**Silencing and Assertion: An Account of their Conversational Dynamics**[[1]](#footnote-1)

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“On the account of the speech act of *assertion* that I have been using, an assertion is something like a proposal to change the context by adding the content expressed in an assertion to the common ground. …I am not claiming that one can *define* assertion in terms of [that] context-change rule, since that rule will govern speech acts that fall under a more generic concept [e.g., conjecture]. …*whether a speech act counts as an assertion or not will be partly a matter of…what [the discourse’s] common purposes are taken to be…*

…*[that] model of the speech act of assertion is highly idealized and oversimplified…* One specific way that model is oversimplified is this: *the context-change rule is a default rule.* Although it is part of the assertion game that the interlocutors have the opportunity to reject the assertion, *it is a rule of the game that the content of the assertion becomes part of the common ground if it is not rejected.* *But of course, in any realistic situation, it cannot be assumed that the addressees accept every assertion that they do not explicitly reject.* Consider [for example] a lecture… [it] is not expected that hearers will interrupt at each point where they are unwilling to accept the speaker’s claim.”

--Robert Stalnaker (2014) pp.89-90 (last three emphases mine).

“The ability to perform speech acts can be a measure of political power…Conversely, one mark of powerlessness is an inability to perform speech acts that one might otherwise like to perform. …members of a powerless group may be silent because they are intimidated, or because they believe that no one will listen…”

--Rae Langton (1993) pp. 314-315.

“Speakers require audiences to ‘meet’ their effort ‘halfway’ in a linguistic exchange…In short, to communicate we all need an audience willing and capable of hearing us…An instance of silencing concerns a single, non-repetitive instance of an audience failing to meet the dependencies of a speaker, whereas a practice of silencing, on my account, concerns a repetitive, reliable occurrence of an audience failing to meet the dependencies of a speaker…”

--Kristie Dotson (2011) pp.238-241

“Mr. Vice President, I’m speaking. I’m speaking. If you don’t mind letting me finish, we can have a conversation.”

--Kamala Harris, US vice presidential debate, 10/7/20

“The free speech of men silences the free speech of women. It is the same social goal, just other *people*.”

--Catherine MacKinnon, (1987) p. 156

1. **Introduction**

Above, Robert Stalnaker suggests that in “realistic scenarios”, we cannot always assume that an assertion met with silence has been assented to by every conversational participant. Kristie Dotson and Rae Langton consider circumstances in which this is so. Potential speakers may choose to remain silent because they have been intimidated or believe that they will not be ‘heard’ or ‘listened to’ by their audience. In the literature on epistemic injustice and feminist philosophy of language, such cases are known as a type of *silencing*.[[2]](#footnote-2) As a first pass, these are cases in which a speaker with sufficient epistemic reason to challenge an assertion is unable to do so because of her failure to be accorded the ordinary conversational standing to reject her interlocutors’ assertions.

A more precise characterization of the phenomenon of interest will be given in sections 2 and 3. For now, let’s make do with a concrete illustration.

I once heard of an academic who yelled at his colleagues. He didn’t always yell. He yelled only when the issue of diversity came up. And he didn’t yell at all his colleagues. He would only yell at a colleague from a marginalized group [[3]](#footnote-3) when she spoke up in favor of a diversity-promoting proposal in a faculty discussion. *Sometimes*. Other times, he would lay in wait, yelling at his outspoken, marginalized colleague after the meeting was over and his other colleagues had left. “Oh, he has a temper”, the other faculty would tell their marginalized colleagues, “pay him no mind. We don’t.”

It was generally agreed, though, that the yelling was unpleasant. When meetings were held, it became difficult for marginalized faculty to speak up or be heard. Over time, meetings on diversity were postponed to avoid their colleague’s wrath. It was not long before the department could no longer have open and honest discussions among the faculty about diversity.

Call this case “Yelling Colleague”. Here I argue that representing the type of silencing exemplified in *Yelling Colleague* requires an addition to Stalnaker’s idealized model of assertion. As we’ve seen, on that idealized model, an assertion successfully updates the set of propositions mutually presupposed for the purposes of conversation (aka ‘the Common Ground’) just in case it is not rejected. Rejection here requires an act on the part of a conversational participant. An assertion met with silence is one that has not, in this sense, been rejected by any participant. In a case in which a potential speaker is silent because she has been silenced, though, her silence does not indicate assent. In such cases, assertions cannot be successful.

Let’s draw out the implications of this. In much of the existing literature on silencing, the primary focus is (rightly) on the injustice to the speaker of failing to accord her an ordinary speaker’s conversational standing, e.g., the presumption that she means what she says or that her assertions are to be assessed on epistemic grounds.[[4]](#footnote-4) Here, though, we are focused on the consequences of a certain type of silencing for assertion *as such*. In conversations in which a participant is silent because she has been silenced, silence does not indicate assent. And when it can no longer indicate assent, assertions can no longer do their job of helping inquirers become more jointly opinionated about what the world is like. In other words, silencing is more than an injustice. As illustrated by *Yelling Colleague*, it is a form of communicative breakdown in contexts of inquiry.

Making good on these claims will proceed in five stages. In section 2, I’ll consider in

more detail some general conditions on successful assertion. In section 3, I’ll consider a rather ordinary type of conversational situation that will allow us to isolate the difference silencing makes to an assertion’s success. Isolating the difference that makes a difference to an assertion’s success or failure in our cases will allow us to see what must be true of a conversational context in order for silence to indicate assent and so for an assertion to be successful. Spoiling the suspense, I’ll argue that the source of conversational breakdown in the cases of interest is silencing itself. For this reason, silencing presents a distinctive form of assertional barrier, one that cannot be explained on other grounds, such as a failure of mutual cooperation.

In section 4, I’ll argue that in order for an assertion’s non-rejection to signal mutual assent, conversational participants must each believe that they have the standing to assert or reject an assertion successfully on epistemic grounds alone.[[5]](#footnote-5) As we’ll see, though, except in somewhat unusual cases, such joint belief will depend upon each participant’s having such standing.

In section 5, I’ll offer reasons to think that modeling the conversational dynamics of silence requires adding conversational standing as an element of contexts of utterance. Finally, in section 6, I’ll propose a way to model conversational standing using resources we have independent reasons to posit in an overall theoretical model of how communication occurs.

**2. Assertion and its Success Conditions**

According to a widely accepted, theoretical notion of contexts of utterance, contexts play a dual role in explaining communication. First, they play a role in determining the content or, more broadly, the significance of an utterance. Second, they play a role in representing how the joint acceptance of an utterance impacts a conversational exchange. A specific account of what contexts need to contain in order for them to play these two roles is an account of *conversational dynamics*. Following David Lewis, a standard way of representing contexts is in terms of a conversational scoreboard. As I shall understand them, a conversational scoreboard represents those features of a conversational situation that play this dual role and that participants need to track in order for successful communication to occur. On the influential, Stalnakerian model, contexts include a *Common Ground* (CG), i.e., a set of propositions presupposed for the purposes of conversation. In our opening passage, Stalnaker suggests that an assertion is a proposal to update the Common Ground with its content. This is the “context-change rule” for assertions, i.e., the rule governing how they are to update the context of utterance. However, this rule does not yet distinguish assertions from other sorts of speech acts. For example, like assertions, conjectures are proposals to update what is presupposed for conversational purposes. Whether or not such a proposal is an *assertion*, Stalnaker suggests, depends on what those conversational purposes are.

*Discourse goals*, aka conversational purposes, are also widely recognized as an element of Lewisian scoreboards, as they are understood here.[[6]](#footnote-6) What must a conversation’s discourse goal be in order for an utterance to be an assertion, rather than a conjecture? One widely recognized hallmark of assertions, one that contrasts them with conjectures, is that they express the speaker’s belief. A natural suggestion, then, is that assertions may be distinguished from conjectures in *contexts of inquiry* (COIs), i.e., contexts in which the primary, overarching discourse goal is for participants to become better jointly opinionated about what the actual world is like.[[7]](#footnote-7)

COIs are fairly ubiquitous. They include discussions amongst members of research groups, activists, and policy makers. More broadly, any conversational situation in which interlocutors are engaged in joint practical decision-making where the stakes are sufficiently high will be one in which facts about what the actual world is like will be of significant conversational interest, e.g., discussions between parents, teachers, mechanics, and medical professionals. These are all contexts of inquiry. On one way of thinking of COIs, the Common Ground represents what is *mutually believed*. Its status as such is recorded on the conversational scoreboard as a discourse goal of inquiry. On another way of thinking of them, that the status of what is presupposed is mutual belief is itself presupposed (and so part of the Common Ground). In what follows, I’ll treat discourse goals as a separate element of the Lewisian scoreboard, though nothing here hangs on this choice. On the resulting picture, an assertion is a proposal to update a Common Ground that represents a state of mutual belief.

When is such a proposal successful? There are two different ways an utterance might succeed or fail as an assertion. The first is *illocutionarily*. For our purposes, to succeed illocutionarily as an assertion, an utterance needs only to have an assertion’s characteristic conversational update rule in a context in which a primary discourse goal is a better informed, mutual belief state. This is why what the lecturer does, in Stalnaker’s example, still counts as asserting, even though she does not expect that everyone will come to believe everything she says. Here our focus is on the conditions under which an assertion is *perlocutionarily* successful in the respect that gives it its distinctive point. The characteristic perlocutionary aim of an assertion is for the audience to come thereby to believe its content. In this respect, an assertion is successful when its content is added to the common stock of belief.

Under what conditions is an assertion’s content added to the set of propositions mutually believed? Above, Stalnaker suggests that the ‘ideal’ situation is one in which the absence of explicit rejection signals assent. In such circumstances, an assertion’s content becomes part of what is mutually believed if conversational participants explicitly assent or remain silent. It’s this latter phenomenon that is of interest here. To underscore: On Stalnaker’s idealized model, silence is a form of conversational acceptance. This gives silence itself a role to play in conversational dynamics. Ideally, a proposal to update an element of a conversational scoreboard, such as the Common Ground, is successful when it is met with silence.[[8]](#footnote-8) Here we are interested in a particular form of departure from this ideal, namely, cases in which a conversational participant with sufficient epistemic reason to reject an assertion’s proposal fails to do so because she has been *silenced*.

“Silencing” is a term of art drawn from the literature on this topic. A speaker is silenced, roughly, when her audience fails to accord her the standard speaker’s authority in some respect, for example, to be taken to mean what she says (as in the case of sexual refusals)[[9]](#footnote-9) or to have her assertions accepted or rejected on epistemic grounds alone (as in the case of testimony).[[10]](#footnote-10) One way this can happen is if a speaker rejects an assertion with good epistemic reason, but she is ignored for non-epistemic reasons. In contrast, in the cases of primary interest here, the silenced potential speaker is literally silent as a result of her recognition of her failure to be accorded the conversational standing to have her assertions assessed on epistemic grounds alone.[[11]](#footnote-11),[[12]](#footnote-12)

What happens to an unrejected assertion made in the course of a conversation in which at least one member is silent because they have been silenced? To address this, I next consider a more careful representation of the phenomenon at issue.

**3. Silent from Silencing**

Consider a series of relatively simple, clear examples of a context of inquiry, each of which is a variation on the same, basic case involving a meeting of lab workers trying to identify the explanation for the failure of their experiment. They are together reviewing the assumptions on which the experiment was based to identify which is most likely false, given their collective information. The experiment was based on assumptions A, B, and C. The overarching goal is to use the conclusion of their discussion to develop the best experimental redesign. The lab is organized into the usual hierarchy of principle investigator, staff scientists, postdocs, graduate students, and techs. Deliberation begins with exclusive focus on assumptions A and B. (Call this basic case “Lab Meeting”.)

From this basic case, we’re interested in the contrast between two sets of cases. In each case, the Staff Scientist makes an assertion. The first pair illustrates cases in which the context of utterance is ideal in Stalnaker’s sense, i.e., ideal with respect to an assertion’s ability to be successful. The second set illustrates non-ideal cases of the kind of interest here—cases in which a speaker with epistemic reason to challenge an assertion has been silenced. Individual cases within a set are contrasted by whether or not the Staff Scientist’s assertion is challenged. The first member (or members) of each set represents a case in which a postdoc has epistemic reason to challenge the Staff Scientist’s assertion and does so. In the second member of each set, Postdoc remains silent. In the ideal case, this will be because she lacks epistemic reason to challenge that assertion. In the non-ideal case, this will be because she has been silenced.

*Lab meeting*

*Ideal 1: Reasons-Successful Challenge[[13]](#footnote-13)*

Principle Investigator: Ok, team. What went wrong? Was our mistake in assuming A? Or

assuming B?

Staff Scientist: Well, for [reasons] assuming B has to be the mistake.

PI: That sounds right. Thoughts? Anyone else?

Rest of group: {Silence as each surveys their epistemic reasons for and against rival explanations.}

Postdoc: Maybe not. For [other reasons], B could well be correct. For [further reasons],

assuming C may be the culprit.

SS: What? Oh, come *on*. That’s ridiculous--C has to be true.

PI: No. Postdoc is right. Though it seems unlikely, [further reasons] are good reasons to think C

can’t be ruled out as the faulty assumption. That possibility needs to be investigated.

*Update:* That either B or C is false is added to the CG. The CG represents a mutual belief state.

*Ideal 2: No reason-No challenge*

Principle Investigator: Ok, team. What went wrong? Was our mistake in assuming A? Or

assuming B?

Staff Scientist: Well, for [reasons] assuming B has to be the mistake.

PI: That sounds right. Thoughts? Anyone else?

Rest of group: {Silence as each surveys their epistemic reasons for and against rival explanations.

No one finds any that is more plausible, given their evidence.}

Principle Investigator: No further thoughts, then? Ok. Let’s redesign the experiment without

assuming B.

*Update:* That B is false is added to the CG. The CG represents a mutual belief state.

*Non-ideal 1a&b:* *Reasons-unsuccessful challenge*

*1a: Ridicule*  
PI: Ok, team. What went wrong? Was our mistake in assuming A? Or assuming B?

SS: Well, for [reasons] assuming B has to be the mistake.

PI: That sounds right. Thoughts? Anyone else?

Rest of group: {Silence as each surveys their epistemic reasons for and against rival explanations.}

Postdoc: Maybe not. For [other reasons], B could well be correct. For [further reasons],

assuming C may be the culprit.

SS: What? Oh, come *on*. That’s ridiculous--C has to be true.   
PI: {Pause} No further thoughts, then? Ok. Let’s redesign the experiment without

assuming B.

Postdoc: {Whaaaat? What about [other reasons] and [further reasons]?}

*Update: Crash.* While B’s falsity may come to be presupposed for the remainder of the conversation, the CG no longer represents a mutual belief state (as Postdoc remains unconvinced).

*1b: Ignore*

PI: Ok, team. What went wrong? Was our mistake in assuming A? Or assuming B?

SS: Well, for [reasons] assuming B has to be the mistake.

PI: That sounds right. Thoughts? Anyone else?

Rest of group: {Silence as each surveys their epistemic reasons for and against rival explanations.}

Postdoc: Maybe not. For [other reasons], B could well be correct. For [further reasons],

assuming C may be the culprit.   
PI: {Pause} No further thoughts, then? Ok. Let’s redesign the experiment without

assuming B.

Postdoc: {Whaaaat? What about [other reasons] and [further reasons]?}

*Update: Crash.* While B’s falsity may come to be presupposed for the remainder of the conversation, the CG no longer represents a mutual belief state (as Postdoc remains unconvinced).

*Non-ideal 2: Reasons-no challenge*

Principle Investigator: Ok, team. What went wrong? Was our mistake in assuming A? Or

assuming B?

Staff Scientist: Well, for [reasons] assuming B has to be the mistake.

PI: That sounds right. Thoughts? Anyone else?

Rest of group: {Silence as each surveys their epistemic reasons for and against rival explanations.}

Postdoc: {Maybe not. For [other reasons], B could well be correct. For [further reasons],

assuming C may be the culprit. But Staff Scientist always ridicules what I say. What’s

the point of speaking up? No one ever sticks up for me.}

Principle Investigator: {Pause} No further thoughts, then? Ok. Let’s redesign the experiment

without assuming B.

*Update: Crash.* While B’s falsity may come to be presupposed for the remainder of the conversation, the CG no longer represents a mutual belief state (as Postdoc remains unconvinced).

All of our non-ideal cases are examples of silencing.[[14]](#footnote-14) For now, though, set aside *Non-ideal* *1a* and *1b* and focus on the second non-ideal case. We are interested in understanding the conversational dynamics of silence as a result of silencing. In the contrast between *Ideal 2* and *Non-ideal 2*, we can see that silencing can make a difference to an assertion’s ability to effectively advance the conversational goal of becoming better, jointly opinionated about what the actual world is like. In *Ideal 2*, Staff Scientist’s assertion is successful: Had anyone believed they had epistemic reason to challenge his assertion, they would have done so. But since they don’t, no one does. The content of his assertion is thereby added to the common stock of belief. In *Non-ideal 2*, in contrast, although Postdoc believes she has sufficient epistemic reason to challenge Staff Scientist’s assertion, she does not do so, thinking her challenge will go unnoticed or worse. Since Postdoc does not come to accept what Staff Scientist says, the latter’s assertion is not able to update the mutual belief state represented by the conversation’s Common Ground. There are two sides to this conversational failure. First, Staff Scientist’s assertion has failed to achieve the characteristic perlocutionary aim of asserting. In this sense, it is a failed assertion. Second, the conversation has become one in which its guiding goal, the goal of inquiry, can no longer be achieved.[[15]](#footnote-15) This is a form of conversational breakdown. As we’ll see, these failures are characteristic of silencing.   
 Here we’re interested in better understanding the source of the failure of Staff Scientist’s assertion in *Non-ideal 2*. In section 4, we’ll consider what added contextual features might constitute a repair. However, at this point one might wonder whether the phenomenon of interest here is really one that is not already well understood. Prima facie, it may seem that the difficulty in *Non-ideal 2* is simply that by remaining silent when she has good reason to speak up, Postdoc is uncooperative in the Gricean sense.

*Grice’s Cooperative Principle:*

Make your conversational contribution such that it is

required, at the stage at which it occurs by the accepted

purpose….of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

(Grice (1980) 26.)

On Stalnaker’s account, not merely assertion, but communication more broadly is not possible absent common interest and common knowledge of that common interest.[[16]](#footnote-16) This is plausibly so even on more conventionalized, non-Gricean accounts of how communication via language is best explained.[[17]](#footnote-17) If Postdoc’s failure to cooperate is the source of the failure of Staff Scientist’s assertion in *Non-ideal 2*, then that case does not illustrate a phenomenon that is not already well understood in terms of Stalnaker’s framework.

A more careful examination of that case, however, shows that the source of the failure cannot be that Postdoc fails to cooperate by not speaking up. To see this, consider the minimal contrast case to *Non-ideal 2* in which Postdoc does speak up. Since by stipulation, *Non-ideal 2* is a case in which Postdoc is silent because she has been silenced, the minimal contrast case will be one in which she speaks up, while the conditions that give rise to her silencing remain. This is possible because one may be silenced in our sense without being silent. In our sense, recall, a potential speaker is silenced when she has been deprived of a participant’s ordinary standing to update the conversational record. More specifically, in the cases of interest here, a silenced speaker is one deprived of the standing to have her assertions accepted or rejected on epistemic grounds. The minimal contrast with *Non-ideal 2* in which Postdoc does speak up, then, will be a case like *Non-ideal 1a* or *1b*, cases in which her challenge is met with rejection on non-epistemic grounds. But these cases are also cases in which Staff Scientist’s assertion fails. Because her challenge is rejected on non-epistemic grounds, Postdoc remains unconvinced and the new Common Ground no longer represents a mutual belief state. This suggests that the source of the failure in our non-ideal cases is not Postdoc’s failure to cooperate. It is that Postdoc has been silenced.

While the failure of Staff Scientist’s assertion in *Non-ideal 2* is not plausibly explained by the hypothesis that Postdoc is uncooperative, perhaps it can still be explained as a failure of the Cooperative Principle. Perhaps the source of the failure is that Staff Scientist lacks sufficient commitment to shared conversational goals. This is perhaps suggested by the contrast between *Non-ideal* *1a (reasons-challenge-ridicule)* and *Non-ideal 2 (reasons-no challenge)*. In *1a*, Staff Scientist effectively blocks Postdoc’s challenge through ridicule. That may suggest that Staff Scientist is more committed to blocking challenges to his claims than he is committed to the joint goals of inquiry. In such cases, a participant rigs the payoffs for mounting a challenge to his assertion in order to shut down even well-grounded dissent. To the extent that a participant’s conversational contributions aim more at advancing personal interests than the joints goals of inquiry, they violate Grice’s principle. If Postdoc were silent in *Non-ideal 2* solely because she knows Staff Scientist has rigged the payoffs in this way, the explanation for the conversational breakdown in that case might seem to be Postdoc’s knowledge that Staff Scientist is uncooperative. In light of this, a failure of the Cooperative Principle might still seem to explain the conversational breakdown in *Non-ideal 2*.

However, this explanation, too, cannot be right because Staff Scientist’s insufficient commitment to the goal of inquiry cannot be the sole reason why Postdoc is silent in *Non-ideal 2*. To see this, first consider the contrast between *Non-ideal 2* and *Ideal 1*. In the latter case, Staff Scientist ridicules Postdoc’s contribution without engaging it on epistemic grounds. So, the hypothesized respect in which he is uncooperative in *Non-ideal 2* is also a respect in which he is uncooperative in *Ideal 1*. In the latter, however, his ridicule does not prevent that challenge from receiving a hearing. There is no conversational breakdown in that case because his ridicule does not have the desired effect. The principal investigator takes her contribution seriously and consequently her assertion updates the conversational record.

This pair of cases illustrates the respect in which silencing is a ‘team sport’. Setting aside conversational dictatorships, silencing an individual in a group conversation of three or more is not something one can accomplish on one’s own.[[18]](#footnote-18) Staff Scientist’s ridicule does not by itself deprive Postdoc of her ordinary conversational standing to have her assertion assessed on epistemic grounds. The silencing in our *Non-ideal* cases and more generally is secured by an enabling audience. Since the difference between *Ideal 1* and *Non-ideal 2* isn’t that Staff Scientist is cooperative in the former, but not the latter, but rather that his hypothesized lack of cooperation in the latter but not the former leads to silencing, a better explanation for the conversational breakdown in the latter in contrast to the former is silencing itself.[[19]](#footnote-19) For the anticipation of ridicule to play a role in the explanation for why Postdoc remains silent in a case like *Non-ideal 2*, it must play a role in her expectation that she will be silenced, as in *Non-ideal 1a*, in contrast to *Ideal 1*. These considerations suggest that even in cases of explicit bullying, it is the silenced individual’s understanding of her de facto conversational status that explains her silence, not the bullying by itself.

Second, notice that the hypothesis that Staff Scientist is uncooperative cannot explain the full range of cases like *Non-ideal 2*. That Postdoc anticipates Staff Scientist’s successful ridicule is but one way that silencing can lead to a case like *Non-ideal 2*. There are many different ways a speaker might be silenced, explicit bullying being only one. Other ways of silencing are compatible with conversational situations in which each participant sincerely accepts the goals of inquiry as their overarching discourse goal and aim to speak so as to further those goals. For example, a would-be challenger may recognize that her fellow conversationalists do not accord her a standing to mount a challenge that is commensurate with her subject matter expertise.[[20]](#footnote-20) Or she may recognize that her interloctors’ behaviors manifest unacknowledged, implicit bias towards individuals who share her group-membership which makes expressing her challenge pointless (or worse). Or, she may recognize that the “pernicious ignorance”[[21]](#footnote-21) of or stereotypes held by her audience[[22]](#footnote-22) renders them unable to appreciate her challenge. All such cases will lead to conversational breakdown because her challenge goes unaired. Since the challenge goes unaired precisely because the potential challenger is aware she has been silenced, silencing itself best explains the breakdown in such cases.

We’ve now seen that silencing itself poses a distinctive problem of assertion, one that leads to a form of conversational breakdown that cannot simply be explained as a failure of cooperation.[[23]](#footnote-23) Before considering what the repair for this problem might be, consider an aspect of its significance. Prima facie, from the point of view of at least some participants in *Non-ideal 2*, their situation may appear indistinguishable from *Ideal 2*. That is, at least some participants may not be able to tell whether Postdoc is silent because she assents to what Staff Scientist has said or because she has been silenced. This means that the difference between an assertion’s perlocutionary success and failure may be indistinguishable to some conversational participants. Call this “*the Predicament of Inquiry*”. This predicament is of no mere theoretical interest. In contexts of inquiry, the difference between the two cases may be of great practical significance, as in *Lab Meeting* where the difference may make a difference to a future experiment’s success.

As I’ll now argue, the locus of our problem of assertion suggests that the repair will take the form of a repair to the conditions that give rise to silencing itself.

**4.The Repair**

What must contexts of utterance be like in order for assertions to avoid failure from silencing? To get the proposal on the table, consider first a plausible principle of rational discussion in contexts of inquiry.

*Equal Standing:* Interlocutors must each have equal standing to update the conversational

record on epistemic grounds alone.

To see what this principle entails (and what it does not), note first that it does not require that each participant’s assertion be assessed on epistemic grounds alone. Participants may recognize other conversational goals that constrain the goal of inquiry. For example, suppose the lab members have a schedule to which they’ve all agreed to adhere. This may constrain the length of time they have in which to deliberate. This may mean that some farfetched, but not conclusively false hypotheses get set aside for reasons of time, rather than reasons of decisive evidence. What *Equal Standing* does require is that to whatever extent other goals constrain the goal of inquiry, they constrain the assessment of each participant’s contributions alike. That does not require that each participant’s contributions are scrutinized with equal care. In cases like *Lab Meeting* in which there are mutually recognized differences in subject-relevant expertise (e.g., between the principal investigator and a first-year grad student), there may be differences, compatible with *Equal Standing*, in the quality of the assessment of contributors’ assertions. But assessments of a participant’s contribution based on her level of expertise will be epistemic assessments. What *Equal Standing* requires is that no participant’s contributions are assessed less on epistemic grounds than any other’s.

Plausibly, the goal of joint inquiry, of a group’s coming together to share information so as to become better, more jointly opinionated about what the world is like, is better pursued in conversations in which *Equal Standing* obtains than in conversations in which it does not. As I shall also now suggest, *Equal Standing* has a role to play in explaining the difference between our *Ideal* cases and our *Non-ideal* cases in which silencing leads to its characteristic conversational breakdown. To see this, first consider *Non-ideal* *2*. In that case, the barrier to Postdoc’s raising her challenge is her belief that her challenge will not be assessed equally on epistemic grounds. That is to say, the barrier is her failure to believe that she herself has equal conversational standing.

What is true of Postdoc, though, is true of any arbitrary conversational participant. Where any conversational participant is silent from silencing, this will be because of their belief that they fail to have equal conversational standing. For this reason, for silence to indicate assent, each participant must believe of themselves that they have equal standing. Call this hypothesis, “Reflexive Belief in Equal Standing”.

*Reflexive Belief in Equal Standing*: Each conversational participant P believes of themselves

that they have equal conversational standing.

Because of the *Predicament of Inquiry*, however, *Reflexive Belief* does not suffice for silence to indicate assent in such cases. To see this, focus again on Postdoc. What’s needed in addition is that her audience also believes that she herself believes that she has such standing. Without such belief, an audience could not assume that her silence indicates assent. (It may instead indicate that she does not think her challenge will receive a fair hearing.) Again, though, there is nothing special about Postdoc that makes what is true of her fail to be true of any other conversational participant. In general, for any conversational participant’s silence in response to an assertion to indicate assent, it must be the case that they each believe that each other also believes that they themselves have equal standing. Call this hypothesis “Mutual Reflexive Belief in Equal Standing”.

*Mutual Reflexive Belief* *in Equal Standing*:

Each conversational participant P believes that each other

conversational participant N believes that N has equal standing (where P≠N).

When those conditions obtain, there is no barrier from silencing to prevent a participant from speaking up. So, when those conditions obtain and a participant remains silent, there is no such barrier to that silence’s indicating assent.[[24]](#footnote-24)

However, while adding these conditions suffice ensure there is no barrier from silencing to a participant’s speaking up, they do not yet suffice to ensure there is no conversational breakdown of the kind characteristic of silencing. To see this, we need to distinguish between the context as it is before an assertion is challenged and the context as it is afterwards. Consider first the context as it is before an assertion is challenged. We are considering now a version of *Non-ideal 2* to which *Reflexive Belief* and *Mutual Reflexive Belief* are added. The result is a case in which there is no longer a barrier from silencing to Postdoc’s speaking up. Since *Non-ideal 2* is a case in which Postdoc does not speak up because she does not believe she has equal standing, adding those conditions will result in a case in which Postdoc does speak up (and in which other participants expect her to do so). As we saw in section 3, a case like *Non-ideal 2* that differs at most in Postdoc’s speaking up will be a non-ideal case of type 1. Adding *Reflexive Belief* and *Mutual* *Reflexive Belief* does not alter the conditions in *Non-ideal 2* that give rise to silencing. A case that is alike *Non-ideal 2* with respect to those conditions, in which Postdoc speaks up and her interlocutors expect her to do so, then, is still one in which she has been silenced. *Non-ideal 1* cases exhibit the same sort of assertional failure and conversational breakdown the type 2 cases do. So, adding *Reflexive Belief* and M*utual Reflexive Belief* to cases like *Non-ideal 2* do not suffice for avoiding breakdown. Whatever else is needed, it will be what is also needed to avoid conversational crashes in *Non-ideal 1* cases.

Let’s turn our attention to those cases, then. Our question is: What must be added to *Non-ideal 1* cases in order to avoid breakdown from silencing? In those cases, Postdoc speaks up, but is not heard. What needs to be added, I’ll now suggest, is the persistent mutual belief that *Equal Standing* obtains.

To see this, recall that, in those cases, Postdoc’s challenge does not receive a ‘fair hearing’, i.e., it is assessed along some unequal, non-epistemic dimension. She realizes this and is unconvinced by Staff Scientist’s assertion. This results in conversational break down in the characteristic way. Consider next the situation from the point of view of an additional participant, Graduate Student. By *Reflexive Belief*, Graduate Student believes that she too has equal standing. By *Mutual Reflexive Belief*, she believes that each other participant believes that they themselves have equal standing. So, she expects that a participant, Postdoc, for example, will speak up if they have an epistemic reason to challenge Staff Scientist’s assertion. Suppose in addition, though, that Graduate Student does not believe *Equal Standing* obtains. For this reason, when Postdoc’s challenge is ridiculed or ignored, she cannot be sure that it has received a ‘fair hearing’, i.e., that it has been assessed along equal, epistemic dimensions. In that case, Graduate Student may not come to believe what Staff Scientist has said. The result would be conversational breakdown of our characteristic type. However, were Graduate Student to believe and continue to believe that *Equal Standing* obtains after the response to Postdoc’s challenge, there would be no such barrier to her coming to believe what Staff Scientist asserts. There is nothing special about Graduate Student’s situation, however. What is true of her is true of each conversational participant. What in addition is needed to avoid such breakdown, then, is that each participant believes that *Equal Standing* obtains and continues to do so throughout the conversation. In other words, mutual belief in *Equal Standing* must be persistent. I’ll call this thesis “Persistence”.

*Persistence*: To avoid conversational breakdown from silencing, participants must

mutually believe that *Equal Standing* obtains (at least to a close enough

approximation) and that mutual belief must persist throughout their

conversational exchange.

This is to accord *Equal Standing* a significant role in explaining why conversational breakdown from silencing occurs when it does and also why it does not when it does not.

The role *Equal Standing* has been shown to play in explaining the difference between our *Ideal* and *Non-ideal* cases thus far is indirect: The explain proceeds via participants’ mutual belief that it obtains, rather than its obtaining. Consider now the relationship between *Persistence* and *Equal Standing* itself. A conversational situation in which *Equal Standing* obtains is one in which there is no silencing. That’s because, as we’re understanding it, silencing is the failure to accord a participant an ordinary speaker’s standing to update the conversational record. *Persistence* is strictly consistent with *Equal* *Standing*’s failure to obtain. This means that removing the barriers to breakdown from silencing is strictly consistent with the conditions that give rise to silencing. Next, we want to investigate how common we should expect these strictly consistent conditions to obtain.

Consider first a hypothesis I’ll call “Responsive”.

*Responsive*: Belief that *Equal Standing* obtains is responsive to whether or not it does obtain.

If *Responsive* is correct, then it will typically be the case that situations in which there is persistent mutual belief that *Equal Standing* obtains will be situations in which it does obtain. And if that is correct, then,

*General Requirement*: Avoiding breakdown from silencing generally requires *Equal Standing*.

Here’s the structure of these considerations:

1. *Responsive* means that *Persistence* requires *Equal Standing*.
2. Avoiding breakdown requires *Persistence*
3. *Responsive*. (Supposition.)
4. Therefore, *General Requirement*.

What remains is to show that *Responsive* is quite plausible. To do that, we consider as a type, the situations in which *Persistence* obtains, but *Equal Standing* does not. These will be cases in which *Responsive* fails—interlocutors’ persistent mutual belief that *Equal Standing* obtains is not responsive to its failure to obtain. These will be situations in which one or more participants have been silenced, but no conversational participant appreciates this.

Let’s consider such a situation focusing again on the conversational perspective of a target of silencing. Consider again a case in which Postdoc speaks up, but is not heard, as when she is ignored in *Non-ideal 1b*. Unlike that case, however, imagine now that she does not realize that she’s been silenced. For example, perhaps she is prone to extreme self-doubt, which causes her to question what she believes in part because she believes it and others don’t. In such a case, she may mistakenly defer to Staff Scientist and come to believe what he’s said. Though such deference is suboptimal for the goals of inquiry, so long as her interlocutors likewise don’t realize she’s been silenced, her silencing won’t lead to its characteristic conversational breakdown—the Common Ground will still represent the stock of mutual belief. Since it is her failure to believe that she has been silenced that plausibly prevents conversational breakdown in such a case, it too fits with our central hypothesis: Whether or not silencing plays a role in conversational breakdown depends upon whether or not *Equal Standing* is mutually believed to obtain. Our question is whether that mutual belief can be reasonably expected to persist in a conversation in which *Equal Standing* does not obtain.

I’ll now suggest that there are reasons to think that in many cases, *Equal Standing* itself plays an important role in avoiding the conversational breakdown characteristic of silencing. As we’ll see, that role is in significant respects analogous to the role Grice’s Cooperative Principle plays in making communication possible. This will be because *Responsive* is indeed plausible.

To begin thinking about this issue, consider first a few different roles we might think cooperation plays in making communication possible. First, we might think communication requires cooperation itself. Second, we might think that communication requires mutual belief that there is cooperation. Or, finally, we might think that it requires both. Communication with assertion is a speaker’s attempt to get an audience member to believe what she’s said. For communication to be successful, an audience member, M, must have reason to accept what a speaker, S, has said.[[25]](#footnote-25) To see this, suppose M does not. In that case, she will not accept what S has said. But if M does not accept what S has said, then S has failed to achieve the characteristic aim of speaking. In order to have a reason to accept what a speaker says, an audience member will need to think that the speaker aims, with her utterance, to advance a mutually accepted discourse goal. But that is just to say that she will need to believe that the speaker is cooperative. Equally, for S to accept M’s affirmation as indicting acceptance, S will need to believe that M is likewise cooperative. So, for communication to be possible, conversational participants will need to mutually believe that each is cooperative.[[26]](#footnote-26)

So far, we have reasons to think that successful communication requires mutual belief in cooperation. Does it also require that that belief is true? In short, one-off conversations, successful communication may be compatible with a temporary lapse in cooperation, as when a stranger deliberately offers misleading directions to someone who is lost, making their situation worse. In longer or iterated conversations, failures to cooperate undermine the mutual belief in cooperation communication requires. Similarly, widespread cooperative lapses in short, one-off exchanges would also undermine the trust required for communication. So, although some forms of minimal communication may be possible occasionally absent actual cooperation, it is generally required for communication to occur.[[27]](#footnote-27)

*Equal Standing* plays a somewhat similar role in contexts of inquiry. As we’ve seen, perlocutionarily successful assertion requires mutual belief that *Equal Standing* obtains. In a short, one-off conversation, successful assertion may be compatible with its failure, as in the case in which Postdoc defers to Staff Scientist, though he has given her no good reason to do so. But, in the way that it does not take long to recognize an uncooperative interlocutor as such, it generally does not take long to realize that one has not been accorded that same standing as others to contribute to a conversation. This is because the deprivation of such standing—manifesting, as it does, in a pattern of being ignored, ridiculed, or otherwise explicitly discouraged from speaking up—is not difficult to spot. *Responsive* is plausible, in other words, because, like failures of cooperation, failures to be accorded equal standing are facts that over time are not difficult to appreciate. This means that in longer or iterated conversations, failures of *Equal Standing* will undermine the mutual belief that it obtains. In other words, *Persistence* requires *Equal Standing*.

So far, I’ve argued that successful joint inquiry requires the mutual belief that *Equal Standing* obtains. The persistence of that belief in iterated discussions or discussions of any reasonable length generally require that *Equal Standing* obtains, at least to some good approximation. This suggests that avoiding our characteristic conversational breakdown in contexts of inquiry generally requires that *Equal Standing* obtains, i.e., *General Requirement*.

However, at this point, even one who grants that the type of conversational breakdown of interest here is not best understood as a failure of cooperation might still wonder whether there isn’t some other explanation available. I’ll address this question in the next section by showing that conversational standing figures in explanations both of the conversational significance of silence and of its update effect on contexts in a broader range of cases than those that exhibit silencing. Thus, we have independent reasons to accord conversational standing a role in explaining the dynamics of silence quite independent of the need to explain cases of silencing. In this way, according it that explanatory role is not ad hoc.

**5. Modeling Conversational Standing I: Reasons to Update the Scoreboard Model**

“Conversational standing”, in the sense reserved here, is an ability to alter the conversational scoreboard—to offer and have accepted conversational “moves” and to accept or reject the moves of others. As a status that is conferred on participants in a conversation by participants, it is a social power.[[28]](#footnote-28) In section 6, I’ll consider how the role standing plays in conversational dynamics might best be modeled. But here I address the question of whether we have any independent reason to think that conversational standing as such plays a role that needs modeling. To begin exploring this, recall the two roles played by contexts of utterance in explaining communication. First, there is the role contexts play in determining the content or, more broadly, the significance of an utterance. For example, we saw in section 2 that whether or not a proposal to update the Common Ground is an assertion or a conjecture depends upon a conversation’s discourse goals. Thus, discourse goals are an element of non-defective contexts of utterance which earn their place on the scoreboards which represent them in part by figuring in explanations of an utterance’s force.

Second, the notion of a context also plays a role in explaining an utterance’s effect on a conversation. In this second role, contexts are that which is updated when an utterance has been accepted. For example, the acceptance of an assertion updates what is presupposed for the purposes of conversation. For these reasons, we posit a Common Ground as an element of non-defective contexts of utterance.

These considerations suggest that figuring in plausible explanations of how speakers are able to track the significance and effect of an utterance serves as good grounds for positing a feature of conversational situations as an element which speakers track in order to do so. Given that conversational scoreboards as we are here understanding them represent the elements of context so understood, this is just to say that playing such a role suffices for positing a feature of such situations as an element on conversational scoreboards. An independent test for whether standing plays the conversational role proposed here, then, will consider whether standing figures in explanations of this kind.

To begin exploring this, first consider again our paradigmatic case of silence due to silencing—*Non-ideal 2*. Because Postdoc lacks the standing to successfully challenge or reject Staff Scientist’s assertion that her silence does not indicate acceptance of what he’s said. Similarly, in Stalnaker’s lecture example, it is because audience members lack (and are known to lack) permission to interrupt the lecturer that their silence does not signal assent to all that she asserts. This suggests that by tracking comparative conversational standing, participants are able to track when silence does and does not express acceptance of another’s assertion. Thus, an interlocutor’s conversational standing figures in explanations of the significance of her silence. Similar considerations apply to other sorts of speech act. Consider, for example, requests or imperatives. Ideally, silence signals an addressee’s acceptance of a request or a directive. In the literature on imperatives, acceptance is modeled as an addition to the addressee’s ‘to do’ list.[[29]](#footnote-29) As I think of them, to do lists are elements of a scoreboard which represent each participant’s commitments. A commitment to ϕ-ing makes one open to criticism for failure to ϕ. In a non-ideal case, where an addressee lacks the standing to refuse a request, her silence does not indicate acceptance and so does not saddle her with a commitment to comply. In this case, too, then, the significance of an interlocutor’s silence is explained in part by her conversational standing.

As we’ve already seen in contrasting *Ideal 2* with *Non-ideal 2*, conversational standing also has a role to play in explaining the update effects of silence. It does as well in Stalnaker’s lecture example. Because audience members lack the standing to reject what the lecturer says during the lecture (and because they are known to), an audience’s silence does not add the content of the lecturer’s assertions to the Common Ground. Putting these considerations together, we see that conversational standing does indeed pass our independent test for positing it as an element of conversational situations interlocutors need to track in order for communication to be successful.

Our focus here is on the conversational significance of silence. But similar points are plausible for overt acts of assent. When a participant lacks the standing to reject an assertion or request, her overt, verbal affirmation does not signal her assent. In the case of assertion, her verbal affirmation does not signal belief in the content asserted.[[30]](#footnote-30) Nor, in the case of an imperative, does her verbal affirmation signal a commitment to comply. (She does not thereby become criticizable for failure to comply.) This suggests that tracking the significance of overt affirmation likewise requires tracking participants’ comparative conversational standing.

Moreover, if we accept that which speech act an individual has performed depends at least in part on her intentions and also, with Stalnaker, that “an intention requires the belief that there is at least a reasonable chance of success”,[[31]](#footnote-31) then the deprivation of conversational standing will also figure in the explanation of certain cases of *illocutionary silencing*. Illocutionary silencing is the deprivation of the ability to perform a specific speech act, (see Langton 1993). Suppose in addition we accept, as is plausible, that speech acts are characterized in part by their perlocutionary aims: An assertion with audience belief, a directive or request with a commitment to comply, etc. In that case, a speaker who knows that her conversational standing deprives her of any reasonable chance of perlocutionary success will be unable to form the intention necessary to assert something or request something. When such a speaker is silent for these reasons, her comparative standing will figure in an explanation of her illocutionary silencing. That the notion of conversational standing developed here is able to figure both in explanations of that phenomenon, as well as the cases of perlocutionary silencing considered here is an advantage of the account. These different ways that a speaker may be silenced are united by being cases of silencing. It is an advantage of an account to identify a single source for that commonality.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Together, these considerations give us good reason to think that conversational standing is a feature of conversational situations speakers track in order to track the significance and impact of an utterance (or of silence).

Second, there is an additional, independent reason to think that relative conversational standing is an aspect of context that can be updated, as when the chair of a meeting opens the floor to discussion or recognizes a contribution from the floor. The effect of such recognition is to alter the standing of an audience member from one who is not permitted to speak to one who is. More generally, changes in standing to contribute to a conversation are an important aspect of exchanges that we track whenever we adopt a norm of turn-taking in speech. If turn-taking were not a default rule often enough to make speaking worthwhile, communication would not be possible.

It’s important to note the independence of several of these reasons to add conversational standing to Lewisian scoreboards. Some of the considerations raised above are quite independent of the claim that standing can figure in plausible explanations of silencing. For example, as we’ve seen, standing figures in a plausible explanation of the impact of the lecturer’s assertions on the scoreboard in Stalnaker’s example. It also figures in a plausible explanation of the significance of her audience’s silence. This shows how the explanation of silencing in terms of standing is not ad hoc, but part of a more systematic explanation of a broader set of phenomena of the kind we look to scoreboards to represent and contexts of utterance to explain.

These considerations together provide good reason to think that comparative standing earns its keep as an element on Lewisian scoreboards and in an account of conversational dynamics.

6. **Modeling Conversational Standing II: Updating the Scoreboard Model**[[33]](#footnote-33)

Recall that here a Lewisian scoreboard represents the information *available* to conversationalists in non-defective contexts. “Information” here is non-factive. For example, a proposition which is false at the world of evaluation may nonetheless be a part of the Common Ground. In cases in which mutual presuppositions suffice or approximately suffice to make it so, e.g., with a conversation’s discourse goals, it can be assumed that Lewisian scoreboards record accurately.

Here I suggest how we might model the role comparative standing plays in conversational dynamics, borrowing aspects of the framework Gillian Russell (2019) has developed in order to model the dynamics of subordinating speech. Russell adds to the usual scoreboard a ranking of individuals or groups in terms of their comparative social status. Status in her sense confers on status-holders a set of permissions and requirements with respect to other status-holders, both in- and out-group. Individuals or groups ranked higher in the ordering enjoy greater permissions and fewer impermissions than those ranked lower. An individual’s collection of permissions and impermissions defines her social powers. As she notes, one such power is the power to update the conversational record.[[34]](#footnote-34) This social power is what I am calling “conversational standing”.

I propose to represent such standing on scoreboards by a pair of two elements, the first, a set of individuals or groups, the second, a ranking of its elements (〈Γ, ≤〉). When there are no comparative rankings, this second element is represented by the empty set. Otherwise, rankings are preorders—transitive and reflexive relations on a set. (“a ≤ b” reads “a is at least as well ranked as b”, where “a” and “b” are members of Γ.[[35]](#footnote-35)) When *Equal Standing* is presupposed to obtain, that ranking will rank all participants alike.[[36]](#footnote-36)

The addition of this pair of elements permits the modeling of various phenomena discussed here. First, a participant’s comparative conversational standing plays a role in determining the significance of her silence. When her standing suffices to give her the power to reject conversational ‘moves’, her silence signals assent. When that standing does not, her silence does not. Stalnaker’s lecture example illustrates. The conversational prohibition on an audience member’s interrupting the lecture partly explains why their silence does not signal agreement with what the lecturer asserts. Second, it allows us to represent changes in such permissions and prohibitions and so changes in the conditions for when a participant’s silence does and does not signal assent, as when the chair opens the floor to discussion. These changes in standing, in turn, can change the significance of an audience member’s silence (as when she has been given permission to speak by the chair).

The addition of this element to the scoreboard also allows us to represent the difference between a well-run conversation and conversational breakdown. In the literature on contexts, conversational breakdowns of various types are explained in terms of defective contexts of utterance. Such defects are represented by defective scoreboards. For example, on a non-defective scoreboard, there is a Common Ground that represents what is mutually presupposed for the purposes of conversation. But it is possible for participants to be mistaken about what each of them jointly presupposes. In cases in which presuppositional differences make a difference to interpretability, there will be conversational breakdown.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Similarly, the conversational breakdown found in our non-ideal cases may be explained by a defective ‘score’ for conversational standing. When a participant knows she has been silenced, for example, but at least some of her interlocutors believe she has been accorded equal standing, the significance of her silence will not be uniformly interpreted. This is what explains the type of conversational breakdown such cases exhibit. It is also what gives rise to the *Predicament of Inquiry*. Positing a ‘score’ for comparative conversational standing allows scoreboards to represent the source of the defects in such cases in just the way a ‘score’ for what is mutually presupposed allows the Common Ground to represent the source of other sorts of failure of interpretability.

**7. Conclusion**

Let’s sum up the lessons here with a return to *Yelling Colleague*. Here I’ve argued that silencing of the type illustrated in that case is not only a form of epistemic injustice. In addition, such cases exhibit two related sorts of communicative failure, one assertional; the other, conversational.

First, such silencing prevents challenges from being raised or properly assessed. This can deprive silenced individuals of sufficient reason to believe the proposition asserted. As such, silencing is a form of practical irrationality. In silencing his marginalized colleagues, Yelling Colleague undermines a condition necessary for the perlocutionary success of his own assertions.

Second, when a conversational participant does not come to believe what has been asserted in a context of inquiry because she has been silenced, the Common Ground no longer represents what is mutually believed. As a result, the context becomes defective in a way that undermines the participants’ ability to achieve their discourse goal of inquiry.

The explanation for conversational breakdown in our cases, I’ve argued, is silencing itself. This means that the repair for such breakdown is a repair to the conditions that give rise to silencing. An individual is silenced relative to a conversation when she has been deprived of the ordinary speaker’s ability to contribute. In Contexts of Inquiry, she is deprived of the ability to add to the common stock of belief or to reject proposals to add to it. In the philosophical literature on testimony, this is characterized as a form of epistemic injustice. In contexts in which demands are made of her, her refusals or her own demands may fail to be taken as such for the purposes of the conversation. In a worst-case scenario, this may leave her vulnerable to predation.

Silencing is avoided in contexts in which *Equal Standing* obtains. When it does, participants in a conversation are each equally able to contribute. In COIs, this amounts to an equality in the ability to have one’s assertions (or rejections of assertions) assessed equally on epistemic grounds. The forms of communicative failure that result from silencing are avoided when there is persistent mutual belief that *Equal Standing* obtains.

“Conversational standing”, in the sense reserved here, is an ability to offer and have accepted contributions to a conversation and to accept or reject the contributions of others. As a status that is conferred on participants in a conversation by participants, it is a social power. I’ve argued that in virtue of its explanatory role, such standing should be seen as a part of contexts of utterance in the theoretical sense of elements of a conversational situation that speakers track in order to track the flow of information. Importantly, the argument for the claim that standing does play the needed explanatory role includes considerations that are quite independent of its ability to explain silencing. In this way, conversational standing’s explanatory role is shown to be systematic across a broader range of phenomena and not ad hoc.

In terms of a Lewisian scoreboard, such standing is represented as a set, ranking pair, where the set may be made up of individuals or groups and the ranking is over the elements in that set. The ranking ranks those elements in terms of their ability to update the scoreboard. Those abilities, in turn are represented as a participant’s bundle of permissions.

Given the harm silencing does to those silenced, as well as the significant costs of conversational breakdown in many Contexts of Inquiry, a pressing normative question is how conversational participants might promote *Equal Standing*. That is a difficult question that will not be answered simply by understanding how language enables communication. How to make a start, though, is easy enough to see. The first step will be self-awareness and an awareness of conversational patterns exhibited by one’s interlocutors. Is everyone given an opportunity to speak? Or is the floor dominated by the loudest? Does each participant equally attend to the words of each of the other participants? Or are contributions by some systematically ignored? Are contributions assessed equally on the basis of appropriate considerations, such as good evidence in the case of assertions? Or are some contributions assessed through a lens of inappropriate considerations, such as contempt or personal pride?

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1. Many thanks to Luvell Anderson, Kim Frost, Samia Hesni, and Mike Rieppel for discussion of the ideas contained here. Thanks also to the audience at the presentation of these ideas at the First Annual Meeting of the Philosophy of Language Association, 6/10/22. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For two good overviews of the literature on silencing, see SEP “Epistemological Problems of Testimony” Jonathan Adler (2017) and Saul and Diaz Leon, “Feminist Philosophy of Language”, SEP (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Person from a marginalized group” in the sense reserved here is anyone who is a likely target of discrimination or bias in a particular situation on the basis of her membership in a historically marginalized or oppressed group. To illustrate, a Black professor might be a marginalized person at a non-HBUC, but not at a HBUC. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, for example, Langton (1993), Maitra (2009), Dotson (2011), and Kukla (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This formulation is somewhat rough. It will be made more precise in section 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Roberts (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This use of “contexts of inquiry” is quasi-stipulative. A conversational situation will not count as a context of inquiry in the reserved sense unless the predominant conversational purpose is to become better jointly opinionated in the relevant way. Exchanges in such contexts may be governed by other mutually recognized constraints, e.g., temporal ones. But it will not be a context of inquiry if the overarching goal isn’t to become as reasonably, mutually opinionated as interlocutors can, subject to those constraints. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Here I focus primarily on assertion, although parallel observations apply to other forms of speech acts, such as requests or demands. For example, a perlocutionarily successful directive commits the addressee to comply. Under ideal conditions, we might suppose, an addressee’s silence in response to a directive suffices to generate such a commitment. (Here I think of such commitments as making one liable to criticism for failures to comply.) For further discussion of these issues, see section 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Langton (1993), Maitra (2009, Kukla (2014), Hensi (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This gloss is mine. But for a similar gloss, see Adler (2017) and Diaz and Saul (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This formulation is somewhat rough. It will be refined in section 4. The notion of conversational standing, left intuitive in this formulation, will be further explained in section 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. What Dotson calls “testimonial smothering” is an example of the type of phenomenon I have in mind.   
     “Testimonial smothering…is the truncating of one’s own testimony in order

    to insure that the testimony contains only content for which one’s audience

    demonstrates testimonial competence. …[This] kind of testimonial oppression

    occurs because the speaker perceives one’s immediate audience as unwilling or

    unable to gain the appropriate uptake of proffered testimony.” (Dotson 2011: 244.) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. There’s an additional ideal case in which a challenge is mounted, but unsuccessful because it is itself met with a successful challenge. Since such cases offer no additional insight into the concerns here, they are omitted from discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. It’s important to bear in mind here that these cases are designed to illustrate silencing. A reader who believes some element crucial to their ability to do so has been left out of their description should feel free to add that element. There are multiple different causes of silencing recognized in the literature. The causes of silencing are not here the focus of interest, but rather its conversational effects. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Does it matter here whether or not Postdoc actually does have sufficient epistemic reason to pose a successful challenge? No. For suppose she does not. If she did not, but believed that she did *and had not been silenced*, she would have stated her grounds for dissent. She would thereby have been given an opportunity to subject those reasons to joint scrutiny and an opportunity to become either convinced or to raise additional grounds for dissent. What is important in contexts of inquiry is that dissent is voiced and considered. Even if Postdoc’s dissent had been voiced, considered, and jointly set aside, it would still be possible for participants to track what is and is not jointly believed. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Stalnaker 2014: 42. Plausibly, licensing the Stalnakerian assumption that silence is a form of acceptance requires that mutual cooperation is an element in the Common Ground. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Stone and Lepore (2015) Even on a conventionalized account, common interest and common knowledge will figure in explanations of why speakers say what they do and why hearers accept what they say, even if those common interests don’t play a role in determining which proposition an utterance expresses. More broadly, any view on which discourse goals and the Common Ground are conventionally supplied elements of a scoreboard will be a view on which communication requires common presupposition and interests. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Using *Lab Meeting* as our basic case, here’s an example of a conversational dictatorship: The dictator puts the rest of the audience “on notice” that supporting Postdoc’s challenge will be costly. If Staff Scientist were such a dictator, his failure to cooperate might in some sense fully explain the conversational breakdown. But it will do so insofar as it fully explains why she is silenced. Silencing here will be the most proximate cause and so better explain the conversational breakdown. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Philip Pettit has suggested that where there is freedom of speech, silence communicates assent. For example, he writes,

    The silent observer gets as close as makes no difference to the position of meaning or communicating by her silence that she approves of what she observes….[S]ilence in the presence of freedom of speech is itself capable of becoming a form of meaning and communication… (Pettit 1994: 49).

    As we can see from the difference between *Non-ideal 2* and *Non-ideal 1 a & b*, however, the difficulty Postdoc faces is not that she is not free to say what she thinks. It is rather than she has not been accorded the standing to be heard. For this reason, freedom of speech does not suffice for silence to indicate assent or approval. (See also Langton (2007) on Pettit (1994).) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Such a case would be an example of what Dotson has called “testimonial quieting”. (See Dotson 2011: 242.) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Dotson (2014) introduces the term “pernicious ignorance” into the literature to denote “any reliable ignorance that, in a given context, harms another person (or set of persons)”. Pernicious ignorance leads to epistemic injustice by “lead[ing]…an audience [to] fail to meet speaker dependencies in a linguistic exchange.” Thus, pernicious ignorance is one source of harmful silencing. An example of pernicious ignorance in Dotson’s sense would be a white person’s refusal to consider the literature on implicit bias, insisting instead on her own ‘color blindness’, in the context of a discussion of fair hiring practices. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For a discussion of stereotypes and their role in social cognition, see Wodak, Leslie, and Rhodes (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. There are further cases that are not cases of silencing, but which may nonetheless mimic them. These are cases in which the silent participant is put off speaking up because of some cost of speaking up to herself, not because, had she done so, she would not have been given a hearing. But if she has the standing to be given a hearing, she is not silenced. These cases can be explained as failures of cooperation.   
     There is a continuum of cases of this type, though. Consider cases in which it is not only personally costly for a speaker to pose a challenge, but it is costly for other group members to speak up so as to ensure that her challenge receives a hearing. A case like *Ideal 1*, but in which it is the PI who ridicules the Postdoc could be such a case. In such cases, at a certain point it is plausible that the costs of speaking up have reached a level at which the assessment of her assertion itself is no longer purely epistemic (in that is also assessed, for example, on the basis of whether it advances another’s personal conversational goals). At the limit, these are in effect cases of conversational dictatorships, cases in which an individual is able to make the penalties for supporting a challenge so great that no challenge is conversationally assessed on epistemic grounds alone. These are cases of silencing. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. This is to say that these conditions suffice for avoiding breakdown from silencing in cases like *Non-ideal 2*. That’s compatible with there being other reasons not to speak up, as Stalnaker’s lecture example illustrates. For this reason, the condition discussed is necessary, but not sufficient, for silence to signal assent. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Having a reason here might simply amount to having no good reason not to accept what the speaker says. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. In a somewhat similar vein, Stalnaker writes,

    “…The cooperative principle is compatible with lots of conflict. It can be satisfied in contentious debates and negotiations as well as in simple exchanges of information. But for communication (trying to get people to believe things by meaning them) to be possible, there must be a recognized common interest in sharing certain information.”   
    Stalnaker 2014: 41-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See also Stalnaker 2014: 41-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Hesni in (2018) also makes use of a notion she calls “conversational standing”. However, her notion differs from the one here in that it is normative and conversation-independent. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See Ninan (2005), Portner (2007), Roberts (2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Thanks to my colleague Luvell Anderson for this observation. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Stalnaker 2014: 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For compelling reasons to think that such cases should be given a unified treatment, see Hesni (2018). In addition, the explanation of illocutionary silencing provided here does not, in contrast to some accounts (e.g., Kukla 2014) have the consequence that which speech act an agent performs is not in any sense under her control. On Kukla’s 2014 account, whether or not an utterance is the speech act a speaker intends depends upon whether it is recognized as such by her addressee. Here, in contrast, whether an utterance is a speech act of the type the speaker intends depends in part upon those speaker intentions. (For a nice discussion of why an account of illocutionary silencing that does not depend upon an addressee’s uptake is preferable, see Hesni (2018).) [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. One way to understand the proposed ‘addition’ to Lewisian scoreboards defended here is by thinking of comparative conversational standing as part of the Common Ground. For these reasons, the proposal here is compatible with the overarching Stalnakerian framework for modeling conversational dynamics in terms of a Common Ground. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Russell (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. a is ranked at least as well as b, roughly, when, for every conversational permission b has, a has that permission as well. a is ranked better than b when b is not correspondingly ranked at least as well as a, i.e., when a has permissions b lacks. Stalnaker’s lecture example illustrates. During her talk, the lecturer is ranked strictly better than her audience members, who lack the permission she has to update the conversational record. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Such egalitarian rankings will be total and symmetric. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. For a discussion of the differences between defective and non-defective contexts and between harmless and non-harmless defective ones, see Stalnaker 2014: 84-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)