

Asymmetry of Online Speech: The Danger for Speaker and Language Use

Yuhui Peng*

School of Life Science, Chongqing University, Chongqing, China

*Corresponding author: 20205614@stu.cqu.edu.cn

Abstract. Network society possesses more influence towards people's lives presently. As a consequence, the caring for uptake is growing within speech acts in online contexts. From the realistic world to the virtual one, the linguistic boundary is becoming broader, so as the boundaries of people themselves. The information age has already changed the cognition about human beings, which is the essence of people is informational fluid that can depart from the body and present an ambiguous status on the network. Causing by the rise of the position of the uptake, a speaker is more likely to fall into an asymmetrical interlocution when exposed to the Internet. This conversational inequality would change the way people speak, and furtherly influence their ideology. The dangers of online speech are therefore unsealed, including the sluggishness and rigidification of language use as well as the conversion within the speakers' minds, whose details will be discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Online speech; uptake; conversational asymmetry.

1. Introduction

It is quite clear when looking into the speech act theory from Austin, which says there is the property of performativity of people's utterances [1]. That is, when people speak, it is not just the conveying of meaningful words but having some specific effects thrown on the listener simultaneously as the utterance goes. The utterance itself possesses actual force in reality, and it is trackable as well as powerful. However, the force does not function only in one direction. According to Butler, the relationship should be bidirectional between the language and the speaker [2]. The speaker cited the sentences from the whole tremendous system of language so that the force of his sentences comes from this language system, not only the context of that particular utterance. Because the performative move can only be successful while depending on the whole language system, which is the place where the authority and conventional power come from. Speech as a kind of action can only be efficient as people surrender to the authority of this system. If the implementer of the language wishes to successfully achieve a certain conversational purpose, then the person must comply with the language usage management to ensure that the language is reasonable in the process of reference. The success of speech act depending to a large extent on the above normative behavior of language expression sequence social moves. Those moves shape personal identity in the community, so the language shapes identity too. Thus, people, as beings rely on certain social positions, go thinking and acting based on their constructive identities which can be changed by consistently using language.

Nowadays, in the broad online context of people's speech, it is still not enough to only consider the constructive power of the utterance. On the Internet, one piece of the message can be extensively seen and be put under any critics. Gradually the addressing of speech earns a gradually increased significance in the network environment. For instance, when a politician makes an inappropriate speech online, the condemnation and critics from internet users have an overwhelming influence on the speaker and have enough power to put that politician in an inferior position. It is not enough to only talk about such severe speech concerning politics. Furtherly, the "uptake" (referring to the hearer's recognition and reception to the intention of the speaker) of the addressee can affect much more extensive range of the speech act, also including the daily talk. Indeed the comments and critics are the response from the addressee but not the uptake itself. However, the power of extensive commitment has cast its light on the process of uptake. Whether people felicitously uptake the speech decides how they respond later, which is discussed in the speech act theory about the relationship

between the illocutionary act and the perlocutionary act. With the considerable extent of response and the extension of communicational boundary, the speech seems can get to its purpose much more easily than in the reality. Moreover, talking on the Internet can diminish loneliness and release the tension of worrying about the visibility of the speech. Those reasons above can partly explain why speaking online appeals to people, and within which the way how addressee recognize the speech attributes a lot, or we say is the primary attribution, to people's affinity for online speech.

The broad exposure of the speech has given the uptake of some of the force of the utterance. Concerning the speaker and the hearer, the appeal of the listener's uptake helps to elevate the state of the later one in the same context even before he makes a response. The power of his potential action invades in the cognition of the speaker to make previous influence. As the way of thinking about how to talk to win the best response, the way how the speaker chooses words for his speech may be distorted. Moreover, through making this distorted performance, his own ideology can be changed too.

The following arguments tend to think that most of this distortion is in a negative direction. When using language is no more a process of germinating thoughts and selecting words for serving the thoughts personally and privately, the ability to use language well, and so as the language itself, can deteriorate. The decay of language will be discussed concretely in the following part.

2. Literature Review

Speech seems to be an invisible conduct, whose real force is inclined to be underestimated. However, it has been argued by many studies that it possesses no less power than any other external performance. Austin showed that there are three dimensions within the act of speech, separately locution, illocution, and perlocution [1]. Locutionary act is the sound of utterance, which is merely the form of speech, including pronunciation and grammar of the sentences. Moreover, perlocutionary act refers to the consequences of utterance. While illocution, the significant part that Austin's study focuses on, reveals the performativity of speech itself. It is an act of the speaker intending to raise a certain effect as well as the effect occurring as the utterance goes. A significant point of this performative act is the concern of whether the act is full enough to satisfy the speaker's intention. In the speech, while communicators want them to make effects in certain conditions, they try to make their utterance fit in the felicity condition (named by Austin, the certain condition that necessarily accesses to the success of illocutionary act). Therefore, if a speech will be regarded as successful when it fulfills the conventional procedures including being recognized by audiences. The uptake assures a speaker of stirring up ripples in the pond. Thus, by performing this speech acts, we, as social animals, crawl our way in our communities to reach our dialogue purposes.

Butler also endorses the performativity of utterance. Nevertheless, she did not stop in the view that merely shows the effects raised by the speaker, further, she developed a broader theory to description of identity [3]. In order to talk about her theoretical framework, the Bourdieu cases shall be mentioned here. When a police officer calls a man to stop in the street, his utterance executes immediately, no matter whether the man recognizes his words or not. The force was put upon the man because the words of the policeman are the symbol of the authority of the nation and the legitimacy of laws. The power of this kind of utterance is not due to the context but to the whole language system that constant-existing before and after the utterance. Thus, what the police officer performs is citing from the language system, and by the attachment to this powerful aggregation, his utterance gains some of its force to inflict on the man. This case weakens the autonomy and contemporality of utterance and leads to the relationship of citation, which decides the authoritative identity of the policeman. Based on this, Butler considered language as a symbolic system where the actual force carried by utterance comes from. Therefore, it is not proper to say in a single-side way that people utter speech, but to say people and their speech mutually construct each other, fitting to a mutual relationship between the speaker and the language.

This led her to think that gender identity is embodied rather than some inherent consequences of physical reality [4]. Gender, the production of speech, keeps changing all along history via sex and gender experiences. Human beings are shaped to be women or men instead of being either of them inherently. Moreover, she realized that ‘gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities’ [2]. In a word, actions of speaking shape people’s identity of gender and of broader aspects of social issues. Beyond the identity of gender, the fluidity property can stretch out to the identity of politics as well as self-cognition.

3. The position of uptake in an online context

There is usually a wish to gain others’ reflection and response back as an effect. So, the hearer’s uptake is generally very crucial since people always use words as socially interacting tools to affect others and they believe that language should serve us in respect of social exchange. People live in specific communities in most cases, which means that they are under certain conventions and relationships that they may think highly of. Although the hearer’s uptake possesses a crucial position in equal communication, there should be a proportionable or even superior state for the speaker’s own commitment. That is, the responsibility should be equational to both interlocuters. Any deviation would make the evenness of the conversation decay.

While the old access of communication is limited by many factors such as geographical distance and linguistic divides, presently, it is time for people to reconsider the ambiguous linguistic boundaries of communicative context [5]. More and more addressees can a speaker have, in lines with people reaching every corner of the world more accessible, might sequence the participation of various comments. Furtherly those comments can to some extent, influence the speaker since the experience online has become a very large part of life. The overwhelming power of online speech acts comes from the increase in time investment into the Internet. As people’s lives are primarily occupied by the Internet, people are no longer to be just some realistic entities but the mixture of physical bodies and information, which the later compound is acquired from virtual experiences online. Therefore, the comments or other types of responses from others have gradually taken over the speaker’s concern from his own intention of speaking.

As a result, people’s speech acts therefore lose the balance of the issuing section and the uptake section of utterance. There is a tendency to cater to the appetite of the addressee. For instance, the frequent appearance of some fixed speaking styles which are considered to be more attractive, and the imitation of some contagious performances on the Internet. Since the consequences of others’ responses are getting more and more powerful, affecting daily life, people’s sociability, together with the vanity and self-preservation, stimulate the growth of the caring of the uptake within the act of speech. Thus, the imbalance of utterance and uptake occurs at the ascending position of the uptake.

4. The asymmetry of online communication

4.1 How the imbalanced relationship works on the speaker

Initially when a speech act generates on the internet, the speaker is driven by certain thoughts to compose a sentence with some words. In this sense, the words are under the initial citation by the speaker, in other words, the speaker gives the words special signification in the first place. However, this connection between utterance and the language system through citing is unsteady. The failure of citation is inevitable, which means that the resignification of utterance is bound to happen [2]. It is highly out of the speaker’s manipulation that the original meaning of utterance gets shuffled by the audiences or by himself.

As undue influence from online response raises a sense of tension inside the speaker’s mind, the shuffle of meaning would happen earlier. The speaker may judge his sentences in a potential-listeners’ point of view, worrying about whether the speech is offensive, whether it is morally impeccable and

so forth. By the cause of the invasion of views of potential listeners, the resignification occurs as the speaker thinks over what words he would use to form his speech.

Moreover, this influence would go deeply into the speaker's mind. From the review of former theories, it is apparent that speech can enact with the conversational environment. Language is conveyed, which attached with conventions, to twist the connective relationship with surroundings. The performativity of speech does not only work on others, but also work on the speaker himself.

When it comes to the modern environment, that Internet penetrates into almost every aspect of lives, and the relationship between speech and identities has become more complicated. According to the reflection of Posthumanism, people have switched their way of existence to a statement of Cyborg, which means that people are the aggregation of information that can be divorced from the entity of human body. The changes brought by the Internet are extremely exhaustive. By a considerable amount of communication and other events happening online, it is what we call a "virtual" experience that consists of our life. Actually, this kind of lifestyle has broken the completeness of ourselves and carries out the extension of our existence.

The concept of reflexivity can be properly applied here, showing that the process set up to construct the subject, later become an inner part of this subject [6]. When reflexivity is used to the situation of uttering, it means that the utterance, originally organized by the speakers, reversely constructs the speakers. This sort of logical explanation is concerning to an idea of considering people as a heterogenous aggregation. Human beings should no longer interpret themselves as creatures with the basement of physical reality, but as combination of information (as the essence) and physical body (as replaceable carrier). Because the virtual experience on the net has already revealed the possibility of totally living in the online world.

There's an example of exposing the fact that the online experience can deprive realistic experience in a large degree. The online game "Second Life" released by Linden Research in July 2003 is a remarkable development. It builds a virtual world that mimics the real world. The degree of imitation was so high that even breaks the boundary between reality and the game. For instance, the money accumulated in the game can be exchanged for US dollars in reality at a certain exchange rate, and a large number of physical companies and institutions have also entered the game to create profits or seek potential consumer groups such as Amazon online bookstores accepting players to buy books [7]. In this game, people have their own secondary social identity. And their virtual identities do not simply parallel the one in real world, but construct an ideal version that suits their imagination among the freedom on the online platform. "Second Life" may be an extreme case, but it reveals that new personality and identity can generate in the online environment, or more elaborately, people can develop themselves in a world consisting of mere digital information.

Now humans can resituate their existence as fluid of information, or consciousness, carried by both flesh and digital apparatus. Since human beings are no longer stuck in the situation of physical reality, the experience online could apparently change them in every aspect. Then when people's online speech is largely influenced by the increasing awareness of uptake, they become reversely substitute to others' comments and critics. The response from the addressee therefore can manipulate the thoughts and feelings of the speaker. Effects happening through this bidirectional relationship between people and their utterance make a great change of the way how people think and speak in an online context.

4.2 Analysis of cases

4.2.1 Assertion in an online context

The assertion is a common type of speech we make on the net. Moreover, it can be separately led in two different directions. Initially there is an explanation of asserting, briefly referring to having an endorsement and making a commitment at the same time [8]. Based on this, the first condition:

It seems that the life length of online speech is distinguished from speech in the real world. In reality, speech constantly executes as long as those listeners still exist. The listeners take the role of witnesses for the relationship between the speaker and the speech. The speaker would generally have

to take responsibility for his speech, or saying, would somehow be urged by the invisible power of the witnesses to keep his acknowledgment for his speech. While on the net, people's memory about some online speech can be easily washed away, probably because of continuously reading clastic texts or being more indiscreet in an online context. If a piece of message gradually diminishes to some words with the little audience, the message is dead. As the number of messages grows so fast in the online environment, plenty of information is drowned beneath this flood. Since the further inference is weakened, the commitment to the original speech may possibly be discarded. That is, people would show ignorance of their former assertion to some extent. In this situation, the asserting is impaired by speaker's excessive awareness of the audiences' uptake.

The second situation pushes the assertion to an opposite position, which is the fixation of assertion. Being a transition point of further inference, the assertion can always be measured by later challenges. When being complained about or refuted, the speaker has the choice to revise or compliment his assertion. The speaker's endorsement and commitment to the utterance do not demand him to defend the very sentences all the time. Instead, they demand him to follow the sequence of his inference implied in his assertion, which shows this kind of speech is evolvable. However, in some cases, the netizens tend to press too much weight upon the speech, immobilizing the speech and holding on the same old judgment. While the speaker, whose way of speaking can continuously develop, could suffer from netizens' rigidifying speech.

The deviation of original process of asserting leads to the destruction of the environment for free speech. Free speech, a significant thing people supposed to defend, is to avoid harm to the individual dignity from "would-be hearers and would-be listeners" [9]. People get silenced when they are losing the right of free speech, not simply referring to locutionary dimension but also to the fail of illocutionary action. As the effects from potential listeners press upon the speaker, the deviation of asserting can be seen as the speaker being partially silenced by the online communicational atmosphere. The power of would-be hearers makes the position of the uptake ascend in speakers' minds, thereafter to destruct individual thinking for utterance.

4.2.2 The construction of an online persona

For a large number of people, their account on online social media is a chance to shape a character different from the real one. There is a word to describe the fictile persona in Chinese, namely "renshe" (literally translated as "design a personal characteristic that you can show off"). The relevant conducts include the practice of fabricating and selling a persona, whose essence is self-branding [10]. Especially the behavior of setting up cyber persona is more common among celebrities and influencers. Although in various ways that the persona can be built, the way people talk is undoubtedly a crucial part. Once a specific "renshe" has been widely accepted and recognized by netizens, the speech of that character is put under certain expectations to follow the former style of speaking. Since the audiences on the internet can nearly only acquaint somebody through his use of language and appearance, they are prone to build a partial version of the speaker with more or less prejudice (the online persona is always a unilateral character, merely showing a little part of people's real characteristics). Besides, fabricating a persona shall be easier in an online context. As there is often a little segment of personality that can be delivered through words (without facial expressions, gestures and appearance, distinguished from communication in reality), it is much more convenient to shape one's persona little by little.

This kind of expectation implies certain way of uptake by audiences and would make some people follow the specific style of speaking in order to cater to audiences' appetite. The fixed stylization of speech is comfortable for both the speaker's talking and the audiences' understanding. Moreover, the comfort zone can diminish people's enthusiasm and creation, leading to the rigidification of language and furtherly to the ossification of personality as well as mindset. When falling into the inaction of staying inside the fixed persona, the elaborative faculty get deprived. It is the same danger George Orwell mentioned that the existing dialect would rush into the speaker's head and do the job for him as an alternative process of individual thinking [11]. The consequences should be taken seriously

because this process will eventually blur or twist the meaning and arouse a decadent tendency in language usage as well as the development of civilization.

5. Conclusion

It is no doubt that the power of online speech can widely and deeply influence people's life. All fields in human's society have been transferred to a modality of a combination of cyber form and realistic form. The internet has become an all-encompassing existence within politics, arts, entertainment, and daily life. As it penetrates in the way people live, the conversion takes place in ideology and changes how languages be used. Under the environment of the internet, people realize that mere words can do lots of things, even be more practical and powerful than words in real life, considering many of the conditions like cyberbullying, the industrial chains of producing internet celebrities, and direction of public opinion. The power sequences attention. In allusion to audiences' recognition, speech is deliberated or designed to cater to potential audiences. Alternatively, in other words, the speaker tends to reach the best situation under the best way of uptake among listeners.

The improper notice of the response forms an imbalanced relationship. And as the asymmetry of interlocution transfer the speaker's mechanism of organizing language, it changes the whole environment reversely. The cause and the effects mutually feed each other. Within this circulation, the language we use encounters a decay through numerous inappropriate exercises, including the ossification of ways of communication and the sluggishness of considering language.

Taking a role of a sign, the decline of language use in online contexts points out the danger of losing our personalities. It is likely for the speakers to put themselves into the asymmetry of interlocution in the circumstances on the internet. When the position of the speaker descends, the opportunity for free speech falls in danger too. The status of communication counts a lot to people's identity in their communities. All in all, this paper is centrally to argue that the expense of the general online speech presently is too severe, for it not only deprives the vigour of language but also impacts the identity and ideology of the speaker. The twist deeply occurs inside people's minds to take away the initiative of performing speech acts. Since the speech acts (or saying the free speech) is of great value of the right to communicate equally, people should consciously take their autonomy of speaking and thinking while they are making speech online for the purpose of guarding the capacity of doing things with words.

While the arguments of this article are given in a recapitulative view, it brings up the problem of lacking analysis for concrete speech texts. The standpoints above therefore have lots of space for development. Also the observation for the arguments to stand upon is mostly based on Chinese social internet, which may set limitation to the view because of the isolation of Chinese network. Considering of the generality of arguments and the restrictive environment, the study can be brought to a farther place if being applied to various situations in different online contexts.

References

- [1] Austin J. L. How to do thing with words. Amen House, London: Oxford University Press. 1962: 98-107.
- [2] Butler J. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. Shanghai: SDX Joint Publishing Company. 2009: 1-6.
- [3] Gaillard S. D. M., Visser J. Pockets, dresses and suppression – A philosophical reflection on clothing, agency, and identity. *Technology in Society*, 2022, 69: 101972.
- [4] McKinlay A. Performativity and the politics of identity: Putting Butler to work. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, 2010, 21(3): 232-242.
- [5] Jacquemet M. Beyond the speech community: On belonging to a multilingual, diasporic, and digital social network. *Language & Communication*, 2019, 68: 46-56.
- [6] Hayles N. K. How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics. Beijing: Beijing University Press. 2017: 5-14.

- [7] Zhao Rourou. The Sphinx's Awakening: What is "Posthumanism". Reading, 2015(10):82-90.
- [8] Brandom, R. Asserting. *Noûs*, Nov. 1983, 17(4): 637-650.
- [9] Hornsby J., Langton R. Free Speech and Illocution. *Legal Theory*, 1998, 4(1): 21-37.
- [10] Gao Shuang. The online activism of mock translanguaging: Language style, celebrity persona, and social class in China. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 2022, 47: 100608.
- [11] Orwell G. Politics and the English Language. *English learning (Teacher Edition)*, 2020, 2: 22-34.