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Performativity

The concept of the performative utterance, born within J. L. Austin's ordinary language philosophy, has influenced the trajectory of linguistic anthropology in ways that I can only hint at here, capturing the attention of scholars working within areas as diverse as ethnography of speaking, language socialization, pragmatics, discourse analysis, and more recently, gender and language. The origin of the term *performative* can be traced back to Austin's posthumous *How To Do Things with Words*. Austin, objecting to the logical positivists' focus on the verifiability of statements, introduced the performative as a new category of utterance that has no truth value since it does not describe the world, but acts upon it—a way of “doing things with words.” The classic constative “snow is white” is descriptively true or false, but statements such as “I now pronounce you husband and wife” are something different, their successful outcome depending on a number of conditions (i.e., “felicity conditions”) that cannot be evaluated in terms of truth. Such declarations are performative, not constative, because it is by the utterance of the words that the act is performed. By the end of his book, Austin cleverly argues that all utterances are performative, even those that appear merely to describe a state of affairs, since such utterances do the act of informing. This is a revolutionary conclusion, for all utterances must then be viewed as actions, an equation which linguistic anthropologists have of course embraced with fervor.

With Austin's exposition, the broader area of speech act theory emerged. Within anthropology, Austin's work had its most immediate impact on the paradigm of ethnography of speaking, and in particular on the study of ritual and performance, when ethnographers took to the field to see if theory could inform practice. The answer coming out of early texts such as Ruth Finnegan's discussion of performative utterances among the Limba, Michael Foster's study of Iroquois longhouse speech events, and Michelle Rosaldo's analysis of Ilongot speech acts is that language philosophers must pay more attention to the localized ideologies that govern language use before making

sweeping generalizations about how language operates in culture. Most telling in this respect is Rosaldo's rejection of Austin's and Searle's five-part taxonomy of speech acts. She argues that intention and sincerity, both of which are granted esteemed positions in these discussions, are irrelevant to the success of speech acts in Ilongot culture. The philosophical emphasis on the speaker's psychological state does not underlie a universal theory of speech acts, but rather an "ethnography of contemporary [Western] views of human personhood and action."

These early critiques of speech act theory resulted in more nuanced ethnographic accounts of performance and ritual in linguistic anthropology, ultimately giving new life to Austin's performative. Many of the subsequent studies on ritual could be viewed as ethnographic extensions of the "dual-direction-of-fit" that John Searle identifies for the classic performative. While the words of a performative do in some sense "fit" the world, conforming to the conventions that govern their success, they also constitute it, so that by their very utterance the world is also made to fit the words. The same duality could be said to be true of ritualized performance (as Tambiah suggests in a direct application of Austin's felicity conditions to ritual in the late 1970s), prompting anthropologists to demand more discussion of the creative qualities of ritual alongside the constraining ones. Hymes' repeated call to "understand structure as emergent in action" is critical here, as he and other scholars of performance, most notably Briggs and Bauman, led us away from the analysis of ritual as mere reiteration. Their work has encouraged a new line of thinking in the last two decades of cultural anthropology as well, exemplified by Turner's work on liminality and creativity and by recent feminist work on the gendered aspects of ritual.

No discussion of performativity would be complete without reference to its uptake in literary criticism, particularly as Austin's performative, reworked by poststructuralist patriarch Derrida, instigated something akin to a revolution in literary theory. Paralleling early ethnographers of speaking, Derrida criticized speech act theory for its focus on intentionality, albeit from a markedly different perspective. While linguistic anthropologists looked to culture for their criticisms, Derrida looked to literature, arguing in a deconstructive vein that because the text can always be detached from the context in which it is written, the intentionality of its author is irrelevant. For Derrida, context can never be identified, since speech acts work through a potential of never-ending citationality; for linguistic anthropologists, context must be identified, since speech acts are realized only through the cultural conventions that govern their use. It is this differing understanding of context that continues to prohibit dialogue between these two uptakes. The buzzword in poststructuralist literary theory becomes "iterability," the endless repetition of speech acts within a discursive history that has lost its original context. Our anthropological buzzword, in contrast, becomes "the total speech act," as ethnographers attempt to define the cultural conventions that make performance, ritual, and even everyday conversation felicitous, while at the same time acknowledging the emergent and creative aspects of any speech event.

We are now entering what might be called the second generation of the performative in linguistic anthropology, one that promises to mimic its earlier uptake, as language and gender scholars, inspired by gender theorist Judith Butler's notion of "performativity," seek to ground her philosophical claims in more localized, ethnographic accounts of diverse communities of practice. Butler's argument that gender works as a performative, constituting the very act that it performs, is, as linguists such as Anna Livia, Deborah Cameron, Mary Bucholtz, and myself have pointed out, a promising idea for discourse analysis, as it leads us away from sociolinguistic approaches to identity that view the way we talk as directly indexing a prediscursive self. To a poststructuralist like Butler, there is no prediscursive identity, as even our understanding of biological sex is discursively produced. This perspective puts more weight on the speech event itself, requiring us to examine how speakers manipulate ideologies of feminine and masculine speech in the ongoing production of gendered selves. Still, it must be stated that Butler, like her poststructuralist predecessors, largely discounts the emergent properties of gendered acts and the agency of the subjects that perform them, focusing primarily on the repetitive nature of gender. For Butler, there is no agency in the sense of a voluntarist subject, as actors are little more than ventriloquists, iterating the gendered acts that have come before them. The only way out of this performative trap is resignification, which if done appropriately (and Butler points to the recent in-group reclaiming of the word "queer" here as well as drag performance) can turn this iterability on its ugly head and betray its constructed nature. It remains to be seen how linguistic anthropologists will reconcile Butler's theory with an ethnographic understanding of context and the diverse conceptualization of agency that comes with it, but we can be certain that Austin's performative will continue to enliven our field in unexpected ways well into the next century.

(See also *act, agency, functions, gender, healing, humor, music, names, narrative, orality, oratory, power, theater*)

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