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Mansplaining and Illocutionary Force

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Abstract

In this paper I describe three kinds of mansplaining, *"well, actually" mansplaining, straw-mansplaining*, and *speech act–confusion mansplaining*. While these three kinds have much in common, I focus on speech act–confusion mansplaining and offer a speech act theoretic account of what goes wrong when people mansplain in this way. In cases of speech act–confusion mansplaining, the target of the mansplaining is not able to do what she wants with her words. Her conversational contribution is taken to have a different force than the force she intends. This contributes to women's discursive disablement and to the restriction of women's participation in epistemically relevant exchanges.

Keywords: illocutionary force, speech acts, mansplaining, discursive injustice

1. Men Explaining

In 2016, Jimmy Kimmel interviewed Hillary Clinton on his show, *Jimmy Kimmel Live*. In the course of the interview, Kimmel had the following exchange with Clinton:

> JK: Are you familiar with mansplaining? You know what that is?
>
> HC: That's when a man explains something to a woman in a patronizing way.
>
> JK: Actually, it's when a man explains something to a woman in a condescending way. But you were close.[1]

This parody works, in part, because so many women who are experts with respect to some area (as one might expect Clinton herself to be with respect to mansplaining) have that area of expertise explained to them by men who are less expert (as Kimmel plausibly is).

[1] Hillary Clinton, interview by Jimmy Kimmel, *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, ABC, March 24, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2wBpYT6Zlo.

"Mansplaining" is a neologism that means something like "explaining without regard to the fact that the explainee knows more than the explainer, often done by a man to a woman" (Rothman 2012). In paradigm cases of mansplaining, a woman—often one with expertise in the subject at hand—expresses some content. A man—often one with less or commensurate expertise—expresses some related content with a high degree of confidence and condescension. And this phenomenon is neither new nor isolated.[2] Rebecca Solnit, in her essay "Men Explain Things to Me," writes,

> Every woman knows what I'm talking about. It's the presumption that makes it hard, at times, for any woman in any field; that keeps women from speaking up and from being heard when they dare; that crushes young women into silence by indicating, the way harassment on the street does, that this is not their world. It trains us in self-doubt and self-limitation just as it exercises men's unsupported overconfidence. (Solnit 2014, 4)

Solnit herself does not use the term *mansplaining* for a variety of understandable reasons. However, the cluster of related phenomena plays a role in many places in women's conversational and epistemic lives.

In this paper my goal is to account for some cases of mansplaining in speech act theoretic terms. Doing so will illuminate the ways in which the kind of conversational dynamics that mansplainers exploit is itself benign. Layering this conversational phenomenon on top of a system of misogyny, subordination, and silencing, however, is pernicious. This project is of use and interest because mansplaining has yet to receive much philosophical attention. The project attempts to contribute to the philosophical analysis of the ways in which social position and power make a difference to speakers, conversation, testimony, and other related phenomena (see, for example, McKinney 2016; McGowan 2019; Tirrell 2018; Dotson 2011). Often, these conversational inequities are difficult to identify, track, or demonstrate to be damaging because the dynamics of conversation are messy and complicated. Systematic philosophical treatment, then, can be helpful when it

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[2] Mansplaining is not the only kind of pernicious exploitation of conversational norms by privileged conversers. Whitesplaining, wherein a white person needlessly explains to a person of color will have relevant similarities to the kinds of phenomena discussed here. I also suspect that disabled people and members of other marginalized groups experience this as well. It can even take place in cases in which the comparative privilege is very localized—primary caregivers who are men have complained of mum-splaining, for example (Goodwin 2018). Indeed, it would be interesting to look at the similarities and differences across these categories.

allows us to carefully point to these harmful conversational dynamics and how they fit with the rest of our conversational practices.

I will proceed as follows: in the next section, I'll briefly discuss some varieties of mansplaining and focus in on my target type. Then, I'll introduce the mechanics from speech act theory that we'll need to understand the target cases of mansplaining. In section four, I'll apply those mechanics to explain one kind of mansplaining. In the fifth section, I'll conclude.

2. Mansplaining

We know that mansplaining involves a woman receiving unhelpful "explanations" from a conversational partner. I can, however, be more precise. On my view, mansplaining, in general, involves the following:

> **Mansplaining**: participating in one of a set of conversational practices *because* one's conversational partner is a woman, despite the fact that one's conversational partner has commensurate or superior expertise in the subject at hand. If one's conversational partner were not a woman, one would participate in a different sort of conversational practice.

Most mansplainers are men. I should note, though, that it is possible for women to mansplain. On my account, mansplaining occurs when some conversational behavior happens because the mansplainer is speaking to a woman. If mansplainer would not have mansplained if his target were not a woman, this counts as mansplaining—this counterfactual is key. Many of the behaviors I'll describe below could occur in cases that are not mansplaining. If I just correct everyone's explanations or doubt everyone's expertise, then I'm not mansplaining when I do so to a woman.

In what follows, I'll sometimes use "the man" for the mansplainer because it (a) seems statistically likely that mansplainers are men, and (b) because it is psychologically tricky for a woman to mansplain. I'll address this further below, but I think we can make some inferences about the attitudes of mansplainers toward women. Usually, these will involve thinking that women are not or cannot be experts in the relevant subject area because they are women. If a woman mansplains, she must, at once, believe (implicitly or explicitly) that women are not experts about *x*, and that she (a woman) is an expert about *x*. This is a plausible combination of attitudes, but I take it to be unusual and to involve a kind of pernicious exceptionalism or egocentrism. So, in what follows I will refer to the mansplainer as "the man" and his target as "the woman."

It is also important to note that, contrary to Jimmy Kimmel and Hillary Clinton's take on the matter, I don't think that mansplaining is always done in a patronizing or condescending way. I think it often is patronizing or condescending,

but it need not be. Many mansplainers are likely entirely sincere and plausibly well intentioned—they may deny that their conversational contributions were performed with any condescension. I don't think we need to argue about this. When a mansplainer mansplains, a person with superior or commensurate expertise is treated in a way she ought not be simply because she is a woman. This is problematic, whether or not it is done in a patronizing way.

In what remains of this section, I will briefly describe three kinds of mansplaining.[3] Each of these three will be described as if they are discrete categories with distinct explanations; however, I am not claiming that each case of mansplaining is one or another of these. I don't take this list to be exhaustive, and I don't take the categories to be exclusive.

In the example with which we began, Kimmel appears to make an inconsequential "correction" to Clinton's answer. While this exchange is satirical, the joke works in part because it is a familiar phenomenon. Kimmel appears to register that Clinton has answered, and then marks that he's going to offer a "correction" by uttering, "Actually." Call this type of mansplaining "*well, actually" mansplaining*.

"Well, actually" mansplaining is one kind of mansplaining. In cases of this kind, a woman offers an explanation or an answer to a query, and a man jumps in to offer his own account. When this happens, the man appears to believe that his account is superior—which explains why he uses the phrase, "Well, actually." The mansplainer's account is put forward as an improvement on or a correction to the woman's. Sometimes mansplainers who participate in this type of mansplaining are, indeed, offering different explanations than those offered by the woman. Sometimes, as in the example above, the difference is minimal, and likely immaterial.[4] Sometimes mansplainers of the "well, actually" type offer explanations of something entirely separate from the original subject matter of the woman's contribution.

Another kind of mansplaining we'll call *straw-mansplaining.*[5] This kind of mansplaining often occurs in response to a question or comment from the woman who is the target of the mansplaining. In cases like this, the woman, who has as much if not more expertise than the mansplainer, might ask a difficult question, or level a challenging objection to the mansplainer, only to find the mansplainer

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[3] I'm grateful to Lisa Cassell, Nicole Dular, Emily McWilliams, Deborah Tollefsen, and Brianna Toole for suggesting some of the remarks in this section.
[4] This is similar to the kind of mansplaining that Federico Luzzi (2016) describes as "a man explains to a woman why something she just asserted is true." However, I'm suggesting a different etiology and explanation for the phenomenon. I suspect that there are many nearby kinds of mansplaining.
[5] I'm grateful to Lavender McKittrick-Sweitzer for suggesting this term.

answering a simpler question or addressing a straw-man objection. To be a case of mansplaining, this answer must be more or less sincere. Someone might appear to be mansplaining but really just attempting to avoid answering difficult objections. This might be a kind of obfuscating move, rather than mansplaining proper. Assuming that the man is sincere, though, by his answer he is straw-mansplaining.

The third kind of mansplaining will be our topic for the remainder of the paper. Call this kind of mansplaining *speech act–confusion mansplaining*. A mansplainer of this type hears his interlocutor making a conversational move—like an assertion or hypothesis—and takes it to be a different move, one that invites him to display his expertise. In paradigm cases like this, the mansplainer takes the utterance to be a question or a request for information. This is despite the fact that the woman who is his target intends to be asserting something. The mansplainer of this type jumps in to address the woman's utterance, despite the fact that the woman, who is an expert in the relevant subject matter, took herself to be *telling* rather than *asking* (or requesting).

I'll discuss this kind of mansplaining at length below, but for now note that this kind of mismatch happens all the time. I am not always culpable for taking someone to be making a different conversational move than she intends. Notice the way that "I'll meet you at the pub" can be a promise, a threat, or a prediction. If my interlocutor intended it as a promise and I took it to be a prediction, I'm not clearly culpable in any substantive way. Thus, it seems, like in the cases above, the mansplainer is exploiting a common and benign conversational pattern.

Also notice what must be going on for a mansplainer to have this kind of confusion. He interprets the woman's conversational move as a question (or request for information). One explanation for why he might do this is that he takes women to be in need of his expertise and assistance. Again, more on this below, but for now, we can note that men who perceive women to need their expertise and help likely take themselves to have superior expertise than women who are, in fact, experts.

Our focus for the remainder of the paper will be on speech act–confusion mansplaining. However, it is important to notice what all these kinds have in common. First, mansplainers are only sometimes involved in the conversation or exchange as directly as Kimmel is in the starting example. Kimmel's "well, actually" mansplaining would be especially egregious if it were in earnest because he asked Clinton for her explanation. This is not always the case. Sometimes mansplainers are involved in the conversation, and sometimes they merely overhear the original explanation and insert themselves as an interlocutor.

Second, in all of these cases, the mansplainer exploits a conversational pattern that is more or less benign. I'll discuss this further below, but notice that this gives the mansplainer a kind of plausible deniability. When someone explains

something badly in a conversation, it is sometimes conversationally appropriate to offer an alternative explanation. When someone is not equipped to understand the answer to their question as asked, it is sometimes conversationally appropriate to answer a simpler one. We do this with our students, and sometimes in casual conversations when we are experts in the relevant subject matter and our interlocutor is not. The problem with the mansplainers is that the explanations they offer are often (a) not better, (b) not asked of them, and/or (c) made to a woman who is more of an expert than they are. This feature, though, is part of what makes mansplaining so insidious. The man wasn't doing anything pernicious, he might argue, he was just φ-ing, where φ-ing is something we all occasionally nonculpably do.

Finally, to explain the behavior of all three kinds of mansplainers, we have to make some inferences to what their mental states might be. I am not claiming to have access to mansplainers' mental states, but given that a woman with some expertise offers an account of something, what are the likely beliefs of a man (often with commensurate or less expertise) who offers an alternative? Or who dumbs down her question? Or who mistakes her assertion for a request for help? It seems likely that the mental states of such a man include an evaluation of the woman's expertise as less substantial or less valuable than his. He takes himself to be in a superior position to offer an explanation. He must be ignoring her expertise, evaluating it as less than his, or treating her as in need of his assistance. As a recent article by Mia Mercado in *Bustle* puts it, mansplaining "implies that the person best suited to explain the topic at hand is a man, regardless of subject matter and whether or not the man present is the one most qualified to do the explaining" (Mercado 2017).

It is, of course, possible that my inferences regarding the attitudes of mansplainers are incorrect. We would have to do some empirical research to be sure. I should also note that I think that it is likely that in many cases of mansplaining, the mansplainer is simply inattentive to the conversational moves that the target of his mansplaining is making. A mansplainer might appear to be a "well, actually" mansplainer, but might simply fail to attend to the woman's explanation—he might just be so ready to offer his (clearly superior) view. This does not require the occurrent belief that his target is ill-qualified, but I'm not sure it speaks much better of the mansplainer's attitudes or habits.

One thing that is distinctive about speech act–confusion mansplaining is that this kind of mansplainer makes a mistake regarding the woman's speech action. We'll get into this more in the next section, but this means that the woman is, to some extent, kept from acting as she would choose. In both "well, actually" mansplaining and straw-mansplaining, the woman explains, and is taken to be doing so (albeit not as effectively as she would like). In speech act–confusion cases, she is

taken to be doing something else entirely. In the rest of the paper I'll focus on this kind of mansplaining because I think that my analysis helps explain how this kind of mansplaining happens and why it is so pernicious. This analysis is in the tradition of what Mary Kate McGowan calls "the linguistic approach to group-based injustice" (McGowan 2019, 4). That the focus is on speech act–confusion mansplaining does not indicate that the other kinds of mansplaining do not warrant attention. Indeed, I'm hopeful that identifying these different kinds of mansplaining and offering an in-depth discussion of one might prompt further work.

3. Speech Acts

To better understand speech act–confusion mansplaining, we'll need some tools from speech act theory. Speech act theory is engaged in the project of understanding, diagnosing, and giving an analysis of the dynamics of conversation. One major observation from speech act theory is that communication is a kind of social action—that is, fully successful communication requires action on the part of both the speaker and the hearer. A speaker attempts a speech act of a particular kind, and the hearer registers or takes up that speech as a particular kind of speech act. Developed from the work of J. L. Austin (1975), speech act theory has been explored and applied, criticized and defended (see, for example, Searle 1969; Sbisà 2009, 1984; Langton 1993; Kukla 2014). I won't defend speech act theory directly, here. Nor should this application be taken as an all-things-considered endorsement of the theory. However, some of the machinery from speech act theory will be useful in understanding our target kind of mansplaining.

According to speech act theory, the basic picture of a successful communicative exchange is as follows: A speaker, Martha, utters, "The window is open" to George, her interlocutor. Call this utterance Martha's locution. Martha intends her locution as a move in conversation. Call this move Martha's illocution. Despite its grammatical form, she does not intend her illocution to be an assertion, but rather intends it as a request that George close the window. This is a key observation from Austin. Speakers can use grammatically identical utterances for distinct illocutionary acts. Martha could have intended the same utterance as an assertion, or a reminder, or a command; but she intends it as a request, and George recognizes it as such. This recognition constitutes *uptake*—George takes up Martha's illocution, and Martha's request is felicitous in part because she has secured uptake from her interlocutor. If George then closes the window, that action is part of Martha's perlocution, and her speech act has been successful.

There are a number of ways that Martha's speech act might be less than fully successful: Martha might attempt to speak but find she's too shy—her locution might fail. George might not recognize her communicative intention—uptake might fail. Martha might secure uptake from George, but George might be intransigent, fail

to close the window, and frustrate Martha's perlocutionary intentions. George might frustrate Martha's perlocutionary intentions, though, even if he is not merely being intransigent. If Martha has been mean or rude to George all day, George might recognize that Martha intends to make a request, but he might think she is not well-positioned to do so. George might not respond to Martha's request because he takes her to lack the standing to make it. In this case, Martha's speech act misfires.

While it's plausible that George might take Martha to be badly positioned to make requests of him, requesting is not the sort of speech act that usually requires any official standing. To see a case of misfiring more clearly, consider a case in which a layperson attempts to perform a Roman Catholic marriage by simply saying the relevant words in the proper order. Performing this kind of marriage requires a very particular official standing. The layperson lacks this standing, so her attempted marriage misfires. Misfires, uptake, standing, felicity, locutions, illocutions, and perlocutions are all part of the basic picture, according to speech act theory.

This basic picture is used to explain a variety of conversational patterns. Austin's original presentation discusses constatives like assertions, requests, and promises, as well as performatives like marriages, excommunications, and christenings, using the basic picture. More recently, Rae Langton used the basic picture to investigate what goes on in some cases of rape. Langton, in responding to work on pornography from Catharine MacKinnon (MacKinnon 1987), argued that certain kinds of subordinating pornography make it impossible for women to secure uptake when they attempt to refuse sex. Langton describes this as follows:

> Sometimes "no," when spoken by a woman, does not count as the act of refusal. The hearer fails to recognize the utterance as a refusal; uptake is not secured. In saying "no" she may well intend to refuse. By saying "no" she intends to prevent sex, but she is far from doing as she intends. Since illocutionary force depends, in part, on uptake being secured, the woman fails to refuse. (Langton 1993)

Langton argued that pornographic depictions of rape and other sexual violence silences women. Women are able to utter no but not able to fully successfully refuse. Langton called this kind of silencing *illocutionary disablement*.

The explanation that Langton offers, in her original discussion and in her later work with Jennifer Hornsby (Hornsby and Langton 1998), is that the woman's assailant has consumed violent pornographic depictions of women enjoying sexual assault. In this kind of pornography, women are depicted as merely being shy or coy in refusing sexual advances from men instead of genuinely refusing. Hornsby and Langton argue that consuming pornography of this kind is argued to shift men's real-

world expectations about women's expressed sexual intentions. This shift keeps him from taking her to be performing the illocution of refusing—to fully successfully refuse one must not want the course of action on offer to proceed.[6] Because women, on his way of thinking, want violent sex to proceed even if they're appearing to refuse, she is unable to bring him to recognize that she meets this preparatory condition. That is, she cannot secure uptake for her refusal. Her "no" is taken as demure consent. According to Langton, the woman is rendered unable to enact her refusal. She is silenced.

Langton's explanation of this case has been controversial. Alexander Bird (2002), building from work of Daniel Jacobson (1995), argues that if Langton is right, then the woman in this case is not raped, since she did not refuse. Leaving aside arguments regarding Bird's interpretation, his objection brings something important to light: Langton, and Bird, and most philosophers writing about illocutionary force have assumed that each utterance is, at most, one kind of illocution. Either the woman's utterance is a refusal, or she's coyly consenting. Martha's utterance is either a request or a command. Marina Sbisà (2013b) challenges this assumption, as do I (Johnson 2019), but it is still widespread.

My conclusion, in my work on this, is that while the assumption of what I call "illocutionary monism" is prevalent, it is by no means compulsory. We can, in other words, have a coherent view of speech acts without assuming that each utterance has one and only one illocutionary force. I argue for what I call "illocutionary pluralism," according to which an utterance can have more than one force. Langton's woman's utterance, then, could be a refusal *and* a coy consenting. I'll return to this point below, but for now, simply notice that the assumption of illocutionary monism is not compulsory, even if we want to use the notion of illocutionary force in our theorizing. This constitutes a complication to the basic picture described above.

If illocutionary pluralism is correct, and we can countenance multiple illocutionary forces for a single utterance, this does not mean that all the relevant forces are created equal. In Langton's case, there is only one force that the utterance *should* have—it should be a refusal. However (and this is key), this is because of the moral facts about sexual consent, not because of anything about the speech act itself (Johnson 2015). Morally, the woman's attempt to refuse is sufficient to rule out permissible sex. Nonetheless, that the assailant took her to be consenting matters for our ability to predict and explain his behavior, and to account for the systematicity of the communicative harms to which women are subject.

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[6] See Searle (1969) for a discussion of conditions for different illocutions.

In other kinds of cases there could be multiple forces an utterance should have—if, for example, there are prudential reasons it should be taken to have some force but moral reasons it should have another. These, however, will not be determined by the facts about the speech act alone—indeed, adopting illocutionary pluralism means that both the prudentially and the morally appropriate illocutionary force can be equally real. And, further, even if we accept illocutionary pluralism, we might still retain the commitment from Austin that a match between a hearer's uptake and a speaker's intention is necessary for *fully successful* illocutionary force. So, with illocutionary pluralism we enjoy several benefits. We enjoy the explanatory benefit of multiple illocutionary forces, we are able to diagnose some forces as better (morally, prudentially, legally, etc.) than others, and we can say that only those forces that have a match between speaker intention and hearer uptake are fully successful.

An illocutionary act is less than fully successful if something is or has gone wrong in its execution. Sometimes called an *infelicity*, this failure to be fully successful is not always fatal to the illocutionary act—that is, there are many illocutionary acts that are executed but executed imperfectly. There are, according to Austin, several ways that an illocutionary act can be infelicitous: as mentioned, it can misfire if the speaker fails to follow the procedure for making the act of the relevant kind or if the procedure cannot be followed in the conversational context—remember the Catholic marriage case. An illocutionary act can also be abused. An act is abused if the speaker lacks the relevant attitudes and/or intentions, or if the illocutionary act fails to have the relevant social effects—if it fails to secure uptake. If a speaker says, "I promise to meet you at the bus stop," without intending to do so, the illocutionary act has been abused. If a speaker shouts, "Look out for that banana peel," and her addressee is inattentive, the illocutionary act has been abused. Nonetheless, the first speaker promised and the second speaker warned. And further, Austin admonishes us, "Do not stress the normal connotations of these names!" (Austin 1975, 16). Just because an act is abused doesn't mean the speaker or the addressee is an abuser in any morally weighty sense. These terms are picking out (perhaps imperfectly) the ways that illocutionary acts can go wrong.

These various ways of "going wrong" are ways that the speech act can diverge from an idealized paradigm. They are not symptoms of a deeply flawed or practically defective speech act. As Sbisà points out, "A speaker may perform a certain illocutionary act even if she violates one or more of its conditions" (Sbisà 2013a, 50). So, according to the kind of pluralism I defend, the illocutionary act occurs even if there is a mismatch in the perception of the speaker and the uptake of her interlocutor. However, the illocutionary act made to the inattentive interlocutor is infelicitous—it is an abuse.

Whether or not we can make sense of illocutionary pluralism depends, in part, on how illocutionary force is generated. In explaining illocutionary force, Austin says, "The illocutionary act 'takes effect' in certain ways as distinguished from producing consequences in the sense of bringing about states of affairs in the 'normal' way" (Austin 1975, 117). This is not maximally clear. Sbisà elucidates as follows:

> 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; and it is an effect that comes into being thanks to the hearer's uptake, that is, insofar as it is clear to the relevant audience that the speaker has (felicitously) named the ship. It is not rash to identify such an effect with the "conventional effect" which the illocutionary act, as an accepted conventional procedure, is designed to produce. In fact Austin's Felicity Condition A1, the first in his list of felicity conditions for performative utterances, reads: "There must exist an accepted conventional procedure *having a certain conventional effect*, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances. . . ." (Sbisà 2007, 464; quoting Austin 1975, 14)[7]

Sbisà, then, identifies the illocutionary force of an utterance with the conventional effect that that utterance has on a relevant audience. There are certain effects that assertions conventionally have on audience members. For an utterance to have that illocutionary force requires that a member of the audience be affected in those conventional ways. And to be fully happy, the effects on the audience member will match the effects conventionally associated with the illocutionary force that the speaker intends.

For clarity, let's return to the example of George and Martha and their conversation regarding the window. Martha says, "The window is open," intending it to be a request. She follows one conventional procedure for requesting.[8] Her utterance prompts in George a reaction conventional for requests—he recognizes that Martha would like him to close the window and feels free to either do so or make his polite excuses. If he reacted as if his refusal would be an act of defiance,

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[7] For more on conversations and how utterances change norms, see McGowan (2019).

[8] Sbisà makes a good case for thinking that many of these procedures overlap. For example, some of the procedures for conjecturing are also procedures for asserting or hypothesizing or considering. This ambiguity is often easily sussed out in conversation, but sometimes the ambiguity remains (Sbisà 2013b).

his reaction would be conventional for a command. With this example, one can see that uptake, for Sbisà, is also a matter of convention.

Three features of conversation complicate this picture from Sbisà. First, a single utterance might have different effects on different audience members, and those effects might be conventional for different illocutionary forces. This is related to the observation that drives my earlier argument. Imagine that Penny is also present for George and Martha's conversation. If Penny reacts to Martha's speech in the manner conventional for questions, and George reacts in ways conventional for commands, then her utterance meets at least one requirement for two different forces. For the utterance to be *fully successful*, George's and Penny's reactions have to match Martha's intention. It is important to keep in mind, though, that there are many ways that a speech act can fail to be fully successful.

The second complicating feature is that conventions are mutable and ephemeral, and they vary both within and across communities. Conventions change over time, which precludes us from specifying, for all communities, for all times, the conventional procedure for making an assertion (for example). Furthermore, communities are by no means discrete. I am a member of many different communities: the community of philosophers, the community of my neighborhood, and the community of my family. Each of these communities has subtly (or not so subtly) different conventions. We would expect, then, that members of these different communites respond to questions, for example, in different ways. Despite these differences, they may be responding in the way that is conventional for that community.

There is a further implication of the mutability of conventions for Sbisà's account. This is that the accepted conventional procedure for making a conversational move with a particular force might vary. In the community of philosophers, for example, I would proceed to make a suggestion in ways that are pretty different from how I would do so in my family. This is because the norms, the conventions, and the proceedures are different. Moreover, this is in addition to the ways in which, within a single community, the conventional procedure for making a request might be very similar to the conventional procedure for making a command.

Third, speakers are themselves audience members of their own speech. In Martha's conversation with Penny and George, Martha plays two roles. She speaks and is a member of the audience. When Martha speaks, her speech prompts effects on herself. She has a reaction to her own speech, which will be conventional (or not) for a particular illocutionary force (Johnson 2015). So, in the Martha, Penny, and George conversation, there are three possibly distinct reactions, each of which might be conventional for a different illocutionary force.

As we know from the above, at most one of these three forces will yield a fully felicitous illocutionary act. If Martha's speech follows the conventional

procedure for a request, and Penny's reaction is coventional for the effects of a request, then her speech is successfully a request. Though, as we've seen, such conventions are mutable, and varied from context to context.

One might object, here, that the only force that Martha's utterance can have is the force she intends and that some audience member takes up.[9] After all, the objection might go, Austin's conditions require intention, uptake, authority, and the rest. On a view like this, Martha's utterance has the force of a request just in case she intends to ask a request, follows the procedure for doing so, and Penny or George reacts in the ways conventional for requests. This is a view that one kind of illocutionary monist might hold.

Notice that making this objection requires denying Sbisà's claim that one can perform an illocutionary act even if one violates one of its conditions.[10] Beyond that, though, there are two responses that the illocutionary pluralist can give in response to this kind of objection. Quill Kukla (2014, writing as Rebecca Kukla) has argued that intentions are neither necessary nor sufficient to fix the force of an utterance.[11] Instead, Kukla argues that an utterance can sometimes be turned into a different speech act than the one intended. Kukla offers an example in which a woman, Celia, who manages a factory floor tries to issue an order but is treated as making a request. Utterances have the forces they have, according to Kukla (2014, 443), "only in virtue of the concrete social difference that they make, or how they are taken up in practice." Kukla is not defending illocutionary pluralism, but the arguments they offer for thinking that social effects fix an utterance's force would be of use to the pluralist. It is easy to imagine cases in which an utterance makes a plurality of concrete social differences. Indeed, these social differences are the kind of thing that Sbisà has in mind when she argues that the conventional effects are part of what gives an utterance its force.

My own view is that this objection mistakes having an illocutionary force with having a fully successful illocutionary force. While the objection is right that the intention and the uptake of an utterance must match for a *fully successful* assertion, or request, or so forth, this does not mean that they must match for an utterance to have a force at all. The felicity conditions that Austin offers are conditions on fully

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[9] I am grateful to a reviewer for encouraging me to consider this objection in some detail.

[10] For more on pluralistic intentions see Sbisà (2013b).

[11] Kukla prefers "performative force" to "illocutionary force" for reasons she details in her 2014 paper. I will not take up that debate here. That paper is rich, and the sketch I provide here cannot do justice to all the important arguments in it. I use "force" here as neutral between illocutionary and performative force, hoping that my account holds, modulo some changes, if Kukla is right about performative force.

"happy" speech acts. If they were all necessary for an act to have a force at all, then the view would have odd predictions. For example, wondering about the answer is a preparatory condition on questioning. If all the felicity conditions were necessary for illocutionary force, then a speaker would be unable to pose a question to which she already knew the answer. This may be a matter of theory choice, but I prefer to have an account according to which most utterances have (somewhat less than fully successful) forces over an account according to which many utterances are forceless because they are infelicitous.

Perhaps we might say, instead, that only some felicity conditions are necessary for an utterance to have a particular force. Matching the intention to the uptake could be a special (or perhaps constitutive) condition. This version of the objection yields similarly problematic predictions: it leaves many speech acts forceless. Consider, again, the conversation between Martha, George, and Penny. Say that Martha intends to request, George takes her to be commanding, and Penny takes her to be questioning. Such a case is easily imaginable, given how flexible we are with our grammatical conventions. In a case like this, if we require both intention and uptake for an utterance to have a force at all, Martha's utterance fails.[12]

According to the kind of illocutionary pluralism I have in mind, the social effects that an utterance has determine its illocutionary force. When Martha speaks to George and Penny, each party to the conversation has a reaction to her speech. Some part of that reaction will be conventional for some illocutionary force. If Martha reacts as though she's requesting, George reacts as though she's commanding, and Penny reacts as though she is questioning, her utterance has those forces. Depending on the legal, moral, and prudential facts of the context, one of these forces might be better than the others, but if so, it will be legally, morally, or prudentially better.

To summarize this section, recall that speech is social action. It involves speech made by a speaker, and some reactions from one or more hearers, including the speaker him- or herself. For full success, the speaker's intention in performing an act using a certain conventionalized procedure must match the kind of reactions that the hearers have. Conventions are mutable, overlapping, evolving, and ambiguous, so mismatches are common and often tolerated, within some margin of similarity—there's often no need to establish a single, correct illocutionary force. Conversations are complicated and messy, and often take place between more than two participants. All of this means that the conventional responses to a single utterance are likely to vary, at least sometimes. We're able to handle this in the course of conversation, and we tolerate some mismatches, as long as they don't get

[12] There is more discussion of this in my recent paper (Johnson 2019).

too in the way of achieving our other goals. Despite our conversational tolerance of mismatches, mismatches can sometimes both be the result of and also contribute to unjust social institutions and arrangements.

4. Speech Act Confusion

How does all of this speech act theory relate to mansplaining? I propose that we can understand speech act–confusion mansplaining as a mismatch between conversational participants' reactions to a particular utterance. The mismatch I have in mind is between the reactions that a man audience member has to a woman speaker's utterance, and the reactions that the woman speaker (or some other audience member) has. These reactions are conventional for different illocutionary forces. Further, the mismatch is caused by differing perceptions of the conventional procedure followed by the speaker in making her utterance.

Let's make that a little more concrete with an example (adapted from Solnit's [2014] discussion). Consider the following conversation:

1) Rebecca: I've been researching Eadweard Muybridge, and…
2) Ralph: And have you heard about the **very important** Muybridge book that came out this year? It considers all sorts of important . . . (*holds forth*)
3) Sallie: That's her book.
4) Ralph: *continues undeterred*
5) Sallie: That's HER book!

Among the other things that Ralph is doing wrong (interrupting Rebecca, ignoring Sallie), Ralph is also mansplaining. And he might be doing so just because he is a jerk. It may be that Ralph is deliberately undermining Rebecca's expertise. It may also be that Ralph simply didn't attend to Rebecca sufficiently—if he wasn't really listening, he might just be free associating with the name "Eadweard Muybridge." However, I want to entertain a different possiblity—one in which Ralph does something more ordinary but, because of pernicious social structure, nonetheless communicatively and epistemically harms Rebecca.

When Rebecca makes her utterance in (1), she probably intends to make an assertion. She is certainly following a procedure that is conventional for asserting, and the conversation suggests that Sallie, at least, is reacting as if Rebecca asserted. However, as we know from the above, conventional procedures for making an utterance with a particular illocutionary force can both vary by community and be largely overlapping with the procedures for making other kinds of illocutions. So, despite her intentions to make an assertion, her utterance (1) also could follow the conventional procedure for making a request for information (or posing a question).

And Ralph, in his response (2), appears to have precisely this kind of reaction. That is, his response (2) would be a perfectly reasonable response to a request for information about Eadweard Muybridge, and so we can plausibly infer that he was affected by Rebecca's utterance (1) in the way conventional for such requests. We can further tell by Sallie's utterance (3) that she was *not* affected by Rebecca's utterance in the way convetional for requests. If she had been, she would not react to Ralph as she does in (3). So, Ralph's uptake of Rebecca's utterance (1) fails, and so her utterance fails to be fully successful relative to Ralph's perspective. This is despite the fact that Rebecca does successfully assert relative to Sallie's perspective.

One thing to notice is that Ralph's reaction by itself is neither crazy nor particularly pernicious. This is for two reasons. First, there are conversational contexts in which a person might ask a question or make a request for information about *x* by saying "I've been researching *x*." Second, conversational mismatches occur all the time. Our conversational exchanges are messy and, as Austin points out, can be less than ideal in myriad ways. Some of these mismatches are harmless, or even helpful.

To see this, imagine an exchange like the above, but with a professor and her student. A first-year student comes into Dr. Gilbert's office hours and attempts to assert, "I've been researching joint intentionality." Dr. Gilbert interprets her student as asking for more information about her area of expertise and suggests that he read her latest book. While it is possible that the student would have a negative reaction to this, it is probably a good opportunity for him to learn. He might not even notice that his speech act wasn't fully successful. We really only need our exchanges to be successful enough, and less than fully successful speech acts often suffice. And if I am right about illocutionary pluralism, we don't have to worry about what *the* illocutionary force was. We have the tools to say why the student's assertion (from his perspective) was not fully successful. And we can say why the professor's conversational contributions were sensible—the student made a request (from her perspective). This kind of benign mismatch is familiar and part of conversational dynamics.

But mansplaining is not just a benign conversational quirk. It is pernicious and constitutes a harm to those on the receiving end. How can this be explained? There are at least two ways in which mansplaining is pernicious. The first is at the level of Ralph's reactions, and the second is more systematic. Let's take each of these in turn. We can see why Ralph's behavior is pernicious when we consider why he reacted to Rebecca's utterance (1) in the ways conventional for questions. Clearly the conversational context did not dictate that her utterance (1) must be a question. We can see from (3) that Sallie responded as if it were an assertion—she is attempting in (3) to show Ralph that he was mistaken to react as if Rebecca were trying to ask a question. We can see from (4) that Ralph does not immediately see

this. It seems likely that Ralph's reaction to Rebecca's utterance (1) is informed by pernicious social structures.

I hypothesize that Ralph reacts to Rebecca's utterance (1) in the way that he does because he reacts to the conventional procedures for asserting vs. questioning in a way that is informed by the gender of the speaker. That is, women, when speaking to Ralph, have to follow a different procedure than men in order to prompt the conventional reaction for assertions.[13] Indeed, given that there is no conventional proceedure in our conversational community to assert-as-a-woman (there is no such force), women are left unable to assert in certain conversational contexts. This means that women who are in conversation with Ralph and people with similar habits and attitudes, are illocutionarily disabled in Langton's sense. Ralph may default to reacting as if women have asked questions because he takes women to be less informed, less intelligent, or more in need of intellectual assistance than he takes men to be. He takes his own authority to be of value—a value that he takes women to be seeking. So, when Rebecca utters (1), he incorporates her gender into his perception of the conventional procedure she is following, and reacts as his presuppositions dictate.

Ralph isn't doing something entirely unfamiliar by incorporating Rebecca's gender into his perception of her speech. We incorporate people's social position into our illocutionary reactions with some regularity. Compare the utterance "Can I look inside your bag?" made by a two-year-old and made by a police officer—we're likely to react to these as having different forces because the speakers have different social positions. The problem with Ralph's reaction is that gender *should not* make a difference in the procedure for making assertions. Taking it to make this difference requires at least a degree of acceptance of a range of misogynistic background beliefs.

The second reason that Ralph's reaction is pernicious is that Rebecca likely faces this kind of illocutionary mismatch with some regularity. Not all men mansplain, and not all mansplainers mansplain in every conversation, but the phenomenon is sufficiently widespread to have a name and be immediately recognizable to most women (every woman, if Solnit is right).

Facing mansplaining as a regular response is frustrating, exhausting, and epistemically stunting. It can contribute to and cause testimonial injustice (see Fricker 2007; Wanderer 2011; Pohlhaus 2014). If women's attempted assertions are regularly treated as requests for information, they're going to have a hard time transmitting their knowledge to others by testimony. We know that women are

[13] Lynne Tirrell's (2018) recent paper suggests that this gendered difference in conversational procedures is widespread and has analogs for all speakers who are members of subordinated groups.

seen as less expert than similarly situated men (Thomas-Hunt and Phillips 2004; Elmore and Luna-Lucero 2017). This may be in part because they aren't interpreted as asserting even when they follow the conventions for doing so. Or, to put it better, this may be because people perniciously and subconsciously incorporate gender into the conventions for asserting. Knowing that they are likely to be mansplained to may also make women reluctant to testify at all (see Dotson 2011). These harms are faced by women when mansplainers incorrectly incorporate gender into their perceptions of women's speech acts.

It might be tempting to simply diagnose Ralph as mistaken about the illocutionary force of Rebecca's utterance. The illocutionary monist would tell us that Rebecca intended her utterance as an assertion, Sallie took it up as an assertion, so it was an assertion, and Ralph is making a factual mistake to treat it as a question. I don't think that we should give in to this temptation, however much we might want to insist that Ralph is incorrect. Certainly he *should* treat the utterance as an assertion, but that is because of the moral and epistemic facts of the example.

As mentioned above, Kukla (2014) points out that we miss something important about the power of our utterances when we don't attend to their social effects. Recall, again, Kukla's case involving Celia, the factory floor manager. Her attempt to order is thwarted, Kukla argues, and she requests instead. I agree that this can sometimes happen. However, I think there is an intuitive sense in which Celia orders, as long as she prompts, in at least herself, the reactions conventional for ordering. If illocutionary pluralism is right, then we don't have to choose. Celia's utterance is both an order and a request. This allows us to predict why Celia's expectations don't match those of her employees. It allows us to better understand, and hopefully to mitigate, discursive injustices.

5. Conclusion

Mansplaining comes in several varieties which have a number of different etiologies and explantions. It would be worthwhile to give detailed analyses of all of them. My goals in this paper, however, have been to identify several kinds of mansplaining, and then give a detailed explanation of one kind using the tools available from speech act theory. What goes wrong in cases of speech act–confusion mansplaining is that these mansplainers incorrectly incorporate a woman's gender into their perception of the illocutionary procedure they react to. This leads them to react to the woman's utterance with conventional request/question type reactions. This is epistemically frustrating for women who are trying to do something else with their words. It can contribute to epistemic injustices such as testimonial injustice and testimonial smothering. And, perhaps this is something that all instances of mansplaining have in common: mansplainers behave problematically because of the

ways that they react to a woman's gender and incorporate it into their conversational practices.[14]

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[14] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for helping me see this.

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