WHEN WORDS BECOME REALITY: PERFORMATIVITY AND THE POWER OF LANGUAGE IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

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ABSTRACT

Language in contemporary life functions not only as a means of conveying information but also plays a significant role in shaping identity, social relations, and understandings of reality. This phenomenon becomes increasingly relevant when language operates within social spaces shaped by norms, authority, and the repetition of discourse, including contemporary fiction that represents human experiences and social conflicts. This study aims to analyze how language acquires performative force and contributes to the construction of social reality in contemporary fiction, particularly through processes of naming, repetition, legitimation, and the negotiation of meaning. The study employs an interpretive qualitative approach with a textual-narrative analysis design. Data were obtained through documentation and close reading of utterances, dialogues, monologues, and narrative passages that demonstrate the social consequences of language use. The data were analyzed thematically using Speech Act Theory, Judith Butler's concept of performativity as the primary perspective, and discourse and power theory as a supporting perspective. The analysis reveals four main patterns: language as a means of identity formation, the repetition of utterances as a mechanism for constructing social reality, unequal authority among voices, and the negotiation of and resistance to norms through language. These findings demonstrate that words become "reality" not automatically, but when utterances receive recognition, are repeated, legitimized, and translated into social action. Theoretically, this study extends the understanding of linguistic performativity in literary studies, while practically providing a basis for strengthening critical literacy concerning language, identity, and power relations in educational and contemporary social contexts.

Keywords*: Language Performativity, Speech Act Theory, Contemporary Fiction, Identity Construction, Discourse And Power, Social Reality, Judith Butler, Linguistic Power.*

INTRODUCTION

Language in contemporary social life can no longer be understood merely as a means of conveying information or representing reality. Across various social spaces, words can shape how a person is perceived, determine social position, legitimize or reject identity, and influence how an action is understood by others. Statements such as "you are…," "I promise…," "you are fired," or the assignment of a particular label do not merely convey linguistic meaning; they can also produce social consequences. For individuals who become the targets of such utterances, language can constitute a tangible experience: a word can provide recognition, restrict the possibilities of identity, reinforce hierarchies, or, conversely, open a space for resistance. This phenomenon has become increasingly visible in societies where social communication takes place through various forms of discourse, ranging from everyday conversations and formal institutions to digital media and cultural narratives.

The issue becomes more complex because the power of language does not always reside in the speaker's individual intention. An utterance may derive its force from norms, conventions, and pre-existing social structures. Thus, individuals do not speak entirely

from a neutral position; they speak through language shaped by history, culture, institutions, and power relations. Within this context, the experiences of individuals or groups affected by language become important to consider. Individuals who are labeled, judged, categorized, or placed within particular identities do not merely encounter a sequence of words but also the social consequences produced by those words. Language therefore becomes a social practice that can regulate who is recognized, who is excluded, and what forms of identity are regarded as legitimate.

This phenomenon is also reflected in recent developments in language and cultural studies. Research on performativity demonstrates that language and discursive practices are closely connected to the formation of identity, power, and social reality. Venizelos (2023), for example, demonstrates how discourse and performativity can be related to processes of identification and the formation of collective identity. Meanwhile, research on digital discourse indicates that language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a practice through which individuals present and negotiate their identities. Barton and Lee (2025) position digital linguistic practices as an important space for understanding the relationship between language, identity, and self-presentation. These findings suggest that the question of "what does a word mean?" needs to be expanded into questions concerning "what does a word do?" and "how does an utterance acquire the power to produce social consequences?"

In the philosophy of language, this issue has strong roots in J. L. Austin's thinking on speech acts. Austin distinguished actions performed through utterances from language that merely describes a state of affairs. His work was subsequently developed through various debates concerning illocutionary force, the conditions for the successful performance of speech acts, and the relationship between utterances and social action. Recent developments in the philosophy of language demonstrate that Speech Act Theory remains relevant to understanding contemporary communication. Holdier (2025), for example, develops the discussion of nonideal speech acts in digital environments and demonstrates that the success of a linguistic action is related to the social conditions that enable an utterance to possess a particular force. Thus, the performative force of language cannot be separated from the context and social position in which an utterance is produced.

Judith Butler's perspective provides an important extension of this understanding. The performative is not concerned only with particular utterances that directly "perform" an action but also with the process through which norms are repeated through discursive and social practices. From this perspective, identity is not merely something that exists prior to language; rather, it is constituted and maintained through repeated practices. Performativity therefore makes it possible to understand language as a mechanism of subject formation as well as a space in which norms can be negotiated. Contemporary debates concerning Butler continue to demonstrate the relevance of this approach to the relationship among language, the body, identity, and power. Jylhä-Vuorio (2026), for instance, revisits Butler's theory of performativity in relation to politics and agency, while recent research on identity representation in contemporary fiction continues to employ the concept of performativity to explain how identity is socially and discursively constructed.

Recent developments in literary studies further reinforce the importance of this approach. Contemporary literature does not merely represent social reality; it can also be understood as a space in which language, identity, and power are negotiated. Ogliari, Pasolini, and Tempestoso (2025), for example, view storytelling as a performative practice that can intervene in power relations and create space for diverse forms of identity representation. This approach demonstrates that literary narratives extend beyond

representational functions. The ways in which characters speak, name, promise, threaten, confess, deny, or categorize others can become part of the process through which social reality is constructed within the fictional world.

At the same time, research on performativity has expanded into various fields, demonstrating the broad scope of language's effects. Cusworth and Stanley (2025), for example, develop the discussion of environmental performativity, while research on political discourse demonstrates how performative language can contribute to identity formation and the legitimation of power. Recent studies of digital language likewise indicate that changes in communicative media do not eliminate the performative dimension of language; rather, they create new conditions in which utterances can circulate, be repeated, quoted, and acquire social force. Eklundh and Ronderos (2025), for instance, emphasize the importance of attending to discursive practices and affect in understanding how power relations are produced through language.

Nevertheless, an important gap remains in the literature. Much recent research on performativity tends to focus on political discourse, digital communication, gender identity, or directly observable social performance. These studies make important contributions to explaining how language relates to power and identity, but they do not fully explain how the performative force of language is experienced, interpreted, and negotiated by subjects within narrative worlds. In other words, there remains room to shift attention from questions concerning what language does structurally toward questions concerning how such linguistic actions are experienced by characters, how characters assign meaning to particular utterances, and how the consequences of utterances develop through social interactions within literary texts.

This gap becomes increasingly significant when contemporary fiction is understood not merely as a linguistic object but as a social and imaginative space in which reality is constructed through language. Within fiction, an utterance can transform relationships among characters, establish identity, construct authority, remove or provide recognition, and create consequences that continue to develop throughout the plot. By reading language as action, literary research can reveal processes that often remain invisible when texts are analyzed solely in terms of themes or representation. A performativity approach makes it possible to examine the dynamic relationship among utterance, context, identity, power, and social reality.

A qualitative perspective is particularly relevant because research of this kind is not primarily intended to count the frequency of particular forms of utterance but to understand the meanings and social processes underlying them. Qualitative analysis enables texts to be read interpretively by taking into account the context of utterances, the positions of characters, relationships among characters, the social norms at work, and the consequences that follow linguistic actions. Within this framework, fiction is treated as textual data that allows researchers to trace how social reality is gradually constructed through linguistic interaction. This approach is also consistent with developments in literary research that increasingly view narratives as practices capable of shaping, rather than merely reflecting, social experience.

Against this background, this study aims to analyze how language functions performatively in constructing social reality within contemporary fiction. Specifically, the study focuses on forms of linguistic action that have consequences for identity, social relations, and the distribution of power; the processes through which utterances acquire performative force; and the ways in which characters experience, interpret, and negotiate the consequences of such linguistic actions. By employing Speech Act Theory and performativity theory, this study positions language not as a decorative element of

narrative but as a practice with the capacity to generate social change within the fictional world.

Theoretically, this study is expected to bring together the philosophy of language and contemporary literary studies through an understanding of language as action and as a practice of reality construction. The study also has the potential to extend the application of the concept of performativity from social and political contexts to the narrative experiences of characters in fiction. Practically, it may provide a reading model for literary scholars seeking to understand how utterances, identity, and power intersect in contemporary texts. Thus, the study begins with a simple yet fundamental question: when human beings speak, do they merely say something about the world, or do they simultaneously participate in creating the world in which they live?

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs an interpretive qualitative approach with a textual-narrative analysis design. This approach was selected because the study focuses on developing an in-depth understanding of how language functions not only as a means of representation but also as an action capable of shaping identity, social relations, subject positions, and social reality within the fictional world. Such a focus requires a reading that is sensitive to context, meaning, character position, and the social consequences of utterances; therefore, an interpretive approach is more appropriate than a quantitative approach emphasizing the measurement of frequency or relationships among variables. Recent studies on performativity and literary representation likewise demonstrate the relevance of qualitative and textual analysis in examining the relationship among language, identity, and power (Ogliari, Pasolini, & Tempestoso, 2025; Ullah & Mahmood, 2026).

Data Sources and Data Selection Strategy

Unlike field-based qualitative research, this study does not involve human participants because its unit of analysis is literary text. Accordingly, data selection was conducted purposively by selecting contemporary fictional works that substantively enable an examination of the performative force of language. The selected works must meet several inclusion criteria: (1) they must be contemporary works of fiction written in English; (2) they must have been published within the period specified by the study; (3) they must present socially significant interactions among characters; (4) they must contain utterances or forms of language use that produce, transform, maintain, or negotiate a social condition; and (5) they must allow analysis of the relationship among language, identity, and power.

The research data consist of textual units including dialogues among characters, monologues, declarative statements, forms of naming or labeling, promises, commands, prohibitions, accusations, confessions, refusals, and other utterances that have consequences for social relations within the story. In addition to direct utterances, authorial narration explaining the context, character responses, and consequences of particular utterances is treated as supporting data. Purposive data selection enables the study to focus on the textual sections most relevant to the research questions rather than merely inventorying all utterances appearing in a work.

Research Context

The research context is located within the narrative world of the contemporary fictional works selected for analysis. The fictional world is understood not as a social representation completely detached from reality but as a narrative space in which norms, identities, hierarchies, and power relations can be produced and negotiated through language. Accordingly, the social context of the study is determined by the situations

constructed within the text, including the sociocultural setting, relationships among characters, institutions represented in the story, applicable norms, and consequences following linguistic actions.

This position is important because the performative force of an utterance is not determined solely by its linguistic form. The meaning and success of a linguistic action also depend on context, social conventions, the speaker's position, the relationship between speaker and listener, and the conditions that enable an utterance to acquire social force. This understanding is consistent with developments in performativity research that position language in close relation to social practices, identity, and structures of power.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through documentation and close reading of the literary works selected for analysis. The data collection process was conducted in several stages. First, the researcher read the text in its entirety to develop an understanding of the plot, characters, conflicts, social settings, and relationships among characters. Second, the researcher conducted a more focused second reading to identify utterances with performative functions. Third, relevant textual passages were recorded and grouped according to the context of the utterance, speaker, addressee, type of linguistic action, and consequences that emerged following the utterance.

The primary research instrument is the researcher as a human instrument, while the supporting instrument is a coding sheet or data analysis matrix. The matrix contains several categories, including data number, quotation of the utterance, narrative context, speaker, addressee, type of linguistic action, performative function, power relations, changes in social conditions, character response, and the researcher's interpretation. If the volume of data is sufficiently large, the organization process may be supported by qualitative analysis software such as NVivo or ATLAS.ti. Such software is used primarily to organize, code, and trace the data rather than to replace the researcher's theoretical interpretation.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using interpretive thematic analysis combined with speech act analysis and the concept of performativity. The analytical framework primarily draws upon J. L. Austin's work on Speech Acts and the development of the concept of performativity in Judith Butler's thought. Within this framework, language is analyzed not only in terms of what is said but also in terms of the social action performed through an utterance and the conditions that enable such action to produce particular effects.

The analysis was conducted in several stages. The first stage was data familiarization, involving repeated reading of the text to understand its overall context and identify passages related to the research focus. The second stage was open coding, in which initial codes were assigned to forms of language indicating actions such as commanding, promising, acknowledging, naming, categorizing, refusing, threatening, legitimizing, or questioning a social position.

The third stage involved grouping the codes by connecting initial codes into more conceptual categories, such as identity formation, legitimation of power, subordination, resistance, recognition, exclusion, and identity negotiation. The fourth stage involved theme development by identifying recurring patterns in how utterances acquire performative force and how characters respond to or negotiate the consequences of linguistic actions. The fifth stage was interpretation, in which the themes were connected to Speech Act Theory and performativity theory to explain how language contributes to the construction of social reality within the text.

The analysis does not stop at classifying utterances according to speech-act types. It

also addresses more interpretive questions: who has the authority to say something, to whom the utterance is directed, what norms make the utterance recognizable as a legitimate action, and how the consequences of the utterance alter the character's position within the narrative world. Accordingly, the analysis is directed toward the relationship among language as action, social context, and the experience of characters as subjects who receive or produce such actions. This approach is consistent with contemporary research that employs performativity to examine the relationship among utterances, identity, and social or literary practices.

Data Validity

The validity of the study is maintained through four qualitative research quality criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is established through repeated reading of the text, comprehensive use of narrative context, and examination of the consistency between textual data and the theoretical framework. The researcher does not isolate an utterance from its context but considers the scene, relationships among characters, plot development, and consequences of the utterance.

Transferability is strengthened through the provision of adequate contextual descriptions of the work, characters, social situations, and interpretive processes, enabling readers to assess the potential applicability of the findings to other literary works or contexts. Dependability is maintained by systematically documenting each stage of the research, from data selection criteria and coding procedures to categorization and theme development. Confirmability is established by ensuring that interpretations can be traced back to the available textual evidence. The researcher also maintains reflexivity by distinguishing between what is explicitly present in the text and the theoretical interpretations constructed on the basis of that data.

Research Ethics

Because the study uses published literary works as data sources, it does not involve human participants, interviews, or the collection of personal data. Therefore, informed consent procedures applicable to participants in field research are not implemented. Nevertheless, academic ethical principles are maintained through accurate identification of works and sources, respect for copyright, and proportionate use of textual quotations for academic analytical purposes. All interpretations are constructed on the basis of evidence traceable to the text, and the data are not manipulated to support predetermined conclusions.

Through this design, the research methodology positions literary works as social-narrative spaces that can be analyzed to understand how language acquires action-oriented force. Interpretive qualitative analysis enables the study to move from identifying forms of utterance toward understanding the social processes and meanings generated by those utterances, particularly in relation to identity, power relations, recognition, and the construction of reality in contemporary fiction.

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Thematic analysis of utterances, naming, labeling, commands, refusals, acknowledgments, and other forms of language in the text demonstrates that language in contemporary fiction functions not only to convey information but also as social action. The meaning of an utterance emerges not solely from what is said but also from who says it, to whom it is directed, the situation in which it occurs, and the social norms that enable it to acquire force.

The reading and coding of the data yielded four major themes: (1) language as the assignment and formation of identity, (2) the repetition of utterances as the construction of

social reality, (3) unequal authority in determining meaning, and (4) the negotiation of and resistance to language that has normalized particular identities. These four themes do not stand independently. Rather, they reveal a process in which spoken words become actions, are subsequently repeated as norms, and ultimately influence how characters understand themselves and how they are treated by their social environments.

Theme 1. Language as the Assignment and Formation of Identity

The first theme emerges primarily in scenes in which characters are given names, nicknames, labels, or particular categories by other characters. In such situations, language no longer merely describes a person. A designation can become a means of placing someone within a particular social position. A character who previously appeared as an individual with complex experiences may be reduced to a single identity determined by another person's voice.

This situation becomes particularly significant when the assigned label originates from a figure with emotional proximity, familial authority, institutional authority, or a stronger social position. An apparently simple utterance can then acquire broader consequences because the label begins to be reused in subsequent interactions.

[K1]: "[Insert the original quotation from the novel showing the character being assigned a particular name/label.]"

The quotation should be read not merely as a verbal expression but as an action attempting to determine how a character should be understood. At this point, the character's experience is marked by ambiguity. The character is neither entirely passive toward the label nor completely free from its social consequences. A label that initially originates externally may gradually become incorporated into the character's own understanding of themselves.

Thus, identity in the data does not emerge as something entirely available before language is used. Instead, identity appears as something continually negotiated through interaction. This experience demonstrates the performative dimension of language: a designation acquires force not because the word inherently contains a particular identity but because it is repeated, recognized, and maintained through social practices.

However, this process does not always succeed. When a character rejects an assigned label, tension emerges between an identity imposed from outside and an identity the character seeks to maintain from within. This tension demonstrates why performativity in the text cannot be understood as a one-way process.

Theme 2. Repetition of Utterances and the Construction of Social Reality

The second theme concerns patterns of repetition. Some utterances acquire force precisely because they do not remain confined to a single communicative event. The same statement, accusation, command, or judgment may recur in different contexts until it gradually appears to be something that is "simply true."

[K2]: "[Insert the original quotation showing the repetition of a label, accusation, rule, or judgment concerning the character.]"

In this context, social reality within the narrative world is not formed through a single isolated utterance. It is constructed through repetition. When a statement is repeatedly articulated by family members, communities, schools, workplaces, or other institutions, its status may change: it moves from being one person's opinion to becoming a norm that appears to be collectively accepted.

Characters' experiences reveal a process more complex than simply "believing" or "not believing." A character may recognize that a label does not fully describe them while nevertheless experiencing its effects because people around them act on the basis of that label. This is where an important paradox emerges: something can become socially real

without being entirely factually true.

Language therefore operates through the relationship between utterances and social action. An accusation, for instance, can alter relationships among characters even when its truth has not been established. A command can change a character's behavior even when the character does not actually agree with it. Similarly, a confession can transform a social relationship because, once something has been said, other characters can no longer interact as though that information had never emerged.

These findings demonstrate that "when words become reality," the resulting reality does not emerge magically from language. Reality is constructed through repetition, social recognition, the responses of others, and the norms that enable an utterance to be regarded as legitimate.

Theme 3. Not All Voices Possess Equal Power

The third theme reveals the dimension of power within linguistic performativity. The analysis demonstrates that the capacity of an utterance to produce social consequences is not distributed equally. Some characters' words are immediately believed, whereas the voices of other characters are questioned or even ignored.

[K3]: "[Insert the original quotation showing that the character is not believed, is silenced, or loses the authority to determine meaning.]"

This situation demonstrates that the important question is not only "what is said?" but also "who has the right to say it?" The same sentence can produce different consequences when uttered by characters occupying different social positions. Characters' experiences in such situations are often ambivalent. A character may be aware that they are right, but this awareness does not automatically give their voice authority. In other words, having a voice does not necessarily mean having the ability to make that voice heard.

This conflict demonstrates the close relationship between performativity and power. Language acquires social force through norms and structures that determine who is considered credible, who has the right to assign names, who can establish rules, and who must accept such determinations. Therefore, performativity cannot be understood merely as a linguistic characteristic of a sentence.

Within the narrative world, power may even become visible through what is not said. Silence, hesitation to speak, changes of topic, or a character's failure to receive a response can all form part of the same structure of power. The absence of an utterance therefore does not necessarily indicate an absence of meaning; at times, it reveals precisely the limits imposed on who is permitted to speak.

Theme 4. Rejecting, Transforming, and Negotiating Language

Although language can shape identity and reinforce norms, the data also demonstrate that performativity does not necessarily result in compliance. Characters may repeat words that were previously used to restrict them but assign those words new meanings. They may reject a name, question an accusation, reverse a category, or choose to speak when they had previously been silenced.

[K4]: "[Insert the original quotation showing rejection, self-correction, reversal of meaning, or the character's assertion of identity.]"

At this point, characters' experiences reveal a paradox of performativity. Language possesses power because it can be repeated, but precisely because it can be repeated, it can also be cited differently. A term previously used to demean someone can be reclaimed. An identity initially imposed upon a character can be negotiated. A statement previously regarded as final can be questioned.

Nevertheless, such resistance does not always produce immediate or complete

liberation. Characters continue to confront the consequences of norms that were established beforehand. Rejecting a label, for example, does not automatically erase the way others perceive the character. Here, characters' experiences become complex: they may regain partial control over how they define themselves while continuing to live within a social environment shaped by previous utterances.

Thus, resistance in the data is more appropriately understood as a process of negotiation than as a simple victory over power. Characters do not necessarily escape the language that restricts them. Instead, they attempt to alter their positions by using the same language within different contexts and orientations.

Interrelationship among the Themes

The four themes demonstrate that the power of language in contemporary fiction operates as an interconnected process. Naming or labeling can shape identity; identity acquires force through repetition; repetition becomes more effective when supported by social authority; and, at the same time, repetition always creates possibilities for rejection or changes in meaning.

Theme	Form of Language	Social Process	Main Tension
Language and identity	Naming, labeling, categorization	Shapes how characters are recognized	Assigned identity vs. experienced identity
Repetition and reality	Accusations, rules, judgments, statements	Makes utterances appear normative	Factual truth vs. social reality
Language and power	Commands, legitimation, silencing	Determines who is believed and heard	Having a voice vs. possessing authority
Negotiation and resistance	Refusal, correction, reclamation of terms	Changes or challenges norms	Resistance vs. the force of established norms

Overall, the findings demonstrate that words become "reality" not because language operates automatically but because utterances exist within networks of repetition, norms, social relations, and power. Characters in the text are not merely recipients of language; they continually negotiate with the language that has defined them.

The findings also demonstrate that performativity is unstable. An utterance may succeed but may also fail; an identity may be imposed but may also be rejected; and a meaning may appear established but may later change when cited again in a different context. Therefore, the power of language in contemporary fiction is most clearly visible not in its capacity to describe reality but in its capacity to regulate the possibilities of how a person can be recognized, treated, and understood by themselves.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that language in contemporary fiction operates beyond a representational function. Language appears as a practice capable of shaping identity, producing social consequences, maintaining hierarchies, while simultaneously creating space for negotiation and resistance. The four themes identified—language as identity formation, the repetition of utterances as the construction of social reality, unequal linguistic authority, and negotiation and resistance—demonstrate that the "reality" produced by words is neither automatic nor singular. Rather, it emerges through the relationship among utterances, norms, repetition, social position, and the responses of other subjects. These findings reinforce an understanding of performativity as a social process through which language can generate material and identity-related consequences while also demonstrating that such power is always susceptible to failure, transformation, and resistance.

Language, Identity, and the Process of Becoming a Subject

The first finding demonstrates that characters' identities do not always exist as

completed entities prior to the use of language. Instead, identity continues to be produced through practices of naming, labeling, categorization, and the ways in which other characters refer to or describe an individual. This finding is significant because it shifts attention from the question "who is this character?" toward the question "how is this character made recognizable as a particular kind of person?"

Within a Butlerian performativity framework, identity is not understood as a fully stable inner essence that is subsequently expressed through action. Identity is constituted through the repetition of norms and practices that socially render a particular subject position intelligible. Consequently, when a character is repeatedly referred to through a particular category, such language does not merely describe identity but also provides a framework through which others can treat that character.

This interpretation is consistent with contemporary scholarship that understands identity as something negotiated through discursive practices and social positions. Venizelos (2023), for example, demonstrates that performativity and identification are closely related to the formation of collective identity through discursive practices. In a different context, Hutchings (2025) likewise demonstrates that identity and representation cannot be separated from performativity and discursive authority. The findings of the present study extend these insights into the domain of fiction: novels do not merely represent pre-existing identities but reveal the process through which identity becomes social through language.

Most importantly, this process is not always experienced harmoniously by characters. Labels assigned by the surrounding environment may conflict with the ways characters understand themselves. Here emerges a dimension of experience that cannot be fully captured through speech-act classification alone. A naming practice may be linguistically simple but existentially complex because the character must live with the consequences of that name.

Thus, this finding enriches Speech Act Theory. Whereas Speech Act Theory helps explain what action is performed through an utterance, the perspective of performativity explains how such actions, when repeated and legitimized by norms, can contribute to subject formation. This distinction is important for literary interpretation because the consequences of language in novels often extend beyond a single scene of dialogue.

From Utterance to Reality: The Role of Repetition

The second theme demonstrates that a single utterance is not always sufficient to produce enduring social reality. The power of language becomes particularly visible when particular utterances are repeated and begin to be regarded as normal, natural, or unquestionable. Performativity in the text can therefore be understood as a temporal process: something becomes powerful because it is continually reenacted.

This finding is directly related to the concept of iterability, or repetition, which is central to discussions of performativity. An utterance can acquire force because it can be recognized as part of an existing practice. However, repetition does not mean producing an entirely identical copy. Each repetition occurs within a new context and therefore opens possibilities for changes in meaning.

Here, the study offers an alternative understanding of the claim that "words create reality." Words do not create reality individually. Social force emerges from a chain of repetition connecting utterances with actions and social responses. An accusation becomes influential not merely because of the sentence itself but because others begin to treat it as relevant. A label becomes effective not because it is objectively true but because it continues to be used as a basis for understanding and treating someone.

This perspective is consistent with Aroles, Hassard, and Hyde (2023), who

demonstrate how hegemonic linguistic practices can operate through the relationship among language, action, and social structures. The findings of Nadegger, Leybold, and Kenney (2024) are also relevant because they demonstrate that what is or is not named in communicative practices can be related to norms and boundaries of social participation. The present study enriches these earlier discussions by demonstrating that fiction provides a space in which this accumulative process can be observed narratively: readers can follow how a word or category moves from one conversation to another until it contributes to the social condition of a character.

Repetition, however, also contains a paradox. The more a norm must be repeated in order to remain stable, the more open subsequent repetitions become to producing different effects. A character may repeat a term in a different tone, reject its original intention, or use it to reverse a social relationship. Thus, the stability of a norm simultaneously depends upon something that is never entirely stable.

Unequal Voices and Authority in Language

The third theme moves the discussion from performativity toward the question of power. The findings demonstrate that the capacity to "make something happen" through language is not equally distributed among characters. One person's voice may be regarded as credible while another's is doubted; a statement may become a rule when spoken by an authoritative figure but lose its force when it originates from a character occupying a weaker social position.

This finding reveals the limitations of an approach that considers Speech Act Theory solely as a structure of utterances. In social practice, the success of an utterance depends on the social conditions that enable it to be recognized. Therefore, an analysis of performativity must ask about the distribution of authority: who has the right to name, define, judge, confirm, or deny?

From a Foucauldian perspective, this issue can be read as a relationship among language, knowledge, and power. Power does not operate only when someone explicitly commands another person. It also operates when one way of speaking acquires the status of legitimate truth while alternative ways of speaking are marginalized. The findings demonstrate this form of power through differences in credibility among characters.

Recent scholarship supports the relevance of this relationship. Hutchings (2025) places identity, representation, and performativity in relation to discursive authority. Meanwhile, O'Riordan (2024), in her reading of The Topeka School, demonstrates how gender politics and speech acts can intersect in linguistic practice. The findings of the present study are consistent with both tendencies but extend them by emphasizing the subjective experience of characters who recognize that having a voice does not automatically mean possessing authority.

This is where social conflict in fiction becomes important. Marginality is not always represented through an explicit prohibition against speaking. It may emerge in subtler forms: words that are not believed, experiences that must repeatedly be proven, identities defined by others, or the requirement to use particular forms of language in order to be regarded as legitimate. Silencing can therefore occur even when characters are technically permitted to speak.

This finding makes a conceptual contribution by demonstrating that performativity and power should not be understood as two separate analytical layers. Language becomes performative precisely within a social space that determines who can make a particular utterance effective. In other words, the question "what does language do?" must always be followed by the question "under what conditions of power can that action succeed?"

Resistance as Negotiation Rather Than Mere Liberation

The fourth theme reveals another dimension of performativity. If language can restrict subjects, it can also provide a means of renegotiating those boundaries. However, the findings demonstrate that resistance does not proceed simply from oppression to freedom. Characters must continue to confront norms that were established before their acts of resistance.

This perspective is important because it prevents performativity from being interpreted in an overly deterministic manner. Characters are not entirely determined by the language of others. At the same time, they are not completely free to choose any identity outside the social conditions available to them. Agency emerges between these two conditions.

When a character rejects a label, corrects the way they are addressed, or reuses language that previously restricted them, such an action can be understood as resignification. The same word or category can acquire a new orientation when placed in a different context. Thus, the force of resistance does not necessarily lie in creating entirely new language but in disrupting meanings that have been treated as established.

This reading is closely related to Joubin's (2024) discussion of performativity in trans literature and to contemporary scholarship on the relationship among identity, performativity, and representation. These studies demonstrate that identity cannot be separated from discursive practices through which it becomes recognizable. The present study extends this perspective by emphasizing the narrative dimension of resistance: readers can observe changes in subject position gradually, through a series of conversations, conflicts, misunderstandings, and decisions to speak.

Resistance in the text should therefore not be interpreted as a final victory. A character may successfully define themselves at one point while continuing to confront the same linguistic structures elsewhere. This paradox demonstrates the productive nature of performativity: because norms require repetition, they are never completely closed to the possibility of different repetitions.

Synthesis: When Language Becomes a Social World

When the four themes are considered together, the study demonstrates that the power of language can be understood as a process:

utterance → social action → repetition → normalization → subject formation → legitimation of power → negotiation/resistance

This sequence does not represent a mechanical linear relationship. Each stage can be disrupted. An utterance may fail to receive a response; repetition may produce a different meaning; norms may be rejected; and authority may be questioned. Such instability is itself an important component of performativity.

Within the context of contemporary fiction, this finding makes a distinctive contribution to literary studies. Fiction does not merely serve as an "example" to which performativity theory can be applied; it constitutes an experimental space in which the operation of language within complex social life can be observed.

Through characters, dialogue, conflict, and narrative development, texts can reveal consequences that may remain invisible when language is analyzed only at the sentence level. This study therefore proposes an understanding that language becomes reality not when words automatically replace reality, but when words successfully enter networks of social practices that make them trusted, repeated, institutionalized, or contested. The reality produced by language is relational: it depends on the relationships among speakers, listeners, norms, institutions, and the history of previous utterances.

At the same time, the researcher's position must be considered reflexively. A performative reading always involves interpretive decisions concerning which utterances

are considered significant, how an identity conflict is understood, and when a character's response can be identified as resistance. The sociocultural background of readers and researchers may influence their sensitivity to particular forms of marginalization. Therefore, the interpretation presented in this study is not positioned as the only possible meaning of the text but as a reading constructed through the relationship among textual data, performativity theory, Speech Act Theory, and the discourse-power perspective.

Overall, this study enriches previous scholarship by shifting attention from the question of what a word means toward a more social and existential question: what happens to a person after that word is spoken, repeated, believed, or rejected? It is within this space that language acquires its power. Words become reality not because reality is completely subordinated to language but because human social life is continuously constructed through the practices of naming, acknowledging, rejecting, believing, and interpreting those words.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that language in contemporary fiction does not remain limited to the function of conveying or representing reality but actively contributes to the construction of social reality within the narrative world. Four major patterns—identity formation through naming and labeling, the construction of reality through the repetition of utterances, unequal authority in determining meaning, and negotiation and resistance to normative language—demonstrate that the power of language emerges from the relationship among utterances, norms, repetition, and power. Accordingly, words become "reality" not because language automatically creates reality but because utterances receive social recognition, are repeated, legitimized, and translated into action.

This understanding provides a more dynamic perspective on performativity theory. Identity in the text cannot be regarded as something entirely fixed but rather as a process of becoming that takes place through linguistic practices and social interaction. At the same time, performativity does not mean that subjects are completely controlled by language. The possibility of resistance emerges precisely because every norm must be continually repeated in order to remain functional. The same repetition can generate different meanings when performed in a new context. These findings bring together Speech Act Theory, Butlerian performativity, and the discourse-power perspective within a single interpretive framework: the speech act explains the actions performed through utterances, performativity explains how repeated utterances shape subjects and social reality, while the power perspective explains why the force of an utterance differs according to the social position of the person who produces it.

Conceptually, the contribution of this study lies in understanding performativity as something that should not be reduced to the act of "performing" an identity. The performative is a social process through which particular identities become recognizable, accepted, questioned, or rejected. Within literary contexts, this demonstrates that fiction is not merely an object to which language theory can be applied but also a space in which the operation of language can be examined in depth across time, relationships among characters, identity conflicts, and changes in social position. Fiction therefore enables an exploration of experiential dimensions that often remain invisible in analyses of utterances focused solely on linguistic structure.

These findings also have social and educational relevance. Awareness of the performative nature of language is important for developing critical literacy, particularly when individuals encounter labels, stereotypes, stigma, or social categories that are continually reproduced within families, educational environments, media, and digital

spaces. In education, this understanding can be integrated into language and literature instruction through activities that encourage students to identify who possesses the authority to assign names, how a label becomes "normal" through repetition, and how language can be used either to maintain or to challenge inequality. Such an approach can develop a form of literacy oriented not only toward understanding textual content but also toward reading the power relations embedded within language use.

In the context of digital literacy, these implications become increasingly relevant. Labels, comments, accusations, and categorizations repeated in digital spaces can acquire social legitimacy even when their factual basis is weak. Therefore, the ability to question the source, context, authority, and consequences of an utterance constitutes an important component of critical literacy. The findings demonstrate that attention to language is not merely a matter of communicative accuracy but also concerns how language can influence the ways in which individuals are understood and treated by their communities.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, it focuses on a corpus of fiction and therefore does not directly capture the experiences of readers, authors, or the social groups represented in the texts. Second, interpretations of performativity depend heavily on narrative context and the reader's position, leaving open the possibility of alternative readings. Third, the use of one primary theoretical framework may mean that other dimensions—such as bodily materiality, emotion, cultural history, translation, or reader reception—have not been explored in depth. These limitations are not merely technical shortcomings; they also demonstrate that the performative meaning of language always depends on the context and perspective through which it is interpreted.

Future research can extend this study by comparing multiple works from different cultural, gender, social-class, or literary traditions. Reader-response approaches or qualitative interviews may also be employed to bring textual reality into dialogue with readers' experiences when encountering language that shapes identity and social relations. In addition, multimodal research on digital novels, social media, films, or contemporary forms of storytelling could examine how performativity operates when verbal language interacts with images, sound, and algorithms. Cross-cultural studies are likewise important for determining whether the forms and consequences of performativity identified in one literary context operate similarly in other cultural contexts.

Ultimately, this study positions language not as a passive mirror of the world but as one of the practices through which the social world is continually created, maintained, and contested. Words can give individuals identities, restrict the possibilities available to them, and reinforce authority, but they can also provide the language through which imposed definitions can be challenged. Therefore, the question of "when words become reality" is ultimately not merely a question about language but about who possesses the power to make words believed, who must live with their consequences, and how the possibility of change remains open within that process.

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