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Performativity: An Introduction and Overview

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A widely used term in postmodern and "deconstructive" literary and cultural theory, "performativity" is a particularly important concept in the work of Lyotard (1979/1984), Butler (1988/1990; 1990/99), and Bhabha (1994), whose theories of, respectively, gender, postcolonialism, and the postmodern have been highly influential, though not uncontested (see Connor [1997, 23-43]; Nussbaum [1999]; Hallward [2001]). The "performative utterance" of speech act theory is another significant permutation of performativity, and while the likes of Butler and Bhabha are most obviously influenced by so-called "continental philosophy," they are certainly aware of the earlier interventions of Austin (1963/1971; 1975), Searle (1965/1971), and others (see Strawson [1964/1971]). Indeed, the idea that language is active and constitutive (that is, it makes rather than "passively" describes), that through language things are *enacted*, is common to both "deconstructive" and speech-act performativities.

At its simplest, a performative speech act, as first formulated by Austin (1963/1971; 1975) is one in which the sentence uttered performs, or enacts, what is being said. It is contrasted with the, supposedly, plainly descriptive constative utterance; the difference between the two types of utterance is the difference between "I promise" (performative), and the report, "he said 'I promise'" (constative). The performative/constative distinction is not unproblematic, however, not least because apparently constative utterances might be construed as, at base, *acts* or *performances* of uttering, stating, or reporting (Austin 1963/1971, 20).

From the simple example "I promise," one can already infer that certain conditions must be satisfied for an utterance to be performative: promising cannot take place without the above or similar form of words being uttered; but, equally, promising will not have taken place unless these words are uttered by someone with the authority to make the promise in the first place (in promising, is the speaker committed someone else to a future act, and, if so, are they authorized to do so?). Performativity, therefore, occurs only within the context of convention and ritual, and Austin (1963/1971) suggests that non-conventional or non-propositional sentences can be performative, depending on their translatability to more explicit forms. (For example, "Done!" might, performatively, mark the completion of one's work; that is, it translates to something like, "with this pen-stroke, I complete my task!") In the case of non-propositional utterances, Austin points out that intonation and gesture can affect performative force – the expostulation "Dog!", or, indeed, any non-lexical cry, can, uttered with urgency and accompanied by the appropriate gestures, operate as a warning of immanent danger. Thus, though Nussbaum (1999) argues that the applicability of speech act theory to Butler's gender theory is limited at best, it should be noted that the body is invoked in both performative acts of speech and enactments of gender (see Butler 1990/1999, xxv).

Austin's basic formulation has been refined by others. Strawson (1964/1971) develops Austin's analysis away from the emphasis on certain classes of sentences, or the translatability of non-standard or –explicit sentences to the form of standard or explicit performatives, and in the direction of communicative processes. Performative utterances may be essentially conventional (or standard) in form or not, but what typifies performative utterances is audience-directed intention: speakers wish their intentions to be correctly construed by their audience. Searle (1965/1971) posits a set of necessary and sufficient conditions according to which illocutionary acts are performed, and from which the *constitutive* rules of performative speech acts can be identified. Constitutive rule are those without which the thing governed by the rules would not exist, as in organized sports. They are distinguished from regulative rules, which police separately existing entities. The contravention of certain rules carries certain penalties – that is, contravention is accounted for within the rules. But without such penalties, or faced with disruptions for which there are no contingencies, games dissolve.

It is, by now, common to view sexual difference as "neutral" biological "fact," essential; and gender as the socialization and naturalization of these differences. Butler's theory of gender performativity aims to make a further step, positing gender as "an 'act,' broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority" (Butler 1988/1990, 279). It is often taken for granted, Butler (1988/1990; 1990/1999) argues, that gender is a "natural"

expression of the “essence” of sex. But, she goes on, there is no necessary link between sex and gender, and neither is there a sexual “essence” for gender to express. For Butler, sex cannot be understood as separate from or prior to gender, because the ways in which we understand sex are themselves gendered.

There is a tension in Butler (1999/1990) between an implied lack of individual agency altogether (we cannot escape the gendering processes to which we are subjected), and the possibility of asserting agency (allowed by her politics of subversion). On the one hand, normative, binary gender identities – received ideas of masculinity/femininity – precede us; we recognize, accept, and accede to these received notions. Generally, the argument goes, we come to accept the apparent “necessity and naturalness” of “our” gender (Butler 1988/1990, 273), which is, in fact, an expression of nothing natural, but is constituted and affirmed only by being performed. On the other hand, gender, as well as being performative, can also be intentional (Butler 1988/1990, 272-73) – one may not be able to “free” oneself from gender altogether, but one can choose the style of one’s performance; and, in doing so, one can subvert gender norms.

Butler’s theory of gender performativity has been illuminating for theatre studies. Consider, for example, the opening of Churchill’s *Cloud Nine* (1985), in which the knowing use of formulaic verse coupled with the presentation of cross-gendered and –raced characters is used to perform the condition of being trapped between who and what one *has* to be (racially, sexually, and so on) and what one desires, and “knows” oneself, to be. However, Butler has remained cautious of close identifications of performativity and theatrical performance: while the theatrical irony of “cross-gendering” in theatre might not discomfit because it explained away as “unreal,” “only an act,” the sight of a transvestite walking the streets can be discomfiting precisely because, claims Butler (1988/1990, 422-23), in this space the transvestite *enacts* a gender no more nor less “real” or “true” than the gender norms it contravenes.

Despite its popularity and influence, Butler’s work has not gone without criticism. Nussbaum (1999) accepts Butler’s theory of performativity as a general description, with a very limited reach, of gender constitution. However, she argues, Butler fails to engage deeply with the traditions and problems of any academic discipline (philosophy, literature, sociology, psychoanalysis), and neither provides readers with a framework for understanding, nor mechanisms for making, moral or political decisions.

In Bhabha’s theory of postmodernism and postcolonialism (Bhabha 1994), performativity is an important concept (rather than a theory in itself). Here, individual agency is said to emerge in the temporal break – or what he calls the “time lag” – between the “pedagogic” and the “performative.” Simply put, pedagogy *tells* us who and what we are; it denotes the narrative processes by which identity – understood as fixed, “sedimented,” given – is constituted. Pedagogy is disrupted by performativity, the non- or extra-discursive processes by which we *enact* who and what we are. In the dialectic between pedagogy and performativity, agency emerges.

In Bhabha’s performativity, identity in its pedagogic sense is absent or foreclosed; performativity is the perturbation of the grounds on which normative identity stands, a perturbation achieved by the rewriting (deforming, ironizing) of familiar pedagogic narrative. In these terms, Bhabha’s is a theory in which *agency* and *subjectivity* must be understood as distinct from, and preferable to, normative (or pedagogic) identity. Bhabha’s performativity involves the displacement of identity by agency-subjectivity which, similarly to Butler, is posited as always in process, always shifting.

Bhabha explores the pedagogic-performative relationship by considering the construction of nationhood and “the people.” Pedagogy is characterized by appeals to idealized or fictionalized pasts and traditions and their continuance. On the one hand, “the people” are invoked in nationalist narratives and rhetoric in order to ground and make authoritative those narratives: “We in Britain/the United States/France etc. are and always have been...”. On the other hand, as well as “pedagogic objects,” “the people” are also “performative subjects” (Bhabha 1994, 151), who enact their heterogeneity – their radical distance from any nationalist pedagogy, and their *difference* from one another. Such *difference*, Bhabha argues, is not equivalent to the binary logic of a cultural us/them and its spatial correlate insider/outsider. Rather, national culture *is* “internal” difference, and cultural difference is “a question of [the] otherness of the people-as-one” (1994, 150).

“Hybridity,” another key concept in Bhabha, is closely linked to performativity; it denotes performatively constituted agencies which have no pedagogic narrative or identity (for, in Bhabha, such agencies are *identical* with nothing). Hybridity is thus contingent upon performativity: from what Bhabha calls the “disjunctive temporality” of the performative, and in the babel of voices one encounters the urban gathering sites of national and racial diasporas, properly hybrid agencies emerge, “outside” of and separate from the intentions of any speaking “subjects.” “Hybridity”

refers not to a patchwork of pedagogic identities or narratives; Bhabha is keen to distance himself from pluralist and multiculturalist perspectives. Rather, it is the repetitive emergence of the absolutely new, the mechanism of which is performativity.

In his important discussion of the postmodern, Lyotard (1979/1984) offers a rather different configuration of “performativity” than those discussed above: here, it is one of the guiding logics of the postmodern epoch. Firstly, performativity is a mode, closely tied to power, by which techno-scientific research and knowledge are legitimated. This performativity is a logic of efficiency, its goal “the best possible input/output equation” (maximum output for minimum input) (Lyotard 1979/1984, 46). Because this efficiency equation affects research funding (both state and private), greater performativity increases one’s, or one’s group’s, capacity to produce proofs, which makes it easier to be “right”; and the more “right,” in this pragmatic, sense a group is, the more the world starts to look the way that group thinks or wants it to look. Thus, in the postmodern epoch, there is “an equation between wealth, efficiency, and truth” (Lyotard 1979/1984, 45)

A similar model is also to be found in education, in which “knowledge” and its transmission is no longer linked to humanist ideals, but aims at passing on the information necessary for maintaining a functional, skills-based society. (There are, broadly, two levels here: the “higher,” specialist skills necessary to make states competitive on the world stage; and the competencies required for “internal” social cohesion [the need for doctors, teachers, and so on]). Such a logic of performativity is indicative of a shift towards an information, or data, society: data banks, writes Lyotard, “are ‘nature’ for postmodern man” (1979/1984, 51).

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KEYWORDS

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Bio.

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