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Lewis and Permissibility - Scott Kirshner (sak292) 2019-02-12 18:10:03.0

Hi all! I personally found Lewis' discussion of master and slave to be, besides racially insensitive, an inaccurate account of the relationship between interlocutors in a conversation. If we assume that both speakers are obeying the Cooperative Principle (according to Grice), it seems that they are collectively in exchange with one another and aim to express their thoughts in a way which is easy to follow given the context. The terms 'master' and 'slave' suggest that one speaker has total control over the other. Lewis qualifies this statement with "At least within certain limits, in a certain sphere of action, so long as certain conditions prevail" (340). However, the 'slave' still can reject presuppositions introduced by the 'master'. As we discussed in class today, the hearer may not accommodate the presupposition if it is unreasonable. This suggests that the power balance between both speakers is more equitable than Lewis argues. Maybe Lewis is trying to say this, but I just thought that this comparison was not a good one. Any thoughts on this? Did you interpret Lewis' example differently?



Re: Lewis and Permissibility - Eric Delgado (ejd112) 2019-02-12 21:36:44.0

Hey Scott,

I found this description of the speaker-listener dynamic off at first as well, and not just for the oddly severe choice of words. Nevertheless, I will do my best to give it the benefit of the doubt and attempt to present a way it could work.

I'll begin by saying I actually love the description of the speaker as the master; the one who is speaking is the one who is specifying (perhaps constructing depending on what's known) the very world in question. The listener, meanwhile, can only receive it. The listener can only sign on to the presuppositions and roll with them. The listener really is powerless in this dynamic. That is not to say, however, that the individual is. Referring back to Lewis' mention of certain limits, a certain sphere of action, and certain conditions, I believe it's the case that the criteria for this master level of control can be met by either interlocutor, and that they last only for the length of the utterance itself.

As I see it, what really happens when the listener, the slave, rejects the presupposition? Are they really the slave anymore? If they voice their disagreement, they are the new speaker, and are now playing the shaping role--the master role--in the conversation. If they fail to voice their disagreement, meanwhile, even if they internally reject the presupposition, they are not producing a change in the conversation reflective of that rejection, and so the master's world remains untouched. To contest the master, in my view, is to become the master. And once it's no longer your turn, the master role will switch again. It is only through this rapid switching model of the roles that I'm able to make sense of Lewis' thoughts, so I hope it's able to help!



Re: Lewis and Permissibility - Paula Rocha (por7) 2019-02-13 09:43:56.0

Rather than seeing the relationship between the speaker as master and slave, it would be more appropriate to label the speaker as the leader and the listener as the follower. The speaker leads the conversation and presents the presuppositions while the follower follows behind, accepting the presuppositions as they come. Eric you bring up a really interesting point in regard to what happens when the slave rejects the presuppositions. It makes me think back to little kids and how they always have that why stage and how they seem to question every aspect of a sentence. You also bring up the idea of what happens when the listener disagrees with the

speaker but doesn't actively voice that disagreement. That is a really interesting point that hadn't crossed my mind. I also can't find figure out an answer to your question but I do have a thought to add onto it. What happens when the listener creates an ambiguous situation around whether or not they agree or disagree with the presupposition. Can the speaker continue on without a concrete disagreement or agreement? Is there a certain point/or certain words that will allow the speaker to pick a side?



Re: Lewis and Permissibility - Devin Natishyn (dpn30) 2019-02-13 20:10:43.0

Hi Paula, I totally agree with your characterization of the speaker/listener relationship as leader and follower. I think that, while the follower can reject a presupposition, they tend not too as often as possible in order to facilitate fluid conversation. In addition, I think "follower/leader" as opposed to master/slave more accurately represents how quickly these roles change and how the power dynamic can vary. Specifically, the follower/leader dynamic can be very nearly equal or completely unequal depending on who these individuals are and their relations to each other. For example: imagine in class, your professor says something like "Being the last monarchy in Europe, the United Kingdom takes royal procedures very seriously". This phrase presupposes that the United Kingdom is the only nation with a monarchy in the continent of Europe today. While this presupposition is not true, you might not correct it. The leader in this situation holds a socially constructed power over you outside of the speaker/listener dynamic, making it possibly rude or 'out of place' for you to correct it. It is not very common for students to correct their professors or instructors if they say something incorrect, unless it is absolutely critical to the lesson. In addition, the situation it was said in may have been a lecture, where interrupting for this purpose would disrupt the fluidity of the lesson, so you would probably just ignore it. However, if your friend said the same thing, instead of continuing the conversation, you may interrupt and remove the false presupposition from the context, saying something like "Wait, hold on, that isn't right. Denmark, Spain, and others all have monarchies today." In this situation, the follower is allowed to reject the leader's statement while taking the reigns as a new leader. This is acceptable because of the more egalitarian social relationship between the two parties. While a professor might be constructed as infallible, thereby creating a taboo around correcting the leader's false presupposition, you probably know that your friend is not infallible, does make mistakes, and has been wrong before, and therefore it is acceptable.



Re: Lewis and Permissibility - Kira Horiuchi (kmh247) 2019-02-13 13:46:46.0

I think that Paula's use of the terms leader and follower more accurately represent the dynamic between a speaker and a listener when it comes to presuppositions. If we were to imagine two speakers, A and B with Speaker A beginning the conversation, A can assert and presuppose whatever A believes to be the common context set between A and B. However, when B speaks and may choose to reject a presupposition of A's, B is the leader in the conversation and A is the follower. In other words, I believe that the role of leader in the conversation lies with the current speaker, and this role can switch during the conversation. The master-slave model that Lewis uses seems to portray the conversation as more one sided.

Stalnaker's idea of common ground that is in use during the conversation leads me to believe that when A and B converse together, they share background knowledge which is reflected by the presuppositions that they use. During the course of the conversation, it is possible for A to start the conversation in one direction and for B to change the course of the conversation via rejecting a presupposition from A's utterance.



Re: Lewis and Permissibility - Alexandra Maris (am2145) 2019-02-13 19:06:09.0

I agree that leaders and followers can switch roles in conversation, especially when the topic of discussion changes to something that one participant is more knowledgeable in (or at least has more correct information).

For example, during one of our team practices, my friend was asking about another teammate who wasn't at practice. He called her by the wrong name and noticing this, I indirectly corrected him. At this point, I assumed the 'leader' role since I was more informed about her name and why she could not come to practice, while my friend became the follower. He said something like, "Is Mikhayla coming to practice tonight?" and I replied, "Oh, Kayla isn't feeling well". In doing this, I was trying not to point out his error too obviously since others may have been listening (so he could save face), while also hoping that he would accept the correction without objection. My friend needed to accommodate to accept the presupposition, changing his context set (and therefore adopting a new world in which the person we were referring to is named Kayla), by editing his background knowledge. However, I was not certain that he understood and accepted this fact until next practice, when he greeted Kayla with, "Hi Kayla!". It is natural for participants in conversation to cooperate, else the conversation may feel unnatural, or not accomplish a goal.