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LANGUAGE AS A MECHANISM OF CONTROL

What are the mechanisms by which propaganda functions in a liberal democracy? Liberal democratic norms pose obstacles for the demagogue. If reasonableness is a norm governing public reason, how could one appear to be reasonable, yet nevertheless undermine reasonableness? In this chapter, I turn to the details of linguistic communication to describe one mechanism that I will argue is often exploited to overcome the problem raised by liberal democratic norms governing public reason. I conclude the chapter with a discussion about whether the phenomena I discuss raise worries for the practical possibility of deliberative norms.

There has been very little discussion in formal semantics and pragmatics on the effects of "code words" on discourse. This is problematic. We have an ideal picture of deliberation spelled out in semantics and pragmatics. That is, we have a specific, worked-out theory of how speaker and hearer can communicate effectively, which exploits a truth-conditional theory of meaning. An utterer can say something, which, if accepted, eliminates certain situations as possible. Eventually, speaker and hearer agree on a picture of the world. This

truth-conditional, cognitivist framework gives us an elegant account of what happens when communication works.

What I will argue in this chapter is that the truth-conditional, cognitivist picture also gives us an elegant account of what happens when communication fails, due to propagandistic manipulation. Since the cognitivist, truth-conditional framework embodies an account of what happens when communication functions well, it allows us precise grasp of what happens when communications fails to function well. My worry with noncognitivist accounts, or accounts that are unsystematic at their core, is that, while they are sometimes well suited to explain failures of communication, they are ill suited to explain the contrast between well-functioning communication and poorly functioning communication.

If a group is deliberating about a policy or course of action that will affect everyone in the group, fairness requires regarding everyone's viewpoint as worthy of respect. But this is just to say that it is natural to expect reasonableness to be the norm governing any such deliberation, including those that are intended to issue in democratically legitimate policies. I will henceforth assume that the principle ideal of public reason is reasonableness, rather than theoretical rationality. To say that the principle ideal of public reason is reasonableness is not to deny that there are other ideals of public reason. Politicians must also be, for example, rationally consistent, objective, and logical.

One moral of the previous chapter is that demagoguery in a liberal democracy takes the form of a contribution to public debate that is presented as embodying reasonableness yet in fact contributes a content that clearly erodes reasonableness. This form of propaganda is not merely a deceitful attempt to bypass theoretical rationality, on this view. It functions via an initial selection of a target within the population.

A proposal is reasonable if it appears so from the perspective of each citizen of the state. A contribution is inconsistent with reasonableness if it undermines the capacity or the

willingness to produce or be swayed by reasonable proposals. Reasonableness presupposes, at least in humans, the capacity for empathy for others. If I am right, we should expect paradigm cases of propaganda to have as part of their communicative content that *a group in society is not worthy of our respect.* So one characteristic way to convey that a target is not worthy of respect is to cause one's audience to lose empathy for them.

Demagoguery can take both linguistic and nonlinguistic form. Many of the paradigm examples of demagoguery, including demagogic propaganda, are posters, pictures, and architecture, rather than utterances of sentences. Any characterization of demagoguery, or propaganda more generally, that is focused specifically on language is clearly too narrow. My characterization of propaganda is accordingly perfectly general. It is not restricted to propaganda that takes linguistic form. Nonlinguistic images or movies clearly do exploit existing false ideological beliefs demagogically in just the way I have described. For example, pictorial representations of Roma in Hungarian articles about crime, or Blacks in American articles on this topic, will be demagogic if they are employed to justify brutal and unequal laws. But I am unable to give an account of the *mechanisms* by which this occurs.

There is a science of language and communication in place that enables us to gain some precision about the mechanisms underlying linguistic propaganda. I exploit that account to explain how some linguistic propaganda works. I suspect the same level of detail has not yet been achieved in our understanding of imagistic representation. Therefore, I will focus on the linguistic case. I expect that future research will be able to help us address how the perhaps more important imagistic case works.

I will use formal semantics and pragmatics to describe a specific mechanism by which demagoguery in linguistic form plays a role in bringing into the context false ideological beliefs that are apparently not part of the discussion. As we shall see, there is a great deal of evidence that there is such a linguistic

mechanism. And perhaps there are analogous mechanisms in the case of images; indeed, the inspiration point in my analysis, Rae Langton and Caroline West's theory of pornography from 1999, employs similar formal semantic and pragmatic mechanisms to explain the phenomena of subordination with images. But it is not clear to me that all these *exact* mechanisms can function with images and movies, because it is not clear to me that one can make the distinction between at-issue and not-at-issue content that is at the center of the mechanism I describe. My focus is on explaining one way in which demagoguery exploits already existing nonpolitical mechanisms to be effective. This mechanism is well understood in the case of language, so we can describe it with precision.

A number of philosophers in the feminist tradition, including Catherine MacKinnon and Jennifer Hornsby, have argued that the function of certain kinds of speech (in their chosen example, pornography) is to silence a targeted group. The philosopher whose work has most inspired and influenced my own is Rae Langton. Langton argues, following MacKinnon and Hornsby, that pornographic material *subordinates* women and *silences* them.[1] In depicting subordination, Langton argues, pornographers subordinate women. Langton argues that the function of certain kinds of racist speech is "to rank blacks as inferior." Langton also argues that pornography silences women, by undermining the felicity conditions of their speech; it represents "no" as yes. My aim in this chapter is to explain some of these effects with the tools of contemporary formal semantics, by applying them to the case of propaganda.

Here is one model of how this could work; as is clear from her response to Judith Butler, it is a model from which Langton distances herself.[2] An imperative is a command to act a certain way. The imperative statement "eat your beets!" directed at a three year old is a command to the three year old to do something. Pornographic speech could function as a mechanism of subordination by delivering imperative-like orders of some kind. The thought here is not that imperatives bring

about their truth. Commands must be associated with practical authority in order to have this function. But so too, as I will argue, does subordinating speech. The relation between imperatives and subordinating speech will be a theme of this chapter, as I will draw on both semantic and pragmatic features of imperatives in my analysis of subordinating speech. I will try to square this use of the semantics of imperatives with Langton's compelling "verdictive" account of subordinating speech.

Our discussion to this point suggests that there should be expressions apt for use in a debate that function to *exclude the perspective* of certain groups in the population. Since demagoguery, like undermining propaganda generally, is masked as embodying the ideals with which it ultimately clashes, we should expect these expressions to operate indirectly. That is, there should be systematic ways of genuinely or apparently *contributing* to debate, which simultaneously frame the debate in such a way as to exclude the perspective of a targeted group. The function of these expressions is to mask the demagogic nature of the contribution, by creating flawed ideological beliefs to the effect that the perspectives of a designated group are not worthy of reasonable consideration.

We should expect there to be linguistic means by use of which one can make an apparently reasonable claim, while simultaneously, merely by using the relevant vocabulary, wearing down the ideal of reasonableness. Because these linguistic means should be available for use to make any point whatsoever that may come up in debate about policy, we should expect that they function to exclude whether one takes the affirmative or the negative position on the debate. Indeed, if there were no linguistic means of excluding the perspective of certain groups from debate, while simultaneously representing oneself as contributing to the debate, that would raise the suspicion that reasonableness is not in fact the ideal of public reason.

If reasonableness is the norm of public reason, we should expect there to be linguistic mechanisms, that is, *expressions*, with the following three properties:

1. Use of the relevant expression has the effect on the conversation of representing a certain group in the community as having a perspective not worthy of inclusion, that is, they are not worthy of respect.
2. The expression has a content that can serve simply to contribute legitimately to resolving the debate at issue in a reasonable way, which is separate from its function as a mechanism of exclusion.
3. Mere use of the expression is enough to have the effect of eroding reasonableness. So the effect on reasonableness occurs just by virtue of using the expression, in whatever linguistic context.

Here is why my characterization of propaganda entails the existence of expressions with these properties. The expressions would have to have the first property, because that would be the property of eroding reasonableness. The expressions would have to have the second property, because they would have to be able to be used in discourse that appears to meet the ideal of public reason. The expressions would have to have the third property, because they would have to be apt for use, whatever one's stance on the issue at hand.

We will need some concepts in our analysis of particular cases of propaganda. The first set of concepts is from the branches of linguistics most relevant for our purposes, namely, semantics and pragmatics. We will also need the concept of social meaning, such as from the works of the legal theorist Dan Kahan. These will allow us to spell out how a claim can communicate an implicit message that runs counter to the ideals its explicit content seems to embody. The concepts we will need are somewhat technical. But this should not distract from the fact that the phenomena they are used to describe are very familiar.

The notion of a *linguistic context* is central in contemporary formal semantics and pragmatics. What a sentence of a natural language says depends upon the linguistic context in which

it is uttered. In a context in 2014 in which President Barack Obama utters the sentence, "I am the president of the United States," what he says is true. In a context in which the time is 2007, or someone else is the speaker in 2014, what is said is not true. I will sketch some required concepts from the theory of formal semantics and pragmatics.

One notion we need in modeling linguistic context is due to the philosopher Robert Stalnaker. It is the notion of *the common ground* of a conversation: "Participants in a conversation begin with certain information in common, or presumed to be in common, and it is that body of information that the speech acts they perform are designed to influence. The content of an assertion will be a piece of information, and if the assertion is successful, then that information will become part of the body of information that provides the context for the subsequent discourse."[3] The common ground of a conversation is the "information in common, or presumed to be common," in a discourse.

On Stalnaker's view of content, which derives from Ludwig Wittgenstein's treatment of content in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, a content is a *set of possible situations*, or "worlds." A proposition on this view is that set of possible worlds in which it is true. A common ground is, then, a set of propositions. On Stalnaker's model of content, the common ground can be thought of as the intersection of all of the propositions mutually presumed to be known by the conversational participants. This is itself a set of possible worlds, the set of possible worlds in which the conjunction of all of the propositions in the common ground is true. Given the model of a proposition as a set of possible worlds, this means that the common ground is the intersection of propositions, and itself is a proposition.

According to Stalnaker's account of communication, successful communication takes the form of *ruling out situations*. I ask you where the gas station is; you reply that it is to the right. You express a proposition, one true in just those possible worlds in which the gas station is to the right, and false in the

others. When I accept your assertion, the common ground is updated. In the new common ground, all the possible worlds are ones in which the gas station is to the right. This is the common information. This is an elegant picture of successful communication. An assertion is made; it is a proposal to add a proposition to the common ground. It is debated and, if accepted, added to the common ground. This leads us to rule out possibilities that we had previously entertained.

In recent years, a basically Stalnakerian picture of communication has been altered to include a more complex notion of a context. The context is not just the set of propositions that are what is presumed by the conversational inquirers. It records more detailed information.

Stalnaker's model of a common ground is designed around declarative sentences, and the practice of *asserting* them. To assert a proposition is to represent oneself as knowing it, and to make a proposal to add that proposition to the common ground. But there are other speech acts that occur in conversation, such as questions ("Who went to the party?) and commands ("Eat your beets!"). To accommodate the contextual effects of these other speech acts, one must have a more complex conception of a context than just the common ground. The details of this more complex conception of context are front and center in more recent work on formal semantics and formal pragmatics. In Discourse Representation Theory, Irene Heim and Hans Kamp make contexts "structured," by appealing to the notion of a *file*, which records discourse information such as referents for later pronouns.

The work of the formal semanticist Craige Roberts has been very influential in recent thinking about context. According to Roberts, a context determines not only what is and what is not known to the participants in a discourse, but also a record of the questions that have been asked that direct the course of inquiry.[4] So Roberts adds to the common ground a record of the *questions under discussion*.[5] Roberts thus argues that contexts contain not just sets of propositions, but other

elements as well. If so, linguistic meaning can change not just beliefs, but also other psychological states.

I will be applying these resources of formal pragmatics to model the workings of demagogic speech. But I am by no means the first to use them in an analysis of problematic political speech. As we shall see in what follows, the philosophers Rae Langton and Caroline West use Lewis's formal pragmatics to address the harm of pornography.[6] More recently, Ishani Maitra suggests the possibility that subordinating speech is or involves an act of *ranking*. Ranking is a speech act that, like Robert Stalnaker's account of assertion, involves adding a content to the shared background of a conversation. She argues that rankings don't merely seek to describe the world, but "constitute norms," and she sees that this may require a different account of their content.[7] She does not provide an account of the contents of rankings in her paper. Nevertheless, Maitra clearly sees here the possibility of extending the kind of dynamic account of conversation that is familiar from the work of Stalnaker and others in formal semantics and pragmatics to speech acts other than assertions. It is this basic model I am filling out and developing in this chapter.

The Dutch semanticist Frank Veltman, in his paper "Defaults in Update Semantics," published in 1996, adds to the context a preference ordering on possible worlds, meant to reflect "defeasible knowledge." The idea is that certain possible situations are conceived of as more likely than others, and hence to be epistemically preferred. Veltman's theory is meant to handle *generic statements*, roughly, generalizations that structure our expectations, making it easier to maneuver around the world. These are statements like "birds fly" or "dogs have four legs."[8] An utterance of "birds fly," if accepted, makes it the case that, when considering any given bird in context, the ordering on possible worlds is one according to which worlds in which that bird flies are closer than worlds in which that bird doesn't fly. This reflects the bias toward situations in which a given bird that one encounters flies.

Another notion we need, in addition to that of a linguistic context, is the distinction between *at-issue content* and *not-at-issue content*. Christopher Potts uses the following two examples to illustrate the distinction between at-issue and not-at-issue content.[9] The first involves what he calls a "supplemental expression," in this case "who lived in a working-class suburb of Boston," to make the distinction. The second involves what he calls an "expressive," in this case "damn," to make the distinction:

1. I spent part of every summer until I was ten with my grandmother, who lived in a working-class suburb of Boston.

2. We bought a new electric clothes dryer, and I thought all there was to it was plugging it in' and connecting the vent hose. Nowhere did it say that the *damn* thing didn't come with an electric plug!

As Potts writes, "[T]he supplementary relative *who lived in a working-class suburb of Boston* plays a secondary role relative to the information conveyed by the main clause. The issue is not where the grandmother lived, but rather the fact that the speaker summered with her as a child." The *at-issue content* is what is at issue in the debate. Supplemental constructions and expressives are "used to guide the discourse in a particular direction or to help the hearer to better understand why the at-issue content is important at that stage."

The at-issue content of an utterance is the information *asserted* by the utterance. When I utter (1), what I assert is that I spent part of every summer until I was ten with my grandmother. To assert something, as the linguist Sarah Murray describes, is *to propose to add it to the common ground*. To assert something is to advance it as something the speaker knows, and to thereby *propose* that its content be added to the common ground. Subsequent argument is debate about whether or not to accept the proposal.

In contrast, the claim about my grandmother, that she lived in a working-class suburb of Boston, is additional material that comments on what is asserted. It is not-at-issue content. The not-at-issue content of an utterance is not advanced as a proposal of a content to be added to the common ground. Not-at-issue content is *directly* added to the common ground. For this reason, not-at-issue content is in general "not negotiable, not directly challengeable, and [is] added [to the common ground] even if the at-issue proposition is rejected."[10] This characterization of not-at-issue content is supported by much linguistic evidence; the evidence mostly involves when it is legitimate to retract a claim. The not-at-issue content is often "semantic, part of the conventional meaning."

Rae Langton and Caroline West argue that not-at-issue content is involved in pornography.[11] Specifically, they argue that pornography has the effect of subordinating women, not by explicitly communicating a subordinating message, but by *presupposing* it. "In order to make sense of what is explicitly said and illustrated" in pornography, they argue, one must make the relevant sexist and subordinating presuppositions, or not-at-issue contents.

Langton and West were writing before the at-issue/not-at-issue distinction was drawn. Their theoretical model is linguistic presupposition, as described in David Lewis's seminal paper "Scorekeeping in a Language Game." Consider the examples:

3. It was John who solved the problem.

4. My wife is from Chicago.

Linguists generally hold that an utterance of (3) presupposes the proposition that someone solved the problem, and asserts that John solved the problem. Linguists generally hold that an utterance of (4) presupposes the proposition that the speaker has a wife, and asserts that she is from Chicago. One reason to think that this is the right account is that denying the speaker's claim is naturally understood as denying what is asserted,

while agreeing with what is presupposed. So if someone asserts (3), and I respond with "that's false," the interpretation of my denial is as denying that John solved the problem, not as denying that someone solved the problem. Similarly, if someone asserts (4), and I respond with "that's false," then my denial is standardly taken to be a denial that the speaker's wife is in Chicago, not that the speaker is married. Presupposed content is a kind of not-at-issue content (roughly). Asserted content is at-issue content.

The linguist Sarah Murray argues that an assertion of a declarative sentence is a proposal to add the at-issue content to the common ground.[12] In contrast, the not-at-issue content is directly added to the common ground. Using the example of Cheyenne, she shows that there are explicit linguistic markers of not-at-issue content. In English, they are less obvious, but still present. For example, the expression "I hear" in (5) functions as a "hedge"; it introduces not-at-issue content:

5. The president is about to give a speech, I hear.

"I hear" functions to comment on the at-issue content that the president is about to give a speech. In the case of hedges like "I hear," Murray argues that they alter the at-issue content. The at-issue content of (5) is that it is *possible* that the president is about to give a speech. The not-at-issue content, that the speaker heard that the president is about to give a speech, is simply added to the common ground. Challenges to (5) are challenges to the at-issue content, but not to the not-at-issue content that the speaker heard the at-issue content. This raises the possibility that one can communicate a noneasily challenged meaning by attaching it to an expression as not-at-issue content.

Here is a final example of not-at-issue content, involving epistemic "must" in English:

6. It must be raining outside.

If someone utters (6), she communicates that she did not herself experience rain, that she *inferred it indirectly*. Kai von

Fintel and Anthony Gillies have convincingly argued that this feature of "must" is like the evidential markings in other languages. (Von Fintel and Gillies's view is unsurprising, because epistemic "must" is of course by definition, like evidentials, epistemic.)[13] That the agent did not witness the event of raining is *not* part of the asserted content of an utterance of (6). For example, it is not easy to deny this content. It is difficult to respond to (6) by responding with "that's wrong, you are soaking wet." The communicated content *that the agent did not witness the rain herself* is something that would be very odd and rude to challenge. So doing would suggest that the agent is deficient in some way, rather than merely ordinarily misinformed. It is not-at-issue content, rather than at-issue content.

Some kinds of not-at-issue content are easier to recover than other kinds. The kind associated with epistemic "must" is "baked" deeply into the meaning of the modal auxiliary "must." Other kinds, such as those found in explicit supplemental expressions, are more easily targeted and identified. The properties associated with being not-at-issue come in degree.

Here is a property of presuppositions that makes them not suitable for analysis as classic not-at-issue content. A presupposition of a word or a linguistic construction can be "filtered" from a larger construction containing it. Sentence (1) presupposes that the problem was solved. But (7) does not presuppose that the problem was solved.

7. If the problem was solved, it was John who solved it.

In this case, the presupposition that the problem was solved has been "filtered" by the antecedent of the conditional, the sentence following "if," namely, "the problem was solved." Similarly, (8) presupposes that John smoked, but (9) does not:

8. John stopped smoking.

9. Bill believes that John stopped smoking.

In contrast, not-at-issue content cannot be "filtered."