreted as a *directive*—much like how graffiti reading “Muslims Out!” is partly a directive (Waldron 2012)—as well as a show of strength. While strictly speaking, ‘hail Trump,’ could be interpreted as a mere greeting, this clearly fails to capture all of what is occurring. The Nazi-esque utterance (and gestures) are meant to evoke that particular history. Given that ‘Heil Hitler’ was partly about displaying obedience, the implicit meanings of that utterance carry over to the present. And more than simply asserting one’s own obedience to a leader, it can also be interpreted to *demand* obedience as well. It is in this way it has a directive side to it as well, like ‘Muslims out!’, and like much else hate speech too.

This all makes the Spencer-led chant a clear case of (authoritative) subordinating speech and a useful example against which to test the limits of accommodation. But what is at issue here is not accommodation in the conversational sense as described by Lewis and taken up by Langton, but rather accommodation—if we call it that—in a much more extended social sense.²³ What a willing audience gives to empower hate speakers is significantly different than the accommodation that occurs within a single, relatively shorter conversation. And it demands a different explanation.

Like Langton, I agree it is largely because of the audience-uptake that this type of subordinating speech may be called authoritative and has the specific subordinating force that it does. But rather than focus on the passive segment of the audience—who either take on board their noxious presuppositions or at least fail to block them—I want to emphasize the role of those who take up these utterances willingly, and in doing so expand the reach of these speakers’ words even wider with their own speech acts. I

²² See Wood (2017).

²³ A similar extension is proposed in Adams (2020). Though, for Adams, ‘social accommodation’ is a mechanism that allows an audience to resist a speaker’s attempt at claiming authority by, instead, “changing the context.” My interest, on the other hand, is in cases where audiences offer a speaker assistance, through their active contributions, in establishing that authority.

propose a model that acknowledges this more *active* role for some conversational participants in the next section.

4. THE ACCOMODATION OF SUBORDINATING AUTHORITY

Part of my motivation for taking a more expansive look at the contexts that enable hate propaganda to subordinate lies in the observation that the rise to prominence of ‘successful’ propagandists often takes time.²⁴ Richard Spencer—or whoever—did not attain the status he did through a single speech act, but rather through a prolonged process involving countless utterances with many different audiences. In other words, even when this process feels sudden, it is without a doubt still much longer than a single conversation, and so is different than how the hike-planner or the restaurant-chooser attains authority in standard examples of accommodation.²⁵ In this way it is also different than the *situational* authority of the hate speaker on the streets, and the stability of their authoritative status is what we should endeavor to explain.²⁶

To capture this, I believe we must appeal to the notion of the shifting boundaries of permissibility as described by Tirrell (2012; 2017) and Jennifer Saul (2017; 2018).²⁷ Like Langton, Saul is interested in how accommodation enables hearers to shift their understanding of what counts as acceptable, but Saul also notes how this doesn’t always occur. Instead, in some cases, openly racist utterances may be perceived to violate a

²⁴ One illustrative example is found in Jamie Bartlett’s *The Dark Net*, where the sudden rise of white nationalist groups in the UK is described to take place over the course of months and years, moving from the online to the streets and back again. See Bartlett (2014, esp. Ch. 2). For other accounts of real-life events of the rise (and fall) of prominent speakers in hate movements, see Strum (1999); Hategan (2004); and Saslow (2018).

²⁵ See: Maitra (2012); Thomason (1990); Ayala and Vasilyeva (2016); Witek (2013); Langton (2017; 2018a; 2018b)

²⁶ Matthew Shields (forthcoming) explores a distinct but related phenomena that he calls ‘conceptual domination,’ and there too the process is prolonged.

²⁷ For example, as Tirrell notes, “our speech acts also undertake a meta-level expressive commitment about the very saying of what is said. Expressive commitments are commitments to the viability and value of particular ways of talking, modes of discourse” (2017, 144). And, moreover, when these expressive commitments are not condemned, they can shift the boundaries of what counts as acceptable discourse in a community.

general Norm of Racial Equality (NRE), and so aren't smoothly taken on by hearers.²⁸ In some social settings “many explicitly racist utterances will not normally be smoothly assimilated” (2017, 109) perhaps because a hearer will interject and block it, or perhaps because the existing anti-racist norms in effect are strong enough to disrupt the process. If it's the latter, silence will not represent assimilation—it may instead signify the mental distancing a hearer undergoes when confronted with an explicitly racist they reject and perhaps did not expect—as many contextual factors beyond mere silence are relevant to the question of whether a hearer takes on board noxious content. And if this were to occur, the presupposed racist norm would not be accommodated.

Saul explores how this resistance can be bypassed through the use of covertly racist utterances—including dogwhistles—that do not so obviously violate the NRE. She draws on accommodation as it is described by Langton and others, but makes the critical addition that these shifts in shared assumptions can be *manipulated* and *effectively forced*. This can occur through what Saul calls a “figleaf.” As she explains, a “racial figleaf is an utterance made in addition to one that would otherwise be seen as racist [that] provides cover for what would otherwise have too much potential to be labeled as racist” (2017, 103). A *synchronic* figleaf occurs at the same time as the original, problematic utterance. A *diachronic* figleaf is “one applied substantially later than the problematic utterance,” which can reconfigure a speaker's earlier explicitly racist remark as seemingly unproblematic (2017, 105-106). Together, these are, in her view, tools that enable a speaker *and their allies* to provide cover for otherwise obviously racist statements, rendering them socially acceptable. Figleaves function to undermine standard inferences about the problematic interpretations of an utterance, and, in doing so, *force* the accommodation of new norms on an otherwise resistant audience.

²⁸ See Saul (2017, 99–101) for a discussion of the Norm of Racial Equality (NRE), which she takes from the work of Tali Mendelberg.

An effective figleaf allows explicitly racist utterances to be accommodated by a potentially unwilling audience. In the case of *diachronic* figleaves, this occurs “substantially later,” and furthermore, can be performed by someone *other than the original speaker*.²⁹ It is cases like these that serve as a template for the type of *social* accommodation of hate speakers I’m interested in. Many speakers, in addition to the initial speaker, help to solidify the normative shift embodied and presupposed by the original speech act, and in so doing extend its reach onto a larger (perhaps less sympathetic) audience. The sort of audience-contribution at issue here, then, is an active one, and demonstrates how some hearers of hateful utterances can play an important role beyond accommodation. They do so actively, not passively, with action rather than omission, and with intent, rather than unconsciously. In this way, this discursively-forced accommodation is no “quiet engine of the speaker’s success,” but, like the group ‘Hail Trump’ chant, is instead an often-loud assist. Acts of repetition, endorsement, and defense from criticism play important roles, then, in establishing a hate speaker’s authority in a way that is, in some cases, much more secure and stable than the situational authority of the bigoted bus rider

Despite stretching—perhaps too far—the conception of accommodation here, there are important senses in which this extended model is more in line with Sbisà’s (1999) approach to ideology and the normative aspects of presupposition. For starters, she points to “the reality of social communication processes, in which more subtle distinctions are involved” (1999, 492). And as she points out, real-world speech acts have complex audiences, and it may be hopeless to carve out informative uses of presupposition from non-informative uses. This leads Sbisà to distinguishing (at least) five different situations concerning whether the speaker and the hearer share the

²⁹ Saul also notes how “what becomes permissible within one community will not be permissible in another” (2017, 110), and so recognizes relativity to a jurisdiction that a speech act takes hold.

presupposed assumption and whether the speaker knows this or (incorrectly) believes this to be so. And, as she notes, this is further complicated by the fact that audiences are likely to be split, “partly sharing and partly not sharing” these assumptions (499). This appeal to many audiences is useful to remember in the context of hate propaganda, as well, and it inspires my reflections on cases where a hate speaker’s presupposition of authority may be passively accommodated by some, and actively endorsed by others. And, as Sbisà adds, a likely scenario is that all these possibilities will hold, maybe at the same time.

As Sbisà puts it, presupposition may be thought of as “a communicative device for constructing the participants’ takes on the context, the functioning of which is guided by the underlying normative character of the objective context” (1999, 503). It is the notion of “constructing the participants’ takes” that interests me here, especially when combined with the recognition of a heterogenous audience. The combination of these two ideas suggests that one function of the ideological use of presupposition is to cultivate and construct an audience, or ingroup. And one way it can do so is by appealing to the shared assumptions that (should) bind that ingroup. Regarding a newspaper columnist who engages in the persuasive use of presupposition, she writes:

It is likely but not at all certain that his readers already share his feelings. But, in a way, those readers who happen not to share them are the main target of the author’s persuasive aims. Moreover, even in the case of readers who do share them, their hostile feelings for the government are reinforced by being provided with new input. (1999, 497–498)

As this makes clear, while readers who don’t already share the presupposed assumption are the ‘main target’ in one sense, other readers who already do are having their perspective bolstered, and this is itself an important function. Lots of propagandistic hate speech is similar, in that it flatters the enthusiastic supporter while

denigrating outsiders. That both acts occur at the same time is what I aim to get across here. And my point is we shouldn't treat these as wholly separate phenomena—in some cases hearers enthusiastically enshrine authority through their acts, in others, hearers passively permit authority through their omissions—and what I want to suggest is that they are related much more strongly. That is, the power of omission to encode authority partly comes from the fact that, in other cases and perhaps at the same time, the same norms (if not the exact same speaker) are being endorsed more actively, and this matters. As I argued in earlier work (Barnes 2016), the hate speaker in Maitra's subway example is not starting from scratch, but is crucially operating within the domain of anti-Arab xenophobia. The robustness of this pre-existing domain is what allows a random hate speaker to take up the role of an authoritative speaker so quickly. And here I'm adding that part of what sustains these domains of hate (anti-Muslim hate, among many other forms of bigotry) is the 'grassroots' support provided by hearers-cum-speakers. It is by noting the heterogenous responses of multiple audiences that opens our eyes to this side of a hate speaker's authority, and what their doing with their words.

Langton's cases focus on the accommodation of *a particular speaker's presuppositions*, and in particular their assumption of authoritative status relative to a given domain. But, in order to understand the power of propagandistic hate speech, we must acknowledge that much of its force pre-exists this particular speaker, and this particular utterance. This, again, is what is included in the "total speech situation" of these utterances, where racist and other bigoted values lurk in nearly all social situations, lying in wait of a speaker to make them salient. Whenever hate propaganda occurs, there are some who share its aims and others who, to differing degrees, oppose it in belief or action. Greater attention to this fact raises several worries, but also opens necessary lines of inquiry.

It is in recognition of the general complexity posed by differing audience responses that Sbisà asks: “Can uptake be multiple (different participants may take an utterance in different ways) and what happens to be “done” in such cases?” (2009, 49). Her response points partly towards the approach I’m exploring here. She notes that this “depends on the kinds of illocutionary acts and on the structure of the social context” and also whether the speaker is most interested in securing the addressee’s uptake, the uptake both of the addressee and of some bystanders, or, most suggestively, “the uptake of ratified bystanders [who] may supplant the failure to achieve the addressee’s own uptake” (2009, 50). As I interpret this latter remark, in some contexts, the uptake of a subset of a speaker’s audience can do the work of establishing what act occurred through their uptake, and this has effects on the wider audience as well.

And while Sbisà’s focus is on things like newspaper headlines and politician’s speeches (and how these are reported in the press), her attention to the ‘real world’ uses of such constructions, particularly how they are used for persuasive means, and her recognition of multiple audiences are the lessons I am taking here. Moreover, the approach to presuppositions as “assumptions that ought to be shared” is importantly normative, and suggests that their function is not (only) about informing audiences of new information, but about constructing ingroups who accept that presupposition—whether it is content or the authority of the speaker—as this sets the stage for this ‘more agreeable’ audience to play a role in securing the speaker’s act as, say, an authoritative directive. All this draws attention to the means through which speakers and hearers sometimes forcefully articulate the assumptions that ought to be shared. Saul’s depiction of figleaves is one such instance where this ‘favoured’ interpretation is not left up to chance, and, in the case of third-party diachronic figleaves, the speaker’s allies make the role of the ingroup vivid.

In closing, I want to note that one benefit of examining this extended sort of accommodation is that it allows us to see how speech acts in addition to those from the original source are also backed up by a similar type of authority. It's a somewhat odd feature of the standard model to maintain that *only* the original utterance is (authoritatively) subordinating, while further utterances such as those occurring when an audience chants along to a racist mantra, or when others later repost similar messages online, are somehow not subordinating in a similar way. The force of these speech acts is left unexplained by Langton, as her account seems to focus on establishing single speakers as authoritative, rather than the mass of followers who may join in with acts of repetition. Because of the reliance of this type of subordinating speech on this part of its audience, whom we may see as collaborators and promoters, I view these speech acts as backed up by a type of *collective subordinating authority*. This sort of subordinating speech needs further examination, and my sketch of its mechanisms leaves many questions unanswered.³⁰ My aim here, however, has been to show how the authority of subordinating speech is not always located in individual speakers, but often in their participation in harmful group practices. Sometimes, these speech acts occur in the context where a group of speakers take their lead from an individual (e.g., the Spencer-led Sieg Heil discussed above) and in other cases the operation is much more diffuse (e.g., Gamergate, though originating in a single-authored manifesto, became a quasi-grassroots harassment campaign as it went on).

CONCLUSION

Writing after the Second World War, Jacques Ellul argued against “a common view of propaganda.” On this view, propaganda “is the work of a few evil men, seducers of

³⁰ I explain and defend this notion of collective subordinating authority more fully in other work (Barnes 2022).

the people, cheats and authoritarian rulers who want to dominate a population” (1962/1975, 118). According to this view, Ellul went on, “the public is just an object, a passive crowd that one can manipulate, influence, and use. ... In other words, this view distinguishes between an active factor—the propagandist—and a passive factor—the crowd, the mass, man.” “This view,” he added, “seems to me completely wrong.” Instead, he suggested that “the propagandist and the propagandee make propaganda together” (Bernstein 2021).

In cases of informal authority speakers rely on their audience to *recognize* their authority and *respond* with the appropriate uptake to achieve this status. As Tirrell puts it, “authority results in uptake, and uptake further entrenches authority” (2018, 17). There is therefore a reciprocal relationship between uptake and authority. And sometimes, perhaps often, hearers respond with speech of their own, and this is one type of uptake that can extend the reach of subordinating speech in troubling ways, and in some cases may lend some stability to the informal authority of hate speakers. Noting the significance of an active audience avoids the pitfall of reifying single speakers as the monstrous center of harmful speech.

In this chapter, I argued there’s a way in which hate speakers gain authority that has so far remained on the periphery of the existing literature on this topic. While prevailing models tend to depict authority as primarily a feature of individual speakers, reality is more complex. Spokespersons for noxious views do indeed rise up, but their rise is supported by an army of collaborators. Thus, instead of a model that locates subordinating authority in particularly noteworthy individuals, I opt for a bottom-up approach that recognizes the power of the crowd. In these cases, the subordinating authority speakers draw on and make use of is not reducible to an individual position. Instead, these speech acts draw power and mutual support from taking place within a

group practice. I believe this conception helpfully opens up new avenues for discussing real cases of subordinating speech.

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