

Contextualizing Gender
Prof. Rashmi Gaur
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee

Lecture - 31
Speech and Subjectivity

Welcome dear friends to this module. In the previous week, we had reviewed Butler's early works including 'Gender Trouble' and 'Bodies That Matter', wherein she has argued that bodies and subjects are constructed in the cultural forms that articulate them. This week we will look at how Judith Butler examines the concept of subjectivity and language and how it helps us to understand the notion of performative agency in the context of gender.

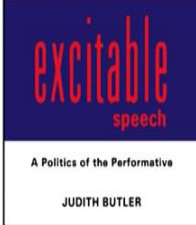
In today's module, we shall analyze the relevance of language and speech in Butler's philosophical approach to subjectivity and gender with special focus on her major critical work 'Excitable Speech,' which was published in 1997. In this work, Butler looks at several efforts to target speech as conduct that has become subject to political debates and also regulations, reviewing hate speech regulations, anti-pornography arguments and recent controversies about gay self-declaration in the US military.

Butler also asks whether and how language acts in each of these cultural sites. She looks at topics like censorship and hate speech and how minorities, particularly from the homosexual community who are the victims of injurious speech, re-signify the words employed against them in social spaces.


(Refer Slide Time: 02:11)

Excitable Speech

- Butler wrote *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* in 1997.
- In this critical work, she examines various expressions of speech -- like hate speech and censorship.
- Butler evaluates elements and events from both the judicial arena and in society.
- 'Excitable speech' includes words and actions that are used to affect a person's emotions either positively or negatively.
- She examines the theories behind the social and political implications of excitable speech.



Excitable Speech Book Cover
Source: Routledge



ITF ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 2


In 'Excitable Speech,' Butler examines various expressions of his speech like hate speech and censorship. She evaluates elements and events both from judicial arena as well as the society. 'Excitable Speech' includes those words and actions that are used to affect a person's emotions either positively or negatively.

She examines the theories behind the social and political implications of excitable speech. During our discussion, we will look at how her take on language and speech is related to the identification and expressions of gender in political spaces. Butler primarily analyses expressions related with derogatory words and actions that create negative emotions in the person who has been spoken to.

(Refer Slide Time: 03:11)

On Linguistic Vulnerability

- Butler asks if our vulnerability to language is a consequence of our being constituted within its terms; and argues that humans are formed in language.
- Language creates the feelings and emotions that support human existence.
- She suggests that people "exercise the force of language even as we seek to counter its force."
- Therefore, injurious speech can paralyze a person and can also create unexpected consequences and responses.
- She presents the idea that language can cause both emotional and physical harm.




ITF ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

Butler asks if our vulnerability to language is a consequence of our being constituted within its terms and argues that humans are formed in language. Language creates the feelings and emotions that support human existence. She suggests that people “exercise the force of language even as we seek to counter its force.”

Therefore, injurious speech can paralyze a person and can also create unexpected consequences and responses. Butler presents the idea that language can cause both emotional and physical pain. A critical reading of speech also brings better clarity to various factors influencing the relation between gender norms and gender positions because the terminologies associated with gender identities are also rooted in language and their linguistic performance plays a significant factor in constructing cultural implications.

(Refer Slide Time: 04:23)

- Butler says that we exercise the force of language even as we seek to counter its force.
- She ponders on the reason why humans are vulnerable before language.
- She notes that it could be a consequence of the fact that we are 'constituted' within linguistic terms.
- She asserts that if we are formed in language, then that formative power precedes and conditions any decision that we make about it, "insulting us from the start, as it were, by its prior power".



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 4


Butler suggests that we exercise the force of language even as we seek to counter its force. She ponders on the reason why humans are vulnerable before language. She notes that it could be a consequence of the fact that we are 'constituted' within linguistic terms.

And she asserts that if we are formed in language then that formative power precedes and conditions any decision that we make about it, "insulting us from the start, as it were, by its prior power". It is perhaps for this reason that linguistic injury appears to be effective and therefore, it is important to analyze the use of selective words and also the modes of address.

The mode of address plays an equally decisive role in portraying its ability to injure or harm. People often accuse others of being 'homosexual' and this is imagined as a derogatory position, Butler condemns this strongly and studies the possible responses that can be initiated in a society.

(Refer Slide Time: 05:43)

- Offensive addressing, like using one's gender as a basis for injurious speech, can paralyze the one it hails.
- But it may also produce an enabling and resistive response.
- To study this possibility, Butler reflects on two prominent thinkers, Louis Althusser and J. L. Austin.
- Butler explains the relation between speech and subjectivity by juxtaposing Austin's understanding of 'illocution' against Althusser's account of 'interpellation'.



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 5

Offensive addressing, like using one's gender as a basis for injurious speech, can paralyze the one it hails. But it may also produce an enabling and resistive response. To study this possibility, Butler reflects on two prominent thinkers Louis Althusser and J. L. Austin.


Butler explains the relation between speech and subjectivity by juxtaposing Austin's understanding of illocution against Althusser's account of interpellation. Austin, a British philosopher, is known for his take on his 'speech acts' and Althusser's concepts decode the political powers behind 'ideology' prevalent in a state.

With reference to these influential philosophers, Butler examines the prospect of how offensive use of language opens the risk of inaugurating a subject in his speech and how language can counter offensive forms of healing.


(Refer Slide Time: 06:53)

Louis Althusser (1918-1990)

- Louis Althusser was a French Marxist philosopher.
- In *Excitable Speech*, Butler reviews Althusser's famous essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" published in 1970, wherein he argued that a person's desires, choices, intentions, judgements etc., are the effects of social practices
- Butler critically looks at his account of interpellation.
- Although Butler does not agree fully with Althusser's account of interpellation, her intention is not to dismiss his theory, rather, to supplement it.



Louis Althusser
Source: Verso Books



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

6

As we know Louis Althusser was a French Marxist philosopher in excitable speech Butler has reviewed Althusser's famous essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' which was published in 1970, wherein he had argued that a person's desires, choices, intentions, judgements etcetera are the effects of social practices.

Butler looks critically at this account of interpellation. Although Butler does not fully agree with Althusser's account of interpellation, her intention is not to dismiss this theory, rather, she tries to supplement it with her arguments. Althusser attained international fame in the 1960s for his attempt to fuse Marxism with structuralism.

His famous essay on Ideology drew on theories of Gramsci, Freud and Lacan to offer an elaborate redefinition of ideology and state power. Notion of subjectivity is central to his writings. Althusser agrees that there is no ideology except by the subject and for the subject. But what is a subject?

Within capitalist societies the human individual is generally regarded as a subject, that is a self-conscious responsible agent whose actions can be explained by their beliefs and thoughts. For Althusser, a person's capacity to perceive oneself in this way is, however, not innate. Rather it is acquired within the structures of established social practices, which impose on individuals the role of a subject.

(Refer Slide Time: 08:54)

The slide features a list of bullet points on the left side, a book cover on the right, and a small video inset at the bottom right. The book cover is red with white text that reads 'Ideology & Ideological State Apparatuses' and 'LOUIS ALTHUSSER'. Below the book cover, the text 'Source: Critical Quest' is visible. The video inset shows a woman with glasses and a purple scarf speaking. At the bottom of the slide, there are logos for 'IIT ROORKEE' and 'NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE', along with the number '7'.

- Althusser argued that ideologies constitute a subject. To explain this, he introduced the concept of interpellation, which is otherwise known as “hailing”.
- Ideologies call out or “hail” people and offer a particular identity, which they accept as ‘natural.’
 - Althusser gives the example of a policeman calling someone in the street.
 - After a commonplace hailing of an individual by a policeman, the individual will respond promptly.
- The power vested in the institution transforms the individual into a subject and the validity of power categorization is provided.


Thus, Althusser had argued that ideologies constitute a subject. To explain this, he had introduced the concept of ‘interpellation’ which is also otherwise known as ‘hailing’. Ideologies call out or “hail” people and offer a particular identity, which they accept as ‘natural.’

He has given the example of a policeman calling someone in the street. After a commonplace hailing of an individual by a policeman, the individual will also promptly respond. The power vested in the institution transforms the individual into a subject and the validity of power categorization is provided. Thus, the dominant class exerts a power over individuals in a manner that is quite different from violent or brute force.

Ideological and political institutions hail the individual in social interactions, giving the individual his or her identity. Here the situation precedes the subject and its autonomy therefore, ideology or the interpellating system is a form of dominant discourse.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:14)

- From Althusser's example of the policeman, it may appear that there is no possibility of any form of agency or disobedience under such institutions.
- But Butler believes that such laws "might not only be refused", but "might also be ruptured" (Butler, 1993, p. 122).
- For Butler, interpellation is something that happens through language. It involves the performative speech acts of naming and name-calling.
- She posits that understanding where speech derives its power to wound, could offer ways to disarm injurious speech.



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 8


From Althusser's example of the policeman, it may appear that there is no possibility of any form of agency or disobedience under such institutions. But Butler believes that such laws "might not only be refused", but "might also be ruptured". For her interpellation is something that happens through language, it involves the performative speech acts of naming and name calling.

She posits that understanding where speech derives its power to wound could offer ways to disarm injurious speech. She finds that Althusser's interpellation can be read as a theoretical mechanism that facilitates a good explanation of ideology, but it also has its limits. But by locating how power is instilled in language use, injurious speech like misogynist and homophobic speech can be strongly countered.


(Refer Slide Time: 11:17)

Regulations on Speech

- Butler investigates regulations created by the US government to reduce or restrict hurtful words and actions directed at marginalized people.
- She takes the example of the view of the US military in 1990s in relation to homosexuality.
- In 1993, the US military imposed the policy "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT). The policy 'theoretically' lifted a ban on homosexuality that had been instituted during World War II.
- It was originally aimed at stopping harassment against closeted homosexual individuals.



Don't Ask, Don't Tell
Source: The Inter-American Institute



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 9

In this context, Butler further investigates regulations created by the US government to reduce or restrict hurtful words and actions directed at marginalized people. She takes the example of the view of the US military in 1990s in relation to homosexuality. In 1993 the US military imposed the policy “Do not Ask, Do not Tell.” This policy theoretically lifted a ban on homosexuality that had been instituted during the Second World War.

It was originally aimed at stopping harassment against closeted homosexual individuals. As per this US law, people who were openly homosexual could not serve in the military, but at the same time closeted homosexuals could choose to continue their service as long as they remain mute or silent about their identity.

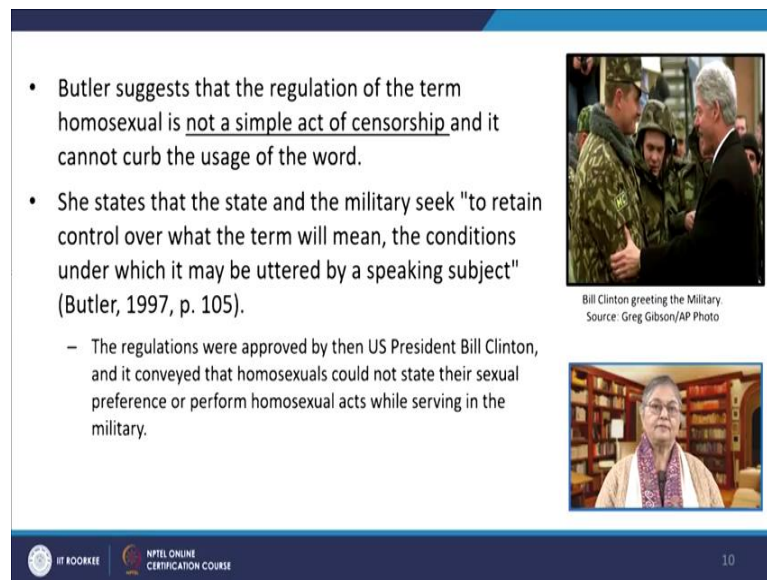
This kind of censorship violates some of the fundamental human rights. The speaker always already exists within a web of historicities and discursive formations that encourage one to attach already taken for granted meanings to words as one articulates them in the public sphere.

The provisionality of the performative is paradoxically also the source of its strength, both in the domain of law and in more ordinary contexts. Speech acts are thus constrained within and also by a larger set of discursive rules or regulations. But as Butler suggests those rules to some degree are negotiable in this complex formation.

Speakers can never determine with certainty the interpretation of the audience of the speaker's utterance.

Butler investigates how this American military law referred here regulated the self-declaration of homosexuality. She questions whether recognition of identity in public space requires the repression of homosexuality.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:40)



The slide contains the following text and images:

- Butler suggests that the regulation of the term homosexual is not a simple act of censorship and it cannot curb the usage of the word.
- She states that the state and the military seek "to retain control over what the term will mean, the conditions under which it may be uttered by a speaking subject" (Butler, 1997, p. 105).
 - The regulations were approved by then US President Bill Clinton, and it conveyed that homosexuals could not state their sexual preference or perform homosexual acts while serving in the military.

Two images are included: the top one shows Bill Clinton in a suit shaking hands with a soldier in camouflage, with a caption "Bill Clinton greeting the Military. Source: Greg Gibson/AP Photo"; the bottom one shows a woman with glasses and a purple scarf speaking.


IT ROORKEE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 10

Butler suggests that the regulation of the term homosexual is not a simple act of censorship and it cannot curb the usage of the word. She states that the state and the military seek “to retain control over what the term will mean, the conditions under which it may be uttered by a speaking subject”. Based on the regulations of the military, the term homosexual describes a class of people who are not allowed to self-define themselves using the term.

Butler interprets the law to show how self description has to be denied to those who identify themselves as homosexual if they are to serve in the military. According to Butler, the military's efforts to censor his speech became a government sanctioned way to take away the freedom of expression and liberties of citizens.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:42)

- Butler highlights that the policy of gays in the military shows how the rights based on guarantees of free speech and equal rights within the United States Constitution have been systematically suspended.
- Butler agrees with Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's views on taboo subjects related to homosexuality.
- The policy created a destructive loop that appears to have issue with not only homosexual acts but also with the statement of homosexuality.
- The prohibition and restriction of an "outbreak" of homosexuality creates a definition that falsely imply that homosexual terms and acts are contagious.



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 11

Butler highlights that the policy of gays in the military shows how the rights based on guarantees of free speech and equal rights within the United States Constitution have been systematically suspended. Butler agrees with Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud's views on taboo subjects related to homosexuality.

The policy created a destructive loop that appears to have issue with not only homosexual acts, but also with the mere statement of homosexuality. The prohibition and restriction of an outbreak of homosexuality creates a definition that falsely imply that homosexual terms and acts are contagious.

Butler argues that it is a misbelief that if someone is openly homosexual it will cause more and more people to undergo a homosexual transformation, in effect the policy manufactured a separation between act and identity.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:55)

- The military regulations included both gay men and lesbians. Butler argues that the interrogations into the personal lives of women can also be considered as sexual harassment. Such intrusions are explicit acts of violation of privacy.
- The military does not confront homosexuality as a problem to be regulated and contained.
- Instead, it actively produces an atmosphere where the homosexual person is deprived of the power of 'self-ascription'. It created a friendlier approach of censorship on the surface but was demeaning to the homosexual individuals, and to their identity and dignity.
- Butler states that censorship cannot fully separate itself from the things it seeks to censor because the censored text takes on a new life as part of the communication.



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 12

The military regulations included both gay men and lesbians. Butler argues that the interrogations into the personal lives of women can also be considered as sexual harassment. Such intrusions are explicit acts of violation of privacy.

The military does not confront homosexuality as a problem to be regulated and contained, instead it actively produces an atmosphere where the homosexual person is deprived of the power of 'self-ascription'. It created a friendlier approach of censorship on the surface, but was demeaning to the homosexual individuals, and to their identity and dignity.

Butler states that censorship cannot fully separate itself from the things it seeks to censor because the censored text takes on a new life as part of the communication.

(Refer Slide Time: 16:56)

- Although the US military policy was originally intended to prohibit discrimination against homosexuals, it declared disclosure of homosexual identity a taboo.
- Following a strong resistance from the homosexual community, the controversial law was eventually repealed in 2011.
- Now people who are openly homosexual or bisexual can serve in the US Army.

A poster celebrating the 10th anniversary of the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT). The text reads "10th ANNIVERSARY 2011-2011 DO ASK DO TELL" with a rainbow graphic. Below it, it says "PROTECT YOUR RIGHT TO SERVE US".

Do Ask Do Tell poster.
Source: National LGBTQ Health Education Centre

A photograph of a man in a blue shirt holding a sign that says "LET US SERVE OPENLY" in front of the US Capitol building.

DADT Resistance.
Source: US Naval Institute

A photograph of a woman with glasses and a patterned scarf, standing in a library or bookstore.

IT ROORKEE | NFTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 13

Although the US military policy was originally intended to prohibit discrimination against homosexuals, it declared disclosure of homosexual identity a taboo.


Following a strong resistance from the homosexual community, the controversial law was eventually repealed in 2011. Now, people who are openly homosexual or bisexual can serve in the US army and also disclose their identity, this also marks a giant leap in terms of a cultural shift in America during the last two decades.

The turn of the millennium welcomed many protests against the discrimination of homosexual rights and the strong protest against DADT law in US military was one of them. Despite this instances of hate speech are still on the rise and to uncover the performative nature of language, Butler examines the linguistic approach of J. L. Austin.


(Refer Slide Time: 18:03)

J. L. Austin and Performative Words

- J. L. Austin (1911-1960) was a British philosopher of language; famous for his linguistic analysis of utterances of everyday language.
- His 'speech-act theory' suggests that every use of language carries a performative dimension.
- His well-known phrase, "to say something is to do something" is from his magnum opus *How to do things with Words*, published in 1962.
- This was his most influential work. His performative approach led other philosophers to think beyond the 'truth-values' of utterances.



J. L. Austin.
Source: Ramsay & Muspratt, British Academy



UJF ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 14


Austin was a British philosopher of language famous for his linguistic analysis of utterances of everyday language. His speech act theory suggests that every use of language carries a performative dimension.

His well-known phrase to say something is to do something is from his magnum opus 'How to do things with Words' which was published posthumously in 1962. This was his most influential work, his performative approach also led other philosophers to think beyond the truth value of utterances. For Austin, a use of a word in speech is also an act of doing.

For example, a Christian priest pronouncing two individuals as husband and wife is not merely speaking the words, but his conducting the marriage ceremony which is an act with a real-life effect and consequences. After his famous formulation of performativity, statements or utterances were no longer seen as limited to either being truth or untruth. They were capable of performing dynamically in different contexts.

(Refer Slide Time: 19:28)

- Butler is focusing on his concept of speech acts and the difference among its classification.
- Austin divides speech into three acts:
 1. Locutionary Act: the act of saying something.
 2. Illocutionary Act: the way of using language.
 3. Perlocutionary Act: The 'effect' brought about by an utterance.




IT ROORKEE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 15

Butler focuses on his concept of his speech acts and the difference among its classification. Austin divides his speech into three acts: Locutionary Act: that is the act of saying something; Illocutionary Act: that is the way of using language; Perlocutionary Act: which is the effect brought about by an utterance.


Butler suggests that Austin's use of performativity where language is found to perform a social action poses the question of how words and actions relate to each other.

(Refer Slide Time: 20:07)

- Butler describes that *Illocutionary* speech acts require an understanding of how certain words are used at the moment of communication.
- On the other hand, *perlocutionary* acts are the words that initiate a set of consequences such as sentencing or a harmful response.
- They have the power to inflict emotional responses to the extent that they impact a person based on societal interpretations.
- To be injured by speech, for Butler, is to suffer a loss of context.



Source: Clarendon Press



IT ROORKEE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 16

Butler describes that illocutionary speech acts require an understanding of how certain words are used at the moment of communication.


On the other hand, perlocutionary acts are the words that initiate a set of consequences such as sentencing or a harmful response. They have the power to inflict emotional responses to the extent that they impact a person based on societal interpretations. To be injured by speech, for Butler, is to suffer a loss of context. Importantly this act can impact or will continue to effect beyond the moment of communication. This is why hate speech can have a long-term traumatic effect on its victims.

A person is demeaned when they are called an injurious name. They are also given are temporary social status in which they are negatively associated with injurious words or derogatory terms. Therefore, one can suffer a disorientation of one's situation as an effect of injurious speech. This shows that words have the power to create a threat of violence and trauma and Butler explains this with reference to Elaine Scarry, an American essayist.


(Refer Slide Time: 21:36)

Elaine Scarry

- Elaine Scarry is an American essayist and Professor of English who explores areas like theory of representation and the language of physical pain.
- She is famous for her work *The Body in Pain* published in 1987, where she analyses physical suffering and its relation to numerous vocabularies and cultural forces.
- She argues that physical pain leads to destruction; and shows the political ramifications of deliberately inflicted pain.
- Scarry explores the inexpressibility of pain where "language runs dry", and gives a structural analysis of pain and torture.



Elaine Scarry
Source: North Essex
Community College



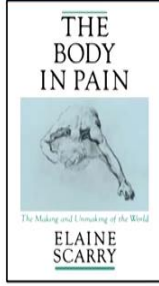
IT KOOBEE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 17

Elaine Scarry is an American essayist and professor of English who explores areas like theory of representation and the language of physical pain. She is famous for her work 'The Body in Pain' which was published in 1987, in which she analyses physical suffering and its relation to numerous and cultural forces.

She argues that physical pain leads to destruction; and shows the political ramifications of deliberately inflicted pain. Scarry explores the inexpressibility of pain where “language runs dry”, and gives a structural analysis of pain and torture.


(Refer Slide Time: 22:25)

- Butler relates to Scarry's perspective that words create a threat of violence.
- She questions how can people account for the specific injury that results from language itself.
- Scarry says that language ‘assists’ violence but it does not create its own violence.
- Butler contends that Scarry's interpretation sets the body and language against each other as opposites.
- Butler claims that language ‘creates’ injuries. She says, “if language can sustain the body, it can also threaten its existence” (Butler, 1997, p. 66).



The Body in Pain
The Making and Unmaking of the World
ELAINE SCARRY

Source: Oxford University Press



Butler relates to Scarry’s perspective that words create a threat of violence. She questions how can people account for the specific injury that results from language itself. Scarry says that language ‘assists’ violence, but it does not create its own violence. Butler contends that Scarry’s interpretation sets the body and language against each other as opposites.

Butler also claims that language creates injuries. She says, and I quote, “if language can sustain the body it can also threaten its existence” unquote. In the opinion of Elaine Scarry, one of the injurious consequences of torture is that the one who has been tortured loses the ability to document in language the event of torture. Thus, one of the effects of torture is also to efface its own witness.

Scarry also shows how certain discursive forms such as interrogation aid and abet the process of torture. Here, however, language assists violence, but appears not to wield its own violence. Butler asks if certain kinds of violence disable language, how do we account for the specific kind of injury that language itself performs?

If words are used in a negative way those words can hurt people or make them dissociate themselves with their way of life in Butler's opinion. To explain this further Butler analyses Toni Morrison's take on language and violence.

(Refer Slide Time: 24:20)

Toni Morrison (1931-2019)

- Toni Morrison is an American writer noted for her examination of Black experience in her works.
- She received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. She was the first black woman to win the prize.
- Butler refers to Morrison's 1993 Nobel Lecture to show how language has possibilities of violence within it.
- The lecture is a fable about the power of language - -- to elucidate, oppress and liberate -- and its ability to capture a human experience.



Toni Morrison
Source: Princeton University




IT ROORKEE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 19

We have discussed Morrison in different contexts in previous modules. We know that she is a famous American writer noted for her examination of Black experiences in her work. And she had received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, the first black woman to win this prize. Butler refers to Morrison's 1993 Nobel Lecture to show how language has possibilities of violence within it.


In this lecture Morrison has quoted a fable about the power of language to elucidate, to oppress and to liberate and its ability to capture a human experience.

(Refer Slide Time: 25:08)

- In her acceptance speech, Morrison said: "We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives."
- This statement by Morrison is in agreement with Butler's understanding of language which she derived from J. L. Austin.
- Butler says, "we do things with language, produce effects with language, and we do things to language" (p. 87).
- Through a parable in her speech, Morrison shows how a writer is blind to the future of language in which she writes.



Toni Morrison at a Lecture
Source: Open Culture



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

20


In her acceptance speech, Morrison had said, I quote "we die that may be the meaning of life, but we do language that may be the measure of our lives" unquote. This statement by Morrison is in agreement with Butler's understanding of language which she derived from J. L. Austin.

Butler says "we do things with language, produce effects with language and we do things to language." Through a parable in her speech, Morrison shows how a writer is blind to the future of language in which she writes. Oppressive language is not a substitute for the experience of violence, it enacts its own violence.

Butler notes that it is impossible to regulate the potentially injurious effect of language without destroying something fundamental about the subject's constitution in language. For both Butler and Morrison, language is what someone engages in to affect others either through the act of using language or through its consequences.

This is why injurious speech against gender minorities can result in prolonged distressing and hence should be condemned strongly.

(Refer Slide Time: 26:36)



Butler on Subjectivity and Relationality

- Butler, speaking at the 2014 PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature held in New York.
- Here, she delivered a lecture on grief, rage, and human dependency.

Source: [Leigha Cohen Video Production](#). [YouTube]

IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

21

At this point I refer to this video in which Butler has elucidated her ideas on subjectivity and relationality. Speaking at the 2014 PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature which was held in New York, she has delivered a lecture on grief rage and human dependency.

“When we lose certain people or when we are dispossessed from a place or a community, it may be that something about who we are suddenly flashes up, something that delineates the ties we have to others that shows us that we are bound to one another and that the bonds that compose us also do strand us, leave us uncomposed.

If I can and do live without you its only because I have not as it were lost the place of the you, the one to whom I address myself the generalized addressee with whom I am already bound up in language in a scene of address that is the linguistic condition of our survivability.

This apostrophic ‘you’ may be this ‘you’ or that other one with another name, but maybe also some ‘you’ I do not yet know at all maybe even some vast set of ‘yous’ largely nameless who nevertheless support both my gravity and my motion.

And without you that indefinite promiscuous and expansive pronoun we are wrecked and we fall. If the life that is mine is not originally or finally, separable from yours then the

we who we are is not just a composite of you and me and all the others, but a set of relations of interdependency and passion.

And these we cannot deny or destroy without refuting something fundamental about the social conditions of our living. What follows is an ethical injunction to preserve those bonds even the wretched ones which means precisely guarding against those forms of destructiveness that take away our lives and those of other living beings and the ecological conditions of life.

In other words, before ever losing, we are lost in the other lost without the other, but we never knew it as well as we do when we do actually lose. This being in thrall is one way of describing the social relations that have the power to sustain and to break us way before we enter into contracts that confirm that our relations are a result of our choice, we are already in the hands of the other a thrilling and terrifying way to begin.

We are from the start both done and undone by the other and if we refuse this we refuse passion, life, and loss. The lived form of that refusal is destruction, the lived form of its affirmation is non-violence, perhaps non-violence is the difficult practice of letting rage collapse into grief. Since then, we stand the chance of knowing that we are bound up with others such that who I am or who you are is this living relation that we sometimes lose.”


In this lecture, Butler explains her take on subjectivity and how it has a fundamental element of relationality. In the moments of crises, it becomes apparent that human beings are tied and bound to one another. We can refer to the recent COVID pandemic which is an example of this. The set of relations of interdependence cannot be refuted or denied while we understand subjectivity.

What follows is an ethical responsibility to preserve those bonds and hence expose an inherent vulnerability of the self and its linguistic autonomy.

(Refer Slide Time: 30:41)

Agency, Subjectivity and Language

- In *Excitable Speech*, Butler extends her discussion further by considering linguistic agency.
- Her theory rests on the twin stipulations that subjects depend for their existence on language and that language is persistently 'excitable', that is, outside the control of its user.
- It is the citatoriality of language that is the primary condition of possibility for linguistic agency and action.
- Butler prefers to understand subjectivity as the product of social discourse – as a site of permanent openness and re-signifiability.



IT ROORKEE | NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE | 22


In 'Excitable Speech', Butler extends her discussion further by considering linguistic agency in detail. Her theory rests on the twin stipulations that subjects depend for their existence on language and that language is persistently 'excitable', that is, outside the control of its user.

It is this citatoriality of language that is the primary condition of possibility for linguistic agency and action. Butler prefers to understand subjectivity as a product of social discourse as a site of permanent openness and resignifiability. For Butler, agency is contingent upon the repetition of the norms that condition social life.

But she claims that the influence of societal norms does not mean that the subject is entirely determined by social discourse. In the context of gender performativity, Butler envisions subjects as more empowered, showing how they have the capability to transform the very structures that generate gender imperatives.

(Refer Slide Time: 32:02)

- Speech, for Butler, is always amenable to re-signification. ‘Sullied terms’ are vulnerable to an unexpected innocence in which they assume a life and a purpose for which they were never intended.
- Butler cites the example of the term ‘queer’.
- It was deployed to stigmatize those against whom it was directed as part of a broader homophobic strategy.
- However from the early 1990s onwards, the term ‘queer’ underwent a radical re-signification.




IT ROORKEE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 23

Speech for Butler is always amenable to re-signification. ‘Sullied terms’ are vulnerable to an unexpected innocence in which they assume a life and a purpose for which they were never intended. Butler cites the example of the term ‘queer’. It was deployed to stigmatize those against whom it was directed as part of a broader homophobic strategy.

However, from the early 1990s onwards, the term ‘queer’ underwent a radical re-signification.

(Refer Slide Time: 32:40)

- The repeated use of queer “again and again as part of an affirmative practice” by queer theorists and queer activists functioned positively in Butler’s judgement.
- It took the term “out of an established context of being exclusively injurious” (p. 13).
- Therefore, although hate-speech injures, Butler also sees it as presenting the initiating moment of a counter-mobilization.
- Butler shows that no term is ever entirely corrupted and no term is ever entirely innocent; they are both at once.



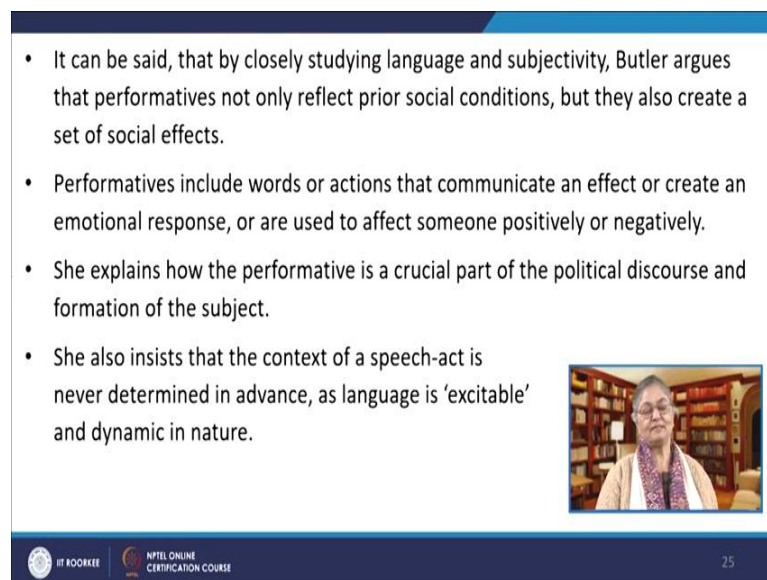
IT ROORKEE NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE 24

The repeated use of queer to quote “again and again as part of an affirmative practice” unquote by queer theorists and activists function positively in Butler’s judgement. It took the term “out of an established context of being exclusively injurious”.

Therefore, although hate speech injures Butler also sees it as presenting the initiating moment of a counter-mobilization. Butler shows that no term is ever entirely corrupted and no term is ever entirely innocent; they are both at once. In this case, a celebration of homosexuality replaced its stigmatization through the use of the very word queer.

The agency of the sovereign subject is thus not a personal capacity they possess, rather an effect of the iterability of language and this is why Butler’s account focuses on the structural conditions that facilitate performative speech acts.

(Refer Slide Time: 33:55)



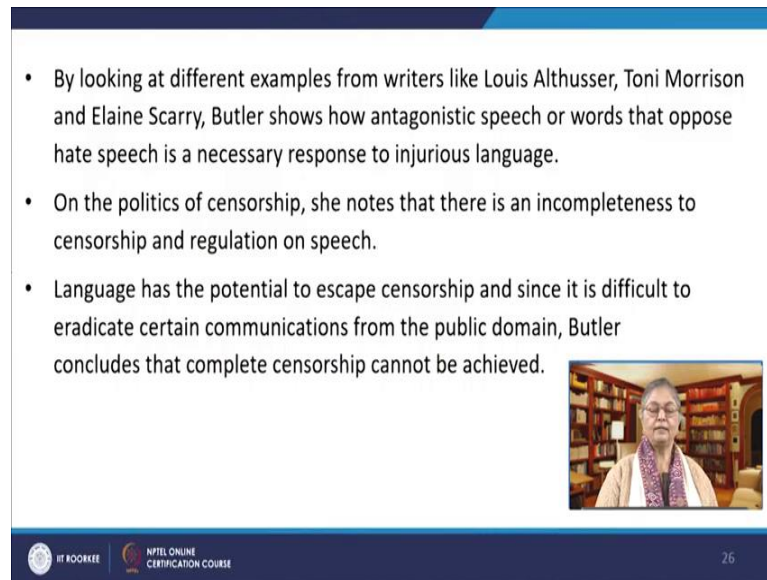
- It can be said, that by closely studying language and subjectivity, Butler argues that performatives not only reflect prior social conditions, but they also create a set of social effects.
- Performatives include words or actions that communicate an effect or create an emotional response, or are used to affect someone positively or negatively.
- She explains how the performative is a crucial part of the political discourse and formation of the subject.
- She also insists that the context of a speech-act is never determined in advance, as language is ‘excitable’ and dynamic in nature.

It can be said that by closely studying language and subjectivity, Butler argues that performatives not only reflect prior social conditions, but they also create a set of social effects.

Performatives include words or actions that communicate an effect or create an emotional response, or are used to affect someone positively or negatively. She explains how the performative is a crucial part of the political discourse and formation of the subject. She also insists that the context of a speech-act is never determined in advance as language is ‘excitable’ and dynamic in nature.

Butler asserts that a speech act can take on a unique or an unintentional meaning, this is why elaborate forms of restrictions in censorship cannot be effective in the long run especially in suppressing identity and agency.

(Refer Slide Time: 35:00)



- By looking at different examples from writers like Louis Althusser, Toni Morrison and Elaine Scarry, Butler shows how antagonistic speech or words that oppose hate speech is a necessary response to injurious language.
- On the politics of censorship, she notes that there is an incompleteness to censorship and regulation on speech.
- Language has the potential to escape censorship and since it is difficult to eradicate certain communications from the public domain, Butler concludes that complete censorship cannot be achieved.

By looking at different examples from writers like Althusser, Morrison and Elaine Scarry, Butler shows how antagonistic speech or words that oppose hate speech is a necessary response to injurious language. On the politics of censorship, she notes that there is an incompleteness to censorship and regulation on speech.

Language has the potential to escape censorship and since it is difficult to eradicate certain communications from the public domain, Butler concludes that complete censorship cannot be achieved. So, in this module we have looked at the interconnected nature of language, speech, and subjectivity - how gender minorities can resist and re-signify regulations on identity and linguistic agency.

In the next module we shall look at Butler's critical essay 'Gender in Translation,' where she highlights the importance of translation in studies of gender within a global framework.

(Refer Slide Time: 36:11)

References

- Althusser, L. (1970). *Ideology and ideological state apparatuses*. *La Pensée*, 151, 67-125.
- Butler, J. (1997). *Excitable speech: A politics of the performative*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2014). Lecture at PEN Festival of International Literature. Leigha Cohen [YouTube] <https://youtu.be/ZxyabzopQi8>
- Disch, L. (1999). Judith butler and the politics of the performative. *Political Theory*, 27(4), 545-559. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591799027004006>
- Price, J., & Shildrick, M. (2017). *Feminist theory and the body: A reader*. Routledge.
- Salih, S. (2006). On Judith Butler and performativity. In K. Lovaas & M. Jenkins (Eds.), *Sexuality and communication in everyday life: A reader* (pp. 55-68). SAGE Publications.
- Salih, S., & Butler, J. (2004). *The Judith Butler reader*. Wiley-Blackwell.

 IIT ROORKEE  NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE

Thank you.