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Biblical Word Power from a Performative Perspective (A Reinterpretation)

Ideas—like books—have their fates. Some enter the blood vessels of culture right after they are born, others become forgotten right away, while still others, lying dormant for years, are picked up by a new generation and become widely celebrated. The concept of the performative belongs to this last group: for decades after it was constructed by linguists and philosophers of language it just sat in a nook of these disciplines until, with the advent of postmodern and poststructuralist thinking in the humanities and social sciences, it went through a radical paradigm shift that suited the arguments of the new thinking. Reconceptualized within the poststructuralist framework, the new performative paradigm came to be widely adopted in theories of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and autobiography, among others, affecting what is often called the performative turn.

The present contribution is a follow-up on my early essay on the performative, published some forty years ago in the *Yearbook of the Hungarian Rabbinical Seminary*.¹ At the time, the concept of the performative was discussed in the structuralist epistemic framework, which constituted its primary paradigm. In the present essay, I introduce this primary paradigm first, supporting my presentation with the classical interpretation of Biblical performativity; then I move on to the current poststructuralist concept, offering a new perspective from which the same examples can be reinterpreted.

1. The primary paradigm

The first phase of the history of the concept of the performative embraces roughly the period between the 1900s and the 1970s, with its heyday from the early 1950s to the mid-1970s.

Relying on the thinking of several precursors in anthropology, philosophy, and linguistics (among them, Arnold van Gennep, Adolf Reinach, Marcel Mauss, Erwin Koschmieder, Karl Bühler, Branislaw Malinowski, and Ludwig Wittgenstein), Oxford analytic philosopher J. L. Austin defined the concept in his Oxford lectures in the 1940s and 50s and his Harvard lectures in the late 1950s, to be published posthumously in 1962 as *How to Do Things with Words*. In these lectures he discussed sentences which can be looked at as performing an act or a ritual, or as entering into a contract or commitment. When performing acts, the speakers of utterances used to perform certain acts (to make a promise, to apologize, to pass a sentence, to name, among others) are agents, whose actions are capable of bringing about changes in the world. Performatives are defined as non-descriptive utterances with the force of actions. Much like the rules of chess constitute the game of chess, utterances comply with certain constitutive rules, shared by all participants.

Austin's examples include ceremonial statements such as "I promise," "I do [take this man to be my lawful wedded husband]" (uttered in the course of a marriage ceremony), and "I name this ship the *Queen Elisabeth*" (uttered when smashing the bottle against the stem of a ship). In performative utterances such as "I promise to return the book to the library tonight," saying the sentence does the promising. To make such statements in appropriate circumstances is not to describe or state, but rather to do something, to perform an act. Performative utterances are not true or false, but have force, performative force: they make the actions come about, and establish a certain binding responsibility on the part of the speaker for the action performed.

Coinciding with the time of the modern episteme in philosophy, linguistics, and literary theory, this primary paradigm of performativity exhibits several traits of the formalist-structuralist paradigm. Given the fact that among these traits is the understanding of language as capable of creating something outside language, with the signifier to bring about the signified, I will



label this primary paradigm as strong or logocentric performative. Exhibiting the “power of the word,” the logocentric performative was understood in this epistemic framework as a language structure capable of creating something outside language. Moreover, the presence of an outside transcendental authority—or at least a speaker with a particular intention—was assumed to be necessary to validate the act, to make the words powerful. All along, the binaries of word and thing, word and deed, saying and doing, understood as transformations of the signifier/signified dichotomy, remained uncontested.

Let’s see some examples now. How did this primary paradigm interpret the Biblical performative?

The foundational moment of logocentrism, when God creates by the *logos*, exploits performative power, the “power of the word,” in a rather obvious manner. Tying the signifier to the signified, the word brings about presence in the world “out there.” Indeed, the narrative of origin related at the very beginning of *Genesis* abounds in instances when words make things, and saying and doing are one: “Let there be light,” “Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters,” or “Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Gen. 1: 3, 6, 26).

Commonly referred to as word magic or the power of words, these are cases with a strong or logocentric performative force, where the word as a vehicle of creation is used to produce some new reality. Man’s whole existence rests on the power of God’s word: “man lives from every *word* that proceeds from the mouth of the lord” (Deut. 8: 3).

Speech act theory allows us to make several claims about the logocentric performative of the Almighty. First, these are performative acts with a tremendous performative force indeed: words make a world. Second, utterance is coincidental with action; action has no existence apart from the utterance. Third, at the time when God’s Ur-performative is uttered, there is no “world” yet for which the word could stand: that world is just being made, brought about performatively by the word. As an act of self-presence uttered by the ultimate Subject,





God's performative conjoins word and world, causing its own truth: creation.

The word of God is power in itself. When God gives names to His creations, He secures His power over them by giving names that predict future events or character traits; God's naming is therefore not arbitrary, but posits an indexical relationship between the name and its bearer. The Bible is the compendium of such talking names. First, He renames Abram for Abraham, making him a "high father," the "father of many nations": "I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make many nations of you, and kings shall come from you" (Gen. 17: 5, 6). Next He renames Sarai to Sarah, thereby securing her position as a princess to be followed by noble descendants. By receiving their new covenant names, the patriarch and the matriarch are brought under God's rule and are given a sacred mission. Their first-born, Isaac, bears the name meaning laughter because at his birth the mother laughed for joy at the supernatural work of grace. Esau received his name for being "like a hairy garment all over" (Gen. 25:25), while his twin brother was called Jacob because at birth "his hand took hold of Esau's heel" (Gen. 25: 26).

Blessing and curse are overwhelmingly important performative acts, whether God blesses man (Gen. 1: 28), God blesses the Sabbath (Gen. 2: 3), God blesses His allies (Gen. 22: 17), or man blesses God, as Moses does in his Song (Ex. 15: 1-18), Deborah in hers (Judg. 5: 2-31), or David in Psalm 30. But not just anyone can make a forceful blessing; this is why, for example, Balak calls Balaam to curse the Jews: "for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed" (Num. 22: 6). However, a curse cannot have force if it is uttered against God's will: "How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? And how shall I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced?" asks Balaam (Num. 23: 8).

As a performative act, the Biblical or Kohanite blessing proceeds according to strict rules too. Similarly, the engagement and wedding blessings must follow an old ritual order. In both cases, the object of the blessing is not man but God, as in the

case of the table blessing too: “When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which He has given you” (Deut. 8: 10).

What is then common in the classic interpretation of all these examples? In short, the logocentric understanding itself. Language is considered separate from the physical spatio-temporal reality, with both realms having self-existence, while signifiers stand in a mimetic, reflective, or representational relation with signifieds. The performative has such a force that it is capable of connecting signifiers with signifieds, words with deeds, in a very direct way. These words have the power to break through language and exist in “reality” as one of the many objects with spatio-temporal existence. Words can make things—and make things happen.

II. The poststructuralist paradigm

By the 1970s and 1980s, the logocentric performative became severely destabilized, to be replaced by a new understanding of the concept. Two circumstances contributed to this destabilization: the linguistic turn and the emergence of the postmodern episteme. The linguistic turn can be defined by the notion that language is not simply the medium of knowledge but the agent of knowing. Richard Rorty, who in his 1967 anthology collected the landmark essays of the new thinking, identifies the linguistic turn as a proper paradigm change in philosophy, whereby the study of language replaced the study of concepts.²

We need to consider the linguistic turn within the context of a broader, more general paradigm shift, the emergence of the postmodern episteme. It was in the 1970s that the postmodern episteme began to replace the modern, fundamentally transforming the conceptual frameworks of investigations used by scholars in the humanities and the social sciences. The episteme component that directly concerns us here consists in the disappearance of the binary structure of the sign, with “reality” and “things” giving way to “mere” discourse: language and words. As Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida famously put

it, "one remains within the dimension of discourse";³ *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*.⁴

Framed by the linguistic turn and the postmodern episteme, the performative has become a generative concept in post-structuralist critical thinking. Within this framework, it has come to be seen as not only contesting the primacy of the signified over the signifier, but as a case of meaning production not involving reference. Indeed, performativity has come to be understood as a function of the signifier only, a non-referential discursive operation. The paradigm originally devised for a particular group of verbs, the performative has now become extended to all kinds of discursive processes where signification comes about discursively out of mere signifiers. The performative has provided a pragmatic form whereby certain constitutive processes can be conceptualized in non-essentialist thinking. To take the example of subjectivities, the performative refutes the essentialist position by showcasing the inflections of gender, sexuality, and race as produced by language. Independent of whether the identities in question are stable or unstable, unproblematic or problematic, intelligible or unintelligible, dominant or non-dominant, the performative establishes the ways they all come about as effects of discourse. Moreover, as effects produced by the performative, which has no referent itself, inflections of gender, race, or ethnic identity are shown to exist only in the symbolic: not as referents but as metaphors or cataphoreses brought about solely by discourse.

Since the 1970s radical thinkers have developed this performative theory in support of their critique of metaphysics; among these are Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Stanley Fish, Shoshana Felman, and J. Hillis Miller. At the same time, feminist critics put the performative in the middle of their constructionist work on the subject, especially when exploring gender, sexual, and racial identity; among them are Diana Fuss, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. A concept originally devised for a small group of verbs, the performative has now grown into a paradigm proper, interpreting discursive processes, including social production.



The question arises: what is the object of the performative act? If the logocentric understanding of the performative is not adequate, can one say that the performative performs anything? It seems that only in the logocentric framework can we give a positive answer to these questions, when the “object” is outside the speech situation. From the poststructuralist perspective the performative can only be considered a discursive function, one limited to the speech situation. As such, the performative will allow the speaker to refer back to discourse, to construct the grammatical subject as social subject or agent. For, as Émile Benveniste claims in his “Subjectivity in Language,” published as early as 1959, it is only “in and through language that man constitutes himself as a *subject*, because language alone establishes the concept of ‘ego’ in reality, in *its* reality which is that of the being.”⁵ Subjectivity is truly a property of language: “[e]go’ is he who says ‘ego.’”⁶ Moreover, the speaker’s performed subjectivity does not precede the performative act; subjectivity comes about exclusively via the (discursive) performative process.

In short, while the verb to *perform* was indeed considered transitive within the logocentric framework, having its object outside the speech situation (in the “world”), this transitivity was severely called into question by the poststructuralist perspective, which limits the act’s sphere of operation to discourse. As such, the performative has the speaker (subject of the performative utterance) as its object, who will be constructed into social subject: linguistic subject and actor becomes social agent. For this reason, I suggest that we consider the verb to *perform*: reflexive. This, I believe is the sea-change the primary paradigm of the performative has gone through within the larger epistemic sea-change from the modern to postmodern episteme.

Let us revisit our earlier examples now. If we understand God’s performative as not a logocentric but a discursive act, and the verb not as transitive but reflexive, the performative utterance seems not to point outside, but to refer back to discourse. In order to understand this, we need to recall Benveniste’s thesis concerning how subjectivity is produced in



discourse: “[e]go’ is he who says ‘ego.’”⁷ In other words, subjectivity and its absolute or ultimate form, agency, comes about by using the first person singular, where the attached verb will reflect back on the grammatical subject.

Returning now to our foundational Biblical example, we can say that God’s subjectivity is truly a property of language. God’s ego comes about discursively and performatively: by uttering the performative ego, “i am.” Moreover, His performed subjectivity does not precede the performative utterance; rather, it comes about via the discursive process.

This claim can be supported, I would like to suggest, by a rather peculiar form of name the Almighty bears: “I AM,” which we learn from Moses. When Moses asks His name, He says, “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex. 3: 14) (in other translations, “I AM THAT I AM”). And when Moses rephrases his question, asking really for a nominal form to be used in the object position in a sentence, God replies, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘i am has sent me to you’” (Ex. 3: 14). In other words, there is no way to put God in the position of grammatical object: His name cannot be referred to with a nominal, the usual grammatical referential form (that can appear in the object position), but only by reiterating His self-existence in the form of first person singular subject + predicate, “I AM.” His position as Absolute Subject in the Sentence is fixed by Law, conveyed in the Decalogos or Decalogue and reinscribed in subsequent laws, forbidding man to refer to Him by the name or give His visual representation. In other words, God’s performative performs the performer above all, assigning agency to Him; as the Almighty, He is Absolute Agent or Subject, whose position in the sentence is fixed by Divine Law.

Moving on to the other examples I cited earlier, when God names His creations, the performative force of naming reflects back upon Himself, securing indeed His power over for time eternal. Having been brought under God’s rule and having been given a sacred mission confirm the Almighty’s (performative) power, in particular, His subjectivity as ultimate agent. The same holds to the blessings and curses: the utterer—God

Almighty—performs Himself as Agent, one with the power to extend a blessing or a curse. This does not change, however, if the utterer is man: since his blessings or curses cannot have force when uttered against God's will, his performative will reflect back to God again. No matter that God appears as the object of a blessing, as of the Biblical or Kohanite blessing, blessing the Lord is just another form, with identical meaning, of the Lord's blessing; indeed, *genitivus objectivus* folds back into *genitivus subjectivus*. The performative power of the word is always the Almighty's.

The poststructuralist understanding of the performative opens new possibilities to understanding divine as well as human agency. For the Almighty offers models to humankind as to attain selfhood and subjectivity "in His own image," so to speak. This form of appropriated agency—the center of heated poststructuralist debates concerning its existence even—coincides with what Michel Foucault calls *assujettissement*,⁸ the process of assigning the person with subjectivity. This post-logocentric understanding of the performative gives the epistemic framework to the divine gesture of God's sharing agency with humankind. This is the Almighty's invitation and promise issued to humans to become, if not fellow creators, but agents in their own self-making, with full responsibility for who they are and what they do.

Is this not the ultimate good news?

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NOTES

¹ A szó hatalmáról — nyelvészeti megközelítésben. In: Sándor Scheiber, ed. *Az Országos Rabbiképző Intézet Évkönyve*. 1977/78. Budapest, 1978. pp. 82-90. The piece requested and published by Professor Scheiber was my first scholarly publication on the performative, to be followed by two books and more than a dozen of essays directly devoted to the topic. In a sense, my “A szó hatalmáról” essay directed me towards a very complex theoretical thematic, which bore results in several fields, from the philosophy of language to literature criticism and feminist theory.

² RORTY 1992. 364.

³ FOUCAULT 1972. 76.

⁴ DERRIDA 1976. 158.

⁵ BENVENISTE 1959/1986. 729.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ FOUCAULT 1982.





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