In Pursuit of Ordinary: Performativity in Judith Butler and J. L. Austin

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Judith Butler, in her book *Excitable Speech: a Politics of the Performative* adapts Austin's theory of speech act into political contexts. She evaluates Austin's theory and tries to show in what ways it is inadequate. The first point Butler discusses is the conventional character of illocutionary utterances. As is also asserted by Austin, illocutionary utterances are not only conventional, but also "ritual and ceremonial." However, Butler interprets "ritual and ceremonial" differently from Austin. According to Butler, the context of an utterance goes far beyond the moment of the utterance, and ritualization exceeds a single moment in time. Butler says, "[t]he "moment" in ritual is a condensed historicity: it exceeds itself in past and future directions, an effect of prior and future invocations that constitute and escape the instance of utterance" (Butler 1997 p.3).

This, on the other hand, is in conflict with Austin's characterization of "a total speech situation" required to evaluate speech acts. The "total speech situation" defined by Austin is spatio-temporally or contextually-bounded and it is related to the immediacy of the present moment: I call it immediate contextualism and assert that it is different from Butler's view. Butler does not think that a speech act is evaluated in a simple sort of context that is defined easily by spatial and temporal boundaries; on the contrary, performative utterances are restaged over and over again. This restaging of a performative utterance requires the present use, which is determined by the past use. Although the future use is not determined yet, since our utterances cannot be free from a socio-historical determination, then it is very likely that the future uses will be similar to past uses as well.

Butler thinks that there are similarities between Austin's concept of "ritual" and Althusser's concept of "interpellation." She states that at the first look they do not seem to be related because in Austin the subject who speaks precedes the speech in question; while in Althusser a speech act, which brings the subject into linguistic existence, precedes and forms the subject in question. However, this apparent contrast between Austin's and Althusser's views disappears when we consider that the workings of performatives in Austin's subject-centered speech acts do not depend on the intention of the speaker always. She underlines that Austin rejects psychologism that would require "fictitious inward acts." The similarity between Austin and Althusser appears at this point. "Just as for Austin the convention governing the institution of promise-making is verbally honored even in the case of a promise that no one intends to fulfill, so for Althusser one is entered into the "ritual" of ideology regardless of whether there is a prior and authenticating belief in that ideology" (Butler 1997 p.24). Hence, according to Butler, Austin's view that an illocutionary speech act is conditioned by its conventional, that is, "ritual" or "ceremonial" dimension, finds a counterpart in Althusser's insistence that ideology has a "ritual" form, and that ritual constitutes "the material existence of an ideological apparatus" (Quoted by Butler 1997 p.25).

Butler accepts that both for Austin and Althusser there is not a preexisting mental state determining the cognitive status of subjects[1]. However, in the case of Althusser "ideas" have their existence inscribed in the actions of practices governed by rituals, while in the case of Austin subject, speaks *conventionally*, that is, "it[2]" speaks in a voice that is never fully singular. That subject invokes a formula (which is not quite the same as following a rule), and this may be done with no little reflection on the conventional character of what is being said. The ritual dimension of convention implies that the moment of utterance is informed by the prior and, indeed, future moments that are absorbed by the moment itself. Hence, when "I" speak there are, actually, an inherited set of voices, an echo of others speak (Butler 1997 p.25). Hence, condensed historicity of language precedes and exceeds the history of the speaking subject and his contingent existence in all directions.

Butler further articulates the nature of speech acts by appealing to Derrida's concept of "iteration" and "citationality." "Citational" character of speech exceeds subjects, who utter the term because at the moment of utterance of names they actually cite them and establish a "derivative status of authorship." This transitivity cannot be reduced to a causal or intentional process of a singular subject (Butler 1997 p.49). Because the subject uttering injurious words is mobilized by a long string of injurious interpellations, she achieves a temporary status in citing that utterance.

Butler cites Derrida criticizing Austin for not considering this citational and derivative character of performatives and she endorses Derrida's idea that the power of a subject is not the function of an originating will, but is always derivative. Butler agrees with Derrida saying that a performative utterance succeeds only if it repeats a "coded" or iterable utterance: in other words, only if it is identifiable as a citation. In this case, the category of intention will not disappear, but "will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance" (Quoted by Butler 1997 p.51). She thinks that a performative utterance succeeds not because an intention governs the action of speech, but because action echoes prior actions, and accumulates "*the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices*" (Butler 1997 p.51). In this sense, speech act does not take place within a practice, but the act itself is a ritualized practice. A term or statement functions only in the accumulation of historicity of force.

Butler criticizes Austin for not embedding the speech acts within historical contexts. In this sense, the derivative character of speech, associated with concepts such as "sedimentation," "interpellation," "citation," and "iteration," is absent in Austin's theory. Butler implies that

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[1] At this point she differs from Habermas saying that Austin restricts himself to the cognitive use of language only.
[2] Realize that Butler identifies subject with "it," which implies that subject is a mere means in a communicative activity.

"sedimentation" or "calcification" exceeds the contingent immediacy of a context and our job is not simply to analyze how sentences and words have been used, in what contexts, and for what purposes (Butler 1997 p.36), but to consider a greater context requiring political and ethical evaluations of the uses of concepts or words within historical perspective. However, Butler's account has problematic aspects.

In Defense of Ordinary

In a Foucauldean manner, Butler thinks that names, injurious names have a history, and at the moment of an utterance historicity is invoked and reconsolidated. Histories are installed and arrested in names. According to Butler, the history has become internal to a name and to its usages, and these usages become part of the very name, "a sedimentation, a repetition that congeals, that gives the name its force" (Butler 1997 p.36).

Butler's description of uses of names with concepts such as "sedimentation," "condensed historicity," "calcification of meaning," "interpellation," "reiteration," "citation," and "repetition" is problematic in several respects. First, it presupposes that socio-historical or historico-cultural uses are sedimented, entrenched and congealed in such a way as to create a substantial, internal meaning determining the future uses of "names" and concepts. Because these sedimented or congealed entities determine the present uses and potentially determine the future uses, it is almost unimaginable to open up possibilities for new uses.

The second problem is internally connected with the first one. The problem with this "condensed historicity" is that the present staging of performative utterances are always determined by socio-historical background of the uses of performative utterances. In this sense, the present use is determined by the past use and the past is already included in the present uses of performative utterances. The future use is not determined yet, hence it is not a context yet, but since our utterances cannot be free from the socio-historical determination, then it is very likely that the future uses will be similar to the past uses of names as well because they are structured already. She says, "an 'act' is not a momentary happening, but a certain nexus of temporal horizons, the condensation of an iterability that exceeds the moment it occasions" (Butler 1997 p.14). According to Butler's account, a person performing an act or pronouncing a sentence speaks according to unchallenged power and she reiterates or cites a "long string of interpellations" in her utterances. In this case, the power precedes the one speaking as subject, though the subject seems to have that power (Butler 1997 p.49). The one who speaks is not the originator of such speech, but just citing or repeating because the subject is produced in language through a prior performative exercise of speech. In this sense, speech is in "some ways out of our control" (Butler 1997 p.21). I think this is another flaw implied in her view because this "out of control"-ness results in a complete elimination of agency.

Butler seems to accept that the reversal of the process is possible by certain means. Her two remarks seem to defeat the total elimination of agency: one is her idea that speech is not only defined by social context, but has the capacity to break with this context (Butler 1997 p.40). This breaking down is possible by "misappropriation." Butler states, "[t]he political possibility of reworking the force of the speech act against the force of injury consists in misappropriating the force of speech from those prior contexts" (Butler 1997 p.40). The subject is interpellated in language "through a selective process in which the terms of legible and intelligible subjecthood are regulated. The subject is called a name, but "who" the subject is depends as much on the names that he or she is never called: the possibilities for linguistic life are both inaugurated and foreclosed through the name" (Butler 1997 p.41). Hence, "misappropriation" is possible by legitimatizing new and future forms, which open up new contexts, and speak in ways that have never yet been legitimated in speech (Butler 1997 p.41). Butler's second remark is implied in the concept of "ambivalence." She doesn't explicitly put forward what she means by the concept, but it may be interpreted as a potential implicit in socio-historical conditions to reverse the process. However, is this "misappropriation" or "ambivalence" possible within Butler's framework?

As is said earlier, since the meaning of the terms or "names" is determined by past uses, which is identified by Butler with concepts such as "calcification of meaning," "sedimentation," and "condensed historicity," then it is almost impossible to break with these socio-historically determined *a priori* meanings. In Butler's framework, subjects are subjecting to the socio-historically determined *a priori* "names" or concepts, rather than acting or uttering performatives by their own will. Because the subject's performative acts are determined in a language in such a way as to exceed and precede subject, then this determination eliminates "its" agency altogether, therefore it is not possible for "it" to be redefined.

There is also a conflict in Butler's interpretation of Austin. On the one hand, Butler asserts that there is a connection between Austin's concept of "ritual" and Althusser's concept of "interpellation," on the other hand, she agrees with Derrida saying that Austin does not consider "citational" and derivative character of speech acts. The concept of "interpellation" and the concept of "citation" complement one another. Therefore, it does not seem reasonable to attribute one without attributing the other to a certain view. Besides, Austin's association of illocutionary acts with "ritual" cannot be correlated with "interpellation" in Althusser for several reasons. First, although Austin talks about "total conditions," they have reference to the conditions implied in the present moment, rather than socio-historical determination. Secondly, because they do not have reference to socio-historical conditions, subject is not interpellated, does not repeat, or iterate, but is an active originator of her speech. This gives superiority to Austin's view. Obviously, Austin emphasizes the conventional aspect of illocutionary acts. However, because subjects are not objectified in Austin, every speech act is actually a new one, complying with a tradition, on the one hand, and diverging from the tradition on the other. This ambivalence opens a possibility for creating a new relationship among human beings. With this respect, Austin's view has superiority over that of Butler presupposing that total conditions exceed and precede contingent immediacy of the present moment of utterance so as to eliminate agency altogether.

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