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Group speakers

Grace Paterson

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines group speech acts to argue against the view, here called *speaker intentionalism*, that one is a speaker behind a speech act in virtue of having the relevant communicative illocutionary intention. An alternative view is presented called *speaker responsibilism* according to which one is a speaker in virtue of having certain responsibilities. Complexities are considered which arise from the kinds of responsibilities the speaker has and the specific ways in which they are acquired.

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1. Introduction

What makes someone or something like a group the speaker of a given speech act? Whose speech act is it? In the case of run of the mill speech acts, there is no special difficulty in answering this question. Put crudely, we need only look for the creature making noises or gesturing toward us. The speaker is, in this way, manifest. However, when it comes to group speech as well as other socially complex forms of individual speech (e.g. those performed by way of a proxy) we cannot necessarily rely on this kind of heuristic. This is because a number of distinct roles which are involved in performing a speech act may be carried out by different agents working in collaboration. The challenge, then, is to figure out what makes it the case that a particular party is, in the most relevant sense, the owner of a speech act, rather than a mere accessory to its performance.

One natural answer, an answer which is often assumed with little argument,¹ is that a speaker is the bearer of the communicative illocutionary intention manifest in the speech act. The intentions at issue here are reflexive in character in the sense first outlined in [Grice \(1957\)](#). That is, they are intentions to produce certain effects in virtue of the audience's recognition of that very intention (although what effects in particular are intended will vary based on the kind of speech act being performed). Intentions of this sort are what make speech acts genuinely communicative and so it is reasonable to suppose that having these intentions is a marker of being a communicative agent, or a speaker. Let us call this view *speaker intentionalism*. Adopting speaker intentionalism gives rise to a certain set of theoretical assumptions and questions. In particular, the question of whether and how a group can be a speaker becomes a question of whether and how they can form such communicative illocutionary intentions.

E-mail address: grace.paterson@univie.ac.at.

¹ For instance, the first condition on group speech acts in [Hughes \(1984\)](#) (extending the framework of [Searle \(1969\)](#)) is that "There exists a group (G), this group has an illocutionary intention, and X [the utterance] conveys that illocutionary intention" (387). [Meijers \(2007\)](#), working within a similar framework, accepts this particular condition of Hughes as "obvious" (102). Coming at the issues from a slightly different direction, [Lackey \(2014\)](#) takes the problem of whether group testimony is to be understood reductively as being at least in part do with with whether the group has an "intention to express communicable content" (89), however [Lackey \(2018\)](#) does explicitly recognize that in cases of "authority-based-group-assertion" it could be the spokesperson and not the group with this intention, which is consistent with the view here. (Note too that Hughes uses the term *speaker* to refer to whomever is performing the utterance act, and *intender* to the group spoken for. Differences in terminology aside, the relevant point is that on the view of Hughes it is essential to a speech act being a group's speech act that the group have the relevant illocutionary intention.)

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In this paper I argue that speaker intentionalism is false. In particular, I argue that being the bearer of the operative communicative illocutionary intention is neither necessary nor sufficient for one's being a speaker, or at least it is neither necessary nor sufficient for one's being a speaker in the respects that are of greatest philosophical import. As an alternative to speaker intentionalism, I propose what I call *speaker responsibilism*: the view that the speaker behind a speech act is determined by facts about who is responsible for that act in certain salient respects. The role of speaker is, on this view, a normative one. Questions about whether and how a group can be a speaker are therefore questions about whether and how it can come to occupy this normative role.²

It might be observed that speaker intentionalism and speaker responsibilism are views about what it means to be a speaker that one can, in a certain sense, read off of certain popular views in speech act theory. That is, if one holds a view of speech acts built heavily around the role of intentions, then one is likely to be tacitly assuming speaker intentionalism. Similarly if one holds a view of speech acts that is more normative in character, then one is more likely to be tacitly committed to speaker responsibilism. Be that as it may, the point of this paper is not to rehash old debates about the underlying nature of speech acts. My starting place is very different: whereas analyses of speech acts typically begin with the assumption that we know who the speaker is and ask what it is about what they do that makes their speech act what it is, we will instead begin with specific speech acts and ask what it is about those acts that makes one party rather than another the speaker.

To see why we should be concerned with the question of what, if anything, makes one a speaker, it is instructive to consider group speech acts. There are, in fact, numerous ways in which a group of people may participate in the performance of a speech act, only some of which intuitively constitute a group speaking. Here are just a few examples: a corporation makes a promise to consumers, the Catholic church apologizes for past abuses, a country declares war on another, a jury issues a verdict, colleagues sign a retirement card for their peer, a sub-committee makes a recommendation to its parent committee, a research team reports their findings at a conference, a group of concerned citizens signs a petition, a union demands higher wages, a crowd cheers and boos at a sporting event, children sing happy birthday to their friend, a team writes a speech for the president, and so on.

Now, all of the above events are, in some sense, instances of groups engaged in speech; but it does not seem to me at all clear that in all cases there is any kind of group speaker. Indeed, it isn't even clear that in the case of, for instance, a crowd cheering or chanting, there is a single speech act of which we can ask who the speaker is. It may instead be a single event composed of numerous distinct individual speech acts made by an array of different speakers.³ Additionally, in listing these examples I have glossed over the internal complexity underlying each of these events: the corporation might make its promise by way of a spokesperson, or by way of a statement drafted by an internal committee; those signing the retirement letter may each add their own message; the union members may have an opportunity to vote on their demands; the crowd may be taking the direction of cheerleaders, or each member may be acting spontaneously, etc. These details can matter to our intuitions not just about what was said, but in fact about who (or what) has spoken. The aim of this paper is to make sense of such judgements in a theoretically fruitful and non-ad-hoc manner.

Before going on, I want to make it clear what I am and am not arguing: I am not arguing that a communicative illocutionary intention is unnecessary for the performance of a speech act, only that the speaker needn't be the one with such an intention – sometimes another party is the one with this intention. I am also not arguing that groups cannot have such intentions (although there are reasons to worry about this given the reflexive character of communicative intentions). In fact, for the sake of argument, I will assume that groups can have such intentions. If it turns out that this assumption is false, so much the better for my view – but it doesn't need to be false for the argument to go through. Finally, I am not arguing that group intentions considered more broadly play no role in a group speaking. To the contrary, I will suggest that some group intentions are very important. The point is only that the group being the locus of the communicative illocutionary intention underlying some particular speech act is not required for it to be that speech act's speaker.

2. Speaker intentionalism

There are a number of ways in which intentions enter into the performance of speech acts. One way in which intentions are relevant to speech acts is that different kinds of speech act may express or have as felicity conditions that the speaker have certain intentions. I will not focus here on these particular intentions, except to note that who the speaker is will determine whose intentions of this kind are relevant to questions of sincerity and non-defectiveness of the speech act performed. Another way in which intentions are relevant to speech acts has to do with their being complex action types. Specifically, speech acts are layered in an important way. You may please a friend by making her a promise, and make her a promise by saying a particular phrase which semantically means that you promise to do such-and-such. I follow [Austin \(1975\)](#) in referring to the first of these as a perlocutionary act, the second as an illocutionary act, and the third as a locutionary act.⁴ My focus in

² Note that a speaker intentionalist may hold that having and acting upon illocutionary intentions places the speaker in certain normative relations with her audience. However, for the speaker intentionalist these normative relations hold in virtue of her having the intention. For the responsibility, by contrast, the normative relation may hold even in the absence of such an intention. The issue is therefore one of priority.

³ An interesting and more detailed discussion of the distinction between speech acts in which many speakers perform the same act at once and those in which a single speech act is said to be coming from a group of people can be found in [Hancher \(1979\)](#).

⁴ Alternately one may consider these to be different descriptions of the same action.

this paper is on the illocutionary act and the accompanying communicative illocutionary intention. That is, when asking after group speakers I specifically mean group illocutors: groups who do things such as *promise, assert, testify, ask questions, issue orders, and make demands*.

Illocutionary acts are themselves complex. The intention at the heart of an illocutionary act is more than just an intention to perform that illocutionary act. When I make a promise to you I am not just acting on an intention to make a promise, nor even (to be more specific) an intention to be bound by obligations toward you. The promise is a public matter. I must make you aware that I am intending to take on certain obligations toward you. More specifically, following the work of Grice (1957), we say that a performance of an illocutionary act involves a special kind of reflexive intention. This intention is reflexive in the sense that it is an intention both to produce some sort of effect in the audience and also to do so in virtue of the audience's recognition of that very intention. What specific kind of effect is intended will depend on the force and content of the speech act in question. With all this in mind I define speaker intentionalism as follows:

Speaker Intentionalism: An agent is the speaker of a given illocutionary act in virtue of having the operative communicative illocutionary intention.

Note that this is a metaphysical claim. It does not, as such, explain how it is that an audience member can come to know who the speaker behind a speech act is. Indeed, this information is not transparent. In conversation we must make use of various contextual cues to infer who the intender of a speech act is, just as we infer what her intention is. We might do this at least in part by looking to the agent who performed the locutionary act in question, since the locutionary act and illocutionary act are in ordinary cases performed by the same agent. But that does not entail that this is what it means to be an illocutor, only that this is one of the most reliable sources of information we as audience members have about who bears the relevant communicative illocutionary intention.

In addition to a certain degree of intuitive plausibility, speaker intentionalism has the merit of fairly clearly setting out what our theories of group speech must do. In order to determine how groups can perform speech acts, we must determine how they can have the relevant intention. Happily, we have a growing array of theories about shared and collective intentions which may be invoked for this task.

However, I will argue here that this approach is, at best, limited because speaker intentionalism does not seem to adequately capture what it means to be a speaker. This can be seen by considering group speech acts as well as other socially complex speech acts. In particular, a group being itself the bearer of the relevant intention is neither necessary nor sufficient for it to be a speaker. The groups which most plausibly have such intentions are not necessarily speakers; and groups that are most plausibly speakers often seem to lack such intentions. Let us consider each of these concerns in turn.

2.1. *Against necessity*

It is common (though not universal) for group speech acts to be carried out by way of a proxy. By a proxy, I mean an agent who, in some sense, takes actions on another's behalf. For instance, a group might employ an authorized spokesperson or representative who is chosen to speak for them as a whole, or to act as their "mouth piece". Of course, group speech acts are not all performed by proxy (we will see some shortly that are not), and not all proxy speech acts are group speech acts; but the importance of proxies to many kinds of group speech is notable. My claim here is that at least in some cases of group speech performed by proxy, it is the proxy and not the group who has the relevant communicative illocutionary intention. The reason for this has to do with the scope of the proxy's authority and the extent to which the speech act in question was planned ahead of time by the group.

Take as an example the case of a negotiator for a group such as a government or a union. Suppose that the negotiator represents a group with specific interests and is personally tasked with speaking for that group. As part of this, she is tasked with making certain requests and demands. Suppose as well that she is empowered to (at least preliminarily) accept or reject a deal offered, the specific response being dictated by the contents of the deal. Notice that in this case that the group she is speaking for is not, as a whole, privy to the specifics of the negotiation, and does not know ahead of time how this negotiation will unfold. In other words, the negotiator is empowered to make certain speech acts on behalf of the group she represents; however the group does not know which specific speech acts these are, and may also lack specific details about content. In particular, they may know that the negotiator could reply in some way to a proposed deal, but they don't know what that reply will be. Given the group's general ignorance about the speech acts in question, and the fact that it must be informed about them after the fact, it does not seem right to say that it is the bearer of the communicative illocutionary intention in question.⁵

There are several ways to push back against this conclusion. One is to say simply that the intention in question may be in the head of the proxy, but counts, in virtue of her having been appropriately authorized, as belonging to the group.

⁵ A point worth flagging is that a spokesperson sometimes speaks for the party she represents, and sometimes speaks for herself. It is not, therefore, the case that everything the union negotiator says in the context of the negotiations constitutes a speech act by the union, even when the speech act is about the union. Sometimes the spokesperson speaks for and about the union, sometimes she speaks for herself but about the union, and sometimes she speaks for and about herself. What determines which of these is the case for a given speech act will depend on what determines who the speaker of a speech act is – the central problem of this paper. The issue of spokesperson autonomy is taken up in more detail by Lackey (2018, 29) and Ludwig (2017, 197–198).

Alternatively, we could argue that the group's intention is constituted by or reducible to the intention of the proxy in certain circumstances. In other words, we could argue that in these cases the group's intention is carried by a particular individual.⁶

I do not see anything wrong with saying that in certain circumstances an intention in one person's head either constitutes or counts as that of a group; however I think that such a theory requires a prior commitment to a story about the circumstances under which the group, and not the proxy, is speaker. After all, the proxy might have communicative illocutionary intentions pertaining not only to the group's speech acts, but also to her own speech acts (indeed many proxies switch rapidly between the mode of speaking for themselves and speaking for another). We must therefore be able to provide an explanation of which of the intentions that happen to be in the head of the proxy belong to her and which belong to the group she represents. In short, it presupposes an independent means of determining the identity of the speaker behind the speech act in question. We cannot therefore appeal here to facts about who has what intentions as the guide to who the speaker is; we must instead appeal to other facts about the situation to decide who counts as having the relevant intentions. In this case it seems as though those other facts and not the having of the communicative illocutionary intention are what are, in fact, fundamental to being the speaker.

Another way to push back is to argue that the group does have an illocutionary intention, it is just of a conditional – and possibly also partial – form. For instance, it might be that the group has the following intention: we intend to accept a deal if our opponent bends to all of our demands, and otherwise to refuse the deal. This is the group's plan, a plan which the representative must use to guide the actions she takes on the group's behalf. Suppose that the group's opponent does, in fact, bend to the group's demands and that the representative does, as a consequence, accept the deal on the group's behalf. Is it then the case that the group has the illocutionary intention involved in the act of acceptance? Given the group's absence from the bargaining table (outside of their representative), it would have to be the case either that they came to have the communicative illocutionary intention when the antecedent inside the intention came to be, or that they already had the intention in question. The first possibility cannot be correct. In general, if one intends to X should situation S obtain, it does not mean that one automatically X's in situation S. I can intend to bring my umbrella whenever it is forecast to rain and still, when I see the forecast for rain, choose to leave it behind. Similarly, the fact that our group intends to accept given conditions that do, in fact, obtain, does not amount to them actually accepting the deal in that circumstance nor even entail that they will.

The second possibility – that the group already has the relevant intention also does not work. The intention the group has is a conditional intention about which illocutionary act is to be performed in which circumstances. But this is not the right kind of intention. Communicative illocutionary intentions are, recall, intentions not merely to have certain effects on the audience, but to have them in virtue of that audience recognizing that very intention. If this intention were a conditional intention as described, then the intention would require that the audience recognize that very conditional intention. However, what is communicated to the audience in such a case is not a conditional intention to agree to the deal in certain circumstances, but, given that the circumstances have obtained, the intention to agree. There is a difference between communicating the negotiating plan and acting on that plan. Acting on the plan requires actually agreeing to the deal in the circumstances that were planned for.⁷

2.2. *Against sufficiency*

We have seen now that it need not be the case that the speaker behind a speech act is the bearer of the communicative illocutionary intention associated with that act. Additionally, the party that does plausibly have this intention need not be its speaker. Indeed, we need look no further than the example of the negotiator given above. In this case, the proxy and not the group seems to be the bearer of the illocutionary intention despite the fact that the group is, in the most relevant sense, the speaker. We can make the case against sufficiency more stark by noting that some proxies can act on even looser guidelines than our negotiator's relatively simple plan. It may be the case that the party represented does not come to know what specific speech acts have been performed on their behalf until well after they have already occurred.

⁶ This seems to be more or less what Meijers thinks occurs in the case of things like negotiations where the spokesperson may not be able to consult the group on each thing said. On his view, such individuals nonetheless convey the group's illocutionary intention because they can, on their own, settle what the group's various intentional states are. Thus, for instance, "an authorized speaker can make it the case that his utterance expresses a group belief by declaring that it expresses that belief." (103, emphasis in original).

⁷ Note that an *intention to accept p under certain conditions* is not the same as a *conditional acceptance of p* where the latter is understood as accepting p conditional on those conditions being met. Compare receiving a job offer conditional on you getting a visa with the employer merely stating an intention that they will offer you the job should you manage to get a visa. In the context of a negotiation, it may in fact be unwise to offer a conditional acceptance of a deal. For instance, suppose the party being represented has several desires where one of these desire is absolutely essential and the others are inessential. The negotiator might be instructed to accept any deal that satisfies the essential desire but to try to also get the other desires met. If this were to be put in the form of a conditional acceptance, the opposing side would have no reason to make any compromises above and beyond the bare minimum needed to trigger the acceptance of the deal. In light of the above, we may also note that when a group authorizes a party to accept a deal under certain circumstances, the group may well be acting intentionally under a certain description; however, that description will be a fairly general description designed to leave open negotiation space. This is similar to the example in Ludwig (2017) of an real estate agent: "if I grant a nondurable limited power of attorney to close the sale of my home, when my agent signs for me, I close the sale intentionally. In contrast, if I grant a nondurable power of attorney to handle generally buying and selling of real estate or me, my agent can make decisions about what property to buy or sell independently of my direction. When he acts for me in a property sale, I sell the property but the particular property I do not sell intentionally, as I had no specific intention with respect to that" (198).

Notice too that there is no reason to assume that the proxy must be an individual. A group which manages to be the bearer of a communicative illocutionary intention may not necessarily be speaking for itself. It might, instead be acting as a proxy for another party. The most common examples of this are when a subgroup is assigned as proxy for a larger group of which it is part, although there is no reason why it could not also be the case that a group speaks for another group entirely or even for an individual.

Cases which do not require of us controversial assumptions to plausibly hold that a group itself bears an illocutionary intention are those in which all group members are fully aware of the speech act to be performed, are all involved in the process of planning its performance, and where all aspects of the speech act's planning and production are common knowledge among the group members. Examples from Lackey (2018) of "coordinated group assertion" seem to fit this bill. Among these kinds of group speech act are those "where the members of a tour group stranded on a desert island work together to form the words 'We Need Help' in the sand." and "where all of the members of a research team collectively draft an article together, such as through Google Docs." Lackey (2018, 22).

In fact, each of these cases has siblings where the group performing the speech act is a proxy for others. For instance, the group that spells out "We Need Help" might be a subgroup of the larger tour group charged with the task of sending out an SOS and more generally communicating with rescuers while others from the tour group forage for food and build a shelter. Neither the supergroup as a whole nor its individual members need know the specifics of what is being said nor even how. As such, the most plausible candidate for being the bearer of the operative communicative illocutionary intention would be the subgroup charged with communicating the main group's needs. Nonetheless the larger group is still, in the sense of greatest interest, the group speaker. Any assertion about their need is their assertion and any cry for help is their cry for help. Similarly, a team preparing an article on Google Docs might be doing so on behalf of others and, like the negotiator discussed earlier, they might only be equipped with a set of talking points and priorities. They might have, in other words, a fair bit of discretion about what, in the end, the document should say. Here again the subgroup charged with putting together the document is the most plausible bearer of the relevant intention, but they are speaking for a larger group.⁸

Some conceptual clarity may be obtained by appeal to the participant framework of Goffman (1981). As discussed earlier, the notion of a speech act has some ambiguity to it, being applicable to perlocutionary, illocutionary, and locutionary acts. Adding complexity to the picture, Goffman observes that our common usage of the term "speaker" is also ambiguous between a number of different possible meanings. Sometimes it seems to mean whoever is responsible for the actual utterance by which the speech act is performed. This, Goffman calls the *animator*. Sometimes, it refers to whoever is responsible for composing the speech act or for choosing the words or deciding what to say. This is *author*. Finally, sometimes it refers to whoever is, in some sense, at the centre of the speech act. This is the speech act's *principal* and may be roughly thought of as the agent of the illocutionary act performed.⁹ Many speech acts, including those we have already considered, involve a division of labor where different parties occupy Goffman's various roles. For instance, a political speech may be authored by a team, while the politician remains the principal and animator. Similarly, the subgroup of tourists may animate (and possibly author) a call for help for which the group as a whole is, perhaps, author and principal. And a negotiator may animate speech acts on behalf of a group principal, potentially with authorship duties shared. Employing this vocabulary, speaker intentionalism is the view that the principal is whomever has the communicative illocutionary intention. But what we have seen is that this is wrong because it is very often the authors and animators who bear these intentions instead of the principal. We would do better, therefore, to ask what determines who the speaker is in the specific sense of principal. To avoid confusion I will stick to the language of "speaker" rather than "principal", but it seems to me this is the sense of speaker that we are trying to make sense of.

3. Speaker responsibility

There is an intuitive sense in which a speech act "belongs" to the speaker taken as principal in ways it does not belong to those involved in the other more auxiliary capacities such as authorship and animation. Thus, for instance, it is the group that accepted the deal in our negotiation example who is committed to go through with it, and who is for that reason owed certain

⁸ Something worth remarking is that although I hold that the subgroups in these examples (and proxies more generally) have the communicative illocutionary intentions, those intentions may, in a certain sense, implicate the larger group. This can perhaps be clarified by looking at the role communicative intentions play speech act theory. By way of illustration, here is a description of *statements* in Bach and Harnish (1979, 16):

...for S's utterance of e to be a statement that P, S must [reflexively intend] H to take the utterance as reason to think (a) that S believes that P and (b) that S intends H to believe that P.

Now the thought here is that with unusual speech acts such as proxy speech, the proxy may have the reflexive intention to get H (the rescuers, hopefully) to take the utterance as a reason to think something, but that that something may be about such things as belief's, intentions, responsibilities, and commitments of the party they are representing rather than themselves. So for instance, the sub-group reflexively intends H to take their message in the sand as reason to think that (a) the larger group believes they are in danger and (b) the larger group intends for H to believe that they are in danger. (Note that I don't mean to apply commitment to this particular theory of speech acts. The point is more structural, having to do with the relation of communicative intentions to the content of the illocutionary acts so communicated.)

⁹ See McCawley (1984, 1999) for a detailed examination of the relationship between Goffman's framework and Austin's speech act theory, including the observation that the principal can be thought of as an illocutionary agent.

goods. A rough initial characterization of speaker responsibility is that it is the view that the speaker of a speech act is determined by facts about who is responsible for that speech act in certain ways. More specifically:

Speaker Responsibility: An agent is the speaker of a given illocutionary act in virtue of being responsible for that illocutionary act in relevant respects.

Of course, observing that a speaker is whoever is in some sense responsible for a speech act does not on its own give us a useful account of what it means to be a speaker. We must explain both what kind of responsibilities the speaker has and how she comes to have such responsibilities. Moreover, to avoid circularity, we must not make use of the assumption that the agent in question is the speaker when explaining how she acquires her responsibilities. It will not help us to flatfootedly say that a promisor acquires responsibility for a promise in virtue of making a promise since we are, in fact, concerned with how we can say it was her who made the promise in the first place. To reiterate, the thought is not that because an agent is a speaker she has certain responsibilities, but rather that when a speech act occurs, some agent in some way comes to have certain responsibilities, and it is in virtue of having those specific responsibilities that we call her the speaker.

The particular form of Speaker Responsibility I am going to sketch here is designed to complement a normative picture of speech acts. Going forward I will draw on the work of William Alston, in particular with regard to how we should understand the kind of responsibility involved in speaking. For Alston, speech acts involve the speaker taking responsibility for the satisfaction of different conditions, the specific conditions being dependent on the kind of illocutionary act being performed (Alston, 2000, 54–55). Alston explains the notion of responsibility he is after as follows:

‘Take Responsibility’ must be understood in a special way. The idea is not that U (utterer, speaker) took responsibility for state of affairs C in the sense that he was prepared to acknowledge that he *brought C into existence*. It is, rather, like the way in which, when I become the head of a department or agency, I take responsibility for the efficient and orderly conduct of its affairs, including the work done by my subordinates. I am responsible for all that work, not in the sense that I have done it all myself, but in the sense that I am rightly held to blame if the work is not done properly. I am the one who must ‘respond’ to complaints about that work.” (54)

What one takes responsibility for, in other words, needn’t be one’s own direct doing. We can take responsibility for what is done by others. It is this sense in which, for Alston, a speaker takes responsibility for satisfaction of the conditions of their illocutionary act. Speakers are those who may be (justly) blamed or called to answer if these conditions are not met regardless of how the speech act was performed. At the same time, Alston emphasizes that the *taking responsibility* itself is something one *does*: “it involves U’s *instituting* a state of affairs, rather than just being a matter of U’s *recognizing* an already existing state of affairs” (55, emphasis in original). Our taking responsibility in this way alters the normative facts. Moreover, for Alston the speaker’s taking of responsibility must be done voluntarily and knowingly. In other words, it is important that the taking of responsibility be the agent’s own action, even if *what* the agent is taking responsibility for is not.

I am in broad agreement with Alston on these points, but wish to observe as well that we can see two ways in which responsibilities are involved in this kind of story. Most obviously, if one takes responsibility for some X, then one is responsible for that X. But because taking responsibility for X is itself a doing, one is also responsible for that. That is, one is responsible for taking responsibility for X. As we will see, there are other ways one can be made responsible for X, ways that are not one’s own doing. The choice to be responsible is of significance.

Going forward I will refer to the first kind of responsibility as *illocutionary responsibility*. A speaker’s illocutionary responsibilities are dictated by the particular conventions in her community surrounding that specific speech act. Illocutionary responsibilities vary from speech act to speech act and appear as the various illocutionary conditions required by the speech act. For instance, if the speech act is an assertion the speaker will have certain epistemic responsibilities, perhaps related to what she asserts being true or justifiable (the specifics will depend on one’s underlying theory of assertion). If she makes a promise, she will have certain responsibilities toward the promisee and may be obligated to take certain actions in the future. The illocutionary responsibilities associated with a particular speech act are a matter of convention within a linguistic community.

The second sort of responsibility is what I call *practical responsibility*: the speaker has responsibilities in virtue of the speech act being itself an action, specifically a *taking of* (illocutionary) responsibility. When a speaker takes responsibility in this way she is subject not only to the illocutionary responsibilities mentioned above, but also to the same rational pressures as she has when acting more generally. Thus, for instance, she is subject to rational pressures to make her future actions, including her speech acts, consistent with the speech act she performed and the illocutionary responsibilities that she took up. If the speech act performed calls for some kind of follow through, then she will be under rational pressure not to take actions that would prohibit this. So for example, if she makes a promise to meet a friend at 5pm, then she takes responsibility for being in the meeting spot at 5pm. If she takes herself to have this responsibility, if she is sincere in her speaking, then making plans to be somewhere else at 5pm would not only violate her freely chosen responsibilities but also reveal a kind of practical incoherence in her behaviour. She should not be taking up responsibilities she intends to ignore or cannot meet.

In light of these observations, Speaker Responsibility actually gives us two answers to the question of who the speaker is, answers that suggest two different kinds of speaker:

Minor Speaker: an agent that *is assigned* illocutionary responsibilities in accordance with the particular speech act performed.

Major Speaker: an agent that intentionally takes illocutionary responsibility (that is, *accepts and assigns* to herself illocutionary responsibilities) in accordance with the particular speech act performed.

What makes a major speaker special is that she willingly assigns (or at least accepts) illocutionary responsibilities for herself. She therefore accrues practical responsibilities for the act of self-assignment in addition to those illocutionary responsibilities thereby assigned. By contrast, the role of minor speaker is actually quite weak. A merely minor speaker lacks practical commitment to their illocutionary responsibilities.¹⁰

Minor speakers arise in cases where the authority of the proxy comes from an external source. Thus, for instance a proxy can be granted authority to assign illocutionary responsibilities to the party spoken for by a third party such as the state, or even have their authority put in place by a coercive social structure.¹¹ In these cases, the party spoken for may be the minor speaker; however having not themselves authorized the proxy, they are not the major speaker. This can lead to a somewhat paradoxical looking state of affairs where it might be entirely rational for a minor speaker to take actions that contradict and even indirectly undermine her illocutionary responsibilities, while at the same time acknowledging that she has and is bound by such responsibilities. Thus, someone who has been signed by proxy into some contract that they would not have chosen for themselves might look for loopholes, or try to engineer the situation to invalidate the contract – behaviours that would seem strange if this was something that they had freely chosen for themselves. They might do all this while nonetheless viewing the contract as binding.

To get a feel for how this might look, consider the example from [Lackey \(2018\)](#) of an unpopular king who “has the legal authority to speak on behalf of his citizens, but there is widespread discontent in his nation about the existence of the monarchy. No one acknowledges his authority and no one takes him to be speaking for the nation”(29).

Now how this kind of case gets fleshed out I think makes a difference. If indeed nobody recognizes the king’s authority then he is unable to speak for the nation in either a minor or major sense. However, it might also be the case that the country is a minor speaker in virtue of the king’s representation. In this case the nation could, for instance, declare war on a neighbour by way of the king. At the same time, the fact that the king has not been properly authorized by the nation and its citizenry means that the nation is not a major speaker. It would be quite sensible in this circumstance for the nation to work to reverse the declaration of war, for individual citizens to refuse to participate in military activities, for the diplomatic corp to attempt to retain good relation with their neighbour, and for political rivals to work to eliminate the unpopular king so that peace could be declared.

Given that groups so often speak through proxy we might worry that they will more often than not be speakers in the minor sense. But I do not think, based upon what we have seen, that this is the case. This is because most proxies (such as spokespersons) receive their authorization to assign illocutionary responsibilities from the party they represent, not from an external source. When it comes from the spoken for party itself, the authorization of a proxy should be understood as a kind of pre-emptive taking of responsibility on the part of the authorizer. In other words, by authorizing you to perform a speech act for me, I take illocutionary responsibility in advance for that speech act. In this way, I make it so that when that speech act is performed, I, rather than my proxy, am its major speaker.

A group speaker in such a case intentionally and pre-emptively takes responsibility for what their representative says on their behalf (within certain bounds) even if they do not at the time of so authorizing know the precise details of what that will entail. This is what occurs in our earlier case of a negotiator representing a group. She is authorized by the group to accept or refuse offers depending on what they are. In authorizing her in this way, the group pre-emptively accepts illocutionary responsibility for whichever of these speech acts ultimately gets issued by their representative. In choosing to do this, they make themselves practically responsible for the act of acceptance as well.

All this said, it is not essential that a major speaker authorize their proxy ahead of time as in the examples we have considered thus far. It is also possible for a party to take up after the fact a speech act performed on their behalf. They do this by retroactively accepting and assigning themselves responsibility for something previously done in their name. Let us call this a kind of act one of *accommodation*.¹² Whereas pre-emptive taking of responsibility through a mechanism of authorization is typical of more formal institutional contexts, accommodation is more often seen in informal contexts where the proxy and principal are close. For instance, if I am at dinner with a friends and leave to use the restroom, my friend might order for me even if I didn’t specifically ask her to because she knows well my desires and there is a degree of trust between us. After learning that she placed the order for me, I might accommodate this act by assigning myself responsibility for it as if I had placed my order myself. Of course, I might not do that. I might view my friend’s action as presumptuous or patronizing.

¹⁰ There are a number of other ways in which one may be, to some degree, responsible because of speech acts. For instance, a parent may, in some sense, be held responsible for promises or claims made by their children. They inherit these responsibilities because of their role as parents but they are not, in general, the speakers in either the minor or major sense. They are, instead, responsible to a degree for the fact that their children performed certain speech acts, just as they might be responsible to a degree for the fact that their children ran wild through the aisles of the supermarket.

¹¹ [Ludwig \(2017\)](#) argues that cases in which the individual spoken for does not herself authorize the proxy “even indirectly” are not cases of proxy agency but rather “acting in someone’s name”(209). This shares with proxy agency a common social “infrastructure” but on Ludwig’s view differs precisely because the agent spoken for is not involved even at a fairly minimal level of authorizing others. Presumably this implies that they are not, for Ludwig, agents of the action in the same way. The distinction between major and minor speaker as discussed here might be seen as putting a more precise point on these sorts of differences.

¹² I am grateful to JJ Lang for bringing the possibility of accommodation to my attention.

There are certainly similar contexts which have a more coercive character in which one party makes another a minor speaker against their will.¹³

Before wrapping up, I will quickly return to the cases that have been considered so far and summarize what this species of speaker responsibility has to say about them. We first have the case of the group negotiation that goes through an appointed representative. In this case, so long as the representative is considered authorized to speak for the group, and is acting in this capacity, the group is the minor speaker. Moreover, if the representative's authorization comes from the group itself, and she is acting under the group's own guidance, the group is also the major speaker. Similarly, in the case of the stranded tourists or the collaborative document writers, it is the larger group that they are representing which takes responsibility for the speech acts in question by authorizing the subgroup's actions ahead of time and by delegating to them certain tasks. Since, as we have seen, a proxy's instructions may be more or less specific, the kind of role the represented party plays and her degree of autonomy may vary enormously. For instance, a spokesperson for a group may be given a clear playbook to work off, or she might be given much wider discretion. These aspects of the scenario will shift the specifics of who is culpable for what.

4. Conclusion

Something that all theorists of group speech must contend with is that traditional speech act theory has taken the speaker as a theoretical primitive and focused on the nature of the speech acts performed by these individuals. This generates difficulties when attempting to apply speech act theory to group speech in no small part because identifying what are and are not cases of speech act by groups, and hence both the data for and subjects of our analysis, requires us to have a clear sense of what makes a group a speaker. In this paper, I have shown that one of the most plausible conceptions of what makes something a speaker is off target, at least when it comes to group speech. In particular, we have seen that the locus of communicative illocutionary intentions needn't be the speaker, and that the speaker needn't be the locus of communicative illocutionary intentions.

I have also sketched an alternative view on which the speaker is conceived of instead as the locus of various responsibilities, some of which are illocutionary and some of which are practical. This view both aligns with and explains background intuitions about which kinds of speech involving groups are actually the speech of groups. If speaker responsibility is correct, then theorists of group speech should turn their attention toward the problems of (i) what it means to hold a group responsible in the ways demanded by different illocutionary acts, and (ii) what it takes for a group to take responsibility for an illocutionary act – that is, to make it the case that they are themselves bearers of illocutionary responsibility.

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¹³ There is another phenomenon similar to accommodation seen frequently with speech acts such as assertion. In these cases, one person may seem to take responsibilities associated with speech acts others performed and which they witnessed but which were not performed in their name and which have someone else as its major speaker. One may, for instance, choose to defend someone else's assertion. It seems to me that this constitutes a kind of repetition. By making oneself blameworthy and answerable for the content of a speech act you may have witnessed, you are effectively performing another act with the same (or similar) content. My thanks to a reviewer for raising this kind of case.