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Performativity

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1 Definition

The terms “performativity” and “performance” derive from the verb “to perform.” They denote the capacity to execute an action, to carry something out actually and thoroughly, as well as to do according to prescribed ritual. “To perform” may also be used in the sense of “to perform an artistic work,” i.e. to act in a play, to play an instrument, to sing or dance. In narratology, performativity denotes modes of presenting or evoking action. A performance, i.e. the embodied live presentation of events in the co-presence of an audience at a specific place and time, is performative in the narrow sense: performativity I. Here the audience experiences the actors and the action directly, i.e. visually and acoustically at a minimum. Performance can take place in the real world (as in a wedding ceremony or a court trial) or it can depict fictional events (as in a theater performance). Verbal or visual scripts can prepare the performance in playtexts and stage directions, film scripts and choreographic sketches. These may also detail gestures, facial expressions and voice. In a wider sense, the term performativity can also be applied to non-corporeal presentations, e.g. in written narratives: performativity II. Here performativity refers to the imitation or illusion of a performance. In this case, readers reconstruct the performance dimension in their minds—the performance is imagined.

In systematic terms, actions can be conveyed on two different levels of the presentational process. They can be located, first, on the level of *histoire* (the story that is presented). This aspect of performativity is called “performativity I.i or II.i.” Here the spectator’s or reader’s attention is directed to the actions taking place in the story, actions that can be conveyed with varying degrees of immediacy. Secondly, the actions can be located on the level of the narration (the narrator’s act of mediation). This is called “performativity I.ii or II.ii.” In this case, the reader’s or spectator’s attention is directed to the act of narration itself, or to the actions of the narrator, which can be foregrounded to a greater or lesser degree. When the performativity of the act of narration is considered in a wider pragmatic and cultural context, aspects of the empirical author (e.g. gender) can also become pertinent to the reception and appreciation of narrative as a form of cultural agency.

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Explication

Performativity and performance are interdisciplinary concepts that have emerged in linguistics and the philosophy of language, in performance, theater and literary studies, as well as in ethnology, sociology and cultural studies (Loxley 2007). Although the terms “performative,” “performance” and “performativity” are frequently referred to across a broad range of narratological investigations, they have received no systematic treatment in this field to date. Therefore, this article will aim above all to provide a systematic account of how the concept of performativity currently pertains to narratology.

Performativity I refers to the performance of a narrative, i.e. to its fully embodied, live enactment in front of an audience in a real world context or on stage. The audience, co-present with the presenters or actors, can experience this performance visually (as in a pantomime) or both visually and acoustically (as in most theatrical, musical and real-world performances); there may be physical contact between audience and presenters, and some performances even affect the audience’s olfactory sense. Performativity II refers to the illusion of a performance created in non-corporeal presentations of a narrative (Wolf → Illusion (Aesthetic) [1]), e.g. in writing, cartoons or film. These presentations of narratives evoke a performance in the mind of the reader or spectator.

In narrative, performativity can be located on two levels: the level of the story, or *histoire* (i); the level of the act of narration or narrator’s action (ii). Performativity I.i refers to the level of histoire (the story that is presented) in the performance, i.e. in the fully embodied enactment of a narrative. The spectator of the performance perceives the unfolding of a story in a scenic transmission, bodily presented by one or more actors. Performativity II.i refers to the level of *histoire* (the story that is presented) in the non-corporeal presentation of actions not mediated by a narrator (Alber & Fludernik → Mediacy and Narrative Mediation [2]). In the strictest sense, this denotes direct speech only, as in dramatic writing, dialogue quoted verbatim, etc. (McHale → Speech Representation [3]). Yet performativity can also refer to the level of the narrator’s agency or act of narration (ii). In the case of performativity I.ii, the spectator of a performance perceives an act of narration taking place. Here the performance consists in the presentation of a story by a narrator or presenter, e.g. in the figure of the rhapsodist vis-à-vis an audience. The story is mediated in a plurimedial manner by a single narrator/presenter. His or her voice, body or actions rather than those of individually embodied persons or characters form the core of the performance, which allows for different degrees of impersonation. Performativity II.ii (e.g. in written narratives) refers to the narrator’s self-thematizations, to his or her explicit comments on the story or the act of narration

and to addresses to the reader (Neumann & Nünning → Metanarration and Metafiction [4]).

The two levels of performativity (*histoire* [i] and act of narration [ii]) thus introduce a relation of partial congruity between live performances and evocations of the illusion of performativity in purely verbal narrative—a congruity that can also be investigated in a historical perspective (Fludernik → Conversational Narration – Oral Narration [5]). The performativity of the illusion of dramatic presentation in written narrative corresponds to or appears to be modeled on scenic performances. Likewise the performativity of the act of presentation or narration, especially in feigned orality or skaz narration, corresponds to or appears to be modeled on performances by an embodied storyteller.

Understood as the capacity to generate in the reader's mind the notion of a performance, performativity on both levels (*histoire* and act of presentation) can be graded according to a scale of greater or lesser performativity. Direct presentation on the story level (II.i) can be more or less absolute (e.g. mental processes can be presented as an interior monologue or as free indirect speech). Analogously, mediation of the act of narration on the level of the narration (II.ii) can be either more obvious or less so (overt vs. covert). When performativity evokes action in the mind of the reader or viewer, the demands it makes on the audience's imagination vary according to the media in which that action is presented. Arguably, the performativity of films and cartoons, thanks to the immediacy of the imagined actions to which they give rise, is greater than that of purely verbal narratives, except when mental actions such as thoughts are presented (Ryan → Narration in Various Media [6]).

In the case of both performativity I.ii and II.ii, the actual or implied act of narration can itself present a story or "story of narration" (*Erzählgeschichte*, Schmid 2005). This story tells of changes in the situation, attitude or behavior of the narrator. Some critics here also apply the term "mimesis" when they speak of the "mimesis of storytelling" (*Mimesis des Erzählens*, Nünning 2001), or when they distinguish between "process mimesis" and "product mimesis" (Hutcheon 1984: 36–47). On this level, the act of narration is thematized in a self-reflexive manner. Performative in this sense is often used synonymously with self-conscious and reflexive or with metanarrative and metafictional.

The two basic levels of performativity can also be re-conceptualized in speech act terminology that describes utterances as a mode of action. According to the philosopher Austin ([1962] 1975), utterances not only have a propositional content—they do not only say something—but they do something as well, provided that they fulfill specific conventions. Searle ([1969] 1995) further formalizes the

felicity conditions of utterances while foregrounding the successful communication of the speaker's intention against a complex and contingent background. In the context of narratology, the performativity of speech acts is relevant on two levels. First, speech acts directly precipitate action on the story-level (promises, threats, wooing, etc), whether in court-rooms or dramatic dialogue (Pfister [1977] 1993: 118–19). Second, the narrator deploys speech acts (to identify and report, generalize and promise, etc.) on the level of narration (Chatman 1978: 161–66). On this level, whole narratives can also be treated as metaphorical "utterances" or "complex speech acts" (e.g. Pratt 1977; Todorov [1978] 1990); in this perspective, a novel, too, is a speech act. Analyses of the act of narration in this sense tend to emphasize the narrative's performativity in a larger pragmatic and cultural context, possibly taking account of the empirical author or of paratextual matter and stressing the narrative act as a mode of cultural agency that engages with cultural conventions and shapes collective identities.

Since speech act theory remains language-based, it applies only to verbal narratives. Yet other media, e.g. painting or film, rely on visual or on visual and acoustic performativity, which may involve pointer or narrator figures. The specific demand performativity makes on the spectator's imagination thus varies according to the medium.

Though used primarily to denote the co-presence and live interaction between the presenter(s) of a narrative and the audience, the notion of performance is sometimes deployed in a looser sense. With a view to media in which the narrative is encountered as already given and complete, as in a novel, film or painting, the term performance is also used to describe the process of realization or mental performance of the recipient. In this case, the term becomes synonymous with the individual reading or viewing process.

4 Concepts and their Study

4.1 Performativity I: Corporeal Presentation of Action

When performativity is realized in a performance—performativity I—actions are presented in all their plurimedial dimensions (McAuley 2007). Nevertheless, the intensity with which they are experienced may vary. The spatial proximity between performance and audience as well as the possible manipulation of light and sound bear on this experience. The impact of styles of acting or ritualized behavior within given conventions of presenting and viewing may also enhance or lessen the impact of performativity in a performance. Disciplines that study the performativity of narratives in cultural or theatrical performances rarely draw on narratology,

although they do focus on the performativity of narratives in a wider, communicational and context-sensitive framework. Ethnographic and anthropological work (Turner 1982) investigates the way in which a society performatively constructs, preserves or changes its traditions, identity and cultural memory. Theater and performance studies (Auslander ed. 2003) complement this research as they analyze the processual nature and liminality of these performative constructions, i.e. their capacity to dramatize moments of transition and change. These studies emphasize the significance of material embodiment and re-contextualization, paying attention to the impact of foregrounded theatricality, audience interaction and the transitoriness of the performance (Fischer-Lichte 2004).

However, studies of oral narratives presented by a corporeal teller tend to focus on performativity I.ii, i.e. on the level of the narrator's agency rather than on the story level, as they investigate how narratives produce—in a performative and interactive manner—individual and group identity on a pragmatic and cultural plane. Since Labov (1972), research on oral narrative and face-to-face narration in linguistic discourse analysis and sociolinguistics has been concerned with specific characteristics of the oral format. More recent investigations have become increasingly sensitive to cultural contexts, analyzing how narrative performances constitute or index individual, social and cultural identities (Georgakopoulou 1997: 123–97), as well as roles, relationships, stances and activities (Bamberg → Identity and Narration [7]). Moreover, some analyses of the provisional character of narratives-in-performance indicate that the act of narration, understood as a social, communicational event, acquires collaborative aspects. From an ethnological perspective, Bauman (1986) looks at narrators in closely-knit communal settings and shows how the narrated events are shaped in the narrative event. And the sociolinguists Ochs & Capps (2001) analyze how performances of provisional narratives negotiate the teller's desire for coherence and identity while acknowledging contradictory human experiences in open collaborative forms of narration. This focus on oral narratives as performative modes of embodied social communication and interaction has sparked interdisciplinary work which Herman (1999: 219) describes as "socionarratological."

Performances can be scripted as well as mediatized. Some aspects of the performativity actualized in a performance may be scripted in a play- or filmscript or in visual sketches or even in community-based guidelines for the performance of ritual acts. In play- or filmscripts, numerous aspects of the performance are encoded through deictic references to the *hic et nunc* of the dramatic situation in the main text, but also through stage directions detailing spaces, bodily movements, light and sounds (Elam 1980; De Marinis [1978] 1993). Drawing on the work of Elam, Fludernik has recently explored the implications of locating discourse either at the

level of the playtext or at the level of the performance. She also suggests that we revise the general narrative communication model for all written narratives so that it includes performance as an additional optional level (Fludernik 2008: 365). In lyrical poetry, performativity can be traced in the visual layout (length of lines, stanzas) that serves to structure the oral performance of the poem as well as in the foregrounded acoustic potential or "musicality" of the language (Wolf 2003: 78; Hühn & Sommer → Narration in Poetry and Drama [8]). However, performances are not only prepared in various ways. They can also be recorded or mediatized. This again inflects the degree of their performativity in the new medium and involves modifications of meaning (Auslander [1999] 2005).

4.1 Performativity II: Non-corporeal Presentation of Action

4.1.1 Performativity II.i: Histoire or Story

Performativity as performativity II is also manifest in non-corporeal representations of action. The term performative in the wide sense of dramatic or unmediated roughly coincides with the term "mimetic" as opposed to "diegetic." In book III of Plato's *The Republic*, Socrates speaks of pure diegesis when the poet represents the action in his own voice only. In the mixed mode of the epic, the poet combines his authorial descriptions and comments with mimetic elements, i.e. direct speech representing the characters' speech. And when the poet completely effaces his own voice and represents the action in the imitated voices of the characters only, this is called *pure* mimesis, to be found in drama (Plato 1997: 394c). Plato thus confines his notion of mimesis to the level of *histoire* as specified by Genette and singles out drama as *the* mimetic (or performative) genre par excellence. However, Plato (395c–398b) attacks and devalues the mimetic mode for its corrupting effects on a strictly ordered society. Aristotle (1995: 1448a, 20), too, distinguishes between pure narrative, mixed narrative and dialogue, and pure dialogue. In contrast to Plato, however, Aristotle (1448b, 5–20) endorses the mimetic mode specified by Plato on account of its strong imitative force, which, he argues, gives pleasure and is pedagogically valuable. On this account, he lauds Homer's epic writing for its generous use of the mimetic mode (1460a, 5–10).

The major classical authorities thus describe the dramatic genre as performative because it presents the story in an unmediated or direct manner. This description has been repeated throughout critical appreciations of the genre, leading Pfister ([1977] 1993: 4) to draw attention to the "absolute nature" or unmediated presentation as a necessary criterion in his classic model of dramatic communication. Yet Pfister admits that unmediated or "absolute" presentation is an idealization, and in fact research on forms of mediation to be found in drama has

greatly expanded (see below).

Performativity in the sense of direct or mimetic performativity can also become a feature of narratives that are regarded as mediated such as short stories or novels. In the 18th century, readers juxtaposed the “dramatic illusion” (performativity II.i) attributed to Richardson’s novels and the “epic” impact (performativity II.ii) ascribed to the work of Fielding who foregrounds the narrator. In 19th-century definitions, narrative realism had to be “dramatic,” “impersonal,” or “objective.” And in the early 20th century, the mimetic mode of “showing” as opposed to the diegetic mode of “telling” turns into a well-nigh obligatory and defining characteristic of modernist writing and poetics. Henry James ([1909] 1986: 45–51) gives explicit priority to modes of immediacy such as rendering the characters in their own voices or portraying the events through their eyes and minds in order to achieve empathy (Keen → Narrative Empathy [9]) and a “scenic” impression of life. At about the same time, Lubbock ([1921] 1957: 200) attempted an extensive analysis of the methods of presentation involved in the creation of this illusion of an immediate encounter with “life,” which “gives validity, gives direct force to a story.” Historicizing the modernist era’s normative aesthetics, Lodge (1996) suggests that its adherence to a mimetic manner of representation has given way, in postmodernist fiction, to a preference for the mediated, diegetic mode.

Without using the term, Booth and Genette both take a closer look at the concept of performativity underlying these normative assumptions. Though opposing showing and telling, Booth points out that authorial agency is not conveyed merely in addresses to the reader or in comments and direct judgments, but also through the direct speech of reliable characters, the ordering of the narrative discourse or through any shifting of the point of view. “Everything he [the author] *shows* will serve to *tell*” ([1961] 1983: 29). Yet, as Genette points out, this does not impair the performativity of “showing.” While drawing on Booth, Genette ([1972] 1980) nevertheless distinguishes the representation of action and of speech. He argues that within the diegetic mode, mimetic or direct speech does not *represent* speech at all, but rather repeats speech or, in literary narrative, directly constitutes it: “narrative will efface itself before the direct quotations where all representational function has been abolished, just as when a judicial orator interrupts his discourse to allow the tribunal itself to examine an exhibit” ([1972] 1980: 5). Genette treats the phenomenon of performativity under the heading of “mood” and “distance” (161–64), where he refers to the “illusion of mimesis” (164) thus conveyed.

Other theorists pursue the question as to whether performativity can be graded on the story level. In his early writing, Chatman (1978) distinguishes between “non-narrated stories” and stories deploying a covert or an overt narrator, arguing for

the existence of conventions to the effect that the narrator should be considered as absent. He claims that conventions of non-narration hold for the epistolary novel, for gradable possibilities of representing a character's speech and thought, for the neutral reporting of action, or for descriptions that seem to emerge through a character's internal focalization (Niederhoff → Focalization [10]; 1978: 146–96; for a linguistic construction of this argument, see Banfield 1982). Standard examples of narratives with an absent narrator are Hemingway's "The Killers" or some of Dorothy Parker's stories containing only dialogue and action not commented upon. Chatman later drops the concept of the non-narrated narrative, arguing that every narrative is by definition narrated or presented by either an agent or an instrument which need not be human (1990: 115–16).

Whereas Chatman's argument suggests that performativity, especially in the representation of speech, can be graded in a fairly straightforward way, Sternberg, focusing on speech, argues that the communicative functions of reported discourse, such as e.g. the impression of greater or lesser immediacy or liveness, cannot be correlated straightforwardly with specific linguistic features such as direct, free indirect, or indirect speech. After all, the unmediated representation of untagged direct dialogue in written narrative does not necessarily convey a greater degree of immediacy than reported dialogue with a narrator specifying, for instance, the facial expressions and gestures accompanying the utterances or the tone of the voices. Sternberg thus abandons graded correlations of linguistic form and performative effect in favor of an account of the full range of the communication. Its transposition into written language always remains selective and implies choices; quoting always involves mediation (1982: 145). This insight can be extended from the representation of speech to that of visual detail (Chatman 1978: 28–31). Whereas written descriptions of characters ("a woman") and settings ("a room") have to be "built from nothing," cinematic descriptions of characters or settings start with a plethora of detail which the camera may reduce in many ways. As a consequence, there is always more than one approach to creating the illusion of immediacy, and the conventions determining what counts as a successful achievement of this illusion may vary (Wolf 1993). The opposition of showing and telling is particularly relevant to the discussion of film (Kuhn & Schmidt → Narration in Film [11]), where language and camera may operate independently from each other (Chatman 1990: 124–60).

4.1.1 Performativity II.ii: Narrator and Act of Narration

As far as discourse level or act of narration are concerned, the concept of performativity II.ii refers to the narrator's agency or the act of presentation and to the pragmatic context of this act. The capacity at issue thus inheres in all modes of

the act or process of presenting the story. Writing about Baudelaire and Sterne respectively, MacLean (1988) and Pfister (2001) emphasize that the foregrounding of the act of narration can feign a performance in which narrator and audience are conceived as fully embodied, co-present and interactive. Moreover, Schmid (2005: 268–70) argues that the act of narration implies both the story narrated (*die erzählte Geschichte*) and the story of narration (*Erzählgeschichte*). This "story of narration" usually remains a fragment, but in some cases it offers a great many details and may even take precedence over the story proper, as in *Tristram Shandy* . The performativity that refers to the act of presenting includes forms of self-reflexivity such as metanarration and metafictionality that effectively dramatize or foreground the act of narration. As Nünning and Fludernik point out, the accumulation of a large number of metanarrative comments results in a "deliberate meta-narrative act of celebration of the act of narration" (Fludernik 1996: 275) or a "mimesis of narration" (*Mimesis des Erzählens*, Nünning 2001).

The notion of the absolute nature of drama, as indicated above, amounts to an idealization, since the act of presenting can be traced in dramatic writing, too. The play within the play and other metatheatrical devices in *Hamlet*, or the heightened intertextuality of Stoppard's *Travesties* direct our interest to the narrative act. Pfister discusses chorus, prologue and epilogue as narratorial devices along with Brecht's use of song and montage, his deployment of a presenter figure as well as his anti-illusionist approach to the theater apparatus ([1977] 1993: 69–84). Recent studies focus on onstage narrators in memory plays or on narrative insets including the telling of anecdotes, jokes and dreams, but they also thematize the narrator as an abstract structural agency. Jahn (2001) even assimilates the concept of overt or covert narratorial agency in plays to the narratorial agency we associate with the novel, thus sketching a transgeneric perspective for drama and novel that is further elaborated by Nünning & Sommer (2008) and Fludernik (2008). All of this work strongly suggests that the performativity of drama is a much more "mixed" affair than has previously been thought. Conversely, forms of poetry that display great immediacy of consciousness or achieve scenic presentations in different voices do not square with the notion of poetry as pure diegesis (Wolf 2003; Pfister 2005).

Performativity is at stake also when narrative discourse as a whole is treated as a speech act, or when the attention shifts to the pragmatic relations within which the narrative itself turns into an act. Pratt (1977: 2, 86) treats literature as a "speech context" in which the individual work or speech act is deciphered according to "unspoken, culturally-shared knowledge of the rules and conventions." Incidentally, her alignment of natural and literary language is diametrically opposed to Austin's and Searle's position, notorious for describing what Searle calls "fictional discourse" as "parasitic" on ordinary language (Austin [1962] 1975: 22), or as a series of

pretended, make-believe speech acts (Searle [1969] 1995). Pratt (1977: 152–224) and later Todorov ([1978] 1990) focus on the performativity of genre conventions in particular. And in a historical perspective, Petrey (1988) traces the specific conventions of the "realist speech act" in 19th-century French novels, while Esterhammer (2000) investigates the shape of the "Romantic performative" in Britain and Germany. Taking Pratt's considerations into a different theoretical arena, Rudrum (2008) posits that the concept of narrativity itself should be de-essentialized and rethought as convention- and community-based performativity (Abbott → Narrativity [12]).

Iser ([1972] 1974) and Kearns (1999) theorize the reader's response in general terms when they argue that literary narratives, by performing illocutionary acts and implicatures, trigger interpretive choices in the act of reading. Moreover, Iser ([1991] 1993: 281–96) also discusses the narrative act or "fictionalizing acts" in an anthropological perspective. He points out that the Aristotelian notion of mimesis already implies a teleological thrust exceeding mere imitation, which is increasingly complemented in the course of history by a performative dimension in the process of reception. Here the concept of performativity seems to combine the formalized features of performativity in speech act theory with the contingent aspects of (mental) performances in the reader's relation to the text (Prince → Reader [13]).

Finally, a number of critics have explored how gender bears on the performativity of the narrative act and its pragmatic relations. Lanser (1981) draws on speech act concepts of performativity to reappraise the gendered relation between author, narrator and point of view. She later argues for a contextualist narratology that aims to investigate how "texts, like bodies, *perform* sex, gender and sexuality" ([1999] 2004: 127). Page (2006: 94–142) complements this approach by insisting that the performativity of gender in narratives possesses an ideological dimension that cannot be appreciated without attending to the specific social functions of these narratives.

5 Topics for Further Investigation

As this brief survey has shown, the notion of performativity cuts across a wide spectrum of fruitful research in narratology that calls for more systematic investigation. Rather than aiming to replace the categories that have served to label some of this research so far ("mimesis," "aesthetic illusion," "metanarrativity," etc.), such investigations could further explore the relations between them. For instance, this survey suggests that the concept of performativity could serve as an ideal site for studying the interrelation between the degree of narrative performativity in visual or verbal forms of presentation and the more or less

determinate visual and kinesthetic mental performance taking place in the mind of the reader or spectator. How do different media or specific cultural environments affect this interrelation? Furthermore, the survey indicates that the concept of performativity and the two levels of narrative to which it refers provide a distinct inroad into research on written narratives. In this perspective, investigation into the textual illusion of scenic presentation and the textual illusion of orality can be pursued as accounts of complementary types of textual performativity. At the same time, the capacity of speech acts to shape gendered as well as social or cultural identities (Butler 1997) seems to merit closer analysis in written narratives, too.

Yet the concept of performativity also introduces a theoretical query. In narratology, the notion of performativity is indebted both to the concept of the speech act and to the concept of performance. Speech act analysis, when restricted to verbal narratives, demands a certain degree of idealized formalization, while the analysis of performance deals with highly contingent and embodied interactions as processes. The relation between these two points of reference and their integration into narratological research needs to be developed further. Considering the fully embodied and specifically situated performance of utterances, we must ask what precisely the abstractions of speech act theory involve and how they shape narratological analysis drawing on speech act theory. In any case, the study of performativity in narratology supplements the analysis of performativity *in* narrative with the analysis of the performativity *of* narratives. On this account, the narratological study of performativity offers the potential of complementing structural analysis of narrative with analysis of its communication situation that is culturally and historically specific.

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