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## Linguistic Contextuality: Deixis, Performance, Materiality

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A deictic term returns the speech act to the world  
—Jed Rasula, *The Poetics of Embodiment*

### Introduction

Many linguistic theories posit that language is an ideal edifice (Suber 72-74), an incorporeal structure (Nancy 84), a system of pure difference (Saussure 115-120), a human-made informational network that can function outside of the human and beyond the contingency of a singular utterance in a particular place and time. Words can travel outside their time of origin. Sentences can move beyond the bodies that originally speak them or receive them. Language can perform here but can also perform there, where “there” can be extended to an infinite series of contexts. Language is able to perform in these respects because it contains functional signs which bring together signified and signifier and thereby establish a link between referent and reference. A sign stands in for a “real” thing, but words are not bound to the realness of the thing they represent. In this sense, words can have a life of their own. Language is: 1) atemporal, as it continues to signify outside of any given time 2) disembodied, as a word’s referential function performs irrespective to the speaker, receiver, or the embodied materiality of the words themselves 3) able to hold a semantic function (i.e. a word means something) or a semiotic-structural function (i.e. a word is distinguishable from what it is not) outside of any performative function which it may also hold.

Deixis<sup>1</sup> throws a wrench into this entire linguistic project by opening up a Pandora’s box of contextuality. Deictic claims complicate the immobility of language by claiming that certain words can only be understood contextually. These deictic words can only func-

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<sup>1</sup>Deixis is the linguistic phenomena whereby certain words have referents that change depending on the context in which they are used. Linguists typically classify deictical phrases into locative (for example, “there” or “here”), identity (for example, “I” or “you”) or temporal (for example, “now” or “then”).

tion within a specific spatio-temporal index that materially and spatially ties together: the bodies that contain them, the actions that they perform, and the time in which they are performed. For deixis, words must be embodied, they can only be performed, and they are always only in one time.

More problems regarding the de-contextualized account of language are opened up by considering the difference between a word's written mark and spoken utterance. A structuralist Saussurean account of language marginalizes the importance of the materiality of language by noting that material arbitrariness is a determinative factor for language to function. Likewise, a Derridean account of language reduces the material difference between the phonic and graphic by locating the absentive feature of writing in vocal utterance as well. However, the anthropological-historical accounts of these two systems (orality and literacy) as found in thinkers such as Walter Ong and Eric Havelock make the blurring of the boundaries of these systems highly susceptible. From sensuous differentiation of sight and sound, to the removal of authorial intentionality, to arguments of inward embodied qualities of speech, to the contextual situatedness of dialogue, language continues to perform differently in these different material contexts and this performance has vast implications on subjectivity, temporality, and embodiment.

Another angle of approach to these considerations lie in the accounts of performative contextuality found in J.L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* and the series of in-depth responses by Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, and Eve Sedgwick. A foundational question for these authors is: how far does such a context reach? For Derrida the contextual limits are spatio-temporally infinite; context cannot hold its limits and this limitlessness is the very foundational aspect which makes language what it is. Butler and Sedgwick cannot follow Derrida this far, as one consequence of this Derridean limitlessness is an inability to mark differences between various kinds of utterances. For Butler this concerns utterances that break or injure. For Sedgwick it includes utterances that are periperformative spatial outliers. The only thing that is clear here is the messiness of the situation, and how these three authors are ready to embrace such a mess. For all three, words are bound to contexts, but the important question that follows is: to what extent? The answer to this question (i.e. the spatio-temporal limitations or qualifications of this context) will affect the way in which language performs, subjects are interpolated, and bodies are to be understood.

What follows is an analysis of linguistic function around these three aforementioned themes: materiality, deixis, and context. The fact that words can be written or spoken reveals that a singular utterance differs in linguistic function depending on this context (i.e. written or spoken); however, this difference predominately changes the emotional, connotative, and performative elements of an utterance and leaves the denotative quality of an utterance unaffected. The phenomena of deixis reveals a more radical contextuality—namely that some words have referents that change depending on the context. This quality in deixis hints at the possibility that all language itself can be contextual—that words themselves are empty vessels to be filled in by the context in which they are uttered. What then follows is a post-structuralist analysis of the contextuality of language as found through Austin, Derrida, Butler, and Sedgwick that analyzes the very term of contextuality itself to see how far one context extends, how much can be enclosed, included, or occluded within a given context. Ultimately, this essay aims to provide an expanded linguistic framework that embraces contextuality and incites discursive practices to embrace the context of their utterances (and the design of these contexts) as a crucial factor which determines an utterance’s meaning, understanding, and communicability.

### Connotative Contextuality—From Speaking to Writing

Authors have raised questions regarding the difference between oral discourses and literary discourses for millenia. One example being Plato’s *Phaedrus* which questions the legitimacy of written discourse over oral dialectic exchange. The differences—material, cultural, historical—between writing and orality create a perfect setting to stage our questions of contextuality. If an utterance changes its linguistic function as it changes from being written to being spoken then this would indicate that language is somewhat contextual. The crucial question that remains is to consider how this linguistic function changes, and—perhaps more concretely—what exactly does change.

The historian Walter Ong in his book, *Orality and Literacy*, takes up these questions as he explores the philosophical implications brought about by the rise of cultures of literacy. Much of Ong’s argument has to do with larger cultural phenomena of orality and literacy and so touches less on the linguistic function of written and spoken utterances; however, these socio-historical differences cannot be ignored as they too impact an utterance’s function and use. One cannot provide a full account of these differences here; however what can be

noted is that many are tied to memory's function in oral culture, typographical and topological movements in the development of literacy and print culture, and social apparatuses that connect oral cultures differently from literary cultures.

A particular distinction from which Ong draws many conclusions, and is shared by several other theorists, is the differing sensuous qualities of each medium. Sounds form events, and so sounded words uniquely exist in time and cannot be stopped or halted (Ong 32). It is this permanent fluidity of sound that leads Ong to make an ontological claim that sound exists only when it is going out of existence (69). Graphic interfaces move language into a topographical dimension where sight lays the groundwork for understanding and where the objects by which sight sees are stable and static. The relation to body here is somewhat more nuanced than it appears. For it would seem that both mediums equally allow for embodiment (graphic with eyes, phonic with voice) yet Ong clearly notes a de-centering of the body that occurs within writing. He explicates the embodied connections between vocalized performance and tactile movements. Examples include manipulations of beads, string figures to complement songs, bards plucking strings to accompany verse, and Talmudic rocking back and forth (Ong 66). Not only does written culture create less opportunity for embodied performative gestures, but the written word is removed from a lived-situation, from a "total, existential situation, which always engages the body," which spoken words always modify (66).

This world of speech not only engages in a wide set of embodied practices, it also lives inside and amongst the body in a way writing is not able to. Ong outlines the interiority of sound argument, as similarly described by Hegel, Husserl, and Merleau-Ponty noting that you, "can immerse yourself in hearing, in sound," but that there, "is no way to immerse yourself similarly in sight" (Ong 70). Ong then ties this lacking immersiveness of vision (and thereby of writing) to cultural developments of a unique externality, thing-like-ness, and objectivity. Writing allows for a radical disconnect from the world of objects dangerously lending itself to solipsism (100), and also pushes human consciousness to think of its own internal resources as more thing-like (129). In this sense, writing conditions the uniquely western performances of subjectivity that we have come to take for granted.

In Ong, we are supplied with a vast cultural cartography of how these two worlds of orality and literacy differ. The way in which oral word is embodied finds no corollary in the written word, which is

able to subsist and exist outside of a body, to persist bodiless, unseen, and un-sensed. The living quality of a vocal utterance is tied to its temporality—its fluid movement can only exist within time like all living organisms—whereas the written word is atemporal, static and therefore lifeless. While Ong would most likely recognize that all language has a performative quality, and both cultures of literacy and orality ground subjectivity (and in fact form a different kind of subject in each instance), oral culture bears a significantly more stark connection to the “real” world, the world where action resides. While it may perhaps be erroneous to extrapolate Ong’s claims about the cultures of literacy and orality to the linguistic performance of a singular sentence, the paper would, nonetheless, suggest such a move. For Ong, the written utterance performs via a removal from the lived embodied encounter that allows for greater object-oriented, topological, and static understanding. The oral utterance performs via immersive embodied practices that allow for a fluidity of meaning that is connected to action, community and the unique living moment of its encounter.

In Eric A. Havelock’s *Preface to Plato* many of these claims of Ong’s are echoed as he explicates the developments of a literary culture which overtook the oral poetic culture of Ancient Greece. While much of his claims have to do with particular developments within cultures of speaking and memorizing—Homeric poetry as cultural heritage, monological speech versus a Socratic insistence on breaking up oration to ask questions, distinctions between the functional qualities verbs and nouns, etc. Havelock ends his study with a pronouncement that the development of literacy radically aided the formation of a uniquely Western post-Platonic thinking which is abstract and disconnected from the embodied visual and material world of poetry (Havelock 303). A Platonic tradition of thinking, inevitably made possible and eventually perfected by the development of literacy, announces another vast cultural distinction between the phonic and graphic, one that ties the phonic to a world of imagistic embodied memorization, and one that links the graphic to a world of disembodied abstraction, and provides another layer of justification for Ong’s dichotomies between literacy and orality.

This disjunction between the performativity of text and speech which we find in Ong and Havelock is called into question in Paul Ricoeur’s *From Text to Action*. For Ricoeur, both speech and text retain the temporality of the event as, “the sentences of a text signify *here and now*” (Ricoeur 119). The lived world of speech is also found in the readerly experience of the text, just with different parameters of audience and subjectivity. For Ricoeur this readerly situation of the text,

“is not essentially the presumed intention of the author, the lived experience of the writer, but rather what the text means for whoever complies with its injunction” (121). This disjunction between intention and utterance does not occur in speaking (148) and a kind of coupled immediacy of intention and meaning occurs in spoken utterances, whereas this is lacking in the written word. Ricoeur, embedded in a hermeneutical project, claims that textual moments are defined by a unique dialogical relation between one’s self and the other of the text, a relationship which is mediated by the act of interpretation—defined as one’s ability “to place oneself en route towards the *orient* of the text” (122). There are moments in Ricoeur’s project where a kind of unification between text and action occurs, where actions are themselves quasi-texts (137-8) and where a division between an embodied world of gesture and movement can function similarly to a world of writing. These boundaries are blurred because of similar trace-like and inscriptive qualities that occur in both action and text (137-8).

However, in spite of these moments of graphic-phonetic unification, Ricoeur also identifies a key difference in linguistic function between speech and writing. For Ricoeur, when a spoken word is inscribed in writing what is carried forth is not the event of speaking, but rather the discourse—the “said” of speaking, its semantic function (Ricoeur 146). Drawing on Austin, Ricoeur identifies speech acts as having three linguistic properties—locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary<sup>2</sup>—the first and less so the second of which cross the border between speech and writing; however, the third, the perlocutionary, troubles this divide:

But the perlocutionary action is precisely what is the least discourse in discourse. It is the discourse as stimulus. It acts, not by my interlocutor’s recognition of my intention, but sort of energetically, by direct influence upon the emotions and the affective dispositions. Thus, the propositional act, the illocutionary force, and the perlocutionary action are susceptible, in a

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<sup>2</sup>Austin identifies the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts in the following way. A locutionary act is, “the act of ‘saying something,’ which includes, “the utterance of certain noises, the utterance of certain words in a certain construction, and the utterance of them with a certain ‘meaning’ in the favourite philosophical sense of that word, i.e. with a certain sense and with a certain reference” (Austin 94). For example, “He said to me, You can’t do that” (102). An Illocutionary act refers to the way we are using speech in this occasion (99). For example, “He protested against my doing it” (102). A perlocutionary act is the “certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons” (101). For example “He pulled me up, checked me” (102).

decreasing order, to the intentional exteriorization that makes inscription in writing possible. (Ricoeur 147)

For Ricoeur, both speaking and writing have the potential to convey meaning through a clear semantic process that is marked by a movement out of the embodied, material conditions that occur at the instance of a word's utterance or inscription. However, it is only speech that allows for a non-semantic mode of communication, a sort of mysterious energetic transfer of emotion. Writing removes this possibility because the perlocutionary enigmatic transfer is, "the least inscribable aspect of discourse" (Ricoeur 147). So for Ricoeur the movement into writing is marked by a movement towards a greater "said-ness" of the words themselves, a movement towards greater locution whereas speech acts contain residue of an instantaneous transfer of intention. The mechanism of this transfer is not entirely located in the words themselves, but rather in the non-descriptive contextuality that holds unique powers of performativity.

A final account of the phonic-graphic divide that the paper will touch upon is found in Jakobson's *Six Lectures on Sound and Meaning*. At various moments in Jakobson's account it seems like there is a divestment of the embodied, motor-functions of sound in favor of a perceptual study of the quality of the sound itself (Jakobson 12-18). But this sound, the unit of the phoneme, is not to be analyzed purely scientifically or empirically; rather it is a sound which is imbued with meaning by its status as an agent of pure difference. For Jakobson, only the phoneme is purely arbitrary. Phoneme is the smallest linguistic unit that is divested with meaning; but even then the structuralist differential calculus is able to function. It is here that the body is brought back in, as voiced and unvoiced oppositions (and other embodied components of the sounds) are determinative of the phoneme's oppositional status (80).

One important consideration that Jakobson investigates is non-semantic phonic functions in sentences—for example a raised intonations at the end of a sentence. Jakobson remarks that, "such phonic devices give us no information concerning the cognitive content of sentences; they signal only their emotive or conative functions—emotion or appeal." (Jakobson 59-60) Emotion and impulse, both sites of embodied activation, are uniquely tied to non-semantic phonic devices. The phonic is distinguished through its ability to perform linguistic functions of pure emotive communication.

Jakobson's account, in the end, throws a mild wrench in the arbitrariness that lies in the center of the structuralist program. Jakobson gives an example that, "the opposition between acute and grave phonemes has the capacity to suggest an image of bright and dark," or another example of, "the Czech words *den* 'day' and *noc* 'night,' which contain a vocalic opposition between acute and grave, are easily associated in poetry with the contrast between the brightness of midday and the nocturnal darkness," arguing that the semantic meaning of a word may find correspondence with an emotional or aesthetic meaning that is only afforded by the phonemic externality of an utterance (Jakobson 112-113). However, over and against this movement which is favorable towards the poetic, the embodied and the material, it does not seem as though the materiality of the sound, that is, its embodied qualities, have linguistic function. The functional aspect of the sound continues to be its oppositional status. The structuralist focus on differentiation as being the sole value standard for meaning is merely removed from the signifier and signified and placed on the phoneme itself. The meaning of sound, and what "sound" is, is then radically redefined and placed into a structuralist landscape. Body is continually displaced in favor of the intangible quality of difference.

So let us return to our original question: how does a sentence differ in linguistic function when it moves between writing and speech. As Jakobson shows, a written sentence, when spoken, could utilize phonemes that alter the emotions around an utterance. In other words, this transfer from writing to speech alters the perlocutionary act; however the denotative quality is unaffected. Jakobson's account reinforces Ricoeur's argument that the perlocutionary quality of an utterance is brought forth in vocalization but is diminished in writing. Both Jakobson's and Ricoeur's accounts linguistically bolster the cultural and anthropological arguments of Ong and Havelock. A written sentence removes context and gives the word a disembodied static transferability—an ability to move from one context to the next while retaining basic denotative functions. When this sentence is spoken, the embodied context of the sentence is added to this denotative function—emotional and enigmatic perlocutionary forces are brought into the performance of an utterance.

### Deixis—Contextuality Becoming Denotative

With the phenomena of deixis we find a more radical contextuality of language. Not only do utterances shift their emotional or perlocutionary qualities when they change from context to context, but the

referents themselves change as well. Deictic words change meaning as the context changes. The implications of this phenomena are vast—for it reduces the separation between words and ourselves, bodies and environments. Words are no longer pure abstractions, and so contextual elements (our bodies, selves, identities, surroundings) are not only shaped by language, but also shape language.

Emile Benveniste's *Problems in General Linguistics* is a remarkable structuralist extension of Saussure's semiotic linguistic project. The systematicity of language, its arbitrariness, its contingency, its structure, are taken up from Saussure with remarkable precision and accuracy. Benveniste's project is a radical shaking-out of the bed pillows of those who claim to use language universally, but are actually only using it within an isolated Western-centric approach. He accomplishes this by performing a structural, and cross-culturally, synchronic and diachronic analysis on various parts of speech, most relevantly, his work regarding the nature of pronouns.

For Benveniste, in a typical structuralist manner, "I," "you," and "he/she" are understood by each term's opposition to one another. "I" is always the utterer and forms a foundational quality of subjectivity. "You" is not only the person other than the subject, but the one that I is speaking with and the only one I can speak with. Both "I" and "you" are then paired in opposition to "he" (the third person) which is not really a person at all, but a pure abstraction (Benveniste 201). "I" and "You" are grounded in a concrete dialogical interchange of the present instant (118); whereas the third person is radically displaced, is a non-person of no time, "extended," "unlimited," and "limitless" (204). In this sense "I" and "You" are the constitutive deictic claims; whereas the third person manifests abstraction and de-contextuality.<sup>3</sup>

With "I" as a foundational deictic operative, Benveniste goes on to define the boundaries of other deictic terms by setting them in relation to the function of "I." For example, he argues that "this" is the object indicated in the present discourse of the "I," whereas, "here and now delimit the spatial and temporal instance coextensive and contemporary with [the] present instance of discourse containing I" (218-

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<sup>3</sup>However, the contextuality that functions within deictic pronouns also applies to verb forms. For Benveniste, the verb form itself is, "always and necessarily actualized by the act of discourse and in dependence on that act." (Benveniste 220) Verbs are necessarily connected to distinctions of person as he cannot seem to find any language where verbs don't indicate the grammatical person (197) and so verbs too are always only manifested in the situation of discourse, and receive their form through the individuated contexts in which they occur.

19). All of these deictic terms, each unique in their relation to the present instant of discourse, share the common feature of being an ‘ensemble of “empty” signs that are non-referential with respect to “reality” (219). These terms lack referentiality, as they function merely as reflexive tools that announce a particular intersubjective condition. A deictic term’s performance is precisely this—to announce that I am here, beside you, in this particular configuration of space and time, in relation to these particular objects that lack all designative qualities except for their “real-ness” beside us. In other words, they exist and that is all we can say about them.

Christine Tanz’s *Studies in the Acquisition of Deictic Terms* provides a rigorous psycho-sociological study into how children acquire deictic terms. While Tanz notes that deictic terms have a marginal status within a semantic approach to language (Tanz 9), she implicitly lays groundwork for linguistic and philosophical claims that are themselves outliers to these normative accounts of language. What are these limits of deixis? The terms that Tanz takes up are spatial relations (front/back), personal pronouns (I/you), demonstratives (this/that/here), and special verbs (come/go/bring/take) and verb tenses. While Tanz almost goes as far as to claim that the contextuality of language may reside in a broader range of utterances than those traditionally considered, she nevertheless provides an account by which a deictic term (such as I) can be delimited from a term like “chair.” Both “chair” and “I” can pick out different terms each time they are uttered, yet both seem to have a certain degree of contextuality, “the utterance does not establish the chair as a chair while it does establish an individual as the addressee” (Tanz 9). For Tanz, deictic terms have special performative qualities that establish the object in its very utterance. The referent only exists within the utterance, whereas non-deictic terms function in some capacity outside of their utterance.

While Tanz considers many aspects of deictic terms, spatiality holds a primary function in her account. Tanz claims that, “the most concrete and basic way that utterances are situated is that they take place in some physical location” (Tanz 70). She goes on to provide an in-depth account of varied spatial qualities of utterances, from the locative acquisition of front/back terms (13-14), to Somali suffixes which indicate the positionality of an object (70), to Piaget’s topological child-development models. The persistent “now” of an utterance is met with a manifold variety of spatial and embodied positions that determine the performance of a given word.

This embodied spatiality points to a hidden aspect of deixical formation—namely, that deixis is mediating phenomena between the pure spatiality of gesture and the abstraction of language. Tanz considers the possibility of there being a “pure” deictic indicator, “such as the gesture of pointing, which can be used to point to anything.” (Tanz 6) For Tanz, only gesture has the status of pure contextuality, as a direct relationship is formed between the body, the space of utterance and the indicator that are all brought together and exist wholly and entirely only in that given moment’s existence. Language removes this pure embodied element, for even deictic terms are not entirely contextual. Their linguistic status can be lifted from the immediacy of embodiment—an embodiment which forms a direct correspondence with context.

For Benveniste, the performative function of deictic terms carry a similar function to that of Tanz in that their capacity for switching I’s and You’s becomes the grounds for a dialogic reciprocity. However, unlike Tanz, Benveniste links deictic function to acts of interpellation. We, as subjects, are defined, identified and constituted by the instance of discourse which fills the empty deictic forms (Benveniste 227). Benveniste is decidedly silent on the notions of embodiment. The body is merely that which language is not. It is merely a position from which utterances occur—a kind of shrouded centrality with no form yet utters claims and thereby helps to ground subjectivity. For Tanz the body plays a role of primary importance as it presents the possibility of a pure deictic indicator (a pointed finger). The phenomena of deixis is constituted upon a vibrant spatial embodiment that performs without the aid of language’s empty abstractions.

Jed Rasula in *The Poetics of Embodiment* provides an expansive and comprehensive account of deixis which spills out into the body, metaphor, and perhaps even all of language. He opens his considerations of the topic by stating that deictic claims “returns the speech act to the world,” and give priority to “context over text” (Rasula 63). In “normal” language words attach themselves to bodies, as a tree means a specific thing in the world; however deixis does not function in this way (Rasula draws on Tanz here to add that this explains why it is so hard for children to learn deictic claims). Deictic claims are, “mobile, interchangeable, and empty” (66-7) and in this sense, are completely decontextualized and contain a doubtful spatio-temporality all of which are a function of deixis as a linguistic category. It is precisely this interchangeability on the linguistic level that gives deictic terms the capacity to be filled and resolved in a particular instance (75).

Rasula undertakes an extended analysis of Jeffrey Kittay's and Wlad Godzich's *The Emergence of Prose* which helps create an expansive account of the performative function of deixis. Kittay and Godzich argue that prose has, "a textual space in which it holds together its discourses by referring one discourse to another, by positing deictic relationships between them" (Rasula 116). In this way, a reader of prose must come to terms with a radically disembodied multiplicity, whereby subjectivity comes to be defined only in "the assignment of different, multiple, and short term positions" (76). As a culture increasingly becomes able to deal with deictic instability of positionality (305-6), it effects counterbalancing measures, namely the development of an "introspective dimension," i.e. subjectivity (309).

While deixis comes to inform a multiplicitous embodiment, it also provides a metaphor for how the body comes to work as, "the body itself is a sort of deictic empty form, to be filled by the overt scenarios specific to social modalities of exchange" (Rasula 81-82). It is with this move, with emptiness as his hinge, that Rasula comes to identify emptiness itself (perhaps a positioning towards a Derridean absence) as "a structural feature of any semantic domain" (Rasula 81-82). This provides a sort of grounding for Rasula to include metaphor into his deictic system: "here is a figure that stands for another figure, a person in place of another person, or a thing in place of a person—here is an empty place that can be filled by anything at all" (136). For Rasula, the correlation between body and deixis is not an absolute coherence, as the body implies a particular relation to the performative. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's theories on corporeality and body image, Rasula identifies that while deixis has a neat distribution between terms—now/then, here/there—our body always exists alongside this distribution, tugging at it, affecting it, always pulling us towards action-potential. This is because our sense of corporeality is not coextensive with our flesh, and so there is a constant labor to re-work distance in space, into a "workable corporeality" (112-13).

Far from being a marginal linguistic phenomena, as it was used to be thought, deixis actually reveals prominent qualities of language, its relativity and its contextuality. And while Rasula only uses Barthes as a mouthpiece to say all of language is deictic, and only extends deictic status beyond its normal usage (pronouns, locatives, etc) to metaphor, what deixis does is reveal to us—in its inability to stick to objects—that its peculiar feature is actually a quality of both language and ourselves; language does not fully presence, does not fully adhere

to a single piece of reality, and neither do our bodies. Deixis reveals emptiness as a fundamental gap between signified and signifier. This emptiness is what we play with when we play in language. This emptiness is filled in the momentary junctures of reality which ground us as subjects, and it is this ultimate groundlessness which causes, in fact forces us, to create the fictitious entity called “subject” (a kind of Humean fiction). Perhaps even most radically, this emptiness *is* our body—“the body itself is a sort of deictic empty form” (Rasula 81). Our body, our subjectivity, our lives and our language are all contextual—they interpolate, they are filled by a moment, and then they move on.

### Radical Contextuality—Derrida, Butler, Sedgwick

As we have opened up Pandora’s box of linguistic contextuality, the question now becomes how far does it extend? What exactly is a “context”? What are its limits? This paper will now offer a comprehensive consideration of linguistic contextuality by focusing primarily on the concept of context as explicated in Derrida’s *Signature Event Context*, Butler’s *Excitable Speech*, and Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling*. In these works, each author responds not only to John Austin’s notion of contextuality as found in his *How to Do Things with Words* but also create a shared commentary on each other, as Butler responds to Derrida, and Sedgwick responds to both Derrida and Butler. This being the case, these thinkers will be treated in the same order.

Derrida with relation to the concept of contextuality in *Signature Event Context* finds agreement in Austin’s notion of contextuality as it shatters the “concept of communication as a purely semiotic, linguistic, or symbolic concept” (Derrida 1988: 13). But further carries it to a logical conclusion far beyond the likes of which Austin would accept. For Austin’s account to function, for an utterance to successfully perform, an utterance must delimit the bounds of its context. Outside of an utterance’s center, defined by a linguistic boundary that unites a particular performance to its intention and no other, there are various infelicitous performances which must be excluded. This is where Derrida catches Austin and notes that it is only because of these outliers that the utterance can perform in its centrality. That is, without a “general iterability” there could not be a successful performance (Derrida 17).

For Derrida a written sign—and writing here, while denoting graphic inscription, also refers to the trace-structure of all language (Spivak xxxix, lxix)—functions only because of its ability to break from the author’s intention and the environment of its occurrence (Derrida

9) and because it is capable of being re-inscribed into an infinite number of possible contexts. This is what Derrida identifies as iterability. Moreover, Derrida maintains that this applies to spoken as well as written utterances stating that the structure of possibility for the utterance, “the sky is blue,” “includes the capability to be formed and to function as a reference that is empty or cut off from its referent” (11). Writing, defined by this notion of iterability, implies a radical delimitation of presence; based in absentive traces, writing offsets claims to its materiality, as it must, “be capable of functioning in the radical absence of every empirically determined receiver in general” (8).

Because linguistic signs function by an infinite series of iterations, context can never be delimited or bounded (Derrida 3) that is to say we never know where a context begins and where it ends. In this sense, contextuality begins to lose sense as a concept because all of language (every utterance) is equally contextual, in fact infinitely so, not because a given mark is never valid outside of a context, “but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center or absolute anchoring [ancrage]” (12).

And what would then be the temporality of this infinite contextuality? The temporality is also thrown askew. Certainly an utterance is not determined by the present moment it is uttered. An ultimate delaying and deferment of meaning constitutes language. All *actual* moments of an utterance’s performance are not important for Derrida, namely because what grounds the possibility for a meaning to exist in that isolated brief moment in time is language’s iterable structure of unending traces. The temporary disclosure of meaning in one instance is temporary, fleeting, unanchored, de-centered—and if properly analysed and “deconstructed” one will see that meaning is ultimately abated and deferred. Derrida explodes the notion of contextuality leaving us in a post-structuralist fall-out zone where all individual instances and places are negated by a series of infinite disembodied traces—timeless and placeless.

In *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler follows Derrida’s argument until its ubiquitous reduction that all utterances hold equal contextuality. She identifies that the Derridean iterative break from all context is, “the force of the performative” and it functions outside of meaning or truth via a structural account of language that operates autonomously from any semantic or social dimension (Butler 148-9). This is precisely where Butler departs from Derrida, as Butler wants to provide an explanation of performativity, of contextuality, that can account for

why certain utterances “break from prior contexts with more ease,” and why certain utterances “carry the force to wound,” more than others (150). Derrida’s account, in its radical a-temporality and a-sociality, in its radical semiotic formalism, doesn’t provide an “account of the social iterability of the utterance” (150).

Butler’s main concern with Austin’s speech act contextual theory is that it cannot be contained in a given moment; rather a vast history of utterance must be considered and brought into the context at hand. This historicity of context is linked to the question of how a subject is constituted. For Austin, in illocution, “the subject who speaks precedes the speech in question”; however, for Althusser, the notion of interpellation implies that, “the speech act that brings the subject into linguistic existence precedes the subject in question” (Butler 24). Butler draws on Althusserian notion of interpellation to show that each act of interpellation, each moment of address (for example being called “hey you” by a police officer) animates a subject into existence (25). It is through ritualized performances of subjectivity (by being called this again and again) that a subject comes into formation. Butler then makes a crucial departure from Althusser’s ritualized account of subjectivization by resisting the complicity of sedimented language and ritual. For Butler, an individual *does* have power; not the power to move outside of history, but to choose a particular utterance’s usage and to hold responsibility for, “negotiating the legacies of usage that constrain and enable that speaker’s speech” (27).

In *Touching Feeling* Eve Sedgwick, takes issue with Austin in a similar Butlerian fashion by challenging the singularity of an utterance, the possibility of it being located within a given moment. Sedgwick assents to the works of Butler and Derrida, both of whom respond to the Austinian false presenced center. For these three thinkers an utterance’s spatio-temporal context cannot be easily and readily defined by a simple “there”-ness of its instance. But while Butler and Derrida focus on a temporal relocation of the utterance—via iteration, history, citation (Sedgwick 68)—Sedgwick moves to a project of spatialization, a kind of topology of the periperformative, defined as the outlying performances located tangentially and on the margins of a central utterance (5).

Sedgwick provides an excellent example in the statement “I dare you” and the implications of wussiness that it entails. If Butler were analysing this occurrence, she would most likely look into the interpolative history of this utterance and the multiplicitous cultures surrounding its usage; Sedgwick, on the other hand, considers those

located spatially around the statement's utterance—those complicit in its ability to function who witness the dare. Sedgwick considers what consensus we must assume to exist between these parties and what energy is required to disinterpolate, to count oneself out of this centered situation of negative attitudes towards wussiness. For Sedgwick, an utterance's disinterpolation is always messier, stranger, de-centered (Sedgwick 69-70).

Sedgwick's account revolves around the notion of the periperformative, the strange neighboring terrain around the central performance (an example of centrality being the speaker who utters "I dare you). At the very moment an utterance is uttered, there are innumerable goings-on around that utterance that allows for it to be uttered and which perform alongside the main utterance. Sedgwick does the messy work of mapping out these suburban landscapes which are full of ambiguities, disavowals and negativities and insists that they are not any "less" in terms of their rhetorical force. Moreover, any attempts to calculate their distance from the center are bound to fail, as their spatial texture is non-uniform and non-homogeneous. The messiness of these vicinities implies multiplicity: multiple emotions, multiple illocutions, multiple locations (Sedgwick 78-9). All of this leading to a radical instability, and an incredible power in this instability—a power to destabilize the centrality of a performance.

For Sedgwick, this spatialization of performance helps make room for a unique account of "performative affectivity" that sidesteps "intentional or descriptive fallacies" (Sedgwick 68). This is accomplished in the "beside" that is afforded by spatialization—a dethroning of dualisms that includes a wide range of, "desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling," (8) and helps open an account of affect that allows also for a wider range of possible emotive attachments—not merely affects that surround the speakers of a central performances, but affects which can be attached to "things, people, ideas, sensations, relations," [etc.] (19). Sedgwick's account of the periperformative helps ground a theory of decentralized affect that stands in for a singular embodied quality of emotion. In this sense, the body is extended outwards, dissipated out into a wide range of possible places, entities and contexts.

## Conclusion

As explicated in the introduction, language has a unique iterative structure that allows for words to travel between multiplicitous

contexts. However, this does not mean that the differing contexts of its travel do not change something fundamental in the words themselves. A word can change from spoken to written; however, one may argue that those changes are predominantly connotative or perlocutionary functions. This alteration does not affect the referential or denotative quality of the word in transit. With deixis, this is not the case, for words mean differently as contexts change. And while one may argue that deixis is merely a marginal linguistic phenomena (that it only applies to a small group of words), deixis reveals a possibility within language that can extend to its very center—the possibility that words are empty signs that are filled in by the contexts in which they inhabit. Once this possibility is granted, the next question that must be addressed is what is this contextuality that has been opened? Is it, as Tanz argues, merely the particular finger pointing at the particular object in a particular space and time? Is it as in Butler’s explication—the entire history of this pointing in various situated cultural contexts? Is it more aligned with Sedgwick’s account—those besides the pointing who allow for what is pointed at to be pointed at? Or is it Derridean—are these contexts limitless, extending to an infinite series of iterations and widening circles of contextuality that these iterations embrace?

As language becomes contextual and these contexts expand and contract their boundaries, so we too expand and contract. Our identities, subjectivities, and bodies are conditioned by these contexts. In order to understand who and what we are, we must understand where and when we speak and are spoken to. To make sense of language’s contextuality, to aid in this understanding, I believe it is helpful to turn to Butler’s and Sedgwick’s accounts. Derridean limitless contextuality doesn’t speak to the particularity of “social iterability” of an utterance and doesn’t help us make sense of particular cultures and systems of contextuality.

While Butler is interested in the question of why particular utterances break away more easily from past context, Sedgwick is concerned about the question of who periperformatively lies around the utterance, this paper is more deeply invested in the particular embodied, material, and spatial elements that lie within and around utterances. Of particular interest is the question of why certain discursive practices embrace the intentional creation, design, and fabrication of these elements, and some do not. In political discourse, not only are words crafted, but the dress of the speaker is considered, his/her placement, and the camera angle which broadcasts and captures these utterances. In theatrical discourse, scenery, gestures, stagings, and movements are considered as well. However, academic culture (for

example in conferences, talks, or symposia) rarely intentionally design such elements—and consider such elements to be of marginal concern. I believe that these implicit claims of linguistic contextual marginality within academic cultures stem from misconceptions regarding the pre-dominate perlocutionary, affective and emotional contributions that such contextuality brings.

In a kind of white wall approach, the academic conference seeks to diminish contextual elements (the embodied, spatial, material, performative) such that the denotative quality of words is amplified. To extend Ong and Ricoeur’s analysis, academic culture is primarily a literary culture (one that de-emphasizes the contextual, and emphasizes the “said” of what is said). However, I do not believe that all literary cultures must inherently foreclose contextual considerations.<sup>4</sup> Operative within a given discursive culture is not an ontological foreclosure of the contextual, but rather beliefs regarding the importance (or lack thereof) of contextual considerations to determine an utterance’s meaning and performance. It is my hope that by foregrounding linguistic contextuality greater reflexivity can be afforded towards contextual paradigms that are embraced (or rejected) such that a wider range of contextual operatives may be utilized.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Take for example the diverse and prolific field of contemporary electronic literature. This field has shown that literary utterances can intentionally design material, performative, spatial, environmental, and even embodied elements. For more on this see Katherine Hayles’ *Writing Machines*.

<sup>5</sup>For a more in-depth account into these considerations regarding the contextuality of utterance within philosophy and theoretical discourses see Finbloom’s article *Philosophy Becoming Para-Textual How to transform a philosophy text into a game?* 2016

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