

Performative Language

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Key Points

- J. L. Austin originally outlined the conception of the ‘performative utterance’, a speech act that accomplishes the action it is describing, as well as conditions necessary for accomplishing the performative effect.
- Following Austin and Derrida’s criticism of his work, Judith Butler presented gender as the performative result of normative behaviors, constrained and circulated in social discourse.
- Linguistic anthropologists have enhanced Butler’s conception of performativity with Michael Silverstein’s work on indexicality to elaborate the ways performative language interactionally constructs and limits identity.
- Performative language has been used as an analytical foundation to explore the relationships between language and gender, language and race, and language and class and many other discursive structures that order society and our social lives.

Abstract

This chapter explores the historical concept of performative language and how it has evolved within linguistic anthropological thought up to the modern day. The discussion begins with J. L. Austin’s understanding of the performative utterance in the 1960s and traces its conceptual lineage into Judith Butler’s understanding of performativity in the 1990s. It then examines how Butler’s performativity theory has been taken up by linguistic anthropologists in thinking about performative language, especially scholars of gender, race, and class, largely in conjunction with Silverstein’s work on indexicality and indexical performance.

Introduction

In recent years, performativity theory, and indeed the narrower concept of performative language, has moved beyond academia to enter the public consciousness. This performativity zeitgeist has largely been centered around the writings of Judith Butler, whose work has been both lionized by those on the political left and demonized by those on the political right (Szalai, 2024). Butler’s theory of performativity holds that one’s gender is not an indelible, essential part of one’s biology, but rather that it is socially produced and reproduced through one’s behavior (and, necessarily, linguistic actions) found in preexisting cultural scripts. But this conception of gender – which the popular media often describes erroneously as ‘putting on the costume’ of gender (Sehgal, 2024) – has sparked a worldwide furore of ‘anti-gender’ and ‘gender-critical’ discourse based in sex essentialism (Borba, 2022; Tudisco, 2023; see also Butler, 2021). Departing from dominant streams of feminist and queer theorizing since the early 1990s, spokespersons for these movements assert the ‘fact’ of biological sex and dismiss social understandings of gender as mere ‘ideology’. Indeed, across disciplines, several public intellectuals are calling for academia to acknowledge the necessity and fixity of biological sex categories, in what seems to be a nostalgic push toward a time ‘before performativity’ (see Barrett & Hall, 2024, for their recounting of an event at a major North American anthropological conference). That return, however, would fly in the face of the immense body of valuable work that linguistic anthropologists have produced over the last fifty years in leveraging a performative understanding of language and social life. With that context, this chapter seeks not just to explain the conceptual history of ‘performative language’ and how it has been taken up within linguistic anthropology, but also to elucidate the established connections between contemporary understandings of identity, agency, and performativity theory more broadly.

Performative Language, Performativity, and Identity

In his landmark work *How to do things with words*, philosopher of language J. L. Austin (1962) established the category of language that he called ‘performative utterances’ as distinct from statements that he called ‘constatives’. Constatives are important

philosophically because, as utterances that describe a historical event or some facet of ontological reality, they can be categorized as true or false depending on their relationship with observable reality. Yet the relative truth values of constatives are not easily applied to Austin's category of performative utterances, which do not report or 'constate' anything about the world but rather perform some action in their being uttered. For example, saying 'I promise to come visit tomorrow' cannot be considered true or false because it does not describe anything about the world; rather, it constitutes the act of 'promising' just by being said. Austin pointed out that these performative utterances are commonplace and often culturally significant (consider the phrase 'I now pronounce you husband and wife' or the more contemporary 'I now pronounce you married') and so must be systematically analyzed in a broader philosophy of language.

To this end, Austin proposed a series of conditions that must be satisfied for an utterance to truly have a performative effect. These 'felicity' conditions can be simplified as:

1. There is a pre-existing social convention that gives the utterance a performative effect when said by appropriate people in appropriate circumstances (e.g., a minister at a wedding).
2. The effect of the performative utterance is carried out by all participants.
3. Anyone participating or invoking the performative effect is doing so sincerely and intentionally. (Austin, 1962, pp. 14–15)

For Austin, if these conditions are not satisfied, the utterance is not considered 'false' but rather 'infelicitous' in that it does not convey the performative result. Austin details other potential ways in which an utterance might be infelicitous – such as if the utterance was made but not heard or otherwise observed – but these felicity conditions make up the core of what Austin considered to be a performative utterance. While this system was taken forward and expanded upon in other work by philosophers of language (see Searle, 1989 for a somewhat modified set of felicity conditions), the notion of intentionality in the third condition forms the basis for the debate with fellow philosopher, Jacques Derrida, that came to inform Butler's theory of performativity.

While Derrida disagrees with Austin and his student John Searle, it is worth noting that the two camps are not entirely separate. Derrida (1988) agrees that language can create tangible social effects, and that the heuristics of performative utterances and speech acts (see Searle, 1969) are useful ways of exploring the relationship between language and our social reality. However, Derrida's major point of departure concerns ways in which Austin's conception of performative language, even if positioned as a universal theory, locks the performative effect to restrictively narrow events: utterances that are said in specific places, at specific times, following specific forms, and – most confoundingly – with specific intentions. Derrida begins his analysis by discussing the properties of textual communication; he argues that texts show how language can have perduring social effects outside of a given spatio-temporal context. Derrida uses this to articulate his concept of iterability – the idea that linguistic forms exist in an infinitely citational space and their citation allows the replication of linguistic forms across time, copying form and structure but removing the intentions of an original interlocutor. Derrida argues that it is the recognizability and iterability of linguistic forms (both spoken and textual) that allow performatives to function at all; indeed, the focus on conventionality in Austin's first felicity condition must mean that performative utterances exist in a framework of iterability, since different interlocutors use the same (or very similar) linguistic forms for accomplishing similar actions. Notably, this conception of 'citationality' would go on to influence the work of some linguistic anthropologists, like Nakassis (2013), who explores the semiotic gaps and processes that allow citations to carry (and lose) indexical meanings across different citational utterances. Derrida goes on to argue that because we can never truly know the intentions or motivations of all these individuals in such a framework, the structure and its recognizability are what render an utterance performative, not its specific context at the point of occurrence. These ideas helped form the basis for Butler's conception of the performativity of gender.

Butler (1990) first presented their conception of gender as performative in *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, published in 1990. In combining Austin's concept of the performative utterance, Derrida's notion of iterability, and many political critiques from Michel Foucault, Butler argues that subjects do not exist with an a priori ontological quality of gender; rather, through their acts, subjects performatively instantiate gender. Butler also argues against a misleading linkage between biological sex and social gender, explaining that social genders cannot be wholly mapped to corresponding categories of biological sexes, which are themselves social constructs. However, in contrast to the 'costume of gender' analogy often ascribed to performativity theory, Butler describes gender as existing in a constrained system of Foucauldian discourse that is rooted in historical signs and meanings (for more on Foucault's ideas of discourse, see Lawlor & Nale, 2014). While subjects have a certain amount of agency in how they perform gender, they still exist in a series of restrictive logics that control not only how gender can be expressed but also what genders it is even possible to imagine. Indeed, through the first chapters of *Gender trouble*, Butler calls for feminist movements to attend not just to patriarchal systems of masculine power but also to the ways they embody logics that essentialize or universalize female identity. For Butler, acknowledging the discursive strictures of gender is just as important as realizing its performative capacity. While Butler would go on to further articulate their theories in later texts, the foundation presented in *Gender trouble* would give scholars in many disciplines the tools necessary to begin understanding how gender (among other identity categories) is performatively realized. This shift pushed many linguistic anthropologists away from the bound categorical notion of performative 'utterances' to thinking about language as wholly performative in that it creates and reifies our social realities.

While Butler was developing their theory of performativity, a contemporaneous intellectual movement emerged in linguistic anthropology: the growing importance of indexicality as a theoretical model. Even preceding Derrida's critique, ethnographers of language had critiqued Austin's model for relying on Western presumptions about language, illustrating the inapplicability of notions such as intentionality to other cultural contexts (e.g., Rosaldo, 1982; Foster, 1989 (1974)). But in his piece on linguistic

'shifters', Michael Silverstein (1976) established a performative approach to language based in a very different intellectual lineage, the semiotic theory of C. S. Peirce. When explaining how aspects of language map onto the Peircian triad of icon/index/symbol, Silverstein focuses most explicitly on indexes; that is, signs that are understood to 'point' to some referent or object because of a perceived co-occurrence. While Silverstein largely focuses on the phenomenon of deixis as it applies to indexical terms like 'that' or 'me', he deploys these examples as illustrative of the ways indexes more broadly are both culturally specific and discourse dependent. After all, the meaning of a shifter – whether in terms of time (*now* and *then*), place (*here* and *there*), person (*I* and *you*), or discourse (*this* and *that*) – emerges only in the contextualized unfolding of the discourse event.

Silverstein expanded on the social aspects of indexicality throughout the rest of his career, including, most relevantly, a 1985 piece where he examines how certain linguistic forms leveraged in an interaction may (or may not) index an interlocutor's gender. In a series of posthumously published lectures, Silverstein (2022) most succinctly lays out his understanding of how identities (both macro-sociological categories like class and gender, and interactionally specific identities) are realized discursively through the employment of indexical signs (e.g., utterances, stylistic variations, gestures, etc.), which can only have their social meanings because of a 'ritual baptism' that enables repeated historical iterations. While Silverstein does not seem to engage with Butler's work directly anywhere in his writings, there are clearly shared understandings of social life, and his ideas on indexicality have been taken up by many who examine the social construction of gender (e.g., Ochs, 1992), sexuality (e.g., Barrett, 2017), and identity more broadly (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Silverstein's presentation of the concurrent phenomena of indexical presuppositions and entailments that are omnipresent – even in the smallest of everyday interactions and utterances – allows for identities to be continually created within interaction by invoking certain inscribed social meanings, in a way that is reminiscent of Butler's conception of preexisting cultural scripts of gender. At the same time, Silverstein's (2022, p. 4) granular attention to discourse, which he understands as the 'processual aspect' of language, enables a more complex understanding of semiotic change than found in Butler's work, with each interactional unfolding contributing to the 'always transformable structure of salient social identities'. Indeed, there have been specific calls for the field of queer linguistics – arguably the subdiscipline most overtly attuned to the performative – to better integrate and interrogate the evolving nature of indexical processes and systems (Hall, 2013).

Given Butler's focus on gender and sexuality, it is unsurprising that their ideas were taken up with fervor by scholars of language, gender, and sexuality. While the limits of space, time, and digital ink will prevent an exhaustive list of examinations of gendered and/or queered (and/or genderqueered) linguistic practices, it is safe to say that many scholars rely on Butler to provide a theoretical framework (see Milani, 2019 for a more detailed chronicle of Butler's influence in queer linguistics specifically) and Silverstein to provide an analytical heuristic. More recently, scholars working within the emerging paradigm of trans linguistics (Zimman, 2020) have used indexicality and performativity to articulate specific aspects of language that correspond to gender performance, including ways in which gender norms are (or are not) violable. For instance, Zimman's (2016) work examines the ways in which transgender men linguistically perform a masculine gender, often through phonetic elements. He shows that certain elements of speech are seen as more necessary (performative?) for transgender men to be perceived as masculine, and while trans men express a certain amount of agency in how they stylize their speech or in choosing to receive or not receive masculinizing vocal training, the pressure to gender conform creates limits to this agency. Moreover, Zimman (2017) argues that the multiplicity of speech variables that are understood to perform masculinity interact in such a way that a 'primary' variable – in this case, low fundamental frequency – along with other contextual factors (clothing, physical appearance, etc.) are necessary for constructing the indexical meanings of other gendered speech signs. Calder's (2019) work similarly shows this relationship between the indexicality of performative language and other salient contextual factors in their analysis of radical queer performances by drag queens in San Francisco, who are differentially read as 'sissy' men or 'sickening' queens, depending on the holistic gender performance. In this way, scholars of performative language have expanded Butler's original work in the early 1990s by adopting Silverstein's (1985) focus on the unstable indexical play between forms, use, and ideology – 'the total linguistic fact', in his terminology. Linguistic anthropologists are accordingly now using the concept of indexical variation – the idea that a given sign can have multiple indexical meanings across audiences and may or may not actually be pointing to any one of them – to analyze practices of 'misrecognition' that are not well accounted for in Butler's description of performativity as a system of circulating norms achieved through consensus (Barrett & Hall, 2024). To that end, scholars of language and race have shown that the linguistic forms taken to perform gender in white contexts do not always have the same indexical meanings and subsequent effects for non-white listeners (Calder & King, 2022).

Although several linguistic anthropologists have examined the ways in which race is socially constructed, it would be fallacious to think of gender and race identically within the broader framework of Butler's performativity theory (see Bucholtz & miles-hercules, 2021). While many linguistic anthropologists have examined how gender is performed within a discursive system by the subject who is being gendered, racialization is more commonly thought of as a systematic process in which racial categories are discursively assigned onto bodies through the performativity of language (Alim et al., 2020). Many of these processes come about when 'listening subjects' (see Inoue, 2006) report what they hear (and otherwise perceive) from subsequently racialized subjects, their utterances 'performing' and projecting race onto the body. Alim (2016) shares his experience in being 'racialized nine different ways over the span of five days' based on his own linguistic practices and other indexical factors, showing the mutual co-construction of racial and linguistic identities. In this way, race might be thought of as 'performed' in how it adheres to raciolinguistic ideologies of the listening subject (see Flores & Rosa, 2015). Alim posits that a 'transracial subject' disrupts the ontological assumptions that racial hegemony rests upon. Similarly, Wirtz (2016) points out in her exploration of the Cuban experience of Blackness that 'to focus on the performativity of race ... is to shift away from thinking of race as a system of static categories imposed on people ... and toward examining racializing processes as emergent semiotic relationships.' As Wirtz explains, racialization relies on interactional semiotic processes to performatively claim or assign a racial identity. To that end, scholars of race and language have also shown how 'whiteness' is similarly

performed and assigned. Bucholtz (2001) examines performances of whiteness in superstandard language practices amongst self-identified nerds at a northern California high school, with their linguistic practices creating a kind of ‘hyperwhite’ markedness. That is, the general category of ‘whiteness’ can be claimed and linguistically performed through (linguistically performative) processes of racialization against a non-white other (see also Henry, 2023 for an exploration of how ‘positions of whiteness’ are realized in a post-colonial context).

Beyond gender and race, linguistic anthropologists have also explored the ways in which social class can be brought into being through linguistic acts that move beyond the socioeconomic basis on which class structure sits. This performance of class often works in ways that situate the speaker and some other interactant in different or opposing class positions. Building on Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) work on social processes of class distinction, which rely on socialized predilections toward – or away from – certain tastes (which Bourdieu calls ‘habitus’), many scholars have shown how social actors assign class positions to themselves or others by articulating meaningful indexical relationships between speech habits and social status. Much of Reyes’s (2017; 2021) work has analyzed the ways in which elites in the Philippines are characterized as authentic or fake through their linguistic practices, showing that class categories and even membership of those categories are realized in language. Moreover, and perhaps more strikingly for scholars of class relations, several linguistic anthropologists have examined how the normative force of middle-class identity (a relatively unmarked category when compared to social elites or the socially disenfranchised) is also performed through linguistic acts. Hall (2021) examines the ways in which sexual modernity, as signaled by joke tellers in Delhi through their use of Hinglish (Hindi-English code mixing), works to position interlocutors as progressive and cancels the class entailments that would be indexed by relying more heavily on either English or Hindi. Similarly, Khoo (2023) details how the Singaporean variety of English, known as Singlish, is situated within a class- and race-neutral ideology of what it means to be Singaporean, and politicians’ ability to ‘correctly’ speak Singlish as determined by the listening public can (un)mark them as neutral, middle-class citizens. Thus it becomes clear that not only is class yet another social category that is performed through language, but structures of race, sexuality, and class intersect within specific performative utterances. Additional analyses that examine how these performances further intersect with other dimensions of social life will continue to add nuance to our understanding of how performative language constructs these different ontologies.

While many scholars have largely shifted from Austin’s original conception of the performative utterance, the critical turn from Butler’s conception of performativity to the more pluralistic and contextualized understandings of indexicality found in linguistic anthropology can give us new tools for better understanding how systems of power ‘do things with words’ and subsequently how to interrogate these systems. Consider recent work in neurodiversity, where scholars across disciplines have examined how the act of a diagnosis (an Austinian performative utterance) can fundamentally alter the lifeworlds of those diagnosed with autism (Tan, 2018), ADHD (Nielsen, 2018), or numerous other conditions. What does performative thinking and its implications for agency, indexicality, and identity construction tell us about the lived realities of these subjects? Beyond thinking about gender, race, and class, performative language has created a theoretical lens for linguistic anthropologists to examine and interrogate the discourses of power and being that constrict all of us. Regarding capitalist markets and forces of commercialization, Nakassis (2012) explains how the citationality of performativity allows brands to create their own identities and essences for a consumer audience, while Cavanaugh (2016, p. 1) analyzes the role that linguistic labor plays in how Italian food workers realize food safety through the performativity of their documentation practices, creating artifacts that ‘constitute what they purport to depict’. More generally, linguistic anthropologists continue to push the theoretical boundaries of performative language. For example, in considering cultural taboos, Fleming and Lempert (2014, p. 500) examine how swearing and other similarly prohibited kinds of talk carry a kind of ‘rigid performativity’ in that these utterances need not follow any of Austin’s felicity conditions, and yet a speaker who swears – even in reported speech – can cause the social effects of insult, obscenity, or offense. Similarly, scholars have expanded the concept of performative ‘language’ by applying performativity to new and distinct semiotic contexts, such as Nakassis’s (2023) work on understanding the dualistic relationship between representation and performativity in the filmic images of Tamil cinema.

Conclusion

In short, performativity gives linguistic anthropologists a foundational framework for understanding how our social worlds are brought into being through language. It would not be an exaggeration to say that a performative understanding of language lies at the heart of most linguistic anthropological analyses, even if a given author doesn’t specifically invoke the term ‘performativity’. To return to a time ‘before performativity’, as advocated by scholars advancing anti-gender and gender-critical positions, would be akin to going back into the gloom of Plato’s cave and staring at shadows, the colors and contours of social action hidden in the umbra. The field would be left trying to make sense of the blurred outlines and flattened silhouettes that are the static and essentialized categories of sex, unable to truly grapple with the inherently dynamic and shifting structures of discourse at its back.

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