

# **META-PERFORMATIVITY: BEING IN SHAKESPEARE'S MOMENT**

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The analyst's task is to account for [the] "lived" quality . . . to show how actors deal with this alliance between the rational and the pulsional . . . for it always says more than the intentional signs of the character (Pavis 2003, 136).

PERFORMERS OF TEXT, even those working with short pieces of script at a time (as is the way with filmed performance) repeat memorised words many times, often with the objective to sound each time as if the words just happened to come to them in that instant, in response to the need to express a specific thought. I propose that when this is successfully achieved, particularly in the performance of Shakespearean text without losing the heightened, poetic nature of the text, the illusion of 'natural' speech which is described as 'being in the moment' owes its existence to a particular meta-performative quality adhering in the voice.

## **Introduction**

The first challenge when discussing anything as ephemeral as the voice in performance is finding a method of capturing its unique quality without turning it into something else, or killing it stone dead, since by its very nature it only ever occurs once. In an attempt to reveal, rather than capture something of that uniqueness, the concept of performative speech acts has been appropriated to provide a framework which nevertheless relates directly to the physical nature of the voiced text as it is delivered and perceived. The second challenge is to find an appropriate vocabulary relevant to sound, rather than to vision, since the language of visual metaphors has been the convention for discussing matters relating to perception since at least the time of the ancient Greeks (Ihde 1972, 5). This paper therefore considers the text spoken in performance as a series of interrelated and indivisible temporal events (Cresswell 1996, 79-88), each vocal event resonating (both physically and metaphorically) with perceptible qualities. Without delving too deeply into event theory, such a phenomenological approach allows the voice which executes the vocal event to be discussed in terms of its influences, its circumstances and its effect, to some extent, upon the listener.

The process of discussing the vocal event, especially with regard to performance, is necessarily subjective. There may be an entity identifiable as the vocal performance within the performance text, but it exists only as a relationship between its eventuation and its perceivers. As an individual who brings to the process of perception a set of values, belief systems and a personal psychological state which

cannot help but impinge upon, and influence in some way, the resulting argument, I acknowledge that there is no “neutral” stance from which an objective Cartesian “vision” can be abstracted (Ihde 1972, 41). Nevertheless, such is the tradition of writing about performance in the western world from a presumed objective stance that it is important to acknowledge the non-objective phenomenological stance I undertake in this paper.

### **Voice**

The voiced utterance, like any other temporal event, is influenced by preceding and contiguous events, and therefore the words may be spoken in a range of different ways, depending on the circumstances. For example, the speaker may inflect the voice ironically in such a way that the listener is made aware that the core speech act of the language has been compromised. This level of performativity, with all its inherent ambivalences, is what is expected of a naturalistic performance, particularly one associated with so-called ‘method’ acting, and with contemporary texts. I suggest that in these circumstances what we actually hear in performance is an aural illusion of the normal, or ‘natural’ vocal event. When the language is heightened, poetic or verse drama, such as Shakespeare, the illusion is still possible, although its success is also dependent on the skill level of the performer in the use of such structured text.

All spoken utterances are, by definition, voiced. The voice is created within the body of the speaker, and that body is a uniquely complex combination of matter, solids and fluids, constantly in motion. The responsive voice is influenced from moment to moment by chemical reactions resulting from the mental and emotional state of the speaker, and the speaker’s environment (Damasio 1994, 138-42). Pavis states that “[w]estern actors are trained to change their voices continually, according to the person they are addressing” (2003, 138). They are trained to do it, because they are mostly unaware that in ‘real life’, they do this all the time. Vocal quality is adjusted instinctively when talking to small children, to computers, or to our mothers, for example (Armstrong). As well as this phenomenon, cultural, social and familial circumstances influence the way utterances are voiced and perceived, and these may not be, “under sovereign control” (Butler 1990, 69 in Worthen 1998, 1098).

Words are audible thought, and thoughts do not exist separate from the body—the ‘being’—of the self who generates them (Damasio 1994, 240). The body transforms them into sound, the ever moving, changing thoughts compel movement and transformation in the body and sound emerges in transformation even as the body prepares for the following sounds. A single vocal event may be defined in terms of phrase or sentence structure, but it is experienced by voicer and listener alike as a flowing, continuous “stream” (Handel 1989, 189) in a constant state of flux (Ihde 1972, 84).

The speaker’s voice shaped into words is the nearest thing possible in that instant, (arguably the identical) thing to the self as constituted in that moment, the unique “vocalic revelation” (Cavarero 2005, 11), of the speaker. The vocal event manifests the thoughts, the ‘being’ of the speaker, with all of the contradictions and inconsistencies that involves. The speaker who says one thing and means another is perceived as insincere. The speaker who says one thing, and means it as she says it, may be acting, (otherwise known as lying), but she will be heard as genuine. The listener perceives the sound and interprets within her own cultural and social conventions the meanings of the words, the functionally performative expressions within the phrases and the para-linguistic tonal qualities including inflections and intonations; however the interpretation is also subject to the para-performative or meta-performative qualities which are evident within the sound.<sup>1</sup>

**Performativity**

J. L. Austin, who coined the term ‘performative speech acts’ considers that the words of a written text, when spoken in performance, are “hollow or void . . . in some ways parasitic upon [language’s] normal use” (Austin in Rottenberg 1997, 566 original emphasis). It is my contention that, far from being “hollow or void”, language spoken in performance retains its innate functionality, however this may be inadvertently suppressed to a greater or lesser degree, or revealed in unexpected ways. When suppressed, the flow of vocal events is often perceived as ‘muddy’, or lacking in clarity; however, when potentialities within the language are revealed via what States refers to as an “unfamiliar route” (1985, 22), the effect is likely to be recognisable as ‘being in the moment’. This latter quality is what Bogart refers to when he observes, of Spencer Tracy:

Spencer does it, that’s all. Feels it. Says it. Talks. Listens. He means what he says when he says it, and if you think that’s easy, try it (Humphrey Bogart in Hall 1983, 6).

Linguistic performativity is inherent in the language provided by the playwright for the character in the play, to be used as if it were in normal use, in the world inhabited by the character. In that world, the words of the text may have an active (Austinian) performativity, performing an action or deed in their own right such as ‘promising’ or ‘asserting’. For the most part, individual speech acts exist in isolation only in theory. In the moment of utterance, as the vocal event occurs, they have a habit of being rendered less efficacious or even contradicted by what Austin refers to as “infelicities” (Austin 1970). For example, the speaker may be distracted, confused or ignorant of the appropriate linguistic convention for the particular occasion, and so the effective performance of the intended function (for example ‘to forgive’ as in “I forgive you”) is compromised. Just as words retain their literal meaning, even though that literal meaning may be subverted in the execution of a vocal event (Stainton 2007, 10), the performative function of the language used, arguably, loses its illocutionary force while retaining its performative potential. It is not relevant to my argument to pursue this in terms of either linguistics or semantic theory, two disciplines of which my knowledge is limited. Rather, I wish to explore the spoken text’s performative qualities as being aspects of the performer’s vocal aesthetic.

**Para-Performativity**

A second level of performativity occurs as part of the vocal event when the utterance takes the form of a demonstration which has nothing to do with the world of the play, or the character’s intentions. For example the voice, in the execution of the vocal event, may be used to impose a particular meaning the performer deems essential to the audience’s understanding. Merleau-Ponty refers to this imposition of meaning as the “mere ‘fulfilment’ of a sign (1970, xiv). Alternatively, the event may take the form of a vocal citation, foregrounding the fact that authorship of the script does not lie with the speaker; or the event may have a ‘quotational’ quality, whereby the listener is reminded that the words have been memorised, or that a particular style of delivery has been selected, and now consciously determines how the text is presented. In some instances, delivery of specific lines results from pre-ordained decisions, inhibiting the actors’ ability to: “deliberately allow[ing] their corporeality to ‘overflow’ and impact” (Pavis 2003, 136) in unexpected, presently occurring ways. When this occurs in performance, the vocal aesthetic is often perceived as an ‘acting’ voice. In all of these instances, the secondary performative function is superimposed over the first, with varying degrees of aurally perceptible transparency. I shall refer to this act of superimposition as para-performativity: ‘para’ in the sense of providing a cover or protection (as in parachute), and also ‘para’ because it is—in Austin’s usage—“parasitic upon [language’s] normal use”. This is not intended as a derogatory appellation, rather it is intended to be descriptive.

We do not hear at only one level . . . it is not that we hear words but not phonemes, or phonemes but not formants, or formants but not transients. Rather, we can listen at all levels . . . Sometimes each level illustrates only one facet of an event; other times each level illustrates a different reality. Possibly the question “What do we hear?” is a poor one, because it suggests one answer to a reality that admits many (Handel 1989, 181).

As Handel suggests, individual sounds (phonemes) and words are heard without necessarily being registered as such. Indeed when they are, the attention which is directed to identifying such segmented events is attention which has been subtracted (or distracted) from the wider context of the ongoing series of vocal events (Handel 1989, 189-90). Likewise, the act of demonstrating, citing or quoting, is capable of diverting the listener’s attention from the innate linguistic codes of performativity which reside within the language by drawing attention to the duality, if not the artificiality of the situation. There are occasions when it is appropriate, and creative, for a performer to direct focus to this duality, or artificiality, however I shall argue that this can be achieved as a stylistic device without diminishing the functional performativity within the language by a process of integration, outlined below, rather than one of superimposition.

The performer’s contract with an audience involves the acceptance by both parties that, as Worthen puts it: “[p]erforming reconstitutes the text” (1998, 1097). It is not necessary, in most cases of the performance of dramatic text, for a performer to sign-post that the words are not hers; when this happens, consciously intended or not, the text sounds as if it is being quoted, as against being expressed. There is a school of thought that considers this to be a ‘Brechtian’ style of performance, and it certainly can have a distancing, or dislocating effect upon the listener. However, Brecht’s description of Helene Weigel’s voice as “wholly unemotional and penetrating” when announcing Jocasta’s death does not imply that she was either demonstrating the meaning, or quoting the text. Indeed, he goes on to state that while she did not “abandon her voice to horror”; she spoke “firmly and definitely”, relating the events in a highly idiosyncratic, unexpected manner in which, in Brecht’s words, “there was no mistaking her tone”, whether it was one of astonishment, self-pity or a denial of regret (in Willett 1964, 28). States makes the point that “revolutions like Brecht’s are not unconnected to Shklovsky’s idea that “art makes objects ‘unfamiliar’” (1985, 24). I would argue that Brecht’s quest for the performance which provokes and stimulates an audience into utilising its own imagination and its critical faculties has more to do with Shklovskian artistry than with para-performativity. The ‘art’ is the result of craft applied in such a way as to conceal the craft, and reveal the object—in the case of performance, language with all its inherent and unfamiliar possibilities.

### **Meta-Performativity**

Such a level of artistry is present with the occurrence of a higher, or ‘meta’ level of performativity, when the practical requirements of performance, such as appropriate volume, extended range and clarity, and remembered lines are all present and accommodated, but integrated with or transformed into the context of the moment. Meta-performativity (‘meta’ in the sense of “[d]enoting change, transformation, permutation, or substitution” (O.E.D. online) allows for thought, voice and words to be, as far as discernible, ‘as one’, having been absorbed by the actor as the expression of presently occurring thought processes. This is unremarkable in everyday speech; but it needs to be consciously facilitated and practised by the actor (Rodenburg 1993, 4). Meta-performativity involves the act of appropriation of the words of the text as they are uttered, in order that their linguistic and performative codes may be revealed by the vocal event, with all the complexity, subtlety and potential instability that implies. I suggest that when the latter occurs, what is perceived by the audience is what is perceived by the audience is what is identified as ‘being in the moment’. This is the vocal quality which

creates the illusion of 'natural' or 'real' speech, as against 'acted' speech.

Performativity in the context of performance requires the physical presence of the 'act-or', the person undertaking the act; therefore performative implies—literally— 'being there'. Performance, in the present sense of performing a memorised text, requires that the actor 'be there' for the purpose of creating the illusion of the character's 'being there'. When the skilled, rehearsed actor is aware of, and responsive to the physical, mental and emotional states which continuously transform her being in performance, the verbal expression she requires comes in the shape of the words the playwright has provided, and the meta-performative act is that of 'being there'. It is the constantly renewing action of this process which allows her to be totally present, on stage, in character, speaking 'as if' she were the embodiment of her character—which is what, in fact, she is. Everyday speech, which cannot help but be 'in the moment' is described by Cavarero as "not simply the verbal sphere of expression: it is also the point of tension between the uniqueness of the voice and the system of language" (2005, 14). When the performing voice is in relation to the system of language provided by the playwright, the point of tension is what the listener perceives as 'liveness', or 'being in the moment'. There is an aural illusion, or an illusory perception that the words are those of the speaker who is identified as the character rather than the actor, and the meta-performative action of 'being' has been accomplished. It is not merely an illusion, or an abstract metaphysical event: in that moment, those words are the words of the person speaking them.

When dealing with a highly structured, poetic textual style, the performer needs to have the vocal and linguistic skill to speak as if it were natural for her to speak in that style (Cohen 1978, 147-53). This does not equate to speaking 'naturalistically', if by that is meant in a localised contemporary style. What is at issue here is the ability of the performer to express herself by means of the vocabulary, phraseology, style of expression, linguistic and literary structure as if they were 'normal' to her. Rather than transforming the text to meet the criteria and conventions of her own 'normal' (that is, contemporary) use of language, she must have the skill to give the impression that the criteria and conventions which are 'normal' to the character are normal to her. Shakespearean performance which recites, or demonstrates with para-performative efficiency is fairly easily identified as "the Shakespeare Voice".

### *Hamlet*

In my research to date, I have undertaken two case studies, in which I have identified both para-performativity and meta-performativity within productions of Shakespearean performances (studied on video). Richard Roxburgh as Hamlet in Company B's 1992 production, directed by Neil Armfield, is consistently 'in the moment'. He expresses himself in Shakespeare's heightened prose and poetry as if there were no other way to speak. Yet this alone is not sufficient to engage and then keep my attention without a conscious effort on my part to continually 'suspend my disbelief' throughout the duration of the performance. Beyond this considerable expertise in the use of the language, the meta-performative quality within the sound of his voice has the effect of opening an aural gateway to the thoughts of the speaker, and the consistent presence of that quality allows for an intense theatrical experience within the world of the play.

Clearly, I express myself subjectively in the two preceding paragraphs, since, as stated in my introduction, there is no way I can distance myself from my experience, any more than I am capable of taking a viewpoint which is other than anthropocentric (Matthen 2005, 153). Any attempt to so distance myself can only be from within the context of my experience and my understanding. In Heideggerian terms, my understanding of the vocal event/s manifested as part of Roxburgh's performance of Hamlet is "conditioned by a prior concern for the subject matter and [that] any understanding is the result of an inevitably circular process of interpretation" (Hoy 1980, 895).

For example, when Hamlet says to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: "I will tell you why; so shall my anticipation / prevent your discovery of your secrecy to the King and / Queen" (II, ii. 1340-42) it is within the narrative framework which includes, at this stage in the play, his distress at his father's death, his belief in the King's guilt and suspicion of the Queen's duplicity, and his sense of betrayal by his former companions. These factors provide background information as to why Roxburgh/Hamlet's voice at this moment in the play resonates as balancing delicately somewhere between sarcasm and warmth, two qualities dependent upon tonal and intellectual control. They do not, however, provide adequate explanation as to why I also feel both shock and admiration for Hamlet, and not, you will note, for Roxburgh (that comes later, on reflection). The speech act (asserting a commitment to admit why he is behaving so strangely) contained in the text is revealed, along with its potential for being a lie. There is no hint of lines remembered or quoted, there is only the effect (apparently on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and certainly on me) that I am hearing a genuine commitment. This has the effect of comforting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and of shocking me, since I don't want Hamlet to tell them the truth. I know in advance what comes next, and yet I am still shocked.

A description, emanating from the 'global' experience (Ihde 1972, 44), depends upon the way the listener (myself) attends to the event, whether focusing my attention narrowly upon smaller and smaller events until the sounds emerge as individual words or phonemes, or broadening it out to encompass the "flux and flow" of the sound world (Ihde 1972, 84). Sitting in the office of the Belvoir Street Theatre's wardrobe department and watching the performance on an elderly television set from an elderly video recording, it is not possible to completely forget one's surroundings. Yet something in the moments captured electronically and relayed to me contains my attention within a span just wide enough and deep enough to encompass Hamlet and the two courtiers, to recognise what Hamlet is saying (having seen the play before, and read it many times), to comprehend, from my perspective, the political motivation which brings him to say it, and to be genuinely surprised at how he says it. Within that 'how', it is possible to set down in phonetic notation the pronunciation of each word, the stress values, the rhythm and the intonation patterns of the lines. From that notation it would be possible for anyone conversant with phonetic notation to speak the lines with exactly the same pronunciation, stress, rhythm and intonation, and yet still fail to capture the particular vocal quality which occurred in the vocal event as I experienced it. A skilful performer can re-constitute Roxburgh's interpretation with full value given to the linguistic performativity, or as a quotational event by mimicking his inflections and intonation; and while it may be possible to actually provide the meta-performative quality which made it thrilling in the first place, it is difficult enough to engage with language meta-performatively from a remembered sequence of words, let alone a remembered sequence of words, stresses and rhythmic and intonation patterns, and range of vocal qualities. It is far simpler, and more reliable to engage with the text on one's own terms, than to try to do so on someone else's terms. This is why students need to be discouraged from basing their performance on the performance of another actor.

### *Macbeth*

Another example comes from Edwin Hodgeman in the title role of the State Theatre of South Australia's 1977 production of *Macbeth*, directed by Colin George. Never less than intelligently presented, there are times when the para-performativity in his vocal sound is that of an actor playing, or demonstrating Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, at others it is not apparent, and his voice seems to become (or comes to be) the voice of *Macbeth*—or to put it another way, the vocal event/s occur as the expression of the character. The para-performative process of remembering lines and demonstrating his understanding of them is subsumed within the performative function of the language, and the transformation both clarifies the language and reveals complexities within it.

Throughout this production, Macbeth's progress from ambitious, loving husband to tyrannical and insensitive warlord can be charted vocally in terms of resonant quality from an open but guarded quality in the early scenes to the edgy, sharply constrained voice with which he responds to Macduff's challenge in the later battle: "But get thee back! My soul is too much charged/With blood of thine already" (V, vi. 5-6). In Hodgeman's interpretation, over-weening confidence at this point allows an almost conversational note in his voice: it is relaxed, broadly resonant. This is in sharp contrast to the way these lines are more often delivered: this is the moment when Macbeth usually expresses regret at his actions.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the speech act contained in the language is that of confessing, and the phrase "too much charged" implies there is something Macbeth would rather were not so; in other words, Shakespeare has apparently written an apology, if a grudging one. Yet, in this instance, this Macbeth is not apologetic, even in the very act of apologising. The words make sense, the speech act of apologising is clearly performed, yet the sequence of vocal events fall upon my ears as an expression of extreme arrogance, and I feel a deep dread at the recognition of the existence of such arrogance in the world as I know it. The vocal events I experience are particular to the life and circumstances of the world of Macbeth at that moment. As with the Hamlet example above, there is no notation which even can adequately account for the vocal quality which is perceptible at such times; it is in addition to the resonant quality and yet inseparable from it also. It is the quality of meta-performativity. It is a quality which, in the instant of eventuation, transforms the language from text, or even from spoken words, into art, in that it is the "setting-into-work of truth" (Heidegger 1971, 73).

It may be possible that both para- and meta-performativity, as described above, could be described as para-linguistic suprasegmentals, being vocal effects which articulate in the process of communication, in a category similar to tone or intonation. I would argue however that there is a strong case for considering them as aspects of vocal aesthetics, indivisible from the integral being of the performer, rather than as aspects of the language itself. There is clearly a need for further research which takes these qualities of para-performativity and meta-performativity into account when identifying the processes of meaning-making in the theatre, as they relate to the performer engaged in the practice of making theatre, and to the audience in the act of experiencing theatre. In the performance of Shakespeare in particular, the concept of meta-performativity offers a means of analysing performance after the event, while providing students with a means of identifying the results of different approaches to the performance of text.

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## Notes

1. Of course, visual input also influences how the sound is perceived. It is not my intention to deny or to negate such influences, but rather to reinforce acknowledgement of the contribution made by sound, and in particular the sound of the voice uttering text.
2. Thanks to Richard Fotheringham for this observation.

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