

*PUBLIC WORDS AS SOCIAL OBJECTS*

Suppose Alice wants Caroline to think that Bernard is asleep, and so she says something that sounds very much like, “Bernard is asleep”. On many philosophical accounts of linguistic communication, Caroline can reliably uncover the intended meaning of Alice’s utterance in part because (i) they both use the same public words with the same meanings, and (ii) Caroline can recognize which words Alice uttered. Indeed, we would not expect Alice and Caroline’s exchange to succeed if Caroline thought that the word ‘asleep’ meant *awake* or that Alice articulated the word ‘awake’. On such accounts, public words provide a mechanism by which Alice and Caroline can reliably communicate. But despite this central role, serious investigations into the nature of public words are lacking. While most of the philosophical literature on public words concerns their meanings, little attention is given to words as signs themselves—as things *pronounced* and *inscribed*. How should we understand these objects and how are they related to their articulations? What makes it the case that Alice’s utterance “asleep” is an utterance of the word ‘asleep’? In virtue of what are two articulations that sound rather different articulations of the same word?

Providing answers to such questions is not straightforward. Perhaps an utterance counts as an utterance of a given word when it adheres to a particular sonic pattern, and hence, perhaps two articulations are articulations of the same word when they manifest the same pattern. But while this is a good place to start, counterexamples are easy to find. The same word can be pronounced in a variety of ways (e.g., the word ‘pen’ might be pronounced [pɛn] by some speakers but [pɛn̩] by others), and different words can share a pronunciation (e.g., the verb ‘profit’ and the noun ‘prophet’ share the pronunciation [prɒfɪt]). But it is not that conformity to a phonological pattern is irrelevant, since when it comes to articulating a particular word, not any pattern goes. It is not obvious what kind of model can account for the particular ways in which a word’s articulations vary and that agents can communicate in spite of this variation. Indeed, none of the extant models found in the work of Quine, Kaplan, and Chomsky succeed. But without such an account, many philosophical theories of linguistic communication are incomplete.

In *Public Words as Social Objects*, I propose a novel account of public words that is responsive to both their communicative role and the observations about articulation variation. *The Communicative Policy Model*, as I call it, holds that the relation between a public word and its articulations is grounded in a kind of social relation between the speaker and those spoken to. In a communicative exchange, speakers and receivers invoke pairs of communicative policies for mapping their private linguistic structures (or *lexical items*) onto phonetic forms and for mapping received phonetic forms onto their private linguistic structures. These policies describe a speaker’s competence for sending and receiving phonetic forms in a potentially heterogeneous linguistic community, and they are sensitive to aspects of an agent’s internal grammar as well as aspects of the social and conversational context. I argue that sets of these policies (i) forge connective bonds between the lexical items of different agents, providing the basis for a notion of a common public word, (ii) set up articulation standards that constrain which word an articulation is of, and (iii) provide solutions to a Lewisian coordination problem posed by communication (e.g., that of assigning pronunciations to words). In light of these considerations, my model holds that two articulations made by distinct agents are articulations of the same public word when they are articulations of lexical items connected by pairs of overlapping policies. Furthermore, it lays the foundation for the notion of a public word as something agents build—as the *product* of the communicative policies that hold between agents. The model I offer differs from previous models in assigning a central role to the *audience* in providing an account of public words. First, the model is *audience directed*, in that communicative policies take account of who is being spoken to and can shift depending on features of the audience. Second, it is *audience involving*, in that public words arise out of the overlapping policies of speakers and receivers. And third, it is *coordinative*, in that speakers and receivers jointly converge on a public word and its pronunciations in overcoming a coordination problem. I end by exploring the notions of a public word that are compatible with this model, including a radical view on which sets of policies that sort lexical items into equivalence classes play the role of public words in communication.

My dissertation asks that we abandon the orthodox idea that public words are stagnant objects with fixed pronunciations in favor of a new idea: that public words are dynamic objects, constructed by the speakers and receivers who use them and related to their articulations via the social relations that hold in a linguistic community. Indeed, it argues that where there are no social networks of communicative policies, there can be no notion of a public word as a vehicle of communication.