

# SILENCE IS A SIGN

**W**e talk to **Prof. Maria Gołębowska** from the PAS Institute of Philosophy and Sociology about performatives.

**ACADEMIA: What does this unclear term “performatives” mean?**

**MARIA GOŁĘBIEWSKA:** The project we have launched involves semiotics, pragmatics and indeed performatives. Semiotics is the science of signs, part of which – according to Charles Morris – is semantics, that is, the theory of meaning. Pragmatics deals with the use of signs, while performatives is an element of the theory of speech-acts. The performative theses appeared within the theory of speech-acts, proposed by John Austin in the 1950s. Performativity is a feature of signs; it describes the possible cultural impact of signs due to the specific way they are used.

**What do you mean by “signs”?**

A sign is any way of demonstrating and indicating something. In semiotics, as a theory of signs, we find an important linguistic basis for considering spoken and written language. This isn't as obvious as it sounds; as recently as the middle ages language and sign were seen as separate, with signs mainly understood as visual data – for example, William of Ockham wrote about sign-boards, shop-signs. At a certain point in the development of sign theory these concepts of sign and language converged, and additionally the concepts of logic, too. The theory of signification was developed in the late middle ages by Ockham, who considered the issues of spoken language and logical judgment, that is how our speech and statements are regulated by argumentation. Let's remember that linguistics is the study of colloquial speech, everyday language. And rhetorical argumentation also concerns colloquial speech, while the logical argumentation is developed in the area of logic. It could be said that Ockham's philosophy intertwines the issues of signification, colloquial language, and logic.

**How is the sign defined contemporarily?**

It would be a certain cultural representation, that is, how we indicate something or express ourselves. One

can say that sign has two basic functions, and the first of them is indicating.

**Such as indicating the position of something?**

That's right; a good example is road signs, as ones which indicate. However, when we talk about expression, that is about second function of signs – it pertains largely to artistic signs.

**Is this what you focused on while you lectured at the Academy of Dramatic Art?**

That's right – I lectured on verbal performatives, especially expressive performatives. In the humanities and social sciences, the performatives of expression is an interdisciplinary domain which enables us to study the impact we have on other people through signs. Performatives examines some topics of marketing as well as the signs of art. The basic question of performatives deals with effective action using signs. Austin wrote about doing things with words, since he believed speech to be a type of action. An earlier concept of speech as action was described by Adolf Reinach in his theory of law, and this concept was partially developed and systematized by Austin in the 1950s. It could be said that performatives originates from rhetoric; it is a developed rhetorical conception which defines how we use colloquial language in everyday communication and how it affects our actions. As customers and audiences of radio and TV advertising, we all know that advertising works by persuasion. Obviously, persuasion is a kind of performatives, but it is an extreme type of performativity. And imperative sentences are such a type of performativity as well, because – we may say – they work in a similar way. But there are many different performative expressions, such as sentence equivalents or specific questions: “Would you like...?”, “Could you be so kind and do...?” They also have a performative power.

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is a philosopher; her studies currently concern the topics of semantics, receptivity and performativity, considered in the phenomenological context.

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**Is the task of expressive performativity to show something using gestures?**

That's right. Austin's theory mainly concerns the performativity of speech, but he writes that silence is also performative. Speech is accompanied by gestures, but speech acts can also be replaced by gestures, which are – in this way – performative.

**Is saying "Go there" and pointing with a finger a performative act?**

It is a very powerful performative act, involving both speech and gesture. But I should also add that Austin defines the performative acts as linked with conventions, because we fulfill these actions using the language and according to definite conventions. We don't always realize what conventions they are and how polite questions such as "Would you like...?" are powerfully performative. It's not manipulation in the sense that we use a certain convention which we accept and which guides our actions. We act as both senders and recipients of such announcements.

the sign indicates. The signs always refer to our way of thinking, but they also refer to external beings. This is a matter of sense and reference.

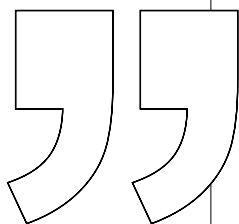
**Nowadays, we talk about the "performative turn". What does it mean?**

The performative turn relates to interdisciplinary research, covering the anthropology of culture, philosophy, and sociology, concerning rhetorical and semiotic matters. Such research has been developing since the 1990s and it concerns issues such as political subjects, that is, ways in which we act, ways in which we are active subjects of social life – not only in politics but in our public and private relationships, in every interpersonal communication and discussion. Performativity is mainly developing in relation to theatrical and semi-theatrical actions. The performative theory is developed by philosophers such as Judith Butler, among others, and it pertains to social actions – the actions of subjects aware of their role in society.

**Tell us about the Academy of Movement Theatre, active back in the 1970s.**

Performative actions mainly aim to blur or eliminate the boundary between the theatrical situation which happens on stage and the audience. This is a result of a shift in theatre practice during the 1970s, and it also harks further back to the theory of happenings and performances of the 1950s. According to Austin, theatrical actions follow a certain convention which in a way suspends performativity. We know that the contract obligatory on stage is different to that in the audience. In the audience we are performative subjects which act in the social world, but a different kind of contract is obligatory on stage. We could describe it as a reality taken in parenthesis, second degree of conventionality. The performative theory of theatre assumes that theatrical action affects the real world; that theatre is socially active.

An example of performativity in visual arts can be found in Marina Abramović's performances; she frequently endures pain and harm as an expressive artistic action and self-creation. On the other hand, her performances define the artist as someone from the former Yugoslavia; as a person with a given biography and own personal history; as an individual from a specific geographical location which carries its problems; someone who defines herself as a free subject in the world, a woman and an artist; as someone who has a right to express herself. This is because different agreements and conventions exist, and not every convention gives us the right to express ourselves. We act in ritualized ways; and Austin's performativity relates just to this ritualization, that is, to certain conventions. What's the aim of performativity? According to Austin, it is to change conventions. We could say that performativity marks relations between an individual



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**Is it the same when it comes to silence or refusal?**

It is, and the meaning can be linked with acceptance. It was John Locke who proposed the concept of tacit consent: if a subject of political action in a liberal democracy does not rise to speak, it can be assumed that this person expresses his or her silent acceptance as part of the given political system, and thus is an agreement with others' opinions. Obviously, silence can also signify refusal – silence which is considered to be a sign.

**Does it mean disapproval?**

Yes; but also within a certain convention, except here it is not tacit consent but a convention of silence as refusal.

**If we shift this theory to elections, Locke would say that if we don't vote we agree to the status quo.**

Not quite, because refusal to participate in elections can also signify disapproval. We have to know what

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person and those conventions in the framework of which the person is acting. From the perspective of individual persons, we have intentions in accordance with which we are acting: I – a concrete, autonomous person – want to say something, indicate something, express something, express myself. However, I express myself following a convention inasmuch as the convention allows it. I am a political subject inasmuch as political conventions allow me to speak. So what is the aim of performativity, according to Austin? The aim is just to change conventions, that is, every individual subject is considered to be an legislative subject. This is a subject authorized to influence legal and political prescriptions.

**It is a shift from the concept of a passive subject holding onto certain conventions, to a concept of an active subject who has an influence on conventions and can cross them.**

Or shape them. Obviously, there are certain groups which are allowed, by convention, to express themselves, and they are artistic groups. That's why performative theory has developed in relation to theatrical actions: theatre provides a space for artistic practice and social life – it is a human community. In short, it is a place where performativity can be practiced and fulfilled. This is a space for actions of individuals who have an intention to express themselves, and it provides the appropriate conventions.

**Let's get back to politics. What can performative theory tell us about the political situation here and now?**

Performative theory should make individuals aware that they are able to act, to influence, especially in a liberal democracy. This has been written about by Austin and later by Butler, who talks about amendments to the US constitution and various kinds of legislation. Performative theory gives individuals the ability to act, but more than anything it encourages them to be active and shows how to be efficacious: artistically and socially, following the law. This is very important. Austin's performative theory is derived from rhetoric, and traditionally rhetoric has two spheres of influence: politics and law. The performative acts, which concern law and legal realm, are directed towards the past, because law deals with the evaluation of facts that occurred in the past. In contrast, politics is mainly interested in the future, since politicians propose projects relating to our future. When we vote in elections, we make a choice between different projects of the future. Therefore, rhetoric has these two main vectors: towards the past and towards the future. One of the goals of performativity is to change legislation. The political subject, socially and politically engaged individual, should strive to amend legislation.

**In spring 2018, mothers of people with disabilities engaged in a long protest in the Polish parliament, the Sejm; were they engaging in a performative act? It was a very clear protest: they were at the Sejm demanding a change in legislation.**

We could say, in terms of speech-act theory, that the protesting people were a great exclamation, a great call. They are a question awaiting answers.

**I cite them as an example because they were desperate, distressed, and their expectations concerned changing the reality in which they live.**

And to change this reality it is first necessary to change the law, that is, the legislation. Obviously, this involves moral issues. Performativity generally involves ethical matters, because conventions allow us to say certain things but not others. Let's consider a common, well-known and discussed example: should a doctor tell their patient if they only have a few months left to live? Or would it be better for them to keep it quiet? Is it better to tell the truth or not tell the truth in

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this case? There is also an ethical issue concerning speech. The problem of how to make promises and state obligations is extremely important in politics, because the impact of promises is different from that of obligations. These matters are also considered in the theory of law and political theory.

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**It turns out that philosophy has a lot to say about reality.**

That's right, even though people generally believe that philosophy deals with issues detached from our daily reality. But, for example, bioethics and philosophy of law are important and close to our lives. Just as performativity, which is a way of defining and shaping the real world.

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