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## What is Power

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*This is an abbreviated summary of the essay I prepared. If you would like to read the entire essay (18 pages plus Appendix), please let me know by email: [richardfkessler@verizon.net](mailto:richardfkessler@verizon.net)*

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When I began creating lectures last year, I promised that I would not attempt to lead my audience by the nose by attempting a Socratic interrogation where I got to the conclusion only after subjecting the listener to the third degree. Instead, I begin with the Conclusion and then proceed to an explanation.

### Conclusion

The meaning of power is best understood through a linguistic analysis of the structure of its meaning.

1. Power is an expectation. It is not an action
2. The expectation is expressed in a counterfactual conditional sentence.
3. The expression requires a social or institutional context to become meaningful.
4. The expectation must identify the actor in the premise who can actualize, perform or carry out the expectation. It refers back to a person or a human institution.

Power is exercised by a person or people but not by a thing.

The definition of power requires linguistic examination of the grammar of power and its specific syntax. Such an examination results in a definition that “power” is a statement of an expectation expressed as a counterfactual conditional in a social context relating to human agency.

### Introduction

In foreign affairs, a nation has sovereignty when it can protect its borders against invasion and impose law and order within its jurisdiction. Such sovereignty exists even when that nation does not repel enemies from its borders or put down rebellions on a daily basis. A bank robber can rob a bank by brandishing a weapon when the bank is filled with customers and fully staffed with employees-without firing a single shot. Most of the time, power controls human relationships without ever being actively exercised. The mere fact that the teacher has the power to send a student to detention produces an orderly class even when no student has been put on detention.

In 1994, Nelson Mandela, recently elected, walked across a Rugby field in front of a white Boer audience. Loftus Versfeld Stadium is considered a shrine to Afrikanerdom, the spiritual home of the tribe. At first there was stunned silence; then a smattering of applause. The applause grew and grew. By the time he reached the other side, South Africans knew the much feared civil war between whites and blacks, would never need to be fought. By walking across a stadium field, Mandela had changed the expectations of South Africans.

The observation and documentation of power has been widely studied and lies as a cornerstone of the social sciences. It is part of everyone's daily experience and runs the gamut from the mundane to the sublime. Few, however, have examined how power actually works. It is like a clock. Everyone can tell time and measure time without knowing how the clock works. When it comes to examining power, I want to attempt to look at the inside and see the works as if examining a clock.

What does power mean? How does it work. To get inside, one needs to examine the grammar of power. The choice, use and meaning of the words used to define, identify and describe power

The language of power is about inference, probability and uncertainty. It is not the language of what has occurred or what we know will occur. Instead, it is the language of what might happen. Because it embodies expectations and uses probabilities, its effect and influence upon human nature equals the effects of the physical forces of nature.

Power has been commonly defined as the ability to cause or prevent an action, make things happen; the discretion to act or not act. It is the opposite of disability; it differs from a right in that it has no accompanying duties. [BusinessDictionary.com](http://BusinessDictionary.com) The definition works as a definition but begs the question. The definition uses the words "ability to cause or prevent" without explanation. When used in a sentence describing power what meaning does the phrase "ability to cause or prevent" entail?

The different theories of power attempt to define and describe the differing social and cultural contexts in which power is exercised. See Appendix A for a sample of different theories of power. From my standpoint, this has always been disturbing. It explains what is happening -which I admit is a very important, necessary piece of information- but it does not explain why it makes sense.

Power exists in human society and functions in human relations because people have expectations of probable outcomes. If every contract had to be enforced by litigation in a court of law, contracts would not be a viable way of transacting business. Contracts work because people generally do what they promise to do. That is an operative expectation. Another expectation is that there will be adverse consequences if one fails to perform a contract. Enforcement of contracts may be a necessary condition to keep

everyone honest but it is not a sufficient condition. That requires the institutionalized expectation that someone will do that which they have promised to do. Power normally operates not by its actual exercise but because of expectations of what would or could happen if power is exercised. Police usually take charge of a service call including making an arrest without drawing a weapon because of the effect of the expectations of those confronted by police authority.

### An Expectation

These explanations are informative and illustrative but do not provide a core meaning which accounts for all these different ideas. What is the all-encompassing structure which accounts for all these variations and perspectives

The answer lies in the observation that there is a difference between power and its exercise. Likewise, there is a difference between what *can* happen and what *could* happen. A statement about power states an expectation of what will occur even if it may or may not happen. An exercise of power is not an expectation but an event which occurs in time and place; an exercise of power is an occurrence. The Germans *could have* won WWII but they did not. The German loss was an outcome of Germany's unsuccessful exercise of power which is different from the expectation of the outcome Germans held before the War. The outcome of the war belies the statement the Germans *can* win the war because they lost but not the assertion the Germans *could have* just as easily won the war.

### The counterfactual conditional

A statement of power is an expectation. A statement of power is not a statement of what will happen. George Foreman did not knockout Ali but he could have. A power statement is a statement of what could happen if something would be true. It is not a statement of cause and effect. Instead, it is a prediction. It does not state a conclusion of what will happen if stated conditions are met. Instead it predicts what would or could happen. It is an expectation or prediction of a result which may not turn out to be true. Accordingly, one might say pouring water on a campfire will put it out. This is a dispositional statement. One could say one pours water on a camp fire, it could put out the fire because water has the power to quench fire. However, it might not quench the fire, and perhaps the whole forest will burn down. There is a reason why the sentence is awkward. The former statement is absolute, a statement of certainty; the latter is a statement of expectation not certainty

A disposition sentence is a simple assertion of cause and effect. It is termed a "material conditional". Logicians argue that such if-then statements are not statements of cause and effect. In response, I simply argue that dispositional statements are material conditions which also imply cause and effect. A power statement is not. A power

statement does not use the syntax of a material conditional. Instead, it relies upon the words used for a counterfactual conditional assertion.

A counterfactual conditional states that if the antecedent were true, the conclusion would also be true. The antecedent of a counterfactual statement is either factually true or false and therefore logically false. It is logically false because it may not be true. Life and death decisions for individuals, communities and nations are based upon the very expectations that form the foundation of power employing the syntax of power statements.

The counterfactual condition logically is dependent upon a set of conditions. The assertion implies if a set of conditions were true, an expected occurrence would result. It is precisely because of the dependence upon a set of conditions that a counterfactual conditional can provide a hypothesis for an empirical, scientific test.

The difference between “can” and “could” is critical if a power statement is being made. “He can unlock the door because he has the key in his pocket” is not a power statement. “He could unlock the door if he had the key in his pocket” is a power statement. The former statement states a conclusive outcome in the form of a dispositional if-then statement. It says that the conditions necessary for the precedent are true and therefore the conclusion follows. The second sentence is a prediction of an outcome where the speaker believes but does not know that the conditions precedent are true. It may turn out the conditions precedent are not true. We are often sloppy in our speech and do not necessarily observe the distinction between “could” and “can”. The distinction nevertheless is valid even if ignored in ordinary conversation. A power statement is a prediction of an outcome not the statement of a conclusion. That is why a power statement makes an assertion which as a prediction may turn out not to be true if and when an exercise of the power is attempted. A power statement entails a premise whose veracity is in doubt. We can believe a man is rich and has the power to buy whatever he wants though in fact he may be broke. Normally a loan is made under the assumption that the debtor will be able to make timely repayment of the loan. As 2008 demonstrated, the assumption does not always prove to be correct.

A *can* statement states a conclusion as if it were a logical syllogism as in  $A=B$ ;  $B=C$ ; therefore  $A=C$ . A *could* statement uses a false syllogism to make a prediction:  $A=B$ ,  $B$  may or may not equal  $C$ ; therefore  $A=C$ .

A *can* statement is an absolute, dispositional assertion that what is stated is true. A *could* statement is probabilistic. It can be subjected to an inferential analysis whether it is more or less likely to be true. Accordingly, the statement “A could open the door” is apodictically illogical but makes perfect sense as a prediction.

A power statement is prospective; it predicts what will happen but with no guarantee. Accordingly one can say “The Yankees lost the ballgame but they *could have* won. The words “could have” relate back to a time before the loss when either team could have won. However, the statement “The Yankees lost the ballgame but the Yankees can win it” is nonsensical. So long as the premise *could be true or false*, the prediction can be asserted as an expectation. Once the prediction becomes fact, it is no longer a prediction. It is a fact. The Yankees *cannot* win a ballgame which they have lost but they *could have* won it.

A statement expressing a logically correct syllogism is inflexible. It does not allow for nuance, doubt, probability or error. The differing explanations cited above concerning power cannot be confined and limited by the logical confinement imposed by the syllogism. For instance, an analysis of whether Russia will try to annex eastern Ukraine cannot be written in the form of a series of syllogisms. Such an action “could” be undertaken by Russia or not. Perhaps the U.S. and its western allies will dissuade Russia from this course of action. However, such an activity only “can” be undertaken by Russia if the sentence assumes, before the fact, that Russia will have completed the annexation after the fact. The logical structure of a syllogistic statement imposes this rigidity. Only the counterfactual conditional provides the freedom of expression necessary for meaningful dialogue and analysis.

Some scholars have defined power to involve control over the resources needed to accomplish or perform an action. Such a definition overlooks the difference between a factual statement and a counter conditional statement. My point is that the expectation can be asserted even if the premise turns out to be untrue. One of the most notorious examples is the persistent and repeated overestimation of the military might and economic wealth of the Soviet Union by the CIA and NSA. The power statements issued by the CIA for decades proved to be incorrect. Nevertheless such statements were predicated upon extensive, research, intelligence and analysis. However, the assumptions turned out to be wrong again and again. Power statements are not assertions of fact but statements of expectations usually based upon assumptions which may or may not turn out to be correct.

Power statements can be analyzed with inferential reasoning if not deductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning links premises with conclusions. If all premises are true, the terms are clear, and the rules of deductive logic are followed, then the conclusion reached is necessarily true. Deductive reasoning (top-down logic) contrasts with inductive reasoning (bottom-up logic) in the following way: In deductive reasoning, a conclusion is reached reductively by applying general rules that hold over the entirety of a closed domain of discourse, narrowing the range under consideration until only the conclusion is left. In inductive reasoning, the conclusion is reached by generalizing or extrapolating

from initial information. As a result, induction can be used even in an open domain, one where there is epistemic uncertainty.

A statement of power can be evaluated by probability of outcome; an exercise of power can be analyzed by observing and recording the outcome. A statement of power uses the counterfactual conditional.

### The Social Component and Human Agency

This brings us to the third structural component of power. If power is an expectation, its expression requires a social or institutional context to become comprehensible. Power does not exist in a vacuum. The expectation which is a component of power as a linguistic structure results from socialization. Socialization refers to the lifelong process of inheriting and disseminating norms, customs and ideologies, providing an individual with the skills and habits necessary for participating within his or her own society. Socialization is thus the means by which social and cultural continuity is attained. Socialization involves a continuing process whereby an individual acquires a personal identity and learns the norms, values, behavior, and social skills appropriate to his or her social position. Socialization is the process by which human infants begin to acquire the skills necessary to perform as a functioning member of their society, and is the most influential learning process one can experience. Unlike many other living species, whose behavior is biologically set, humans need social experiences to learn their culture and to survive. Although cultural variability manifests in the actions, customs, and behaviors of whole social groups (societies), the most fundamental expression of culture is found at the individual level. This expression can only occur after an individual has been socialized by his or her parents, family, extended family, and extended social networks. This reflexive process of both learning and teaching is how cultural and social characteristics attain continuity. Many scientists say socialization essentially represents the whole process of learning throughout the life course and is a central influence on the behavior, beliefs, and actions of adults as well as of children.

Power is a central concept in many disciplines in the social sciences, including political science, sociology, social-psychology, organization studies, and urban politics and planning. Despite, or perhaps because of, its ubiquity, it has been analyzed in numerous and diverse ways in different discourse communities.

Most theories of power provide a taxonomy of how power is exercised. Despite their variety and ingenuity, all seem to accept the premise that humans and society are necessary components of the explanation.

The fourth component of power requires that the expectation must identify the actor in the premise who can actualize, perform or carry out the expectation. People exercise

power. Things do not. If-then conditional statements about things describe dispositions. Meaning and context are inextricably interrelated.

### Testing the Definition

This paper has defined power as a statement of an expectation expressed as a counterfactual conditional in a social context relating to human agency. Does it work when applied to different types of power? When philosophers ask this question, they usually word it differently. Can you think of an instance where the definition does not work to explain statements about power? One failed instance means the definition is not true as a logically correct statement. Finding such an instance does not, however, rule out the possibility that the definition still works most of the time.

Three examples will be considered, one from daily life, another from politics and the third from foreign affairs. Assume a teacher says “I can give homework next Tuesday. Is this a power statement? No it is not. It implies that the teacher has all necessary resources needed for the teacher to give homework and therefore the statement is true. Assume the teacher instead says “I could give homework next Tuesday.” This is a power statement that the conclusion is true even though its conditions precedent may or may not be true. Between now and Tuesday that Teacher might die, be dismissed or not show up for work, the school may be closed on Tuesday or the students may boycott the class. Accordingly, the statement becomes a prediction that it is true.

There are currently 1071 bills pending in state legislatures in the 50 states. The opponents of a woman’s right to choose are more influential in some states than in others. West Virginia has 90 bills pending and Texas has 88. Assume a politician has been informed by his advisors that he could win office if he obtains the endorsement of the right-to-life organizations. This is a power statement. It states a conclusion which may be true or may not be true. It depends on whether or not the required endorsement is obtained. This contrasts with the statement that the candidate can win office which implies the candidate either has or will lay his or her hands on the required endorsement.

The third example involves the development of a nuclear device in Iran. The statement Iran can have a nuclear bomb in six months is false. Iran in accordance with an arms control agreement has reprocessed most of its stockpile of bomb grade material to a lower grade only suitable for a civilian nuclear reactor. Prior to the treaty, many arms experts said Iran could complete a nuclear device in six months. Having degraded its fissionable material, completion of production of a nuclear device, the restart of production will take more than six months. The assertion that “Iran could have a nuclear bomb in six months is also false because it is untrue that Iran has enough weapons grade material to complete a device in six months. The assumption cannot be true.

Likewise, neither the use of the verbs “cannot” or “could not” allow for a truthful assertion because the assumption that Iran lacks sufficient, high grade plutonium cannot be false.

Power exists in human society and functions in human relations because people have expectations of probable outcomes. If every contract had to be enforced by litigation in a court of law, contracts would not be a viable way of transacting business. Contracts work because people generally do what they promise to do. That is an operative expectation. Another expectation is that there will be adverse consequences if one fails to perform a contract. Enforcement of contracts may be a necessary condition to keep everyone honest but it is not a sufficient condition. That requires the institutionalized expectation that someone will do that which they have promised to do. Power normally operates not by its actual exercise but because of expectations of what would or could happen if power is exercised. Police usually take charge of a service call including making an arrest without drawing a weapon because of the effect of the expectations of those confronted by police authority.

A statement about power is conditional and predictive. It may or may not be true if and when the power is exercised. It is not a dispositional statement of the conclusion as if the event had already occurred. Instead, it is a prospective prediction of will occur if and when it takes place. A statement expressing a logically correct syllogism is inflexible. It does not allow for nuance, doubt, probability or error. The differing explanations cited above concerning power cannot be confined and limited by the logical confinement imposed by the syllogism.

