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## Judith Butler's View on Performativity

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### Abstract:

Performativity is a multi-facets concept with various origins and contemporary usages in diverse fields such as: law, linguistics, philosophy, gender studies, performance studies, etc. With regard to gender studies, some theorists, notably Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, have the view that even commonplace communication and speech acts are performative, i.e., they serve to define and maintain identity. Based on this trend, performativity reverses the idea that an identity is the source of more secondary actions such as speech and gestures. On the contrary, it inquires into the construction of identities as they are caused by performative actions, behaviors, and gestures. Butler purports that all gender is a set of performances, similar to stage performances, that are culturally and socially scripted.

### Performativity: Controversial Views

For Judith Butler the “performative ” act is a key concept. She borrows this term from J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* and Jacques Derrida's development of the notion, especially in his seminal “Signature Event Context.” Austin is a pluralist who defies logical positivism that tries to create an idealized form of language. Derrida differentiates between two types of statements: constative and performative. Constative statements describe an already existing state of affairs, and, accordingly, are either true or false depending on whether the statement fits that affair or not. Performative statements, on the other hand, bring a state of affairs into the world. They are speech acts that, upon utterance, perform an action. These statements cannot be judged as true or false, but felicitous or infelicitous—depending, mainly, on the “background” conditions of the utterance.

In later research, however, Austin admits that the distinction between constative and performative statements is, by and large, blurry. So, he abandons “the initial distinction between performatives and constatives and the program of finding a list of explicit performative words”(Austin, 1975:121) and considers instead “the senses in which to say something is to do something” (Ibid.). He now distinguishes between the locutionary act (which is the act of speaking a sentence), the illocutionary act (the act we perform by speaking this sentence), and the perlocutionary act (which is the effect brought about by performing the illocutionary act). Thus uttering the sentence “You are fired!” is a locutionary act. By performing the act of uttering this sentence under, again, proper circumstances I will perform the illocutionary act of sacking, and finally, by sacking you, I may perform the perlocutionary act of, say, terminating your health insurance. Thus, Performativity is a bodily practice that produces meaning. It is the presentation or 'realization' of symbolic systems through living bodies.

Intriguingly, Austin's account of performatives explicitly excludes theatrical performance. His analysis, he explains, applies only to words spoken seriously. “I must not be joking, for example, or writing a poem” (Ibid.:9). He continues:

A performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or introduced in a poem, or spoken in a soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance—a sea change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of the etiolations of language. All this we are excluding at present from consideration. Our performative utterances, felicitous or not, are to be understood as issued in ordinary circumstances (Ibid.:22).

Jacques Derrida objects to Austin's exclusion of "nonserious utterances." He believes that all utterances, including jokes, are potential speech acts. He tries to clarify the distinction by adding the concepts of "citation" and "repetition." A speech act is deemed felicitous only when and because it "cites" and "repeats" previous uses of the locution that has become an unconscious component of the background knowledge not only of the interlocutors but the whole linguistic community. Derrida famously wonders:

Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a 'codified' or iterable form, in other words if the formula that I utter to open a meeting, christen a boat, or undertake marriage were not identifiable as conforming to an iterable model, if it were not thus identifiable as a kind of citation? (Derrida, 1988:18).

Our (cultural) understanding of these terms is informed and shaped by the background, stereotype knowledge we possess. Identity is, accordingly, something that is produced, and concurrently performed on us, by these citational repetitions. Concepts like "sex," "gender," "queer," are, Butler believes, examples of such Derridean "citations" and "repetitions."

Nonetheless, a more thoughtful reading of Butler's writings would reveal that she was not only building upon Austin's performative theory, but also, significantly, on Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of the sign. Saussure dismisses the ages-old philological understanding of language as a simple "naming process" which assumes that "ready-made ideas exist before words" (De Saussure, 1959: 66). In his view, a word is not a thing or a symbol that unequivocally corresponds to an external referent, but rather is a "sign" [*signe*] ("a two-sided psychological entity") that is itself composed of two parts: the signifier [*signifiant*] and the signified [*signifié*]. Those two sides of the sign are as inseparable as the "two sides of a sheet of paper" (Ibid.:69); they are concurrently part and parcel of the sign, the signifier being the "sound-image" or the mark, and the signified the "concept" that attends the sound-image. This linguistic sign is, however, arbitrary, in the sense that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary—there is no natural bond between, say, the "concept" book and the "sound-image" /buk/ in English or /kīṭāb/ in Arabic. Nonetheless, arbitrariness, for Saussure, does not in any way imply that the choice of the signifier is haphazardly left to the user of language, but it means that this choice is "unmotivated, i.e. arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified" (Ibid.). Indeed, Saussure reiterates in Chapter One of the *Course in General Linguistics* that "the individual does not have the power to change a sign in any way once it has become established in the linguistic community" (Ibid.).

Butler could not agree more. In *Bodies that Matter*, she makes extensive references to the signifier "woman," and how it is arbitrarily assigned, used,

and performed but quite regularly communicated with a kind of signification that, apparently, lies outside the power of the individual to change that Saussure talked about. This signification acquires more prominence due to the repetitive citation of the sign.

Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment. Indeed, there is no “one” who takes on a gender norm (Butler, 1993: 232).

The signifier is thus haphazardly assigned to the referent. But rather than describing it, the signifier becomes the subject, and the latter is helpless to subvert the attendant perlocutionary effects the signifier brings about.

That said, and since identity politics, Butler believes, is part and parcel of the whole ordeal of this (mal)signification, she makes no hesitation in linking this to politics. She argues that “[t]hat the category [of women signification] can never be descriptive is the very condition of its political efficacy” (Ibid.:221). The unjust discrepancy between the signifier and the actual, realized referent is both an outcome of and a generating factor for male’s political prominence over women. This very discrepancy, no matter how unnoticed it might be, is at the core of language’s performativity. Language prescribes and dictates this discrepancy.

Butler believes that “identity” is a trap, since we don’t have a choice to decide “who” we are—given the performative nature of language and society. She seeks to disperse the ages-old notion of the “original” identity:

One might be tempted to say that identity categories are insufficient because every subject-position is the site of converging relations of power that are not univocal. But such a formulation underestimates the radical challenge to the subject that such converging relations imply. For there is no self-identical subject who houses or bears these relations, no site at which these relations converge. This converging and interarticulation is the contemporary fate of the subject. In other words, the subject as a self-identical identity is no more (Butler, 1993: 229-230).

She, however, thinks that the citational repetitions of the performative identity acts would themselves backfire and open the possibility of marginal subversion of the dominant classifications of gender. These citations can be

“resignified.” Citing the drag as an example of resignification, she says that drag performance exposes the bipolar gender identity as myth, because it reveals that genders, in this case, are copies without originals. And since drag performance is a performative, not constative, act, the subversive counter-citation would displace and denaturalize the dominant homosexual culture and help normalize minorities, such as queers.

We should keep in mind that Butler does not simply trouble foundational beliefs and brainstorm the readers unknowingly, or at least unintentionally. It is her very project that aims at rendering the sex/gender (mis)conception, to quote her, “permanently problematic” (Butler,1999: 163). Following the footsteps of Simone de Beauvoir, she argues that gender is a culturally formulated stigma that is not necessarily tied to the male/female “natural” dichotomy. Butler is interested in this idea of a performativity, and uses it to clarify how gender works. What Butler wants to explain about gender is that gender is something that is made by doing.

She, however, disagrees with de Beauvoir who thinks that sex, as sex, is a biologically undisputed “fact.” For Butler, sex is no different than gender in perspective—it is also a “variable construction” (Butler,1999: 10) that conforms to preset cultural designations. “Natural body” is, thus, merely another myth.

Nonetheless, Butler is quick to qualify her nuance culturally inscribed sex categorization with another conception that not only challenges common logic, but also critically “queers” the process of identity formation. Sex is characteristically culturally formulated understanding. But this does not, Butler concedes, mean by any means that either of these is an “outside” formula inscribed upon an original insider. Butler frowns at the inside/outside binary the same way she does with the male/female distinction, arguable because the former brings about and sustains the latter. Identity and culture are both mental concepts in process that are, consequently, not expressed, but rather performatively created:

That expectation [of gender-sex conformity]... is based upon the perception of sex, where sex is understood to be the discrete and factic datum of primary sexual characteristics. This implicit and popular theory of acts and gestures as expressive of gender suggests that gender itself is something prior to the various acts, postures, and gestures by which it is dramatized and known; indeed, gender appears to the popular imagination as a substantial core which might well be understood as the spiritual or psychological correlate of biological sex (Ibid.: 278-279).

These performatives constitute identity and they, at times, might happen to conform to an expectedly traditional gender-sex binary. The interpretation of these performatives, however, lies in their performative, not expressive, power. That is to say there is no self before the performance of the self, but

rather that the performance has constitutive powers. This is how categories of the self are seen by Butler, such as gender, as something that one "does," rather than something one "is".

Despite that, Butler concedes that our interpretations of these performatives, no matter how pluralistic they might seem, are in fact induced by our preconceived perception. The interpretation of a performative, one could very well argue, is in many ways a reenactment of our own presuppositions which, Butler sharply points out, fall within the so-called "limits" of convention. Agreeing with Derrida's formulation of recitation, she believes that the interpretation of an identity is, unfortunately, sometimes confirmative of the traditional gender-sex conformity:

[G]ender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repletion of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self (Butler, 1999: 179)

The "stylization of the body" and the conventional norms, however, reinforce rather than invalidate, the overall performativity of identity because gender and sex are not natural or prediscursive but performative and this identity is brought into existence by being performed. This "performance," Butler reminds us, is a kind of copy without origin. Performance is an equivocal concept and for the purpose of analysis it is useful to distinguish between two senses of 'performance'. In the more formal sense, performance refers to a framed event. Performance in this sense is an enactment out of convention and tradition.

The repeated performances, combined with the impact of conventional norms we have just discussed, "produce the appearance of ... a natural sort of being" (Heidegger, 1962: 44).

This stipulation would be clearer, I think, if we take a quick look at Heidegger's hermeneutic theory. Heidegger believes that understanding (Verstehen) is possible only when it is preceded by expectations. Our interpretations render these expectations into actualities through "for-seeing" (Vor-sicht). The surprise, say, we experience in reading Butler's hypothesis of identity formation in fact tacitly illustrates and supports Heidegger's argument. Had we not have presupposed expectations, we would have not been surprised. What Butler does not refer to—and it seems that is less interested in it—is the postulation that if we choose to agree with her, then it is because we undertake a leap of faith towards "laying out" (Aus-legen) another presupposition (Ibid.: 188-195).

The same could be said with the performativity of theatrical performance. In Butler, (gender) performativity and (theatrical) performance sometimes bleed into each other and are treated as interchangeable terms. This claim is

especially evident in her discussion of the drag, in both *Bodies that Matter* and *Gender Trouble*. Butler picks up drag performance, a major component of gay culture, to disrupt the “illusion of the natural body” and reiterate its performativity. Drag performance troubles the conventional understanding of gender, since, in it, there is a “rift”—to borrow Heidegger’s term—between the (traditionally conformed) inside and outside: one is masculine, the other feminine. This performance is, by and large, performative; not only does it yoke together traditionally incompatible femininity with masculinity (and hence suggesting a different kind of identity), but it also exemplifies what we have just termed “copying without origin”—it is a recitation of an original that does not exist. Drag, butch, and femme “identities” are good examples that support Butler’s challenge to “natural” sex and gender, and prove that identity is at best contingent.

Contingency, to be sure, is a major concurrent, constitutive factor in not only the performative act, but also the in-progress identity. Butler firmly believes that identity, gender, and sex are not fixed and/or unchangeable “categories,” but, on the contrary, they are processes in progress that modify, shift, and change in accordance with, and because of, recitatoriness:

[T]he task [of resignifying gender acts] is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself (Butler, 1999: 189).

Gender acts displacement, Butler pointedly concludes, entails “resignification,” “interpellation,” or “refunctioning”—she uses these terms almost interchangeably—on the part of the performative. For instance, the performative “Queer!” had been understood and “proliferated” as an insult, but was later appropriated and resignified to have many more meanings and connotations that, nuances as they are, do not necessarily “erase”—to borrow the term for Derrida—the original insult but rather “veers it off.”

Performativity is a matter of repeating the norms by which one is constituted: it is not a radical fabrication of a gendered self. It is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms, ones which cannot be thrown off at will but which work, animate and constrain the gendered subject, and which are also the resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are forged (Butler, 1993:228).

Performativity, thus, becomes for Butler the suppressive, or more specifically traumatic, heteronormative force and, paradoxically, its (potential) opposite.

Butler, however, is careful to tell us, more in *Bodies that Matter* than in *Gender Trouble*, that although gender is a performative that could very well be closely related to theatrical performance and that “the world is a stage” with men and women, literally, having roles to fulfill, we lack the free will

to choose a role:

[T]hat gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is a 'one' who is prior to this gender, a one who goes into the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today. This is a voluntaristic account of gender which presumes a subject, intact, prior to its gendering. The sense of gender performativity that I meant to convey is something quite different (Ibid.: 226)

Indeed, there is no "one" to choose a specific gender since subject formation is dependant on the performativity of the discourse that brings about that subject. For instance, the utterance "It's a girl!" is, for Butler, not a constative statement; on the contrary, it is a performative, one among many, that genderize the baby. The naming of the girl, she writes, "initiates the process by which a certain 'girling' is compelled" (Ibid.2000:232)

Nonetheless, and to the amazement of some, Judith Butler does not call for the so-called liberation of the queer subject. She does not believe that the queer subject—indeed, just like any other social individual—is a naturally existing entity, but rather a tool that discursive power manipulates. This power, Butler maintains, plays with some traditionally imposed sanctions and disciplines in order to keep identity in check. No one, to be sure, is immune against falling under the spell of discourse, let alone queers. For the queer subject to be recognized as a subject, the biological versus cultural construct of identity needs to be revisited, but with a basic recognition in mind: that any attempt to ascribe a definitive content to this distinction is equally futile. "[T]he impossibility of a full recognition ...," says Butler, "implies the instability and incompleteness of subject-formation" (Butler, 2000:226). Recognition, here, constitutes the subject rather than being merely conferred upon it.

In this respect, Butler seems to be revolting against a long-held feminist position. Feminism has consistently purported to draw attention to the easy but mistaken affinity society holds of sex and gender and how this restricts the liberation of women. Simone de Beauvoir, for instance, argues that although the biological basis of male/female distinction in terms of body formation and genitals is true, the meaning ascribed to this distinction and the significance imposed on it are exclusively cultural. In this sense there is no "natural" meaning of gender except the one societies impose, and so nurture, rather than Nature, becomes the norm although it appears the other way round.

Butler accedes to the idea, but rejects to making it the (or even a major) cornerstone of feminism because of the dangers this particular discourse implies. Because culture has virtually shaped our minds in ways that are hard to defy, thinking about the male/female, homosexual/heterosexual

binaries in the hope of raising awareness is itself a manifestation of culture's heavy-handed schema out of which limits we are unable to veer off. When we discuss the biological sex versus cultural gender distinction, we are still debating it while we are still inside that specific culture and, so, this type of reasoning would, even though inadvertently, strengthen the widely held belief in the "natural" binaries that form the two-item set male/female which, especially in the case of queers, is disastrous. The same two categories would reemerge finding prominence in biological sex distinction that would be taken to reflect Nature's all-encompassing binaries. These binaries are, by and large, also performative.

### **Method**

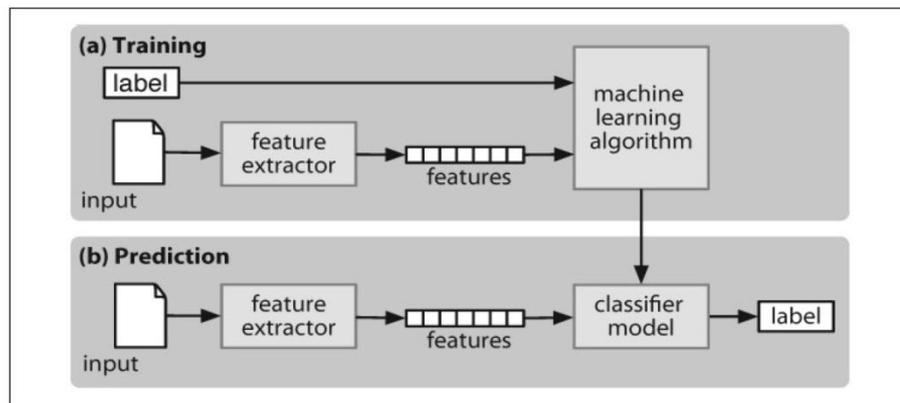
Judith Butler established the idea of gender performativity as a stylized repetition of acts, e.g. language use. In this study quantitative and qualitative analyses of gender play complementary roles. The qualitative analysis of gender and language expression will be quantitatively pursued by measuring features in linguistic style: this method is better known as stylometry. Stylometric studies are usually concerned with authorship attribution to identify authors of disputed works or identifying anonymous works, but can be used for numerous other practical applications as well (McEnery & Oakes 2000:545). A well-known example of authorship attribution is the examination of authorship in Shakespeare's works. Stylometry is not a new discipline and has been around at least since the nineteenth century. Stylometry can also be used to find a correlation between linguistic style and groups of writers or categories of people, such as male and female.

Lexical features such as word frequencies are usually concerned with the most frequent words (MFW). The most common words, function words (articles, prepositions, pronouns, etc.) are, maybe surprisingly, the best features for classification since these features are a good instance of someone's linguistic style (Stamatatos 2009:540). MFWs can be any number of words, but studies have shown that the 100 MFWs are enough for attribution (Burrows 2002). In corpus linguistics, it is not uncommon to look at the keywords of a text; these are usually medium frequent words or rare words that occur more often in one text compared to another text and mark the language use a specific author. However, in determining whether a text belongs to an author, or a group of authors (male or female), it is important not to use medium frequent words because there is a risk that texts are classified according to a topic rather than writing style. For example, if two men write about horses, and that feature is seen as discriminating men from women, a letter by a women is classified as belonging to men when she also writes about horses. Function words are used unconsciously by writers and are therefore topic-independent and better at capturing an individual's linguistic choices (Stamatatos 2009:540). The letters by George Eliot and Marian Evans will be classified with a Delta

algorithm which Burrows proposed in his article “Questions of Authorship: Attribution and Beyond” (2003) and which is now known as Burrows’s Delta. The classification of the data is done with an algorithm where two corpora of authors or groups, in this case, male (M) or female (F), are compared to a third unseen corpus after which the algorithm determines if the unseen texts belong to label M or F based on similarity. Burrows himself measured Delta scores in Excel. Although Burrows did not propose Delta as an algorithm to be used in machine learning, it can be used as such. In machine learning classification of this type is called supervised learning, which takes an algorithm which is trained by providing the correct label (y) of the input (X) which it uses to map features (f) belonging to that label (the features are weighted):

$$1. Y = F(X)$$

The process of a supervised learning task is shown in Figure 1 below.

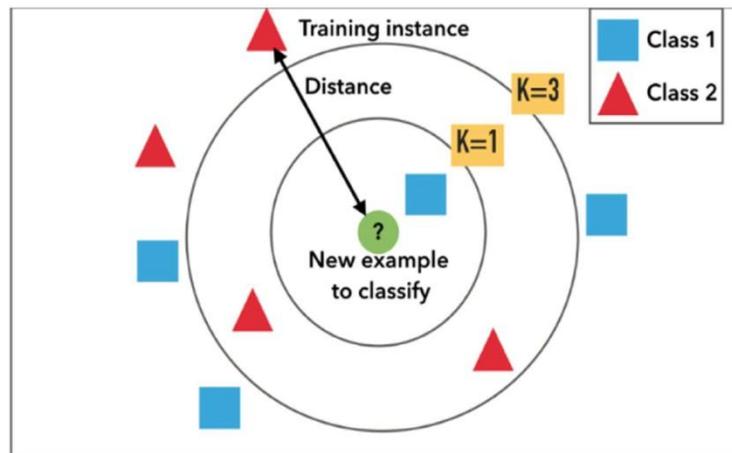


For Burrows’s Delta, first, all standard scores, or the Z scores, of the sets of MFWs are calculated for each subgroup. A Z score shows how many standard deviations a certain point is from the mean. A positive Z score indicates that the word is used more than the norm and a negative Z score means that it is used less than the norm (Stamatatos 2009:549). Then, Delta is “the mean of the absolute differences between the Z scores for a set of word-variables in a given text-group and the Z scores for the same set of word variables in a target text” (Burrows 2002:271). Thus, the difference of the training texts and texts without a label (F or M) is the mean of absolute differences between the Z scores for the MFWs in the training texts and the Z scores of the text without a label. The analysed text is assigned the label with the lowest Delta measure, since it is stylistically similar to one of the texts with the label (F or M). However, Burrows insisted on the use of the phrase ‘least unlike’, since texts with similar Delta scores are not necessarily similar in writing style, but are closer in style than a text with a higher Delta score (Burrows 2002:15).

$$2. \Delta_{(AB)} = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n \left| \frac{A_i - \mu_i}{\sigma_i} - \frac{B_i - \mu_i}{\sigma_i} \right|$$

In the formula,  $n$  is the number of most frequent words.  $A$  and  $B$  are the texts under comparison. The  $i$  is the frequency of given features in either of those texts,  $\mu_i$  represents the mean frequency of a given feature in the corpus,  $\sigma_i$  is the standard deviation of frequencies of a given feature (Eder et al. 2015). Delta returns a matrix of distance scores.

Burrows's Delta is a distance measure and is a variant of the  $k$ -nearest neighbour (kNN) machine learning algorithm, an algorithm that assigns a label to an unseen text by looking for the nearest instance of a known label (Argamon 2007). Like  $\Delta$ ,  $k$  is a distance between one point to another, in other words the boundaries of a class or region that is taken into consideration (see Figure 2). Since Delta works with the immediate nearest instance, the  $k$  in the algorithm will be  $k=1$ .



Once trained, the kNN model will only classify the unknown data by providing a label and an overall accuracy score. The model, however, does not show which words are the most important in determining to which class the unseen sample belongs to. In order to get some insight in the words that are the most important in determining the label, a logistic regression model is used on the training data. The 'weight' of each word is given by the coefficient of the logistic regression model.

**Conclusion**

Butler views gender as an act that has been rehearsed, much like a script, and she adds that people, as actors, come to perform in the mode of belief. For Butler, the distinction between the personal and the political or between private and public is itself a fiction shaped to support an deniable status quo which means that our most personal acts are, potentially, continually being scripted by superior social conventions and ideologies. Butler sees gender not as an expression of what one is, but as something that a person does. Furthermore, she sees gender not as a social imposition on a gender neutral body, but rather as an intention of "self-making" through which subjects become socially intelligible. According to Butler's theory, homosexuality and heterosexuality are not as undeniable categories. A person is merely in a condition of "doing straightness" or "doing queerness".

## الملخص

### وجهة نظر جودث بتلر عن الادائية

اماني مهدي حسين

الادائية مفهوم ذو اوجه مختلفة وله جذور مختلفة واستخدامات معاصرة وحقول مختلفة مثل القانون وعلم اللغة والفلسفة ودراسات نوع الجنس ودراسات الاداء... الخ. وفيما يتعلق بدراسات نوع الجنس فان بعض المنظرين واشهرهم جاك دريدا و جودث بتلر لديهم نظره انه حتى اشكال التواصل المعتادة وافعال الكلام هي عبارة عن شكل من اشكال الاداء أي بمعنى انها تؤدي خدمة لتحديد الهوية والمحافظة عليها. وبناءا على هذا الاتجاه فان الادائية تعكس الفكرة القائلة ان الهوية هي مصدر ثانوي جدا من افعال مثل الكلام والاشارات بل بالعكس انها تحاول الاجابة الى تركيب الهويات كما هي وكما يكون سببها افعال الاداء واشكال السلوك والاشارات. وتذهب بتلر الى ان كل اشكال نوع الجنس عبارة عن سلسلة من الاداء الشبيه بالاداء على المسرح التي تراعي السيناريوهات الثقافية والاجتماعية.

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