

Looking back and not behind. *On the concept of Performativity*

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I. introduction

I chose the title “Looking back and not behind” to talk about the concept of Performativity. I will try to explain the idea and the development of the word “performativity” mainly in language theory and I hope that although it will be quite a bit of linguistics you will see at the end how the concept of performativity opens up and can be useful for understanding cultural practices in general and not only the practice of speaking. I will try to show how the idea of performativity leads from an analysis of language to cultural studies and maybe even further: At the end I have some questions, one is about the role of the object, and the other is if performativity could be helpful to think about media in general (and not only about language).

Performativity I think is mainly a tool that can be useful concerning many different topics. What I mean by tool is that it works on or against something that is already there, it doesn't really stand by itself as an own consistent theory. That's why I first want to situate the discussion around performativity in the larger context of philosophic and linguistic enquiry.

II. Situating Performativity

Language theory like philosophy in general was mostly interested in statements, in declarations *about* the world. Both Philosophy and Linguistics mainly ask “What-questions” because they believe in a fixed state of being, that doesn't change anymore once it has been revealed. A state of being is something that can be referred to, pointed at because it lies outside of language, in the world itself.

For Platon we can find the answer to those “what-questions” (what a thing really *is*) if we look *behind* its changing appearance, at its essence. The essence is a stable entity that lies behind what we see, so we have to abstract from the appearances if we want to come close to the truth. This division between stable essence and changing appearance is the core of what is mostly called metaphysics of presence. It exists in many different versions throughout the history of philosophy, but what those versions have in common, is that they distinguish between two ontologically different states that follow two different

kinds of rules: in Platons case there is one eternal, not historical world of ideas, and one world of changing appearances. The world of appearance is of course much less valuable, because there is no truth, so the concern of the philosopher is the eternal world of ideas.

Linguistics make use of this philosophical scheme and apply it onto language: traditionally it distinguishes between the system of a language as grammatical structure and its use (like in writing or speaking). The interesting thing for them to analyse is the system, not the changing and therefore inferior use.

This is representational thinking that I would like to contrast with performative thinking in sketching three figures that shaped the idea of performativity.

III. Performativity in Language theory

A. John Austin

The first one is John Austin: he was an English philosopher of language from the fifties and the one who came up with the term “performative”. Austin was very much opposed to focussing only on those “What-questions” and on defining statements that can be classified as either right or wrong. He himself was interested in ordinary (spoken) language, where there is of course much more than statements about facts: there are also questions, wishes, promises that make sense. He was interested in *how* language is used and what it *does*. Words, he says, don’t only refer to the world, but they also do something, they can have effects *in* the world, or better in a specific situation.

As examples he begins with Rituals: If in a wedding ceremony the priest says: “Hereby I pronounce you man and wife!” then he doesn’t refer to something, but he turns the man and woman in front of him into a married couple. This kind of words that do what they say Austin called “performative”. Other examples for “performatives” in Austin’s sense could be: “I promise...”, “I bet hundred dollars” or a judge saying in court “I convict you!” Performatives don’t necessarily have to be rituals, but they are all based on conventions. What becomes clear in those examples is that in order to be successful the context and an authorized subject are very important – without church but also without a real priest there is no marriage... So if we ask Austin where words get the

power to transform or perform from, the answer is: The words of the priest have the power to transform two individuals in a couple because they are backed up with conventions - only because the priest repeats a ritual formula he can perform the transformation. The success of a performative sentence depends on the situation around it that is always historical and specific.

This means though that to be performative can not be an internal quality of certain words, and it implies that the effects of words don't only depend on the speaking subject, but on the situation, on the ones that are addressed. Thinking about Performativity is thinking about a relation, the relation between speakers and listeners. If speaking is doing (as Austin says) this doing is always directed to someone, towards a listener or an audience.

The second thing the examples show is that Performatives are not so much about right or wrong, not so much about truth, but about success and failure: And even the ritual act of marrying can fail: if one of the two not yet married says "no", the marriage didn't happen. This means though, that not only the conventional words of the priest are performative. Also a "No" will have a great effect and "change the world" at least for the couple. The possibility to fail shows that every speaking can be doing.

But if every word can then be performative, there is a problem that Austin leaves: how can we then confine a context? If words change the world then it seems hard to separate between language and world or context.

B. Jacques Derrida

To follow the idea that every word is somehow performative I will move on to Jacques Derrida. He reads Austin (in "Signature, événement, contexte") and he is exactly interested in this problem of the context. For Austin we just have to confine the context and analyse it to understand the transformative power of the performative. Derrida is very critical of this idea, that the context is something external to the sign, something that you can draw a line around.

For him, on the contrary, it's only through the context that the sign can have any meaning at all (he replaces "utterance" by "sign", they are structurally the same for him): A sign only has meaning in relation to other signs, it is meaningful not by itself, but through its difference from others – the meaning of

the sign “a” is that it is not “b, c, d” etc. On the other hand a sign is only a sign if it can be repeated in other contexts, if it works in different contexts. Derrida calls this “Iterability”. So on the one hand it is only through the context that the individual sign has any meaning at all, it therefore incorporates those contexts, on the other hand it is the power to break with a context that makes a sign a sign.

Together those two assumptions mean that if a sign changes context it will also change its meaning: repetition implies difference. Meaning is not a stable entity within the sign but is made through the changing *relations* between signs. Meaning for Derrida exists only *in between*. That’s why it can never be absolutely present. Speaking, like writing, is always repetition and therefore it is always referring to a non-present context. To define the context of a speech act is for Derrida impossible: contexts are always open, unconfined.

So where does the performative power of a speech act for Derrida come from? It stems from the just described power of every sign to break with one context and work within another context. The force of performatives is their mechanisms as signs. The power of a sentence or a sign to act is inherent to its being a sign.

So for Derrida every sign, every sentence is performative. In contrast to Austin he gives a systematic, linguistic explanation of Performativity, but his open contexts stay somehow unspecific.

C. Judith Butler

As a third and last position I would like to talk about Judith Butlers view on performativity. For the US-American feminist theoretician the question of Performativity is a political one. She brings Austin’s conventional, but static explanation and Derrida’s structural, but dynamic explanation of performativity together and this is how she gives performative thinking a political turn.

In the United States speech act theory was already a political and juridical issue, it made its way into the courts and law books. If speaking is doing, then people must be made responsible for their speech acts just as for any other acts. This becomes clear if you think about discrimination through words, what Butler calls “hate speech”. If I say “You bitch” and this makes you one or at least feel like one, of course I have hurt you just as if I attacked you

physically and consequently, I must be punished. Although the attempt to fight discrimination is of course good, the consequences of solving the problem in front of court, through the state are problematic for Butler. The state will decide from a universal point of view on what is right speaking and censor what is not - without taking into account the context or different forms of use (like irony, parody...).

For Butler the problem is how Performativity is conceived of here: Performativity in this view is a one dimensional, deterministic cause-effect relation: The word "bitch" makes a bitch. Meaning here is a stable self identical entity that is independent from any context and any kind of use, an entity that has the magical power create what it names.

Butler wants to solve the political problem of discriminative speech through reconsidering how language works and what performativity is. For Butler every speaking is performative, every speaking is doing something – but the essential thing is that speaking can not do exactly what it says. The power of words is not one dimensional. The speaking subject is not a little god that can bring into being what it intends and what it refers to. Her attempt is to conceive of the performative force of language in such a way that the addressed subject has the power to react *in the specific situation*. Her attempt is to redistribute agency. A victim of hate speech is not subjected for ever to someone else's hate speech - it can talk back.

Her starting point is that everything (at least everything that we can think and speak about) is discursive and that there is nothing before and untouched by discourse. Even subjectivity and the biological sex are not just there: they are constituted by discourse like everything else. If I say "the body is natural" then this is still a statement made through language and language is cultural. So everything is cultural because everything is discursive. Society and culture equal discourse.

But if society equals discourse, then agency and resistance has to happen through the mechanisms of language too. The question is how as subjects are themselves constituted by discourse. This is where she makes use of Derrida's dynamic concept of language, his idea of iterability (the idea that every sign can break with a context to work in a new one and like this create new meaning). Following Derrida Butler says that a word can be resignified, its

meaning changes along its contexts and its way of using it. The power of words to hurt (the example of hate speech) can therefore be changed into something positive, hate speech is also (paradoxically) a kind of empowerment.

The example she mostly uses is the history of the word queer: At first calling someone “queer” was clearly meant as discrimination, it was meant to put someone down. But calling a name also creates a position - this is the performativity of language - it creates a subject in society and discourse: in this case a subject that is queer and that can talk back as such. Hate speech creates what it names - a queer subject – but it can not control the further life of this once created position: the queer subject doesn't have to stay in the inferior position, because once called into being it can re-act. And “Queer” actually became a positive self description, a position from which it was possible to claim certain rights and be visible. The word queer has been resignified because it has been inserted in a new context (self-description). That means discrimination always creates its own resistance with it. Agency and the possibility to resist to power structures for Butler are possible through language.

What does this mean for speaking in general? What we do when we speak, according to Butler, is not a create meaning out of nothing, but we use something we have not created ourselves: speaking is citing what has already been said back in time. We can never fully control what we say, because we can't overview all the previous meanings. But if using is repeating, it means also inserting a meaning in a different context and therefore changing it. That meaning always changes then counts for every speaking.

But for Butler words can do things only because people use them. Language is the speaking of all subjects that is historical and changes over time, there is no abstract system. Only through the process of repetition and citation something general (a word, a language) comes about. The general system is not something universal behind the objects but what is shared by subjects.

So what do words do when we utter them according to Butler? They (or we when we speak) make our world, maybe not in its materiality, but in its intelligibility (the possibility to understand certain things and others not).

If speaking is doing and doing is (following Foucault's model of power) always power, then speaking, language is itself powerful and normative. Power

for Butler is the power of discourse. The constitution of a subject for example is not an abstract universal process, but through the individual name (like in the example of the queer) a subject gets a *specific* place in society and other forms of subjectivity are excluded. Performative language is a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, it is not a neutral medium of reference. For Butler words make our society, the values we believe in, the categories we think in. In the interaction of speaking the subjects make their world. It is through the relation that speaking becomes doing, a specific doing.

In this view culture becomes crucial - the specificity of the different cultures can be explained through the specific interactions. And it is through the changing language that this culture becomes historical.

What I wanted to show with this line from Austin to Butler was how the concept of performativity moves from a focus on language towards culture, away from a focus on sense to an emphasis on the shared event of speaking.

Austin showed how important the non-linguistic context (society or culture) is for the success of a performative utterance. But this culture was somehow fixed and static. The context had to be closed off in order to explain why a performative works or fails. Derrida helped to conceive of a dynamic concept of language, but culture and history were left out. There is no transcendence, no world behind, because there is only language. Butler tries to conceptualize a historical and dynamic culture through a dynamic discourse. She includes culture, but at the cost that culture *is* discourse.

III. Opening up performativity

From here I would like to look at how the concept of performativity could or actually did open up. I would like to ask two questions: one is about the role of the object, the other is the question of the medium.

A. Performative objects?

My first question is if we could widen the idea of performativity even more in order to analyse all kinds of practices, not only linguistic ones. Performativity so far was about the practice of speaking, about the use of words that change their meaning through this use. Could this be true for the use of all kinds of

objects and not only of words? The line I drew from Austin to Butler, from language to culture, could also be described in a different way: in this course the subject has been more and more decentred and deconstructed. The focus of performativity was to conceive of the subject in a different way without abandoning it: the subject is still there, but it is not sovereign anymore, it can't fully control what it says and does. But doesn't reconsidering the subject mean automatically reconsidering also the object?

Although the theoreticians I have referred to before don't go that far, I think that the idea of performativity leads to a different view not only on subjects, but also on objects. Austin, Butler and Derrida already practically conceive of words as objects that have a history and a life of their own. The opening up of performativity towards culture has to include also objects, because culture is not just made by or out of subjects. I want to briefly introduce two thinkers that include the object into their performative analysis.

Michel De Certeau (who could be an example for how performative thinking leads to cultural studies) makes no difference between the use of things and the use of words; both things and words are marked and formed by their past uses. Consumption actively changes what it makes use of - using is producing. Interestingly, De Certeau also explains how the privilege of the system versus the use in theory actually comes about: A scientific context (like Linguistics) has to transfer its objects into a secure place, abstract them from their relations and the practices of daily use, in order to analyse them in peace. So what is absent if we analyse things (as well as words) is not an abstract context of signs (as Derrida says), but a concrete and historically specific context of practices and relations.

De Certeau carefully includes objects through their use. Our relation with objects is that we use what we didn't make ourselves and by using them we also change them.

But the question is how the objects also change us, if they generate specific uses.

The potential of objects to act is what the historian of science **Bruno Latour** is interested in. For him it is not the use of things but the things themselves that have a performative power. Things have an internal power to act. And they constantly change because what they are also depends on their

changing relations with other objects and people. Objects change and get changed. Things and people change one another in a network of interaction. Objects are not stable, passive substances, but active quasi-objects.

History with De Certeau and Latour is not only the subject centred history of discourse, but a history full of all kinds of things, practices and opportunities!

Although I ended up quite far away from a strictly linguistic concept of performativity I think that the deviation over language theory was not in vain: The linguistic concept of Performativity changed how we can conceive of culture: culture is not a static system, not a text, but it is fluid, made out of practices by many different actors.

B. performativity and media

The second question (which is still a real question for me) is the question of the medium: How could we think about media from a performative point of view?

(I am now talking about media in a very broad sense, not only about technological media but also about media of perception and about the concept “medium”...).

In the kind of language theory performativity criticizes media have no place. The linguistic focus is the abstract system of language, not its inferior version situated in time and space through media. Media in this view are just realising a grammatical system that is already there somewhere in an unmediated, pure way. Language is a set of possibilities from which only a selection is realised (this realisation is therefore always a story of loss). Thinking that media just realise something that is itself unmediated makes use of the two world scheme: there is a true reality that stays stable behind the false realisation through media.

Maybe the immanence of performative thinking could help to think about media without making use of two ontologies. The focus of performativity was on the actual use of language in time and space, on how something appears in a specific situation. If the use produces the system, then it is crucial *how* language is used – written, spoken, shouted, broadcasted etc. There is no language without a medium that embodies it. Language is always something material, that has an own specific potential. If language only exists in its

embodiments, then those embodiments – the media - are given a crucial role: they make the event; they are not accidental but essential. Focussing on performativity it is important to look at what media do, what kind of use and what kind of specific relation they generate. Different media lead to different kind of practices within the use, to different kind of relations. Media are productive. They produce a relation and they also change what they transfer through their materiality. But this change is not a loss, it's a productive mechanism.

That means media don't deprive us of a true reality – on the contrary: without media (understood in this of course very broad sense of embodiment in time and space) there would be no reality, nothing perceptible. Through the performativity of media we make our reality and it is a really real one with nothing else behind!

C. closing...

I have tried to show how performative thinking challenges a so called two-world-model of philosophy. Representational thinking was about looking behind what we see in order to perceive the stable truth (with a mental not the physical eye...). The main strive of Performativity is to overcome this thinking in two worlds and think immanently (in terms of *one* ontology). Performative thinking is not trying to look behind the phenomena: there is no difference between essence and being (or becoming). In that sense it is a tool against Essentialism. Things, bodies, relations are thought of as constituted and not given. To explain a being, meaning or condition performative thinking looks at the history of becoming, how something became what it is - it looks back and not behind what we see.

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