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A Realistic Approach to the Performativity of Gender

Language is also a place of struggle. (bell hooks 1990: 146)

Abstract

The power of language in performing gender has been emphasized by feminist and queer theorists, such as Judith Butler, who mobilized a concept from the ordinary language philosophy ("performativity") to analyze gender and what she calls the "discursive construction of sex". Her conception has been criticized by various feminist theorists for "derealizing" social relations: forgetting the materiality of the body and neglecting the concrete conditions of women's and non-binary people's work and life. This paper explores how ordinary language philosophy, and especially Wittgenstein's approach of language, may support the Butlerian perspective on gender, in developing a *realistic* understanding of the power of language.

Keywords: Gender, performativity, ordinary language philosophy, realism, Judith Butler

Feminist and queer activists see language both as a place and an object of struggle. They seek to raise awareness of violence and oppression by speaking out (against silencing and invisibilization), by redefining some words, such as "sexual violence" or "rape[1]", and by questioning the role of pronouns (such as "he" or "she") in the naturalization of gender binarism, etc. (cf. Gérardin-Laverge 2018). They have emphasized the role of language in the production of

[1]For example, to include marital rape in the ordinary understanding of "rape".

gender relations and in the construction of gender itself (cf. Abbou 2011). But what is the real power of language, of categories, of words? Aren't they secondary to economic inequalities, to the material conditions of life? With such emphasis on words, might we not be lead to derealize social relationships?

In this paper, I will explore the interest of a Wittgensteinian perspective to develop a feminist approach to gender and language. In feminist and queer theories, it is rather the Austinian notion of "performativity" that has been mobilized to explore the power of words. But if this notion allows us to think about the role of certain speech acts in the production of gender (for example, the assignment of sex at birth by a doctor), it does not necessarily take into account the way gender is more widely constructed in our everyday speech and linguistic interactions. In order to shed light on this construction, the Wittgensteinian approach of language can be very helpful. First of all, I will present how important is the power of language in doing gender, and even sex, according to feminist and queer theory. Then I'll explore the interest of ordinary language philosophy (OLP), and especially Wittgenstein's, to develop a *realistic* understanding of the power of language. By creating a dialogue between Wittgenstein's approach of language and Gender and Language Studies, I will finally defend a realistic perspective on the role of language in doing gender.

1. Doing Gender in Language

Initially a medical concept[2], the notion of "gender" has been taken up by feminist theories[3] to develop a constructivist perspective, i.e. to analyze the social construction of men and women and to name what is socially constructed in contrast with the biological or natural given, called "sex". In the 1980s and 1990s, this distinction between given sex and constructed gender, and the primacy of the former over the latter, have been questioned from various feminist perspectives, such as Marxist feminism or post-structuralist

[2]Developed in the 1950s by the psychologist John Money and the psychiatrist Robert Stoller.

[3]It begins with Ann Oakley in 1972.

feminism. The French materialist feminist Christine Delphy, for example, considers that "gender precedes sex": certain physical traits are considered as significant differences within the framework of a binary system of gender, which grounds the patriarchal system of domination and exploitation (cf. Delphy 2001). In her writings about post-structuralist approach to gender, Teresa de Lauretis, for example, argues that feminists have long taken gender as synonymous with sexual difference, and have thus conceived feminism as the political struggle of women, by women, for women (cf. de Lauretis 2007). While this perspective has allowed them to develop a critical discourse on oppression, it has now become "limiting": it is essentialist, it standardizes experiences, reifies social categories and does not analyze the co-formation of gender and other social relations such as race, class, sexuality or age. Thus, it becomes important to develop a critical approach to gender, which no longer refers to an alleged natural sexual binary.

This is Judith Butler's purpose in *Gender Trouble* (1990). She criticizes the idea of sex as a prediscursive fact grounding gender as a social construction. She explains that sex is only given to us through social and cultural discourses on gender. This "given fact" is not given. As gender, it is a cultural construction. Butler uses the Austinian concept of "performative" (cf. Austin 1962), through the prism of Jacques Derrida's interpretation, to analyze this construction, and what she calls the "performativity of gender": gender is not an essence that would be revealed in our acts, but our acts themselves. We "do" more than we "are" our gender. If gender appears as an essence rather than as an activity, it is both because it is regularly put into act in our discourses, behaviors and interactions, and because non-conforming behaviors can be invisibilized or violently sanctioned: conformity to the dominant ideology of gender binary and heteronormativity determines the recognition, and therefore the social existence of subjects.

As it is illustrated by the use of the notion of "performativity", queer post-structuralist perspectives give a key role to the categories of ordinary language and discourses in the construction of gender. Certainly, Butler uses "performativity" in a broader sense than just a linguistic one. In the 1999 "Preface" to *Gender Trouble*, she writes that

it would be difficult for her to give a precise definition of the concept, because the discussions that followed the book's publication have led her to rethink the notion (cf. Butler 1999, *Preface*). And she uses the concept of "performativity" in order to understand very different processes, such as gender in *Gender Trouble*, or silent political assemblies in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory Of Assembly*. In the latter, she asks: "Why would people be interested in this relatively obscure theory of speech acts" (Butler 2015: 28)? She answers that "first and foremost, to say that gender is performative is to say that it is a certain kind of enactment" (ibid.: 32). It means that norms aren't external rules that we would follow, but that they produce our bodies and behaviors, and exist in and through our acts. "[G]ender is received, but surely not simply inscribed on our bodies as if we were merely passive slate obligated to bear a mark" (ibid.: 30). The body is constructed by its own actions, in performing gender norms. But Butler also writes that:

> Performativity characterizes first and foremost that characteristic of linguistic utterances that in the moment of making the utterance makes something happen or bring something into being. (ibid.: 28)

> My wager is that most of us have had our gender established by virtue of someone checking a box and sending it in [...]. In any case, there was doubtless a graphic event that inaugurated gender for the vast majority of us, or perhaps someone simply exclaimed into the air, 'it's a boy' or 'it's a girl' [...]. In some ways, these all remain discursive moments at the inception of our gendered lives. (ibid.: 28-29)

Thus, Butler's paradigmatic example of the performative production of gender is a speech act: the assignment of sex at birth by doctors, who, by declaring "it's a boy" or "it's a girl", pretend to note a biological fact that is merely descriptive, while they are in fact assigning to children a gendered social identity that will be decisive for the rest of their existence. Therefore, there is a tension in Butler's use of "performativity": on the one hand, the notion helps her to give a key-role to the power of language, and to develop the idea of gender performativity on the ground of paradigmatic examples that are speech acts (such as sex-assignment at birth by doctors). On the other hand, Butler moves the notion away from its linguistic ground, to use it as a theory of action, as a way to think gender embodied

performance. Thus, if we have to underline Butler's distance from a merely linguistic conception of performativity, the role of discourses remains crucial to understand the performativity of gender.

Despite the apparent similarity of their analyses (a critical constructivist perspective on gender, which no longer refers to sex as a natural grounding), Butler has been strongly criticized by materialist feminists such as Delphy, who accuse her of forgetting the materiality of bodies and social relations by reducing the social to discourse. The notion of performativity, by focusing on the discursive production of gender, remains at a representational and symbolic level, and loses sight of the materiality of social life. Is the radical constructivism developed by Butler, who underlines the role of language in the production of sex and gender, likely to lose contact with reality, to derealize gender and social relations and to fall into a kind of "discursive monism"? To answer, I suggest that we should replace the notion of performativity, often used as an isolated notion by later theorists, in the more general framework of OLP, and in particular the thought of the later Wittgenstein, which opens interesting perspectives to analyze the role of speech in the production of gender through a realistic perspective.

2. A Realistic Approach to the Power of Language

Sandra Laugier defines OLP by the attention given to ordinary statements, to our common language, which is the "repository of what we understand as 'real'" (Laugier 1999: 159). Thus, according to Austin:

> When we examine what we should say when, what words we should use in what situations, we are looking again not merely at words (or 'meanings', whatever they may be) but also at the realities we use the words to talk about. (Austin 1956: 8)

Moreover, Wittgenstein considers that philosophical investigation must focus on our ordinary uses of language, not only to explore the meaning of words, but to understand what *are* the things about which we speak:

> One ought to ask, not what images are or what happens when one imagines anything, but how the word 'imagination' is used. But that does not mean that I want to talk only about words. For the question as to the nature of the imagination is as much about the word 'imagination' as my question is. (PI: § 370)

Indeed, the *Philosophical Investigations* begin with a critique of a traditionally referentialist conception of ordinary language, as presented, for example, by Augustine. According to this conception, I first learn the names of things, and the connections between words and things, which then allow me to combine words into new statements. Language is linked to reality by "ostensive definitions", which consist in going outside language to connect each word to the thing it designates. For Wittgenstein, "the ostensive definition explains the use – the meaning – of the word when the overall role of the word in language is clear. Thus if I know that someone means to explain a color-word to me the ostensive definition 'That is called sepia' will help me to understand the word" (PI: § 30). An ostensive definition only works if the learner is already immersed both in the language and in the world, and therefore able to understand the very process of the ostensive definition. As Charles Travis points out, Wittgenstein goes against the traditional conception of meaning, which argues that we can speak a language because we have some knowledge of certain facts and principles about that language, which enable us to make correct use of it in new situations, and to determine in advance and independently of the context whether this or that use of a word is correct (cf. Travis 2003). Thus, the meaning is not "a thing of the same kind as the word, though also different from the word. Here the word, there the meaning" (PI: § 120); nor "an atmosphere accompanying the word, which is carried with it into every kind of application" (PI: § 117). It always depends "in what special circumstances this sentence is actually used" (ibid.), and "for a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in language" (PI: § 43). As Travis explains: in all cases, meaning has a certain sensitivity to the use of words; and, in most cases, there is coincidence, identity between meaning and use (cf. Travis 2003).

Therefore, to determine the meaning of a word or the meaning of a proposition, we must put them back into particular language-

games, i.e. situations that show what is expected of a word in a given context. Language-games "model" our use of language by showing the specified way that words are connected to life. It means that there is nothing like a fundamental, unique, stable meaning which would give once and for all its sense to a word and be common to all its uses. For example in PI: § 66[4], games, and uses of the word "game", are linked to each other not by a set of common features, but by a "family resemblance": just as two cousins may look like each other because one has the same nose as their grandmother, while the other has the same eyes, so basketball may be related to solitaire only through the intermediary of chess: while basketball and solitaire have nothing in common with each other, they each have something in common with chess (the competition for the former, the presence of a board and pawns for the latter) and it is only by virtue of this indirect relationship that they can both be subsumed under the same concept of "game". Thus, "we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fiber on fiber. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fiber runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibers" (PI: § 67). Concepts do not necessarily have well-defined limits. This does not prevent us from using them, but in many cases, it *allows* us to use them. It is because my concepts are "sensitive" to situations and uses that they can effectively speak of reality without enrolling it from the outside and projecting structures that would not correspond to it. This sensitivity to use give concepts a real connection to what is particular in experience. They are not obtained by erasing what is singular in experience:

> In case (162) the meaning of the word 'to derive' stood out clearly. But we told ourselves that this was only a quite special case of deriving; deriving in a quite special garb, which had to be stripped from it if we wanted to see the essence of deriving. So we stripped those particular coverings off; but then deriving itself disappeared. (PI: § 164)

[4] "Consider for example the proceedings that we call 'games'. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? – Don't say: "There must be something common, or they wouldn't be called 'games'" – but look and see whether there is anything common at all. – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that." (PI: § 66)

This very plasticity of concepts, their sensitivity to use, connect them to reality. Stanley Cavell has shown that Wittgenstein's grammatical investigations, which consist in grasping which use we make of words in language-games, tell us what things *are*, because uses of words show how language is rooted in our lives, how words are linked to our activities (cf. Cavell 1969, 1979). Our uses of language are the expression of our values and interests. Therefore, grammatical investigations show us how ordinary language is rooted in what Wittgenstein sometimes calls our "form of life". They highlight the connection between our uses of language and reality, understood as what matters to us, and what things are to us. For example:

> The concept of pain is characterized by its particular function in our life. (Z: § 532)
>
> Pain has this position in our life; has these connexions; (That is to say: we only call 'pain' what has this position, these connections). (Z: § 533)

It means that in learning language we do not simply inherit tools for designating things, but that we are jointly initiated into language and "forms of life". This is what Cavell explains: when we say "pumpkin" to a child, pointing at a pumpkin, the child does not then know what a pumpkin is. Because "to know what a pumpkin is" means to know that it is a kind of fruit, that you can cook pies with it, that it can become a carriage for Cinderella, and so on (cf. Cavell 1979). Children learn to speak against the background of an immersion in our world and in our forms of life. They learn not only to speak, but to speak to us: they are both initiated into our ways of speaking and into our forms of life: "Children do not learn that books exist, that armchairs exist, etc. etc., – they learn to fetch books, sit in armchairs, etc. etc." (OC: § 476)

Instead of affirming an abstract relation between words and reality, the notion of "forms of life" helps us to think of language as a set of various practices that take place and make sense in a set of activities and relationships that constitute our existences. And it is not because language-games show what things are *for us* that they do not show what things *are*: as Charles Travis argues, we must do

justice to the role of what is specifically human in our access to the world, if we want to have any real access to it, against the idea that as soon as something specifically human plays a role in it, access to the world would be hindered, because it would abolish objectivity (cf. Travis 2003). Therefore, language cannot be reduced to a mere reflection of an external reality. It is part of reality, and what we call "language" covers heterogeneous uses and practices. Neither can language be reduced to its mere referential capacity: it does not have only one kind of link with reality, which would be the reference. It can be used, for example, to describe an object, give an order, report an event... As Jocelyn Benoist points out, Wittgenstein invites us to turn the anguishing question of the philosophy of language ("how could language speak of the real?") on its head, by asking "what way of speaking would not be" (cf. PI: § 156)? I suggest that the idea of gender performativity, and of performative gender speech, should be placed in the framework of this very Wittgensteinian realism. Thus, the Austinian notion of performativity could be replaced in a broader approach of the links between language and reality. Indeed, if Austin considers that by examining words, one examines what they speak about, his perspective is, according to Jocelyn Benoist, more restrictive than Wittgenstein's: he explores the different forms of action that speeches can be (cf. Benoist 2013). In doing so, he brings a first answer to the reproach of derealizing the world by insisting on the power of language: for Austin, the context, the conditions, the extra-linguistic conventions can "empty" a speech act, and make it fail. There are social and political conditions of our linguistic activity (especially social status that allow to perform speech acts). Language is not an autonomous sphere, and studying the power of words does not imply derealizing the world but rather exploring the arena of social relations. However, as I have shown, Wittgensteinian realism can allow us to go even further in demonstrating that the focus on language does not lead to thinking of it as a separate sphere, to derealizing the social, but instead allows us to consider language as a set of practices that shape our form of life and put us in contact with the world.

3. Ordinary Language and Gender

A Wittgensteinian understanding of the connection between language and reality is particularly interesting for thinking about the construction of gender in discourses in a more global way, i.e. by focusing not only on performative statements, but on all the ways in which our discourses make gender exist and put it into action. Indeed, some statements, like the doctor's assignment of sex at birth, are clearly illocutionary speech acts[5] that have the effect of producing gender. But we cannot limit ourselves to some punctual illocutionary acts to analyze how gender is constructed. Analyzing the performative production of gender in our discursive practices implies not limiting ourselves to the most obvious examples (such as the assignment of sex at birth by doctors) which could lead us to believe that this production is a one-time event and not a repeateded construction. Wittgenstein's vision of ordinary language as a set of heterogeneous practices intertwined with other activities seems likely to account for the production of gender in ordinary life. Such as "children do not learn that books exist, that armchairs exist, etc. etc., – they learn to fetch books, sit in armchairs, etc. etc.", learning what it is to be a "woman" is not only learning the meaning of the word "woman", but learning to speak about oneself in the feminine, to sit with legs crossed, to check the "F" box in administrative forms, etc. Gender is constructed in the intertwining of heterogeneous practices, discursive and non-discursive, which make it exist in our form of life: gendering my little cousin, for example, is at the same time speaking to her in the feminine, using such tone and such words, grabbing her in a certain way to sit her on my lap, scolding her if she gets too agitated, etc. This construction of gender in ordinary discourses and interactions has been analyzed by linguists, and especially from the "performative turn" of Gender and Language Studies.

Historically, linguistic study of gender has been deployed according to three paradigms of analysis, the last of which I find particularly interesting. As sociolinguist Luca Greco explains in his presentation of Gender and Language Studies, the first linguistic

[5]Defined by Austin in How To Do Things With Words (1962).

studies on gender, with Robin Lakoff's pioneering article, "Language And Woman's Place" in 1973, began by considering that women and men speak differently because of patriarchy and male supremacy. For example, women use more tag questions that reveal their linguistic insecurity. From this perspective, linguistic study consists in observing how gender reveals itself in the interaction, and how social inequality is reflected in linguistic interactions. Social relations are primary in language, which is more likely to reflect them (even if it can, in a second time, contribute to reinforce them). Greco names this approach the "domination paradigm" (2014: 16). He criticizes its referential vision of relations between language and reality, and its essentialist vision of genders. Indeed, the domination paradigm assumes that there are two groups, men and women, who speak differently. It erases gender heterogeneity and construction. At the same time, a "difference paradigm" (Greco 2014: 19) has been developed by linguists based on the idea that girls and boys have different interactional styles and linguistic resources because they have been socialized differently. Deborah Tannen, the main representative of this current, concludes that there is an "eternal misunderstanding" between men and women (ibid.). This perspective has been criticized for standardizing and reifying categories, relying on unquestioned stereotypes, and developing an essentialist and binary conception of gender. For Alexandre Duchêne and Claudine Moïse, the works that are situated in this perspective are based on stereotyped presuppositions (for example, politeness or talkativeness in women) with consequences for the relevance of their results: because they presuppose what they seek to demonstrate (the difference between men's and women's talk, for example), they uncritically find it in their results (cf. Duchêne and Moïse 2011: 13).

On the contrary, a third paradigm, the "performance paradigm" (Greco 2014: 20), doesn't explore how presupposed gender identities reveal themselves in different ways of speaking but explores how gender identities are constructed in speeches and interactions in a dynamic and heterogeneous way: they can be assigned, negotiated, imposed, subverted in interactions. The "performative turn", inspired by Judith Butler, names a change in the way scholars

consider gender: from a being that expresses itself in linguistic uses and attitudes, gender is now considered both as a norm in the background of ordinary interactions, and as an identity people perform through their ways of speaking together. Participants' identities are thought of as the result of polyphonic language practices, and emphasis is placed on gender heterogeneity, including age, race and class. Discourse is not seen as a mere reflection of reality: reality has a discursive dimension, and language is a performative activity in which gender categories and identities are produced, imposed, negotiated and interactively constructed (cf. Greco 2014). This performative turn in Gender and Language Studies has crucial consequences: by emphasizing the interactions between speeches and social structures, this perspective helps us to understand that gender binarism and heteronormativity can be both constructed *and deconstructed* by our discursive practices, and makes it possible to destabilize gender through discursive practices, such as struggles against unequal distribution of the ordinary conversations or queerization of language (avoiding gendered binarism in pronouns by using other forms, such as "they"). It gives weight and meaning to feminist and queer struggles about language, words, categories and meanings.

To conclude, replacing the idea of a "performativity of gender" within the more general framework of OLP, and especially Wittgensteinian realism, helps us to understand how gender can be both constructed and deconstructed in ordinary language, and to understand this construction in a realistic way, including the whole variety of our linguistic uses and interactions.

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