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Performative Acts: Utterances & Gender

Austin and Butler in Conversation

J.L Austin delivered “How to do Things with Words,” a series of lectures at Harvard University, over three decades before Judith Butler published “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” her radical rethinking of gender. Both of their work deals with what they see as performative acts. How are these two thinkers in conversation with one another? And how might their work inform and inflect each other? Butler’s schema of gender as a performative system of social meaning making is derived from the same analytic logic Austin used to argue words change facts about the world. And when placing two thinkers in conversation with one another, we might then investigate how gender performance renders itself in speech and text, and what’s at stake when articulation become digitally mediated.

Language shapes reality every day, but we are more aware of this fact on formal occasions or lawful ceremonies. After a fiancé recites their vows at a wedding ceremony, the words, “I do” create a moral obligation to obey them. Similarly, “I now pronounce you husband and wife” creates a legal bond between two individuals. Austin claims that “in saying these words we are *doing* something—namely, marrying, rather than *reporting* something, namely *that* we are marrying” (Austin 13). A parent can name their child, and a nation’s leader can initiate war by merely declaring it. All of these are examples of performative utterances—statements that perform actions. Austin defined them as a new part of speech entirely: one which neither describes nor reports information as true or false (the role of a constative), but “is, or is a part of, the doing of an action” (Austin). In short, a constative *is*, and a performative *does*.

However, for a speech act to perform an action, or in Austin’s words, to be “felicitous,” certain conditions must be in place. A marriage, for example, isn’t felicitous if the bride and groom are siblings or if a legally recognized officiant is not present to proclaim the marriage. The same is true for declaring war and conferring academic degrees. But in many cases, anyone can change the world with their words. The phrases you use daily, “I apologize,” “I promise,” “I predict,” all instinctively do things. So what? Words can change facts about the world. What does that have to do with gender?

It’s better to begin your paragraph with a topic sentence than with a quote; beginning simply with a quote is a little disorienting. “Gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that is performed” (Butler 527). What makes gender performat*ive* and not performed is that it is a system propagated on cause and effects: gender only exists because people continue to perform it. In other words, it is “an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler 519). Wrapped up in her idea of the performative is the idea that gender isn’t something innate, essential, or predetermined: “The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as a reality again.” (Butler 526) Here she’s thinking of gender as a system of social meaning making. Although Bulter doesn’t seem to think of gender as a language, the way she’s thinking of meaning as produced through difference draws from the pedagogy of linguists and phenomenologists, many of whom were Austin’s contemporaries like Searle, Foucault, Lacan. I’m not sure if Austin would agree with Butler’s claim that gender is performative, but he would at least agree with her logic.

If we were to compare Austin and Butler’s different definitions of the performative, we might then ask how is the performance of gender actualized within the performance of speech? One might point to phrases like “man up,” “don’t be a pussy,” and “run like a girl,” the meaning of which is dependent on culturally constructed gender stereotypes, and using these phrases re-enforces those structures which created them. But that’s not what I’m asking when I’m asking, how the performance of gender is actualized in the performance of speech? Do different genders speak differently? Does one speak more ‘performatively’ in Austin’s definition of the performative? Women are taught to be agreeable and tend to weaken their statements with “like,” “kind of,” “possibly,” or to start ideas with “I don’t know if this is right but…” I find myself doing this sometimes I speak in class, and I observe other women do it too. While sprinkling in “like” and “literally” between your words is now an accepted part of colloquial speech, it is still seen as inappropriate in professional and academic environments. My question is why? On work emails women use exclamation points more than men. Research done on the subject found that “exclamation points rarely function as markers of excitability in these professional forums, but may function as markers of friendly interaction, a finding with implications for understanding gender styles in email and other forms of computer‐mediated communication.” (Waseleski). I often find myself drowning my texts in emojis to the point where they (both the words and the emojis) have lost all meaning.

I think technology is exacerbating and exaggerating gendered speech patterns because typing something, tweeting something, sending something, is an act declaring of your gender. Saying something on the internet is not a mere utterance you have to hit send. You give it a stamp of approval before its disseminated. Speech itself has become an act. While Austin was studying words doing actions. Technology has rendered a reality in which words themselves are a part of the act. And the agglomeration of these acts—texts, comments, tweets, emails—together forges your gender identity as it is mediated through text on a screen. The way we function on the internet is not at all formal anymore. Then there is the question of truth. Just because you’re a girl or boy in real life doesn’t mean you have to be that same gender on the internet. Is my gender on twitter the same gender I present when I speak in a class, or the same gender I see when I look at myself in the mirror, or when my parents look at me? Although Butler’s work was radically forward-thinking for 1988, what Butler couldn’t have possibly foreseen is how much this “*stylized repetition of acts”* would be happening online.

Katie,

This is an excellent essay! Well-written, theoretically sophisticated, and marked –at the end – by a perceptive and fascinating exploration of how new (and newly performative) gendered norms are taking shape in online written language.

I give a lot of in-text comments, so I’ll refrain from overburdening you here. But I’d like to simply reiterate how impressed I am by the structure of your essay. Your use of rhetorical questions (a risky move!) does wonderful work to help you guide your reader through the essay – that is, through your thorough and systematic accounts of Austin, then Butler, then the relationships between them, and then the import of Butler’s work for how we might understand the gendered dimension of online written (but almost spoken?) discourse. That’s a lot to accomplish in 1000 words! But you do it very well, and you do it largely, I feel, by anticipating how your reader will be following along with you.

Well done! It’s great to see such improvement, given that your last paper was itself very good work.

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Works Cited

Austin, John L. *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

Butler, Judith. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *The Johns Hopkins University Press*, vol. 40, no. 4, Dec. 1988, pp. 519–31.

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