

## Accommodated Authority: Broadening the Picture\*

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**Abstract:** Speaker authority can spring into existence via accommodation mechanisms: a speaker acts *as if* they had authority and they can end up obtaining it if nobody objects. Versions of this claim have been advanced by Rae Langton, Ishani Maitra, Maciej Witek, and others. In this paper, I shift the focus from speaker to hearer authority. I develop a three-staged argument, according to which (i) felicity conditions for illocution can be recast in presupposition terms; (ii) just as certain illocutions require speaker authority, there are also illocutions requiring hearer authority; (iii) accommodation may provide a way to confer authority to one’s audience, rather than gain it for oneself. Speakers sometimes act as if *their hearer* had authority, and the hearer can end up obtaining it solely by playing along. In closing, I pause on the potentially problematic interplay between informal authority conferral and social norms of female deference to men.

Words can be used to do a plethora of things. Some such things require that the speaker have authority. Quite clearly, a speaker can have authority formally, in virtue of their institutional role. Authority, however, need not be institutional, and speakers can acquire it informally. To see this, consider the following scenario.

*Sailing Trip Organizer:* A group of friends wants to go on a sailing trip. They are discussing the logistics of the trip, but can’t seem to settle on anything. Eventually, Jenny takes over and begins to make decisions (“We’ll sail around the Canaries”, “We’ll charter a sailboat for the last week in August”). She assigns the other group members specific tasks (“Mark, look for a sailboat to charter in Fuerteventura”, “Kate, buy a cruising guide to the Canaries”). No one objects. Everybody complies with their task.<sup>1</sup>

Arguably, Jenny comes to have the authority to order her friends to do such and such, and to make decisions for the whole group. Her authority is not institutional, nor is it pre-established. Rather,

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Maitra (2012: 106).

she informally gains it ‘on the fly’, thanks to her audience’s compliance. The most well-received version of this claim has been put forth by Rae Langton (2015, 2018a, 2018b). In Langton’s view, the mechanism of authority acquisition at work in Sailing Trip Organizer is akin to *presupposition accommodation*: a speaker acts *as if* they had authority and can end up obtaining it if nobody objects. Other versions of the claim have been advanced by Richmond Thomason (1990), Marina Sbisà (2002), Ishani Maitra (2012), and Maciej Witek (2013). Although their accounts vary in many respects, they are all interested in informal processes of speaker authority acquisition.

In this paper, I shift the focus from speaker to hearer authority. In particular, I broaden Langton’s analysis and argue that speakers sometimes act as if *their hearer* had authority, and the hearer can end up obtaining it solely by playing along.<sup>2</sup> In §1, I outline David Lewis’ notion of presupposition accommodation, and unpack Langton’s insight by relying on J.L. Austin’s remarks on the relation between presuppositions and felicity conditions. In §2, I point out that, just as certain illocutions require *speaker authority*, other illocutions require *hearer authority*. Relatedly, I maintain that accommodation may provide a way to *confer* authority to one’s audience (rather than gain it for oneself). In §3, I pause on the potentially problematic interplay between this reversed dynamic and gender norms of deference.

## 1. Accommodating Speaker Authority

### 1.1. Theoretical Building Blocks

Langton’s proposal is built upon two building blocks. The first is Lewis’ scorekeeping model of conversation. Conversations, Lewis (1979) claims, have a *score* and follow a *rule of accommodation*, i.e. a rule that makes the score automatically adjust (within certain limits) so that what in fact transpires counts as appropriate. Presuppositions make the accommodation rule particularly vivid. Imagine Ada and I are talking about *Interstellar* when I say,

(1) My brother says it’s Nolan’s best movie.

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the paper, I use ‘authority’ to refer to practical authority (i.e. authority over action). I will not deal with epistemic authority (i.e. authority over belief). See Raz (2009: 8) and Langton (2015, 2018a).

My utterance presupposes that I have a brother; it treats this information as something that Ada and I already share.<sup>3</sup> Imagine, however, that Ada did not know that I have a brother. My conversational move is strictly speaking inappropriate – and yet, provided that Ada says nothing and quietly takes on board that new piece of information, the score will accommodate the presupposition, so that my utterance will count as appropriate after all.

The second building block is Austin’s characterization of the felicity conditions for illocution in terms of presuppositions.

[Consider] our infelicity when we say ‘I name...’, but some of the conditions (A.1) and (A.2) are not satisfied [...]. Here we might have used the ‘presuppose’ formula: we might say that the formula ‘I do’ presupposes lots of things: if these are not satisfied the formula is unhappy, void. (Austin 1975: 51)

The words ‘I do’ count as an act of marrying only if certain felicity conditions are satisfied – only if uttering “I do” is (part of) an accepted procedure to marry somebody (condition A.1); the would-be spouses are not already married (condition A.2); etc. Such conditions, Austin submits, can be recast in presupposition terms. The words ‘I do’, pronounced within a marriage ceremony, *presuppose* that the would-be spouses are not already married, that the procedure they are invoking is socially accepted; etc. Clearly, an utterance of

(2) I do,

in the appropriate context, does not presuppose that I am not already married *in the same way as* my utterance of (1) presupposes that I have a brother. The presupposition that I have a brother is (what I call) a *locutionary* presupposition – it is triggered by a specific linguistic construction (namely, the possessive ‘my brother’). The presupposition that I am not already married is an *illocutionary* presupposition – it is attached to the force of the act I try to perform, rather than to a locution that I use.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Putting it in Stalnaker (2002)’s terms, (1) presents the proposition that I have a brother as part of the common ground between Ada and me.

<sup>4</sup> An assertion of “John’s children are all bald”, made when John has no children, is a void assertion, says Austin (1975: 50). If he is right, then certain presuppositions are both locutionary and illocutionary. The presupposition that John has children is triggered by the possessive noun phrase ‘John’s children’. As such, it is a locutionary presupposition. But, insofar as its satisfaction affects felicity, it would also be an illocutionary presupposition.

So, presuppositions in the traditional ('locutionary') sense and presuppositions in the Austinian ('illocutionary') sense are not one and the same phenomenon. Yet, they can both be characterized as *contextual requirements* – states of affairs that must obtain in the world of utterance for a locution to make sense and an illocution to be felicitous, respectively.

### *1.2. Presuppositions of Speaker Authority*

If certain felicity conditions are presuppositions, as Austin suggested, then it should be possible to accommodate them, thus making an infelicitous illocution felicitous after all. Langton argues that it is indeed so for the Speaker Authority Condition.<sup>5</sup>

Let's return to Sailing Trip Organizer. The group is stuck, until Jenny begins to make decisions and orders her friends how to act. Orders impose obligations upon the hearer, and hence are authoritative illocutions: they are felicitous only if the speaker has authority over the hearer. Qu attempts to order, Jenny's imperative utterances ("Mark, look for a sailboat to charter in Fuerteventura", "Kate, buy a cruising guide to the Canaries") illocutionarily presuppose that she has authority over her friends. When she starts speaking, this presupposition is not part of the score – Jenny is a peer among peers. However, since conversations follow a rule of accommodation, the score will straightforwardly adjust to incorporate the authority presupposition that Jenny's orders carry, at least insofar as nobody objects.

It is to be noted that, when accommodation goes smoothly, a presupposition enters the set of things that are mutually accepted for the purposes of the conversation.<sup>6</sup> If Ada does not challenge the presupposition that I have a brother, that content becomes mutually accepted for the sake of the conversation. But it doesn't become true: if I have no brother, the fact that Ada lets that content pass does not make it true that I have a brother. By contrast, if nobody challenges Jenny's presupposition of authority, and everybody does what she says, she may come to acquire the authority that she presupposed she had. There are complex issues here concerning the metaphysics of authority, which I do not aim to settle, but one thing seems pretty clear. Whether or not I have a brother does not depend on whether my interlocutor accepts that I have a brother; but whether or not I have authority over somebody may partly depend on whether it is mutually accepted that I

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<sup>5</sup> The Speaker Authority Condition and Hearer Authority Condition (see below) fall within Austin's A.2 type.

<sup>6</sup> Stalnaker (2002).

have it.<sup>7</sup> Since authority is (partly) a matter of shared acceptances, the hearer's acceptance that the speaker has authority may (partly) constitute their having it.<sup>8</sup>

In Lewis' perspective, presupposition accommodation 'rescues' the speaker's utterance from inappropriateness by supplying a required presupposition.<sup>9</sup> In a parallel manner, authority accommodation 'rescues' the speaker's illocutionary act from infelicity by supplying a required felicity condition.

## 2. Accommodating Hearer Authority

### 2.1. Presuppositions of Hearer Authority

Langton focuses on a subset of directive acts, which I name 'closed calls', that carry presuppositions of *speaker authority*. Other directives carry presuppositions of *hearer authority*. Let me elaborate.

'Calls', in Mark Lance & Quill Kukla (2013)'s vocabulary, are second-person directives that call for a response on the addressee's part. Simplifying slightly, I divide calls into two classes: *closed* (or *imperative*) calls and *open* (or *interrogative*) calls. A felicitous closed call (such as an order or a command) imputes an obligation upon the hearer, whereas a felicitous open call (such as a request or a proposal) gives the one called a reason to behave in certain ways, but such a reason does not constitute an obligation.<sup>10</sup>

Since they do not create obligations, open calls do not generally require speaker authority. This does not preclude the possibility that certain open calls require hearer authority. To explore this possibility, it may be useful to look at the paradigmatic open call – namely, request.

The illocutionary category of requests includes at least two subcategories. Consider the following utterances.

(3) Would you mop the kitchen floor, please?

(4) Can I stay out till midnight tonight, mom?

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<sup>7</sup> Langton (2015, 2018a). See also Sbisà (2002) and Adams (2020).

<sup>8</sup> To reiterate, my focus is on *informal* authority. Formal authority cannot be acquired via accommodation. If Jenny acts as if she were the Queen of England, she does not get to become the Queen, no matter how many people she fools. But she can become her group leader, if she acts as if she were the leader and her friends play along.

<sup>9</sup> Simons (2003).

<sup>10</sup> Caponetto (2017).

The utterer of (3) asks the addressee to do something; the utterer of (4) seeks to obtain a concession from the addressee to act in a particular way. (3) is a *simple request*; (4) is a *request for permission*.

In asking for permission, a speaker illocutionarily presupposes that the activity represented in the proposition is *under the hearer's sole jurisdiction*.<sup>11</sup> In seeking to get permission from you to stay out until midnight tonight, your teenage son is taking for granted that his curfew falls within the jurisdiction of your parental authority – and that staying out at night is something that he has no right to do without obtaining your consent. In contrast, when a simple request is made one does not generally presuppose that the hearer has sole jurisdiction over the requested activity.

Against this backdrop, I claim that permission requests, unlike simple requests, abide by a Hearer Authority Condition: a permission request is felicitous only if the hearer has authority over the activity at stake, and the speaker does not share it. The question I address in what follows is: Can a speaker who asks for permission end up conferring the hearer an authority that they did not clearly have beforehand? To anticipate, my answer is *yes*.

## 2.2. Broadening the Picture

Consider the scenario below.

*Deferential Wife*: 1960s New York City. Pete and Gina are a married couple with two children. Before getting married, Gina used to act in theatre. She misses acting, and Pete knows it. “Joan told me there’s an audition for an off-Broadway play. I’d really love to go. Can I?”, she asks him one day. “You’re serious?”, he asks back. A brief exchange follows, in which Gina says that she can get her mother to watch the kids. She also stresses that it is just an audition and there’s no guarantee that she will get the part. Eventually, Pete says a reluctant ‘yes’.

Pete has no *moral* right to grant or deny his wife permission to go to the audition – and more broadly, to get back to work. Moreover, the legal system in place in 1960s New York City was such that Pete had no *legal* right either to do so. However, Gina’s “Can I?” gives Pete a chance, and thus a *de facto* right, to allow or disallow her to do what she requests permission to do. Recall that permission requests are felicitous only if the requestee’s consent is needed for the requester to (rightfully) perform the activity in question. Since Gina does not need Pete’s consent to go, her request is strictly speaking infelicitous. Yet, it will count as felicitous, insofar as Pete does not

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<sup>11</sup> Cowart (2004).

object. Putting it in Langton's parlance, Gina acts *as if* Pete had authority over her. By playing along, Pete can acquire that authority 'in the moment', thereby rendering her permission request (and his subsequent consent) felicitous after all. As to the nature and scope of Pete's authority, a couple of remarks are at place.

First, accommodated authority, as I understand it, is informal, localized authority. It is *informal* in that it does not derive from official appointment and enacts *de facto* obligations – i.e. preemptive reasons with a 'because-X-said-so' structure, which have intersubjective validity, but are not legally binding, and may not be morally binding either. I follow Joseph Raz (1985) in characterizing 'preemptive' reasons as second-order reasons not to act on clashing first-order reasons. Suppose Pete denied Gina permission to go to the audition. She would acquire a *de facto* obligation not to go that 'preempts' or 'replaces' her reasons for going – an obligation that *she* made room for him to create.<sup>12</sup> There would be no point in asking Pete for permission if a refusal on his part would not be binding for her.<sup>13</sup> In addition, accommodated authority is highly *localized*: it is operative in a specific context and relative to a specific domain. Gina's "Can I?" does not grant Pete authority over her *ad libitum*; it grants him the authority to allow or disallow her to go to that audition. In a similar vein, Jenny, the sailing trip organizer, does not acquire the authority to order her friends anything she pleases. The scope of her accommodated authority only comprises activities for the organization of the trip.<sup>14</sup>

Second, different requests for permission presuppose different sorts of hearer authority. When Gina asks Pete,

(5) Can I (go to the audition)?,

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<sup>12</sup> Of course, Pete's authority would be 'illegitimate' (in Raz's sense). Pete's 'no' wouldn't derive its preemptive force from legitimacy, but from Gina's presupposition that, whatever reasons she may have for going, she does not have a right to act on them without Pete's consent.

<sup>13</sup> Imagine that, faced with Pete's refusal, Gina replied, "How dare you! You don't get to decide what I can or cannot do". Her reply – an open violation of Austin's 'consistency' (Γ.2) condition – would reveal the pointlessness of her request and retroactively undermine its felicity. (See Austin, 1975: 39ff and Sbisà 2019.) Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to discuss this case.

<sup>14</sup> I leave open the possibility that, upon repetition of the pattern ('permission request-consent/refusal', 'order-compliance'), accommodated authority generalizes to other contexts and other domains. If Gina routinely asks Pete's permission before doing things that she would be entitled to do without asking, his *de facto* authority over her might gradually extend across the board.

she presupposes that he has authority *over her*, over what she can or cannot do – just as your son, in uttering (4), takes it for granted that you have authority over what he can or cannot do. In contrast, when I ask you,

(6) Can I use that?,

while pointing at a laptop on your desk, I presuppose that you have authority *over the laptop* – that you have property or disposition rights over it. (4) and (5) involve *authority qua guardianship*; (6) involves *authority qua possession*. Intuitively, only the former can be subject to accommodation. If I ask you whether I can use the laptop on your desk, but you have no right to dispose of it (say, because the laptop is not yours), your replying ‘yes’ or ‘no’ does not magically give you disposition rights over it. But if Gina asks Pete’s consent before doing this and that, thus presupposing that he has informal guardianship rights over her, and he goes along with it, he may end up acquiring those rights. Roughly, this is because whether one is a *de facto* guardian over somebody partly depends on whether the parties recognize and accept that one plays that role.

### 2.3. *Blocking the Accommodation Process*

I have claimed that, just as accommodation can supply a swift mechanism for authority acquisition, it can also provide a way to (more or less wittingly) confer authority to others.<sup>15</sup> It is now to be emphasized that accommodation can do its job only if the audience does not interfere. Thomason construes accommodation as a special case of “obstacle elimination” (1990: 343). To accommodate what is presupposed is to remove the obstacle of an ostensible norm transgression from the conversational path towards a common goal. Of course, the hearer can refuse to remove the obstacle. Metaphors aside, the hearer can challenge what the speaker presupposes, thereby blocking its (otherwise automatic) incorporation into the score. Suppose Ada and I have been friends for twenty years and she has never heard of my brother before. My utterance of (1) will sound particularly unhappy, and Ada may point it out by challenging my presupposition:

(7) Wait a minute! What brother?!

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<sup>15</sup> Speaker authority and hearer authority accommodation are particular applications of a general model of accommodation in illocutionary interaction. See Witek (2021).

The same goes with illocutionary presuppositions. Jenny's friends could have challenged her presupposition of authority, and prevented it from entering the score by default.<sup>16</sup> Somebody could have said,

(8) Climb down, Jenny! Decisions are democratically made here.

Similarly, Pete could have replied to Gina's permission request with something like,

(9) This is your call, Gina. You don't need my permission to go,

thereby stressing that he did not have the authority that her request presupposed he had.

We saw that, while in Sailing Trip Organizer and in similar cases from Langton and others, the one who gains authority on the spot is the speaker, in *Deferential Wife* the process of authority accommodation involves the hearer. Jenny issues orders that carry a presupposition of authority for herself. She acts like a boss and she can end up becoming one. Those who are called to speak up (and block the process) are those whose agency would otherwise be *deflated*. For the purposes of this paper, by 'agency' I roughly mean decisional power. Someone exercises their agency every time they make choices in view of their own goals and desires, or every time their action hasn't been externally commandeered. If Jenny acquires the authority to tell her friends what to do in that context, her friends' agency will be relatively compromised – they will partially lose their power to decide the logistics of the trip. Gina's request, by contrast, carries a presupposition of authority for her husband. She acts as if he had authority over her and this gives him a chance to obtain that authority. Interestingly, the one who is here called to speak up is the one whose agency would otherwise be *inflated*. Pete is the one who has to uncover the falsity of the presupposition carried by Gina's request, but he is also the one who would gain authority, and broaden the boundaries of his agency, if he avoided challenging it. Jenny's friends must have the mettle, so to speak, to stand up to a bossy friend.<sup>17</sup> Pete must have the moral integrity to admit that he has no right to decide for his wife – and pass up the chance to inflate his own agency. Insofar as he makes no attempt to block the accommodation process, he takes unfair advantage of his wife's deference. Where female

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<sup>16</sup> Langton (2018b).

<sup>17</sup> Objecting to a friend's bossy behaviour may not require all that courage. But replace Jenny with the would-be leader of a criminal gang (and the sailing trip with a shadier endeavour). It may take a lot of nerve to stand up to *this* speaker.

deference to men is a social expectation informing and constraining women's behaviour, a man's failure to block is also a contribution to, and a token instance of, social injustice.

### 3. Practical Implications

Both Sailing Trip Organizer and Deferential Wife highlight that authority is a contrastive notion. A *right* on the part of A to give B binding directives is a *duty* on the part of B to do what A has told them to do. In tacitly granting her husband a right to control her conduct, Gina acquires a *de facto* duty to do what he decides for her. With her words, Gina extends the latitude of Pete's agency, while restricting the latitude of hers.

To confer authority over oneself to others is, to an extent, to shrink one's own agency. This has clear implications of moral and societal concern. The Deferential Wife vignette is set in the '60s. Back then, heterosexual marital relationships were generally strongly asymmetrical. Today, in many parts of the world, they are far more egalitarian. Yet, our social practices are still profoundly driven by gender norms suggesting that women should defer to male figures, and especially that wives should defer to their husbands – let them control portions of their lives. The analysis I have developed helps disentangle the normative and material fallout of complying with such norms. I have claimed that practical authority can be a by-product of our everyday interactions, and that accommodation processes may enhance as well as compromise our agency. If so, then observing gender norms of deference might not only contribute to perpetuating a patriarchal status quo. It might also crown a woman's male interlocutor with an authority that in certain local contexts he wouldn't otherwise have, while chipping away at her power to decide for herself.

Before concluding, let me address a potential objection. One might argue that, because Pete and Gina live in a patriarchal society, Pete's authority does not spring into existence via accommodation, but derives from the power structures in play in the broader social context.<sup>18</sup> To conclude this, though, is to overlook that unjust societies allow for egalitarian micro-contexts, in which the discriminatory norms operative in society at large are rejected, or rendered inoperative by people acting as if they did not obtain. People's words and actions affect the normative landscape of the (micro-)environments they inhabit. In asking Pete for permission when his permission would not be needed, Gina contributes to make their normative relationship

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<sup>18</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising this worry.

asymmetrical – as does Pete by failing to object. She brings gender norms of deference to bear *in that particular context*,<sup>19</sup> while he grabs a localized authority that he would have failed to have, had they both acted as if those norms did not obtain.

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Langton and others have claimed that the Speaker Authority Condition for ordering, which in principle should be satisfied before the speaker starts speaking, can in fact be satisfied afterwards, in virtue of hearers refraining from challenging the speaker's contribution. I have broadened this picture by pointing out that, while certain illocutions (like orders) abide by a Speaker Authority Condition, others (like permission requests) abide by a Hearer Authority Condition. I have argued that hearer authority can be supplied 'in the moment', via accommodation, much like speaker authority. Accommodation can provide an easy way not only to acquire authority for oneself but also to confer it to others. In closing, I pointed to some problematic implications that this dynamic may have for those groups of people (like women) that are socially hooked into displaying deference to others.

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<sup>19</sup> McGowan (2019).

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