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## Language, gender and subjectivity from Judith Butler's perspective\*



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### Abstract

The present paper seeks to view language through the prism of gender as social practice as delineated by Judith Butler. Following up on the notion of gender as an entity distinguished from biological sex, she tends to base the notion of a set of normalizing practices that determine gender identity. In so doing, she believes that gender is discursively made or constructed performatively. In her view, the social discourse aligns economic power with a manly power structure where women are dismissed altogether. On the other hand, social and linguistic structures are closely inter-related and serve to perpetuate the dominance and imposed gender identity the latter one of which is actualized through imitated performativity. The article also explores dimensions of gendered practice regarding subjectivity and repression. Butler's views, though quite intriguing for post-structuralists and postmodern scholars, have been criticized on the grounds that it fails to empower women, follow a political agenda, promise any moral basis.

**Key word:** Butler, gender language, performativity, subjectivity

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## Introduction

Language and discourse are processes that influence society, literature and philosophy since language and its dimensions of dynamism enable humans to establish themselves as gendered subjects. In fact, the influence as such is conspicuous in society and plays the role of an agent or motive. Through employing a conventionalized association between the signifier and signified, individuals in human societies maintain and preserve solidarity in a unified system. Any instance of language use not only embodies but also reveals signs and phenomena that have already been enacted and experienced by individuals. Correspondingly, 'language' externalized in the form of socio-historically situated event or act is interconnected with ideology, rituals, identity, ideas and values and is as such closely associated with organization of society.

Speech is a system that plays a crucial role in post-modern and post-structuralist interpretations representing real-time speech processing in the operational cycle. It is the speech that is recorded in the collective memory and works its way deep into the cultural construction in the society. As Austin (1976) puts it, speech is the actualization or a partial actualization of an act. Butler as a post-structuralist was heavily influenced by meaning deconstructionists like Derrida and her dual subject (gender vs. sex) as clearly demonstrated in the title of her thesis entitled '*Subjects of Desire, Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century*' might have been developed due to such an influence (see Butler, Sabot, and Young, 2012).

On the other hand, Butler draws upon the Austinian notion of speech acts introducing '*performativity*' so as to revolutionize 'sex' as a biological entity. Of course, speech for her is a medium through which the nature of sex-related identity is designated and formulated. Additionally, Butler explicitly states that norms and conventions that account for sexual reality are in a way incorporated in the language, its rules, and patterns. From this point of view, performativity functions as repeated, quotational acts through which discourse manifests itself. Performativity of language, therefore, is actualized upon objects and the performative action is a symbolic act and its actualization follows from social situations and distinctions as prerequisites. The elements and structures of language are therefore symbolic and performative representations and undergo changes in the light of social changes. Situations and contexts for performativity in a society can serve to define sexual and linguistic identity where speech acts are the mechanisms for social representations.

Among many conceptualizations of language, that of Judith Butler seems to be quite unique in addressing the issues of gendered act and the way language (as discourse) contributes to shaping feminine and masculine identities. From Butler's perspective, language not only serves to impart a gendered quality to speech and literature, but also can be formulated from this new perspective. Therefore, one cannot disregard a feminized perspective shared by post-structuralists such as Butler, Kristeva, and Irigaray. In fact, the way Butler sees the language is through the lens of gender.

### **The concept of gender problematized**

'Male' and 'female' (or occasionally 'male' *vs.* 'female') as omnipresent, universal linguistic labels appear to be distinct, if not to say significant, enough regarding the way humans see themselves and others in the world. Earlier views and conceptualizations of gender were essentialist in nature, i.e. feminine vs. masculine identities were deemed to have an evolutionary, biological basis which are stable, determined, and not subject to any change (Butler, 2000). A turning point in conceptualization of these labels was the distinction made between 'gender' and 'sex' thanks to scholars like Robert Stoller (Stoller, 1968). This very ground-breaking dichotomous distinction which was meant to de-emphasize the essentialist conceptualization appears to have brought along more perplexity than precision since the relationship between the two terms sounds far from straightforward. The dominant view is that "[w]e grow up with the idea that a person's gender is determined by their sex . . . and we develop the idea that sex and gender are binary" (Ton, 2018, p.6). 'Sex' is associated with the biological characteristics and gender involves "how much feminine and masculine behavior an individual displays" (ibid, p.6).

The picture is, however, not that clear and convenient polar distinction that seems to conveniently settle the debate is challenged by scholars such as Butler. According to Butler "If sex and gender are radically different, then it does not follow that to be a given sex is to become a given gender; in other words, 'women' need not be the cultural construction of the female body, and 'man' need not interpret male bodies" (Butler, 1999, p.142). In rather radical terms, Butler believes that gender is performative, that is it is a matter of doing rather than being. More specifically, the realness of gender lies in its performing, and it is a set of gendered acts that determine our masculine or feminine identities. She proceeds to state that "it seems fair to say that certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity, and that these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in way" (Butler, 1988, p. 527).

Such a perspective bears strong feminist implications whereby the concept of body as a natural, biological entity is rejected. In other words, nature as the basis for a naturalistic explanation for gender reality lacks adequacy.

Feminist theory has often been critical of naturalistic explanations of sex and sexuality that assume that the meaning of women's social existence can be derived from some fact of their physiology. In distinguishing sex from gender, feminist theorists have disputed causal explanations that assume that sex dictates or necessitates certain social meanings for women's experience (Butler, 1988, p. 520).

This line of thinking is shared by philosophers with strong and highlighted phenomenological subscriptions within which distinction is made between *human body* as a bio-physiological entity on the one hand and the *meaning* ascribed to human body. Philosophers such as Merlau-Ponty, see human body as a subjectivity that is

historically significant rather than a species' sexual entity. It can, thus, be argued that feminism and phenomenology look beyond mere biology for theorizing the human body which may otherwise be subjected to essentialist, stereotypical and reductionist accounts of gender.

### **Gender and identity**

Influenced by Foucault, Freud and Derrida, Butler has sought to re-define individual identity. She suggests that language plays a crucial role in shaping the individuals' identity. Linguistic patterns, surrounded by social structures, introduce changes into our gender roles or make individuals re-construct them. On the other hand, language cannot be constrained by either of the genders; rather it is shaped by their interaction. Butler believes that gender is in fact never constant as it acts variably (Butler, 1990) since it is constructed by socio-cultural elements. Additionally, gender performativity can have different realizations where language plays a key role because '*language patterns*' are in fact '*social patterns*', and comprise sociocultural norms. One can, therefore, say that social structures and norms are repeated within some kind of tragicomic, hypochondriac ritual (Vidal, 2006).

Butler (1999) suggests that the idea of a gender identity is socially made, politically charged and informed by a socio-historical context of a male-dominated society and other social laws. Gender is the cultural embodiment of a sexed body and is shaped and constructed through social mechanisms as well as through internalized discourse and tend to perpetuate it (ibid, p.57). She further argues that gender identity is an "agentic process of achievement" (Butler, 1999, p. 50) that we produce because of constraints from society. Repeated gender performativity is what "enables a subject" to be the normative 'male' or 'female' (Butler, 1993, p. 95).

According to Butler, gender norms, behaviors, dress, and demeanor reciting instances is considered necessary if a person is to "count and persist as a credible gendered subject" in society (Lloyd, 2007, p. 64). Thus, we are compelled to act out our expected gender identities in order to become signified in society. This conceptualization of identity differs from the traditional explanations of identity formation in that it embodies both agency and structure in accounting for discursively constructed performativity. For Butler, the traditional concept of identity to is too rigid, and too stable; on the contrary, the contextual performance is fluid, and thus subject to change. For Butler, "performativity is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names," thus taking cues from culture that one in turn reiterates and maintains via the process of interpellation (Butler, 1993, p. 13).

Butler (1999) states that the masculine signifying economy, which describes women as opposite of men, or the other sex, which is body-oriented and subordinate, whereas males are the marked sex, the mind-oriented, existential subject within the societal context. This masculine signifying economy is no doubt internalized by both men and women, which limits the opportunities for full expression of one's self, as women and men are compartmentalized and divided within a binary division of power relations. Butler (1999) argues that through coercive power and force,

“intelligible genders” (ibid, p. 24) or subjects, are created. By intelligible, Butler (ibid) is referring to the socially acceptable gender roles that individuals come to perform, that fit nicely into the binary gender categories of masculine and feminine, and heterosexual. Therefore, only those with “intelligible genders” (ibid, p.23) or those which maintain the heterosexual, male dominant relations among sex, gender and sexuality are recognized and rewarded in society. In fact, the intelligible feature of gender grows out of the social recognition. Intelligible genders stand for and institutionalize relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire. To put it differently, social practices discourage and prohibit any absence of continuity and coherence among the three concepts.

The internalization of the intelligible subject undoubtedly can have an impact on marginalized young women, as they do not resemble the norm, or signified subject in society. Beyond gender, the concept of intelligibility can be applied to other social categories such as race, class and disability, as subjectivity is given only to those who fit into and reiterate the dominant norm Butler (ibid) argues that as we internalize our socially acceptable, intelligible genders, we come to perform our genders with the practice of “repeated stylization of the body” within the “highly rigid, regulatory frame,” (p. 43) that is the masculine signifying economy. For female youth, these repeated performative acts may include passive personality traits, repressed speech, feminine clothing, and hairstyle and focus on the body in the creation of the overall ‘image’ that is feminine.

#### **Gendered subject within speech**

Following Butler, we are constantly involved in practicing and reiterating the force of language by performing linguistic acts. For instance, when we refer to people as ‘men’ or ‘women’, such a reference is developed within speech and has outward representations in society (Butler, 1997). Additionally, speech production of the subject can be equated with the performativity delineated by Butler. Within these very contexts of actions that embody repetition and social habits, the subject can assume roles. From this perspective, performativity turns into absolute power (ibid, p. 49). From the birth, linguistic patterns demonstrate their performance and power. Just like the labels ‘girl’ or ‘boy’ that determines gender, the individuals’ gender identity can emerge in the society. Therefore, the individual subjects his/her identity and gender to performativity not only through language but also through recurring linguistic patterns. This is because gender norms are already repeated idealistic patterns that normalize our behaviors and shape our discourse.

Very much like subject that possesses an integrated pattern in physical and linguistic norms, language also influences our gender. In other words, society imposes its norms on us thereby determining our gender. Butler sought to find an answer to the question *‘What makes a subject and gender out of us?’* In her view, self is a function of Foucauldian power beyond which subject is determined (Butler, 1997). To put it differently, this power precedes subject and incorporates social norms, situations, and orientations. In fact, for Butler, all the conditions that actualize speech

or 'action' are essential; however, unlike Austin who believed that the power structure of discourse is conventional, Butler associated it with social and ritual norms. On the other hand, discourse is viewed as a corporal act where a type of speech complemented by corporal enunciation" (Butler, 1997, p. 32).

According to Butler through *repeating* gendered roles we come to *perform* our identities based on the social pressure or normative discourse that governs society. This can contribute to a better understanding of how gender is socially constructed through linguistic practice, symbolic interaction and socialization all of which are governed by normative frameworks that support rigid gender scripts and social categories. *Performativity*, according to Butler is the repetition of acts in time, which are controlled by the dominant discourse on 'who is normal'. In turn, the individual that perpetuates the normalcy in complying with the regulating social discourse.

Over time and on a larger scale, Butler believes, the regulatory nature of dominant discourse and its impact on the psyche can get in the way of social justice and equality, and "can compartmentalize, stereotype and harm individuals". Therefore, Butler's theories and concepts from *Gender Trouble* (1990, 1999) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) comprise a vast array of implications for theory and practice in humanities. In fact, her views are of post-structural nature that draw on the socio-historical roots of gender socialization, and how this can impact the personal lives of young women. Her post-feminist perspective also addresses the intersectional nature of women and critiques the vague and often homogenous perspective of modern feminism in relation to sexual orientation.

Under the influence of Foucault's '*regulatory power*,' she delineates gender, identity and performativity conceptualizations and how the power of language, symbolism and the force of the status quo, contribute to behavioral and social formation, while also determining and establishment of social position through many instances of performing. Butler's view of identity departs drastically from traditional notions of agentic identity development and achievement. She tends to view the concept of identity as the performance of a repetitive set of acts that women and men come to express "in agentic but constrained terms" (Lloyd, 2007, p. 56).

### Repression

Butler believes that socialization within the masculine signifying economy can have negative effects on the unconscious psyche suggesting that the normalization of heterosexuality is so insidious that it has become an accepted part of Butler's concept of normative violence can be useful in understanding how we come to continually establish and maintain our cultural and gendered patterns of behavior. As Hough puts it,

For marginalized female youth, it is theorized that adapting to a stigmatized context and interacting in an environment that does not support one's internal sense of self can undoubtedly cause turmoil in one's life. Attempting to cope with the demands

of adolescence and the negotiation of a sense of being "different," may prove to have detrimental effects on one's psychosocial functioning, as they are forced to either repress, adapt, or falsify themselves in order to fit in and survive. Furthermore, pressures to adapt to rigid gender scripts that uphold beauty ideals and hetero-normative relations as presented in the mass media may add to the difficulties in solidifying one's identity. (2010, p.23)

Since gender labeling as gendered labels are normative and are assigned through dominant discourse (in the family, media, etc.), Butler seems to support the conviction that those repeated performativity concerns the socially appropriate and acceptable outward representations of identity or roles. Such performances over time are shaped by the social structure and other opportunities for self-expressions and desire are repressed. Interestingly enough, in this way, the social structure with its dominant discourse limits the possible gender representations through normative, repeated performativity which in turn dictates sexual desire. In other words, one of Butler's contributions is how socially accepted gender influences the biological function of sex which is closely associated with desire, though of course in a repressed manner.

In fact, the feminine view and attitude can change social and emotional issues. The way a mother sees the child differs from that of a father since each attitude involves its own identity-oriented social perspective and context, but this very context can overshadow social gender or even change it profoundly. At any rate, there are not any fixed genders (Butler, 1990). As mentioned earlier, Butler draws upon speech acts as performativity so that the nature of sex can undergo changes from a purely biological concept to a socially constructed entity. The speech that grows out of the interaction between ego and society are the mediating elements in Butler's terms that determine and account for the nature and reality of sex. Butler believes that humans are not born with an inherent masculine or feminine identities, rather it is through their personal memories, and their status in history and discourse that they actualize a conceptualization of 'man' or 'woman'. In fact, sexual distinctions that have biological origins like feminine and masculine roles are founded upon social structures. On the other hand, the sexual beings (i.e., man or woman) originate from a structure that Butler labels 'performative' since sexual norms are not descriptive or prescriptive (Searl, 1998). Along these lines, Butler employing performativity (discursive construction of the world around you through discourse) dissociates sex from its biological origin to demonstrate the interconnected relationship between sex and gender. In this way, gender is not based on biological sex, but conversely it is sex that is socially represented by how gender is discursively and performatively made.

### **Subjectivity and Abjectivity: Bodies that Matter**

Butler proposes that subjects are signified provided that they comply with viable, intelligible social grouping. The white-skinned, male, heterosexual, vigorous subject

acts as the reference point against which all other social subjects must be compared. They are considered exemplar through dominant discourse, and thus granted the rights and privileges of subjectivity. Therefore, those who do not fit into such social categories due to their gender, sexual orientation, or racial and ethnic backgrounds, are seen as odd-one-outs and “abjected” (Butler, 1993, p.3) as non-fitting subjects that are denied recognition as normal. The term abjection is defined as “excluding what is unclean, repulsive or improper” in order to signify and recognize the proper subject (Lloyd, 2007). To be considered ‘abjected’ is to be ripped off “subject status” (Butler, 1993, p.3) and be labeled abnormal or aberrant. Butler (1999) delineates that “the “abject” designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered “Other.” This appears as an expulsion of alien elements, but the alien is effectively established through this expulsion” (p. 5). Therefore, those who fail to comply with the discursively standardized labels of ‘male’ or ‘female’ are assigned to the category of abject beings that are unwanted, alien and non-conforming. One can more specifically argue that from this perspective binary labels imposed by the society alienate different individuals, turns them into miserable entities lacking thinking and feeling capacity.

This concept of Butler’s is in line with social practice values revealing the political and oppressive nature of discourse and the way individual subjects can undergo backgrounding and foregrounding in society.

Butler’s argument that there is no identity outside cannot make sense independently of language cuts across the traditional distinction between surface and depth, the Cartesian dualism between body and soul. In the third chapter of *Gender Trouble* she draws upon Foucault’s book *Discipline and Punish*, in which he challenges ‘the doctrine of internalization,’ the theory that subjects are formed by internalizing disciplinary structures. Foucault replaces this with ‘the model of inscription’, p. as Butler puts it, this is the idea that “[the] law is not literally internalized, but incorporated, with the consequence that bodies are produced which signify that law on and through the body” (ibid, p. 134–5). Because there is no inner gender, therefore law can never be internalized.

Her theories are clarified in *Bodies that Matter* where Butler emphasizes the Derridean and Austinian underpinnings of performativity that are as yet only implicit in *Gender Trouble*. “If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity,” Butler writes in the third chapter of *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1999, p. 136). In that case, it must be possible to “act” that gender in ways which will draw attention to the constructedness of heterosexual identities that may have a vested interest in presenting themselves as “essential” and “natural,” so that it would be true to say that all gender is a form of parody, but that some gender performances are more parodic than others. Indeed, by highlighting the disjunction between the body of the performer and the gender that is being performed, parodic performances such as drag effectively reveal the imitative nature of all gender



identities. "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency," Butler claims; "part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender" (Butler, 1999, p. 137-138).

### **In the light of post-modernism and post-structuralism**

The terms post-modernism and post-structuralism have been used synonymously both indicating a mostly American development that address a crisis in western thought that have had many reverberations in art, society and culture. Developments in modernism and structuralism are largely indebted to F. Saussure for the identification of formal structures and objective images and signs. Such formalism could come up with a fixed, ideological and static definition (signification) of the phenomena referring to the physical appearance of the phenomena. As Saussure believes, language is form and not substance; however, thanks to Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Althusser views of language went beyond Saussurian borderlines introduced a ground-breaking step towards aesthetic pluralism, and phenomenology of humans and ontology. Homogenous discourse turned to heterogeneous one to the extent that even scholars like Jean-François Lyotard were prompted to present their understandings of humans and the world as post-modern doubts within meta-narratives, the entities that were more or less accounted for in straightforward structuralist terms. When looked at from a post-modern perspective, a fixed, rationalist thought typical of modernism sound already collapsed. On the other hand, the relationship between subject and the objective world is characterized by ambiguity, imparting a new quality to the discursive identities typical of language-centered modernity. Foucault who aligned with Frankfurt School believed in emancipator role of discourse that was tightly interconnected with the attempt on the part of the subject (the author) to self-create. In his view, society divorced from power relations would cease to exist because social life is nothing more than simply influencing the people's acts, and therefore power is inherent to any social relation. Drawing upon new patterns of thought, and the dramatic changes that modernist views have undergone, Foucault builds upon the course of intellectual history and compels individuals to discard the iconic identities so that the surrounding socio-cultural systems can be transformed. Butler is, indeed, one among many scholars with powerful inspirations from Foucault's formulations of post-modern identities that challenges binary identities. Following Gannon and Davis,

Binary modes of thought limit and constrain thinking in ways that are oppositional and hierarchical. These binary categories—such as man/woman and good/evil—are implicated in dividing and constraining the world in ways that may be violent in their effects. So too, the category feminist, if understood in binary terms, implies the existence of an imagined and oppositional category that contains those items, people, or ideas that are "not-feminist" or even "antifeminist" (mobilizing

the divisive logic of “if you are not with us you are against us”). Detecting these binary or oppositional and hierarchical modes of thinking, where categories emerge to structure thought on axes of this/not-this and good/bad, is of particular interest to researchers working within deconstructive frameworks. The binaries are implicated in relations of power and in maintaining the status quo. Despite the apparent orderliness of binary thought, categories tend to slip around and to glue themselves onto other binaries, conflating one with another. For example, feminist may be conflated with “woman” (and, conversely, not-feminist with “man”). (2006, p.73)

### Conclusion

Discursive processes account for strong enough influences in social, literary and philosophical terms. Gender is, indeed, a significant angle from which such discursive operations are realized. Though the distinction between gender and sex (or gender vs. sex) provided a convenient framework for dichotomizing essentialist as well as socialized aspects of feminine vs. masculine subjects, the ambiguity surrounding the notion of gender has never been satisfactorily resolved. Accompanying the word gender as a social label for human subjects is a variety theorizations and accounts that can be identified within feminist or epistemological lines of thinking. Butler, who sides with general feminist views dismisses nature as a basis for defining gendered identities. In fact, she sees gender as a discursively made label that is imposed by society on account of repeated *doings* of gender. She coins the terms ‘performativity’ by which she means the acts that the subjects perform in order to comply with repeatedly-occurring normalizing discourse of the society. In this way, the male and female individuals may undergo repression of their desire. Such a desire may manifest itself in tendency to choose the clothes of the opposite gender. In her view, the discrepancy between the desired body that performs, and the gender that is performed suggests that the latter is not innate; rather it is shaped by repetitive performativity in compliance with the discursive practices of the society.

Butler’s approach fits in the big picture that informs postmodernism as a paradigm in humanities and arts. However, the same criticisms that are leveled at postmodernism can pertain to Butlers’ theorization of gender and performativity. First, it is generally believed that such views hardly empower or incite any action that can improve women’s situation. Another line of criticism is that such views that can be identified in feminist thought are apolitical, that is they lack any clear blueprint for a comprehensive change in the social structure. Morality is yet another drawback where deconstructionist nature of such views not only fails to promise any moral basis, but also call all moral foundations into question.

Still others believe that Butler’s perspective as a feminist, deconstructionist theorization suffers from relevance as the problems raised are not the immediate needs of most women in non-western women. Finally, it is generally suggested that

these theoretical frameworks tend to give prominence to discourse at the cost of body and materiality. That sex, gender, and desire are erased and face conceptual impasse since they fail to account for many phenomena like desire and risk falling into essentialism. To break away from the inadequacies, Butler and her fellow feminists must accommodate sexed bodies in the discursive construction of the body.

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