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# SPEAKING OUT

*How To Resist with Words*

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Resistance against oppression can be diversely defined. Johansson and Vinthagen (2019) have posited that it is composed of the acts of subordinated people that might undermine power. Henry (2019) describes these acts as contra the forces that homogenise and confine people, aiming at liberation. These definitions broadly describe the amorphous concept of resistance as ‘acts against’. However, what are these acts? Can something as little (or as big) as speaking out be a resistant act? I argue that anti-oppressive speech can enact resistance in accordance with J.L. Austin’s theory of speech acts. While J.L. Austin’s titular task is identifying ‘How to Do Things with Words’, I will describe how to resist with words.



### **To do this, I will:**

- I.** Introduce resistance, explore Audre Lorde’s conception of the resistive power of speech and explain speech acts.
- II.** Describe how anti-oppressive speech may be a resistive performative.
- III.** Discuss the dimensions of content that impact resistant speech acts.
- IV.** Consider the power of oppression as a potential undermining force for anti-oppressive speech acts.
- V.** Offer a solution to this problem and discuss how speaking out can ultimately be used as a means for resistance, and be successful in this.

### **I. Oppression, Resistance, and Speech Acts**

Resistance, as introduced, can be understood as a response to oppression, actions against. Oppression must thus be defined. Iris Young (1990, 39) posited that oppression is an iteration of injustice and a ‘disabling constraint’. To describe how oppression exists in our society, Young (1990, 41) posits that it is ‘structural’, meaning it is present in generally unexamined norms, rules, and habits that underpin institutional governing and the subordinating consequences of it. By understanding oppression this way, it can be seen that undermining rules and

norms is necessary to liberate subordinated people from discriminatory confinement. To expand on the nature of this, Patricia Hill Collins, alongside other feminist thinkers, elucidated how subordinated people occupy unique social positions created by the interlocking of oppressive structures (Collins, 2008, p.82). This theory, labelled intersectionality, has progressed our understanding of oppression, showing how complex it really is. Acknowledging intersectionality can be exemplified by the concept of misogynoir, developed by Moya Bailey, which describes the way that racism and misogyny jointly shape black women’s oppression (Bailey, 2021, p.1). This is visible in media depictions of derogatory archetypes of black women such as the ‘mammy’ or ‘welfare queen’ (Bailey, 2021, p.2). This discriminatory representation is a result of not only misogyny or racism, but the specific combination of the two (Bailey, 2021, p.2). Specific identities constitute social positions that affect the experiences of many subordinated people, and so, intersectional resistance is vital. Therefore, resistance is a direct response to oppression, no matter its complexity, and requires the undermining of the rules and norms that shape it.

Audre Lorde describes speech as resistive, specifically when one verbalises their own experience (Lorde, 1984, p.42). She highlights that this acts against the invisibility that is indispensable to oppression. The act of verbalising experiences stands in direct opposition to the silence which keeps oppression invisible and obscured (Lorde, 1984, p.42). Speaking out from a position of subordination rejects the idea that certain voices are less valuable and so should not be heard. Furthermore, vocalising experiences of subordination can call attention to how the things we see and do every day are capable of being oppressive, in turn challenging us to critique the thoughts and behaviours we consider normal (Lorde, 1984, p.44). Through speech, we are able to discuss oppression and give name and delineate

ideas such as misogynoir, and use this language to criticise norms like the archetypes introduced above. In this way, vocalising such ideas enables them to directly challenge the norms they analyse, providing the tools to change perceptions. Thus, by identifying these benefits of vocalising, Lorde has laid the groundwork for how important speaking out can be as an act of resistance, and we are left with the question, how does this work?

Pausing on the discussion of resistance, I will now elucidate J.L. Austin's theory of speech acts (performatives), before moving onto Mary Kate McGowan's application of this in the context of oppression. This will provide the framework for speech to be understood as a resistant act in itself. J.L Austin posits that performatives, that is utterances that make *something* so, should be considered acts (Austin, et al., 1979). For example, at a wedding, the proclamation 'I do' is considered an act in itself, as it officially marries the couple when it is uttered by both parties. J.L. Austin also explains how there are conditions that performatives must fulfil to be successful. The first is that the circumstances are appropriate, for example, the proclamation 'I do' can only make a marriage happen at an actual wedding (Austin, et al., 1979, p. 237). The second is that there are conventions which recognise these words as acts, for example, the proclamation 'I do' would not succeed if this phrase was not commonly known to officiate one's commitment to marriage (Austin, et al., 1979). Finally, the speech must be sincere and intentional, otherwise it can be classified as an abuse, (Austin, et al., 1979) for example saying 'I do' jokingly undermines the relevant integrity of the statement. Thus, speech can do things and therefore can be an act.

Mary Kate McGowen (2009) takes this framework and argues that performatives can be oppressive, and so speech can enact oppression.

This accounts for the mechanisms of oppression within speech, which will be used to delve into resistant speech. J.L. Austin defines a particular performative, an exercitive, as one that exercises power, rights, or influence (McGowen, 2009, p.393). McGowen argues that oppressive speech can be exercitives that create oppressive rules which then govern a particular environment (McGowen, 2009, p.397). Oppression is the activity that results from the following of created rules and norms which constrain subordinated people, and so speech governed by these rules can be considered as enacting oppression (McGowen, 2009, p.397). This can be seen in the following example of two colleagues talking at work about a woman called Denise who has accused someone of sexual assault:



Ex.1:

Allan: Boys will be boys.

Michael: Exactly, she's complaining about nothing.

McGowen asserts that speech like Allan's can enact oppression as it creates oppressive social rules, the prevalence of which is exemplified in Michael's response. Allan's speech establishes the norm, in this environment, that men's wrongdoings should be considered more forgivable, especially when they are committed against women. Therefore, as speech can influence what is permissible in a given environment, such as oppressive misogynistic rhetoric, speech can be an oppressive performative.

## II. Resistant Speech Acts

To delineate resistant performatives, I will illustrate an interaction between the oppressive rules proposed by McGowan and an example of resistant speech. Analysis of this interaction will motivate the concept of resistant speech acts.

What if, before Michael could respond, Denise spoke up? What if she told Allan that what he said was wrong to some degree? Denise could say:

**Ex.2:**

No! Men should be held accountable for their actions. What he did was wrong and it's good that I came forward

In Ex.2, Denise's response contravenes the rules that, according to McGowan, Allan's utterance sets up, and in this capacity her speech can be classified as an act. Denise knows that Allan's utterance is unfair and misogynistic, and vocalises this. Allan's oppressive act (his permissibility of misogyny) is undermined as the oppressive rules his speech creates are transgressed. Denise's speech functionally makes misogyny no longer as permissible in this environment. Her response further enforces the idea that her experiences and voice are important, and should not be reduced by misogynistic rhetoric. She is not only generally undermining the norms of misogyny in this environment that Alan creates by contradicting him, but as Lorde suggests, the norm of staying silent in the face of it is subverted. Lorde would posit that a considerable aspect of Denise's resistance is the recentring her own experience. In speaking out, she challenges the underlying implication of Allan's utterance that her voice, experience, and opinions do not matter. Denise's speaking out is the antithesis to the silence which is vital to the continuation of oppressive norms. Ultimately, it can be understood that Denise's utterance in Ex.2 challenges the social rule of permitting misogyny and her own subordination, thus is resistant in this capacity.

In order for Denise's response to be a resistant performative, the content of her speech must be distinctly anti-oppressive. For this to be the case, Denise must understand the oppression at hand, and her response shows that she does. She first says, "men should be held accountable for their actions", challenging the oppressive norm Allan's utterance perpetuates; that men should not be held accountable for their sexual violence against

oppressive women, more simply the endorsement of a 'boys will be boys' attitude. She has enough knowledge and familiarity with this concept to understand that this is what Allan was harmfully advocating in his speech. Moreover, she says that "it's good that I came forward", which illustrates her understanding that sexual assault is something worth protesting, even in the face of Allan's misogynistic speech act. In this way, the content that makes up Denise's resistant performative, is dependent upon Denise's awareness of existing oppressive norms. Overall, she enacts resistance, so her speech is a performative.

**III. The Dimensions of Resistant Speech Acts**

As shown, the resistant speech act derives from Denise's understanding of her experience, which calls for an exploration of the epistemic layer of resistant speech acts. Without knowing what Allan meant, especially the harm of his statement, Denise would be unable to enact resistance through words. She understands that the experience is wrong and thus resists. However, imagine if Denise accepted the 'boys will be boys' attitude that Alan perpetuates. In this case she would likely not realise the degree of injustice in her experience, and therefore not speak up in the way she does. The injustice of this attitude needs to be something Denise recognises. A problem thus arises when ideas of certain forms of oppression have not yet been developed or when people are not aware of them. It would be easy for Denise to internalise these attitudes, but access to understanding of injustice can undermine this ease. For example, currently, it seems intuitive that sexual harassment is oppressive and therefore wrong, but this was not always the case. In fact, the concept of sexual harassment was only developed in the 1970s in the U.S (Jackson, 2021). Before then, it was likely more difficult for a woman to understand her own experience as oppression, as she would have lacked the epistemological resources needed to assert the

injustice of her harassment, despite its obvious wrong. Fricker's (2007) idea of hermeneutical injustice discusses this concept. Fricker argues that our perceptions of social experiences are shaped by prejudicial interpretive resources. These implicit biases undermine our ability to understand and thus vocalise the social experience of subordinated people. Thus, epistemic resources form part of the epistemic roots of resistance speech acts.

This is not to say that she is unable to understand how the experience is wrong without external definitions of injustices. However, to counter social norms in the way she does by speaking out, an understanding of the injustice and oppression of this experience is necessary. This necessity is motivated by the ease of understanding and explicating that is provided by ideas of injustice, as identified by Fricker. This ease allows Denise to speak out and for her meaning to be understood and not dismissed. Implicitly understanding her oppression is one thing, but effective resistant acts derive from the explicit naming and shaming of such oppression. This renders the power of vocal resistance temporarily situated, we can only verbalise to the extent to which we can conceptualise forms of oppression, making it part of the bigger task of interrogating our social perceptions to understand oppression and injustice.

Finally, speech, being personal, is a particularly useful tool to enact resistance on an intersectional level, but must be mindful of intersectional oppression. When an oppressed person speaks out against their suffering, they acknowledge the unique social situation that constitutes their experience of subordination. This empowers in a specifically intersectional way as it allows resistance to be personal. The personalisation of resistance is important as, drawing from the ideas of black feminists including Lorde (1984, p.67), articulating challenges to oppression on behalf of others can be harmful as it leaves space to ignore intersectional

forces which may shape the oppression. Thus, as intersectionality recognises the differences in experiences of oppression, personal resistant speech, an act constituted by the perspective of one agent, emphasises the importance of an individual's experience. This demonstrates that resistance speech is particularly useful where it is personal and may become problematic when it is on behalf of others. Speaking out is thus not only an act of resistance, but one of representation. This further illustrates how perceptions of subordination are fundamental to the formation of an anti-resistant speech act. In these ways, the content of resistant performatives is important to allow them to enact resistance. This content can draw inspiration from knowledge derived from personal lived experience of oppression and/or conceptualisations of oppression where they are available. The content must avoid obscuring intersectionality and may be limited by hermeneutical injustice.

#### **IV. The Trouble for Resistant Speech**

Oppression is powerful and prolific. Speech may transgress the rules of oppression in content, but does this change anything enough to constitute an act? I consider here the qualification of speech acts which require a certain level of meaningful difference we must expect to label resistant speech an act. This is the primary problem for resistant speech and resistance alike; how can small, individual actions like speech act to counter something as widespread and dominant as oppression?

McGowen theorises that oppressive speech operates by its influence and that norms and rules constitute oppression, but resistance does not have such a foundation. There are no established 'moves' that one can make, in speech or otherwise, that automatically constitute resistance as it is not a structural phenomenon, but is one of norms and rules, like oppression.

By uttering something anti-oppressive, we cannot draw upon the rules that already exist in society to make something permissible, or not permissible as the case may be. In brief and as stated, it is not an exercitive, as oppressive speech is. Lacking the power to exert authority, anti-oppressive speech may be insufficient in enacting resistance to oppression, which is authoritative. Initially it seems that Denise's response changes the environment by challenging that misogyny should be permissible, but the problem is resistance lacks the same power that oppression holds. What if Allan laughed Denise's response off or reiterated his point? What if Michael still said what he said after she spoke? If any of these things happened, it indicates that it is still permissible in this environment to be misogynistic, to dismiss Denise's experience and excuse men for terrible behaviour. Thus, the rules that Allan's exercitive enacts are not directly altered by Denise's utterance and so oppression still pertains no matter what Denise says. If oppression prevails, has the anti-oppressive speech changed enough to deserve the status of a speech act? Denise's speech may be resistant in content, but if it does not actually alter oppression, it may fall short of meeting the parameters of a speech act.

### V. The Solution for Speaking Out

I defend the notion that resistant speech can be speech acts by arguing that breaking oppressive norms and rules meaningfully compromises oppression's ability to subordinate. As I have shown, through expressing an opposing attitude which oppressive systems seek to forbid, anti-oppressive speech can break oppressive rules, therefore changing the norms of an environment simply by denying them. Moreover, as oppression works through norms and rules, if these are contravened then oppression is not working. We know that oppression can persist, as illustrated by the considerations of Part IV, as resistant speech cannot authoritatively disallow it. However, the persistence

of oppression is undermined by every instance in which speaking out denies its influence. This is due to the fact that resistance is a reaction to oppression and has no structural underpinning of its own. Therefore, it does not set rules and norms of behaviour, does not directly make things permissible or prevalent, but does challenge what is permissible and prevalent at the hand of oppression.

In the case of Alan and Denise, it may seem like this undermining is trivial, and that when Denise is brushed off, she has not undermined any oppression. However, dismantling structural oppression requires steady progress, the breaking of oppressive rules over and over again until norms begin to change. Resistant speech can therefore be used with other forms of protest to combat oppression, all of which are acts of resistance. This can be seen in the name and logo change of the breakfast food brand of Aunt Jemima. The Aunt Jemima caricature drew upon the racist and sexist 'mammy' stereotype originating from minstrelsy, a specific example of misogynoir as conceptualised by Moya Bailey. Riché Richardson identified this issue in 2015, not in speech but in an article, yet still 'speaking out' against this iteration of the mammy archetype (Crump, 2021), however it was not until 2020, with increasing pressure from the Black Lives Matter protests that the logo finally changed. As we can see, Richardson's initial act of resistance did not immediately change the logo of the brand, but was a challenge to a norm, which when repeated over and over, eventually dismantled a form of structural oppression. There are cases when it seems like resistant performatives do not immediately have any effect on undermining oppression. However, every time speech challenges oppression, it is one step closer to shifting norms away from the subordination of people which are often accepted without question. This serve to further define resistance and such defend my understanding of anti-oppressive speech being acts of resistance.

I have defended that anti-oppressive speech can be an act of resistance by their breaking of rules that constitute oppression. By elucidating Austin and McGowan's work on (oppressive) speech acts, it can be seen that anti-oppressive speech constitutes resistance through its subversion of oppressive norms that performatives create. I have then posited how resistant speech can be an act. To follow, I illustrated the epistemic and intersectional dimensions of resistant speech. I raised the possible objection of how speech that is resistant in concept, may not constitute a speech act as it may be insufficient in enacting change. However, I have illustrated that conceptualising and understanding oppressive rules, and then breaking them is key to dismantling oppressive systems through examples of both a hypothetical situation (that of Alan and Denise) and real life one (the case of Aunt Jemima), so this is what constitutes resistant acts and makes anti-oppressive speech qualify as this. I conclude that speech and speaking is not only an act of resistance, but an effective and powerful one that can progress our society away from oppressive norms.



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