The language performativity

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Abstract

In our everyday life, we sometimes use language performativity without knowing it. It is about the words that count, which means that the moment the language is spoken, the action it indicates is realized too. This theory, based on linguistics, is very applicable nowadays in resistances and movements, especially of gender. In this article, we will focus on the transformation of the performativity of language.

In order to better understand what is language performativity, we have to differentiate two types of languages: the "ordinary" language, which we use in daily life to express ourselves, and the philosophical language or the technical language that we usually work with, in university and for research. For John Langshaw Austin, the language is not only useful for description or for self-reflection but also useful with a performative quality. Language allows connection throughout the world and once it is acted upon, it becomes performative. This signifies that it implies consequences and therefore engages itself with a responsibility for the person to act upon the words he or she has spoken. A probative example would be the role of a judge in a tribunal: when the judge announces "this court is now in session", these words are acted upon immediately and imply that the session of the court has started. While the performative language signifies that we do not just "say" something, we actually "do" the thing according to the bias of language.

Nevertheless, this performativity is defined by social norms and conventions and supposes a certain status for the words to be effective or not. Thus, in a tribunal, the sentence can only be declared by the judge and no one else, the performativity of its statements depends on its status. According to J.L Austin, any statement has three functions: First and foremost, the utterance has a locutionary function, that is, the action of speaking instead of being silent. The second function is the illocutionary act that creates a new reality through the utterance. Finally, the perlocutionary act, which is the act of provoking desired or unforeseen feelings in the listener depending on how this person receives the information.

The last function implies that each and every individual is affected differently by language. Thereby, language performativity not only describes reality but also creates new standards and a new reality. Language takes on its full sense as a tool used by the various movements of struggles which seek to construct or deconstruct social realities. To do so, we will analyze the performativity of language and its role in the gender and feminist fights.

Language performativity is a tool of great value in the fight for feminism because it is opposed to this vision of language as a simple representation of reality and thus allows a critique of "*l'illusion de la naturalité des rapports sociaux et de la domination*"[1], according to Mona Gérardin.

The feminist struggles seek to deconstruct and challenge the naturalization of oppression and domination, which results in the silencing of oppressed people and the dominance of certain discourses. This naturalization can be challenged by speaking in which language plays a primordial role.

How do feminist struggles use language and its performativity to support their discourse in the creation of new social realities and new social codes?

First of all, the emergence of inclusive writing is shaking up the very foundations of language by questioning a grammatical principle well anchored in the mentalities which assumes that "the masculine prevails over the feminine". An internalized rule of the French language that remains a form of domination of one sex over another, and which can however be transformed by the use of inclusive writing. Likewise, the feminization of certain words and professions compensates for the invisibility of

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[1] "*l'illusion de la naturalité des rapports sociaux et de la domination*" can be translated as "the illusion of the naturalness of social relations and domination".

women's roles in society. A rather revealing paradox of the importance of the feminization of the French language was raised during a micro sidewalk by the *Egaligone* institute in the streets of Lyon in 2013: "A thirteen-year-old child is in the car with his father when they have an accident. The ambulance comes to pick them up, and the father dies on the way. The child is taken to the hospital. The best doctor in the hospital walks into the operating room, sees the child and exclaims: "But I can't operate on him, he's my son!" "How is it possible?". Most of those interviewed did not thought that the doctor could be a woman and the mother of the child. Indeed, for a very long time, certain professions did not have a female equivalent. This detail may seem trivial, yet it is in reality a barrier between women and certain professional paths. Hayat Outahar, president of the Association Femmes-Entrepreneurs explains: "A trade name that does not have a female equivalent does not help young girls identify with it."[2] Thus, there are few female firefighters or surgeons, because the fact that the feminine name of these professions is rarely used is one of the factors contributing to maintaining the idea that they are for men only. Eliane Viennot, a historian of French literature, points out that the least socially valued professions have never been deprived of their female equivalents[3].

The most revealing act of the use of the performativity of language in feminist struggles is the consistent use of slogans. According to Mona Gérardin, in her article "*Le langage est un lieu de lutte : la performativité du langage ordinaire dans la construction du genre et les luttes féministes*"[4], the slogans are "critical discursive practices because their insurrectional force rests on the criticism which makes social order". The slogans are intended to criticize and fight against the dominant ideology. Thus, according to Mona Gérardin-Laverge, in linguistic practice we can distinguish three different processes that transform gender and subjectivities. These processes are: "contestation", "deconstruction through critical analysis" and "assertion of one's own power and determination to fight".

Feminist slogans are a challenge. Through linguistic work, they underline the importance given to the meaning of words. Slogans use different linguistic means such as redefinitions, reappropriations or even extensions of terms and words. In the 1970s, feminist slogans took up Marxist or anti-fascist terms applied to patriarchal oppression such as "Rape is an unrecognized fascism" (1789). Some slogans also use semantic hijacking or ironic reworking of discursive structures as in the structure of the definition and of the "dictionary" style in "Feminism is an extremist theory which consists of considering women as human beings" (1791). There is also a use of the militant anarchist repertoire. For example, the diversion of the expression "historical materialism" which becomes "hysterical materialism". Finally, we are witnessing the creation of new words such as "hetero-authority" or "heterorism" and the reappropriation of insults and offensive remarks (Pink Bloc banner: "Free sluts solidarity"; poster of the Pink Bloc: "Proud to be the shame of the nation").

The linguistic work of feminist slogans carries out a deconstruction of the dominant norms and puts forward new discourses in conflict with the dominant one which tries to conceal this conflict over gender through silence. The reappropriation of insulting terms makes it possible to keep a memory and aims,

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[2] POULIQUEN, F. (2019). Autrice, professeuse, procureure… Pourquoi la féminisation des noms de métiers pose-t-elle aujourd'hui problème?. *20minutes.fr*. [online] 1 Mar. Available at: https://www.20minutes.fr/societe/2463075-20190301-autrice-professeuse-procureure-pourquoi-feminisation-noms-metiers-pose-aujourdhui-probleme [Accessed 23 Aug. 2020].

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] Mona Gérardin is suggesting in her article that language is a place of struggle: the performativity of ordinary language in the construction of gender and feminist struggles.

not to erase these insults, but rather to lead in a process of reparation. Feminist collages in the streets give special visibility to these slogans and bring a concrete aspect to their performativity that applies directly to a place that women reclaim thanks to feminism: the street. The performativity of language brings a social dimension to discourses and confers a power of action and of transforming social norms to protest movements that use this power in the everyday language we all share.

Feminist struggles are not the only ones to employ language performativity, LGBTQIA+ struggles also use this performativity within their activism.

How does performative language allow the deconstruction of sex and gender?

Originally, the word "queer" is an insult which intends to point out the "strange" character of whoever it designates. It is opposed to "straight" (heterosexual) and has been used since the 20th century to denounce the so-called "deviant" sexualities. In reaction, from the years 1970s-1980s, groups of lesbians appropriated this term and carried it as a slogan to claim their rights, in the face of an American society of heterosexual, white, middle class norms, to denounce the marginalization and exclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community. More broadly, behind these claims, the word "queer" refers to the desire not to belong to an already existing group.

The goal of the "queer" movement is to challenge the principle of male/female binary by deconstructing the assumptions of sex and gender. Sex refers to biological differences, while gender refers to sexual identity, that is, social and cultural differences between male and female. Based on the masculine/feminine binary, sex and gender are born out of the discourse that sets heterosexuality as the norm in our social reality. The idea is therefore, through language, using the term "queer", to transcribe all social realities to make visible those that it has long agreed to marginalize, or even to criminalize. The way in which these lesbian groups have appropriated the term "queer" has enabled them to claim their rights and to deconstruct a social reality whose norm is heterosexuality and gender binary in an attempt to impose a new one: one that normalizes all types of sexuality, and that deconstructs gender identity based on male/female opposition. The simple act of changing the connotation of a word has, in fifty years, changed perspectives of prevailing sex and gender norms.

Thus, language plays a key role in the struggle for the deconstruction of sex and gender. This is what Judith Butler[5] tends to demonstrate in *Gender Troubles*, an essential book to the development of the queer theory. Butler draws on Austin's linguistic philosophy of language performativity to apply it to the gender question. Indeed, according to her, at birth, when the doctor declares that a baby is a girl or a boy, a situation of language performativity is created. In other words, by saying these words, he or she influences the life of the child, who will then have injunctions gendered according to his or her sex, which he or she will have to comply with throughout his or her life. Butler's conclusion is simple: in order to be a man or a woman, you have to repeat feminine or masculine attitudes every day, based on constructions that have no natural basis. Gender is a product of the norms embodied in performative discourses, like for example, a real girl should have long hair, or a boy should not show his emotions, etc. Therefore, performance is internalized and suffered. This is a social constraint that masquerades as a natural attitude. Since gender is always an imitation, it is impossible according to Butler to be entirely a woman

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[5] BUTLER, J. (1990). *Trouble dans le genre. Pour un féminisme de la subversion*. Paris: Éd. La Découverte.

or a man. No one can always conform to social norms. This is why there are troubles with this gendered bi-categorization of our society.

The use of inclusive writing can then participate in the integration of people who do not identify with this male/female dynamic. Despite the criticisms made about the invisibilization of non-binary people, inclusive writing allows the creation of a neutral term, in particular by using the midpoint. In addition, neutral neologisms like "*auteurice*"[6] or the pronoun "*iel*"[7] are increasingly used, especially in queer circles.

To conclude, it is necessary to wonder about the categories and terms used to describe a social reality, or the carriers of demands. It is interesting to question the democratization of the performativity of language. In the original theories, like Austin's one, only certain people had the power to create a performative situation, like the judge, the mayor, etc. Today, by transforming language, using inclusive writing, slogans or the appropriation of originally discriminating terms such as "queer", anyone can produce a performative situation. The slogans of social struggles have always denounced and questioned the dominant norms and ideologies. According to the linguist Laélia Véron[8]: "Language can be as much an instrument of domination as of deconstruction of this domination. We can therefore grasp language in a process of freedom and emancipation". Thus, as struggles go through language and its appropriation, activists may be led to produce new terms, but also to update forgotten words such as "adelphe", "sorority", or even "paintress", thus part of a historical process.

Because naming right allows us to think well about the human world, the GROW team strives to develop a language that is as inclusive, egalitarian and specific as possible. In order to respect our advocated values of equality, it seems essential to neutralize the degrading connotations resulting from the histories of domination that are carried by many terms and expressions of ordinary language. French society has adopted a partial feminization of names and functions, thus revising some of its preconceptions resulting from a conservative and sexual division of labor, but this is still too little to reach a fully egalitarian society, let us recall that still in 2017, the *Académie Française* qualified inclusive writing as "mortal danger"[9]. Consequently, the transition to a more tolerant linguistic is a constant and daily work that everyone can accomplish by giving more importance to words, their grammar, their connotation, their symbolism and finally the consequences that they can have on the creation of new progressive social codes, just as a voluntary silence can reflect a non-recognition of these struggles.

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[6] "*auteurice*" comes from "*auteur*" (masculin noun) and "*autrice*" (feminin noun), this is the neutral noun.

[7] "*iel*" is the analogue of "they" in English, both do not specify the gender but "*iel*" is a singular pronoun.

[8] POULIQUEN, F. (2019). Autrice, professeuse, procureure ... Pourquoi la féminisation des noms de métiers pose-t-elle aujourd'hui problème?. *20minutes.fr*, [online] 1 Mar. Available at :
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[9] PECH, M-E. (2017). Pour l'Académie, l'écriture inclusive est un "péril mortel". *lefigaro.fr*. [online] 26 Oct. Available at:
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