

Class Eight: Langton's "Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts," Part One

Doing Things with Words - Ryan Simonelli

February 6, 2022

1 Some Context

- **The Debate Over Pornography:** In 1980s, Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin put forward a series of ordinances that would allow women to file civil suits against stores selling pornography (note, this wasn't a ban against pornography).
 - **Definition of Pornography:** In the ordinance, pornography was defined as "the subordination of women through pictures and/or words" that present women as sexual objects.
 - * **Note:** The way this is phrased, pornography is not described as *depicting* subordination of women, but, rather, as *subordinating* women through depicting women in certain ways (paradigmatically, as sexual objects).
 - **Freedom of Speech:** These ordinances were generally struck down on grounds of free speech. But, moreover, MacKinnon's claims were largely criticized as involving a "sleight of hand," (Langton 294).
- **Langton's Intervention:** Langton is going to reconstruct MacKinnon's claims with the use of Austin's speech act theory in order to show not only that these claims can be made philosophically precise but that they might also be philosophically defensible.

2 Subordinating Speech Acts

- **The Claim:** Subordination can be an illocutionary act: something that's done *in* saying something, rather than simply part of the content that is said or a consequence of the saying of that content.
- **Example:** Langton has us consider a whites "whites only" sign, posted in a country with racial segregation laws (e.g. America during the 50s or South Africa up to the early 90s).
 - **Locution:** It says *whites only*, referring to whites by "whites" and meaning *no one else* by "only."
 - **Illocution:** Most obviously, it *permits* whites from entering the space and *prohibits* non-whites from entering the space.
 - **Perlocution:** It makes non-whites recognize that they are unwelcome, it stops non-whites from entering the space, etc.
- **Subordinating Illocutionary Force:** There are generally many aspects of illocutionary force in a speech act, and so, in addition to the illocutionary force of *prohibiting* blacks from entering a space, Langton also claims that there are other illocutionary acts performed in the sign's saying "whites only."
 - **Ranks** black as having an inferior worth.
 - **Legitimizes** discriminatory power.
 - **Deprives** blacks of certain powers, for instance, the power to go into a certain area.It's in virtue of these features that it counts as having the illocutionary force of *subordination*.

- **The Verdictive Character of Subordinating Speech Acts:** The principal acts of subordination, which involve the notion of *ranking*, are *verdictives* in Austin's sense. For many verdictives, in order to have the illocutionary force that they do, the verdict must come from a position of *authority*.
 - **Example:** The tennis umpires verdictive "fault," has the illocutionary force of actually determining that the serve was a fault, whereas the angry fan's yelling "fault!" has no such force.
- **The Exercitive Character of Subordinating Speech Acts:** Subordinating speech acts are also what Austin calls *exercitives*, involving a *legitimization* of discriminatory behavior and the *deprivation* of certain rights. These likewise must come from a position of authority in order to be felicitous.
- **Question:** How, exactly are we individuating illocutionary force here? Is the an illocutionary of subordination just a conglomerate of other illocutionary acts (ranking, legitimating, etc.)? Or is there a prior unity, as it were, to the illocutionary act of subordination that we then break down into aspects?

3 Pornography as Subordination

- **Bracketing the Locutionary and Perlocutionary Force of Pornography:** Recall Austin's remark that philosophy has tended to neglect the existence of the illocutionary act, seeing just the locution and the perlocution. Langton points out a similar tendency in the case of pornography.
 - **Locutionary Subordination:** One trend is to think that the criticism of pornography is based on the idea that it *depicts* subordination. This would be analogous to the locutionary act—what is literally "said" (or, in this case, "shown") in the speech act in question.
 - * But, clearly, pornography is not the only thing that depicts subordination, and certain depictions of subordination (for instance, in documentaries) are not themselves subordinating or problematic.
 - **Perlocutionary Subordination:** An alternate trend is to think that the criticism of pornography is based on the idea that it *causes* subordination.
 - * Of course, this is a serious potential negative consequence of pornography and pornography may very well have this consequence, but it's not MacKinnon's claim. Furthermore, if it were MacKinnon's claim, then it would be a simply empirical claim and evidence against this causal relation would just refute it.
- **The Illocutionary Force of Pornography:** MacKinnon's claim is that, like the subordinating speech acts of racial segregation, pornography *ranks* women as inferior and *legitimizes* discrimination and violence against woman, and *deprives* women of certain authorities, for instance, a certain sort of agency.
 - **Note:** The illocutionary act of *legitimizing* discrimination against women—something that's done *in* the pornographic depiction—is distinct from the perlocutionary act of *causing* discrimination against woman—something that's done *by* the pornographic depiction.
- **Evaluating the Claim:** With appeal to Austin's speech act theory, Langton has at least made the claim *clear*. But is it *true*? Langton's strategy in answering this question is to consider whether pornography meets the *felicity conditions* for an act of subordination.
 - **Authority:** Langton suggests that, relative to its intended audience, pornography plausibly *does* have authority required for a felicitous subordinating speech act.
 - * **Note:** *Having* authority and being a *legitimate* authority are treated as distinct here. Consider, for instance, an authoritarian leader who rigs an election so as to stay

in power. After this fraudulent election, they still have authority—they're still, for instance, able to issue laws—even though their authority is not legitimate. In this sense, *having* authority is constitutively tied to being *taken* to have authority.

4 Questions

- **Question:** Now that we've seen the account of pornography as subordination, how do we think that this account might generalize beyond pornography narrowly construed? Might other forms of popular media that is not explicitly pornographic nevertheless count as subordinating in the sense that Langton diagnoses?
 - Consider, for instance, Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines" (and especially the music video for this song). Does this meet the criteria for a subordinating pornographic speech act, as Langton spells it out? Are there other sorts of examples that come to mind?
- **Question:** Langton suggests that, even if pornography (where we might even construe this broadly) has the subordinating force that she argues it very well might, it doesn't necessarily follow that it should be *banned*. Rather, she suggests that there might be other ways of divesting it of its illocutionary force by undermining its authority. What do we think of this suggestion? What would attempts to do this look like?
- **Question:** It's clear that the sense in which Langton is speaking of pornography as a "speech act" is a bit stretched, relative to Austin's use. Austin's account is clearly intended to include non-verbal kinds of communication (for instance, gestures), but it seems that its scope is restricted to acts of *communication*. Does pornography, as Langton understands it, count as such an act? If not, is that a problem for her appeal to Austin?