Speech Act Thoughts in Judith Butler's Gender Performativity Theory

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Abstract: Judith Butler's gender performativity theory has blended thoughts such as Austin's and Searle's speech act theory, Derrida's deconstructivism and Bourdieu's economics of linguistic exchanges, and thus contains rich thoughts of speech act theory. With her efforts, the gender performativity theory has been uplifted to the fields of politics, culture, society, and power critique, including abundant thoughts of constructivism theory.

1. Introduction

Judith Butler (born 1956) is the most influential postmodern feminist scholar in the USA, whose representative works include *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, and *Undoing Gender*. She has made extraordinary achievements in multiple fields, such as contemporary feminist criticism, gender studies, political and ethical criticism, and is regarded as one of the fifty most influential figures on mass culture in the 1990s. Her gender performativity theory has blended thoughts such as Austin's and Searle's speech act theory, Derrida's deconstructivism and Bourdieu's economics of linguistic exchanges, and thus contains rich thoughts of speech act theory. In this paper, the speech act thoughts in Butler's feminism and gender performativity theories are sorted, and the relationships of theoretical sources between Butler's gender performativity theory and Austin's and Searle's speech act theory are discussed so as to more clearly recognize and understand the values of thoughts in the speech act theory and the gender performativity theory.

2. Performative and performativity

To trace its source, the term "performativity" in the gender performativity theory actually originates from J. L. Austin's performative utterance. In his early years, Austin distinguished utterances as descriptive utterances and performative utterances. Later, Butler intentionally discriminated between the "performance" and "performativity" concepts, and subsequently, Chinese scholars tend to summarize Butler's thoughts with the "performativity theory". In her view, performativity is operated through reiterations of norms, and those norms preexist performers and restrict performers' performances. She believes that, performativity norms are not fictions of performers' imagination or wills, nor free play or theatrical self-presentation. It can be assumed that, Butler's distinction between "performance" and "performativity" concepts is her re-examination of Austin's and Searle's speech act view. She stresses that, "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate act, but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names". By contrast, performances are concealing of all hidden, undiscovered or non-performable objects; there must be a "performer" behind a "performance", but for "performativity", there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured". Therefore, "performativity" can not be simplified as "performance", since "performativity" has more complicated "norms" than a performer's performance, not determined by a "will" or "choice". It is wrong to equate performativity with performance. It is observable that, Butler's gender performativity borrows the "performative" connotation of speech act from Austin and Searle as well as the idea of différance from Derrida. She closely relates "acts" to "norms" etc, which is quite similar

to Searle's regarding of speech acts as normative acts. Undoubtedly, the two concepts, that is, performance and performativity, can not be completely separated as well. Butler notices a number of overlapping points of the two. For example, "my theory sometimes waffles between understanding performativity as linguistic and casting it as theatrical. I have come to think that the two are invariably related, chiasmically". For her, theatricality is one of the two indispensable dimensions of performativity, and the representation during performativity is with noticeable theatricality, which is shown theatrically to and commented by the audience, as a form of performance. Butler holds that, gender performativity achieves re-thinking of psychoanalysis through the concept of performing; what the reader plays are those he/she selects. Undoubtedly, something unselected might also be significant.

All of these demonstrate that, Butler's gender performativity theory contains abundant elements of speech act theory. For Butler, gender performativity is an act. If a gender is the target object of a particular person, the gender is likely to be a process of act. However, this process may not be fully realized. That is because gender carries non-natural attributes; it is created by acts and is a product of literature and society, not something one is born with. Butler holds that, instead of believing "speakers utter the language", it is better to believe "the language utters the speaker", i.e. "the language forms the subject"; the language has the performativity function, which obviously implies Austin's and Searle's view of "speeches are performances of acts". Further explained, the gendered body is performative as well, which, for Butler, has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. Therefore, Butler's speech act theory is often called the performance or performativity theory. For her, "what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body". Gender is the result and outcome of acts, and also "women" are the effect and result of performances of those social relations. In simple terms, exchanges lead to women. To achieve their own purpose, social relations produce the gender of "women". Women do not preexist any heterosexual marriage or union of tribes, nor are the foundation or cause to achieve the status, only as an outcome of it.

3. Power and performative

A "performative utterance", as proposed by Austin, is a "speech act that creates or generates its named object". For example, "I declare …" is to make the named relation come into effect. According to Butler's understanding, Austin's performative thoughts are limited to the effective expression of personal intentions. For her, performative is a certain pattern of power, as a discursive power. It has the power to create the domain of cultural and gendered subjects, i.e. the power to create or realize subjective outcome. For her, if the discursive power that generates its named object is related to performative, the performative is a domain where power is as discourse, or the venue where discursive production exist. Both Searle and Bourdieu have surveyed speech acts in relation to political power, but obviously, Butler is more influenced by the latter in this respect. For her, the majority of speech acts perform an act during utterance, with a performative binding power. In various statements, such as legal judgment, baptism, oath of office, declaration of ownership, there is a kind of performative, as well as a granted binding power to perform the act. It can be discovered that, Butler's thoughts obviously originate from Austin's and Searle's concepts of "illocutionary force" or "force". Searle once divided the logical structure of speech act into two parts: propositional act, and force, and Butler's discussions display certain similarities to Searle's remarks. Butler has elucidated in detail some classical examples of speech acts put forward by Austin, like court judgments. For her, the judge's speech performative power comes from his will of speech or a certain preexisted authority; it is by citing the law that the judge's "will" is generated and the "preexistence" of text authority is established. By citing the conventions, the judge's speech act acquires performative power, which, however, does not lie in the judge itself, or in his will, but in the citation of precedents. Through citing, a new "act" continuously appears in a chain of conventions with performative power, and citations constitute legal performative power. It can be found that, Butler's discussions here have integrated theoretical thoughts of Austin, Searle, Derrida and Bourdieu, et al.

4. Rules and construction

Butler's gender performativity theory lays special emphasis on the rules of speech acts and the repetitive studies of rules, which mainly originate from Derrida's speech act deconstructivism, but its ideological source must be traced back to Austin's and Searle's speech act theory. Both Austin and Searle claim that, the speech act is performance according to rules, which may most likely have influenced Butler. It can be discovered that, Butler holds that, "gender" is monitored by social traditions or power, and it must follow some conventional norms. It is no longer a determined body feature constructed with forced attributes, but a materialized cultural norm that controls the body. For example, "much of the most important work with feminist and lesbian/gay studies has concentrated on actual regulations: legal, military, psychiatric, and a host of others". Regulatory norms force the materialization of body and gender. To a certain extent, gender is an institutional ideal with forced materialization; it is not only a norm, but also a rule of gendered body. For her, the formation of gender is a highly institutional act, and the body is the result or outcome of this highly institutional act. Thus, gender has a kind of regulatory or productive force, with the power to control the body. Therefore, in her view, the process of gender formation is indeed that of norm visualization. Without connection established with certain norms or a set of norms, visualization is unimaginable. This is a compulsory, coercive practice, with certain connection with this process norm, which, surely, is not complete the cause and the effect. Gender is manufactured through body acts, formed through internalization of manufacture norms. For these body acts, "the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means".

To put it a step further, Butler's performativity theory is completed through reiteration of rules, which is attributed to her acceptance of Derrida's speech act deconstructivism. Through critique of Austin's and Searle's speech act theory, Butler has restated Derrida's thoughts of "quotability" and "repeatability". For her, performative is not a unidirectional "act" or an act declared when a subject generates her/him, but constantly reiterations of a norm or a series of norms, which is the reiteration power for discourse to create the symptom it restricts or limits. The body is reconstructed into a dynamic product of power; the body is inseparable from the regulatory norm controlling its materialization and the denotation of its materialized outcome. For example, in terms of body construction or reconstruction, there is no purely natural body at all; the so-called "body" is actually the result of repeated writing and self-citation of repeated social norms by relying on social enforcement. So is gender. It is not a simple, static fact of body, but repeated citations and presentation of laws and regulations; its materiality is repeatedly realized through ritualizing of norms. Furthermore, the identity of gender is also the effect of repeated performances of gender acts. For her, gender is regarded as an identity slowly formed over time, and generated from a series of stylization of repeated acts. As a speech act, a performative act does not produce effect until it is repeated. Butler compares the repetition of this performativity act as a ritualistic public performance of body. For her, gender performance politically reveals the performance universality of identity recognition. For example, when a baby is born, one says "this is a girl", which, for Butler, is not a statement (i.e. descriptive), but a performative sentence; it is this series of similar performative sentences that create the subject identity of "girl". Gender acts play a role in the scope limited by the norm, and construct themselves with body acts, exercising an effect on subjectivity, so as to construct the gender identity of "girl". Therefore, in a certain sense, the binary division of gender is imposed.

Based on the above views, Butler disagrees about Austin's and Searle's remarks on the connection between the "illocutionary force" and the speaker's identity, authority and "extra-linguistic institutions", and believes that authority is created through repetition or repeated citations of speech act rules. Some "queer" insults, for example, acquire authority through numerous past interrogations, identical utterances and repeated humiliation, as well as multiple citations. It is worth noticing that, what brings performative effect to "insults" is not repetition itself, but the compulsory norms and their patterns reflecting the history of expulsion of vulnerable groups. That means, the citation is also an occasion to expose the norm itself as a privileged interpretation. For her, the gender norm represents a process of norms being repeatedly promoted to produce effect, which also means it has a

weak side. The reasons is that, gender undoing is the most fearful factor for norm repetition. For example, gender identity contains both norm-compromising factors and norm-resistance factors. Moreover, this performative view also implies a possibility of deviation correction with speeches: the reconstruction of original meaning of speech may subvert its ideological suppression, such as the word "queer" for which trope may be done by LGBT groups. Therefore, for her, "repeatability" and "quotability" have eliminated the essential distinction between norms and body initiative, and there is no "gender identity" of essentialism. As long as gender norms can be copied, they can be applied into body practice, and have an ability to change norms during citations. Butler also holds that, gender performativity is also characterized by passivity and compulsivity. For her, gender performativity is performed under coercion, and is a strategy of existence under a coercive system. Thus, gender has become a performance with punitive consequences, and a performativity act under coercion. Surely, gender performativity is not always passive; under special circumstances, performativity acts may also be active, or even subversive.

Butler has uplifted studies of gender identity, amongst others, to political, cultural and social levels, which is similar to trends and tendencies in postmodernist academic studies. For her, gender performativity covers three aspects: norms (gender), performance (citation), and subject (body), which, although theoretically distinguishable, are indeed a self-creation, flowing and changing process, namely, they are integrated to act. Gender norms create performance subjects during continuous repetition and citations. In the "mask theory", there is a presumed subject wearing a mark. For her, gender is indeed not a mask that can be randomly put on or taken off, since there does not exist a preexisting subject for performance, and there does not exist a real "actor" subject under the "mask". Some flaws or failures may always occur in performances when written or cited, and thus the subject may only infinitely approximate to norms, yet never achieve the same perfection as norms do. The gaps or blanks caused by such flaws and failures are the portals for others to return to the body; the reconstruction of subjectivity caused by others during the return gradually evolves to be drag or parody in its real sense. Besides, as a cultural and social construct, gender has been supported and recognized by an increasing number of scholars in humanities and natural sciences. For her, gender performance is not isolated, but conducted in groups. People do not independently perform their own genders, but jointly with others, even though others may be fictional. It is the language and social relations that form the subject, and there is no preexisting subjectivity: even if there is a "subject" of that kind, it is a "subject in process". Therefore, in this sense, gender is no longer stabilized social identity recognition, but a vulnerable and capricious identity constructed over time and an identity institutionalized through repeated stylizations. Social gender is institutionalized through body stylization, and shall be understood in a secular manner. Butler is adept at contradiction elucidation of problems, and includes problem discussions into analyses of unity of opposites, which is her unique writing style. An example is her discussion about how to construct the body and how to resist body reconstruction.

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