PERFORMANCE
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UNIDENTIFIED VERBAL OBJECTS: HOW DO WORDS PERFORM?

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This article considers how artistically performative practices, especially the scenic embodiment of words, problematizes our accustomed understanding of language, both in a philosophical and an everyday sense. In classical phenomenology à la Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty, language is considered a medium of the process of appearing or expression. As I try to sustain, language should instead be understood as the medium of appearing; not as the primary medium, nor as a medium among others, but as an intrinsic aspect of all appearing, no matter what its medium, user, or level of development. This conclusion, if it holds, leads towards an expanded idea of language where *being linguistic* and *being or having a body* coincide. The idea is sustained by evidence rising out of consideration of the basic corporeal operations of a scenic performer as they try to embody their textual material performatively. Through this idea, the article seeks a reconciliation to a debate between post-structuralist and post-humanist thought regarding the role and scope of language in knowledge formation.

A Problem of Performance Philosophy

The performance philosophy problem scrutinized in this article concerns the relation between two modes of considering and using language. The first one I call *discursive*, by which I mean any institutional or everyday use of language where words have established or agreed meanings and their use follows certain pre-established rules. A 'discourse' is an institutional arrangement that both enables and constrains what can be said or expressed within it. The 'discursive practices' that aim at knowledge formation in the sense that Foucault has analysed them use discursive language.

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This article is written by using language discursively within the framework of 'performance philosophy'. In the following, the discursive use of language will be contrasted with its *artistic* use. Language can be used artistically in many ways, and artistic linguistic practices could be called generally 'poetic', 'literary', or 'fictional'. Here, my focus is on performance practice and its way of operating with language. I will call that practice 'performative' in that specific sense. In performative language, *the linguistic elements themselves perform*, and our attention as audience members is in their way of performing. As I will argue, in different modes of language use words perform differently. This viewpoint re-problematizes our understanding of language in a fertile way.[1]

By 'performance', I understand an *act of appearing*. The definition aims at taking into account the Goffmanian and Schechnerian legacy of the term while making it more accessible to readers and thinkers from non-Anglo-Saxon contexts, where that term is often hard to translate and therefore operate with. The definition implies the possibility of transposition, repetition, variation, and play, as well as the possibility to influence an audience or participants. Moreover, the definition creates a link between performance studies and phenomenology, where the appearing of things constitutes a premise. As we will see, the link is methodologically significant to my argumentation.

All things appear, but they do not necessarily perform. They only perform when they do something for the sake of appearing. The reasons for the apparition may be multifarious and they need not be limited to artistic contexts only. As one makes oneself or something appear, one performs or makes something perform, which in both cases implies a distinction between the performer and the performed. The definition enables us to conceive everything as a performance, but in many cases, we only project the idea to things or events that do not perform really or intentionally. That is to say that we 'dramatize' or 'stage' their mode of appearing and then consider them as performers.

The transition from the direct mode of speaking to the performed mode has been discussed since Plato, who made the critical distinction between *haple diegesis*, a direct narrative voice, and *mimesis*, mimetically reproduced speech (Plato 1979, 392c–398c). In modern times, the phenomenon has been analysed in sociology, performance studies, and linguistics, for example by Erwin Goffman (1974), Richard Schechner (1981), Bryan K. Crow (1988), and Andrea Milde (2019). In my case, the question relates to a larger philosophical debate concerning the transition from post-structuralism to post-humanism. The latter comprises orientations of thought as new materialism, speculative realism, or object-oriented ontologies. A central bone of contention in that debate is language and its forms and function in knowledge formation.[2]

Between the 'Posts'

Although the post-humanist philosophers, or 'new realists' as I call them here, share much with the post-structuralists—for instance a strive for a non-hierarchical, non-binary thinking beyond metaphysical, 'phallogocentric', or colonizing divisions—they have simultaneously wanted to break with the post-structuralist paradigm according to which reality can only be approached and encountered as mediated by language. The 'linguistic turn' represented by the post-structuralists

and criticized by the new realists (Bryant et al. 2011, 1; Cox et al. 2015, 20) maintains a 'view that affirms the indispensability of interpretation, discourse, textuality, signification, ideology, and power' (Cox et al. 2015, 15). Insofar as language is understood as a human construct, as the new realists understand it in this context, it constitutes an anthropocentric closure and an obstacle for a thinking interested in more-than-human aspects of reality, like autonomous material processes, individuation, inter-corporeal relations, networks of heterogeneous agents, asemantic flows of information, and phenomena brought up by contemporary natural science and technology. In such areas, the post-structuralist approach seems to fall short.

What remains between the lines in this mentioned debate is the question of the onto-epistemological nature of language itself, 'the life of signs' as Ferdinand de Saussure called it. On the one hand, the deconstructionists have never claimed that 'there is nothing outside discourse', like the new realists tend to understand the famous Derridian premise, according to which '*il n´y a pas de hors-texte*' (Derrida 1967, 227). Instead of confining human existence and thought in a linguistic cage, the ethos of deconstruction has rather been to expand our understanding of language. As Shining Star Lynghold has remarked, 'the notion of "text" in Derrida, therefore, knows no bounds, without a beginning and an end, without being limited only by language. Rather, the notion of text opens up the possibility of the unexpected, the unknown' (Lynghold 2018, 111). Nevertheless, although the post-structural critique has significantly widened the possibilities and perspectives of discursive practices, it has not necessarily enabled us to approach areas that following my definition cannot be considered discursive or artistic. On the other hand, while the new realists criticize the linguistic paradigm, they still do that discursively and without always problematizing that fact sufficiently.

There are several ways of coping with this seeming paradox. One way is to redefine and enlarge the idea of discursive practices beyond their previous humanistic framings to comprise any sort of material arrangements of meaning making, including scientific arrangements. This is what, for instance, Karen Barad suggests in her inaugural article on 'Posthuman Performativity' (Barad 2003). Quentin Meillassoux, in turn, is ready to question the whole discourse-driven philosophy and replace it with paradigms rising from formal languages and natural science (Meillassoux 2005). Another way is to reconsider linguistic phenomena 'agentially' and range them alongside other agents in different kinds of 'flat' neo-ontological systems. That can happen either by giving to linguistic agents an equal ontological status with any other agents, as in the object-oriented ontology of Tristan Garcia (2009, 242–259), or by seeing linguistic agents as partaking in 'networks', 'chains', 'meshes', or 'assemblages', which comprise various heterogenous and interrelated agents. The latter way of considering language, which is often inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's immanent philosophy, has gained terrain especially in new materialism, which currently also informs applied linguistics (de Freitas and Curinga 2014, 255–260; Toohey 2019, 943–946). If, from the new realist point of view, the post-structuralists' idea of language tends to oppose constraining structures and creative agencies (de Freitas and Curinga, 252), then in the new realist thinking, in turn, the focus oscillates between the networks or assemblages, where the agents find themselves and from where their 'utterances' are born, and the idea of language as 'multimodal doing' or

'languaging', operating creatively with heterogeneous semantic registers and agents (Toohey, 944–945).

However, the closer one considers the object of the debate, which is the scope of linguistic entities, the more the viewpoints of the new realists and post-structuralists seem to converge. In particular, they meet on the question of the *materiality of language*. As educational scholar Maggie MacLure formulates it, in the spirit of new materialism, the challenge is to embrace of the 'materiality of language itself—the fact that language is in and of the body; always issuing from the body; being impeded by the body; affecting other bodies, yet of course, always leaving the body, becoming immaterial, ideational, representational, a striated, collective, cultural, and symbolic resource' (MacLure 2913, 663–664; quoted by Toohey, 643). The idea is basically shared by the post-structuralists as well. As Claire Colebrook reminds us, the connection has already been established in the structuralist idea of the 'materiality of the signifier' (Colebrook 2011, 2). However, in the case of Derrida, for instance, that idea has not sufficed to dissipate the suspicions regarding his 'linguistic idealism'. The reason for that is undoubtedly that also his 'materialism' is hard to sustain (Lynghold 2018, 108–117). Even though in Derrida both matter and bodies remain suspended, withdrawn, or something 'to come', the text and bodies do not cease to seek each other. As summarized by Lynghold, '[t]ext, thus, is the embodiment of phonic or graphic signifiers, or bodies insofar as they can be represented. Bodies, similarly, are always already inscribed with sense inasmuch as they are representable in the physical traces of written marks or spoken sounds' (Lynghold, 113).

There are several ways to tackle this Derridian aporia. One way is to shift the attention to the level of bodies and establish them as sense-making entities. This is what happens, for instance, in Jean-Luc Nancy's post-Heideggerian ontology, or in the post-structuralist feminist thinking inaugurated by thinkers such as Helen Cixous, Julia Kristeva, or Luce Irigaray. In Catherine Malabou, the idea of 'plasticity' provides a substitute for the Derridan 'text', opening the material and non-discursive phenomena to a deconstructive analysis (Malabou 2011, 41–66). At the same time, as the new realists contest the primacy of language and rank linguistic entities alongside non-linguistic entities, the move increases the ontological weight of the former in an ambiguous manner.

The Mutability of Language

Here, I cannot go further with charting this complex disciplinary debate. Instead, I would now focus on a problem that rises from it and that is common to both camps. As one juxtaposes the terms 'body', 'matter', and 'language', and if one does not take the sense of any of them as given, it seems that the terms problematize each other in the same proportion as they seem interrelated. On the one hand, if one supposes that bodies are always material entities, then the embodied forms of languaging (speech, gestures, affective registers, rhythms, etc.) provide an obvious reference point for the consideration of the materiality of language. The opposite reference point consists of the materiality of the elements of linguistic communication, where it is regular to consider letters, words, or signs as some sort of 'bodies' (*soma/sema*). (An additional 'some sort of' is needed, as that corporality cannot be anthropomorphic or living in any biological or phenomenological sense. If

the embodied forms of language use are obvious, the embodied status of linguistic entities is problematic.) On the other hand, as obvious as it seems that bodies are material, it is as usual to think that 'matter' is not linguistic by nature. I cannot state that it is impossible to think the opposite, but special philosophical grounds would be needed to sustain such an idea.[3] Instead, the move from matter to language requires a mediator, and bodies fulfil that function. Therefore bodies are supposed to be something both material and languaged. The latter aspect, in turn, implies that they can appear to themselves and, therefore, also make of their appearance a show—that is, to perform, regardless of how rudimentary that performance is. Thirdly, if the existence or subsistence of language is considered as such, it comprises two interrelated aspects, of which one is more 'material' (media, technologies, embodied forms of expression, communicational contexts) and the other more 'immaterial' or 'ideal' (grammar, semantics, phonologies, 'structures' in general). If that is the case, then the existence of bodies should also share something of both ways of appearing.

Based on these features, it should be possible to construct onto-epistemological models that aim at comprising all these aspects. I leave to the reader to consider whether the already mentioned philosophers and philosophies, or those that have not been mentioned, have managed to do that. However, what in my mind the philosophies that I have encountered have not managed to explain sufficiently is the infinite *mutability of language*, which enables language users and the linguistic entities they use to move from one register to another, from one context to another, and to maintain a difference between those registers and contexts, as well as to play endlessly with them. Here, the agency of the human language user and the agency of linguistic entities is interdependent and interchangeable, so that it is finally hard to decide if the words follow the user or the user the words. This mutability constitutes a prerequisite of all discursive use of language, although users most often do not or need not pay attention to it.

The case is the opposite in the arts, where the attention resides precisely in the mutable or plastic resources of language, in the capacity of words to *perform* and appear differently on different occasions and in different languages.[4] The same principle applies to the debate outlined above. Eventually, it is perhaps irrelevant to ask which theory of language is right or the most comprehensive one. Each of them manifests certain aspects of language, speaks a certain language, and thus retains its contextual relevance. Instead, one should wonder what in language both enables all these interpretations or modes of use and performs and appears according to them. In other words, the problem concerns the *medial* nature of language since, eventually, we can speak of language only within languages.[5]

Here is a performance philosophy problem that derives from artistic practices in general and from the performing arts in particular, where the embodiment of words and the languaging of bodies play a prominent role. Here also is a problem that can be studied through performative means. As I see it, the arts do not have a language of their own. Speaking of a 'language of art', that of music or painting, for instance, is misleading, as if the language of art were just one language among many. Instead, in the arts, language use goes through a certain transformation or manifests its transformative power. The arts imitate and play with all possible ways of using language, including,

for example, the everyday use of language, formal languages, various cultural discourses, poetic language, and sign language, as well as languages informed by social or ethnic background, psychopathological states, age, dreams, drugs, or neurophysiological dysfunctions. From the point of view of the arts, all these forms are *equal*, which, at the same time, highlights the arts' enigmatic linguistic position. The relationship between the arts and language is at the core of my questioning.

As one tries to think about the mediality or multimodality of language, one easily ends up imagining its materiality and corporality. As Plato reasoned in *Timaeus* concerning the idea of *Khôra* (Plato 2009, 49a–53b), the endless transformability or plasticity of an entity requires that it simultaneously retains its receptivity and neutrality regarding the forms it assumes. Correlatively, the way of being or appearing of the materiality and corporality discussed here is paradoxical, and it goes beyond what we are accustomed to mean by those terms. If a word has a material 'body', its corporality can by no means be organic, anthropomorphic, or fleshy. The observation leaves open two possibilities. Either we should abandon the very term while speaking of linguistic entities (or use it only in a metaphorical sense; 'words in certain circumstances behave like bodies') or we must radically change our idea of body and what it can do. If the latter is the case, as I am here inclined to think, 'word' must be a more complex entity than a mere printed mark, a combination of phonemes, or a series of manual gestures. Although a word or a phrase may look like a mere instrument of communication or carrier of meaning, it must have a complex inner life that we are somehow familiar with, otherwise we could not use our words so easily. I am asking now about the nature of that *preliminary understanding* of which we are not necessarily consciously aware while speaking or writing. This search for a preliminary understanding also turns my questioning phenomenological.[6]

In what follows, I will propose for the reader a workshop consisting of a series of simple performative tasks where I ask them to pronounce words in a certain manner and reflect on the outcomes of their verbal operation. Each task constitutes a variation on the same theme, which is the materiality and corporality of language. In each of them, the attention moves from the discursive to the artistic use of language. The tasks can be accomplished alone or together with other people. External execution of the tasks is recommended, but one can also accomplish them internally by reading the given instructions and imagining in one's body how they would realize them and how the outcome would appear. The initial context of the tasks resides in my artistic research concerning the way a scenic performer works with their textual material (Kirkkopelto 2022). If the reader has previous experience of techniques of performing (by no means required), some of these tasks may be familiar from other contexts. Although I have developed them myself, I do not presume that similar techniques have not been used earlier in some other contexts. The point is not the originality of the tasks introduced but the *logic* that ties them together.[7] That is a way to practice performance philosophy. Each task is followed by a short 'commentary' where I gather my reflections regarding the phenomena the task made appear.

A Verbal Workshop

Task 1: A meaningless word

Let us first study the different ways that words can behave and start with the simplest possible option, namely with meaningless words.

Use your mother tongue and choose a word that is neither too short nor too complex and with which you would like to play. A noun may be the easiest to play with, but you can also choose a verb, a pronoun, an adjective, or a participle.

Pronounce and repeat your word aloud so that your way of pronouncing deprives it of its semantic meaning or turns it semantically indifferent to you. This can happen in various ways, and you are free to invent different techniques. Some of them may be more mechanical, some of them more imaginary. Try to find 3–5 different ways to abolish the meaning. Have fun!

Commentary to Task 1

This simple demonstration, where a word was performed and a word started to perform, brings forth at least four interesting aspects:

– Any word can lose its semantic meaning. It is impossible to imagine a word that could not turn meaningless. The loss of meaning should be considered a constitutive possibility of the word to work as a linguistic component.

– Although the meaning of the word is omitted, the word does not disappear as an entity. On the contrary, the operation now only reveals an aspect that its semantic meaning had hidden, namely the materiality of the word. This materiality has a twofold character. On the one hand, it consists of the column of air that your vocal apparatus fashions so that it gains an audible form. On the other hand, that audible form has a temporal duration, a volume, a mimetic likeness, and an affective feel, which in the case of each word and each language is unique and which each articulation realizes differently. The initial airy matter has been given a characteristic form.

– Depending on the point of view, we perceive either a bare voice or a sound object made of air. As we reflect the outcome, our attention oscillates between these viewpoints. Yet, and unlike what one might think conceptually, the result is not dualistic ('matter' + 'appearance'). Instead, the resulting entity is something *attuned,* which implies a certain mimetic likeness and affective feel. Without a given meaning, the attuning is open and ambiguous. Yet it is there and, as a corporeal being, whose body is always attuned in some way or another, I can share the attuned state of the meaningless word. For the same reason, I am also inclined to consider it as a certain kind of body.

– If your operation is considered as a performance, you may look and sound like a person who does not understand the words they emit or does not react to their meaning, or just plays with their voice. Between the body of the performer and the body of the word resides an experiential break.

– The semantic meanings are quite hard to suspend, and the operation requires a specific technique and concentration.

Task 2: A word full of meaning

Next, let us take a counterexample and study how a word can become meaningful. Contrary to what just happened, try now to be attentive to the different semantic meanings your word may have. Try to pronounce the word aloud 'meaningfully' and repeat it, maybe by varying its sense.

– As you may notice, the task is quite hard, if not impossible, to accomplish without imagining a situation where that word is spoken out, together with other words or beings. The attempt easily turns into a pretended speech, or acting, which gives to the pronounced word a performative interpretation. Luckily, there is a technique that enables one to focus more exclusively on the word's semantic meaning. It works as follows:

Find another word whose vocal body resembles the first one and play now with these two words by repeating them one after another. Consider how the semantic meaning changes as you move from one word to another, and how the repetition informs the meaning of the words. Once again, let the task entertain you.

Commentary to Task 2

– The first version of the task indicated how the meaningfulness of a word is not dependent on your conscious intention. Instead, it seems to come from the context, where it is pronounced and which here is imagined.

– The second version, in turn, highlighted a semantic aspect of language that I call 'metonymic'. The idea derives from Roman Jakobson's famous analysis of the two main categories of semantic function in speech and their rhetoric correlates (Jakobson 1990). In metonymic semantic relation, the way a word can replace another word, or follow it, is based on a *partial likeness*, which does not hide the simultaneous difference between the words and their more established discursive meanings. The intermediary semantic space is left open for interpretations and free play.

– In the latter case, you may have looked like a speaking person whose relation to the words pronounced is free and playful, as if you were singing or reciting contemporary poetry! In poetry, words live in a freer semantic relation to each other, in a non-discursive way.

Task 3: An acting word

Let us continue by demonstrating an operation that, after Jakobson, could be called 'metaphoric'.

It implies that you now deliberately try to pronounce your word as if it were pronounced and used in some specific life situation that you have experienced or can imagine. In other words, you now give to the word a fixed performative interpretation. The word and the way you perform it replace and repeat—that is, *represent,* an interpretative situation, a lifeworld which is not here or is here only virtually (Kirkkopelto 2021). Please try to do that until you find a way that satisfies you.

Commentary to Task 3

What you just did was very schematically something the actors do as they rehearse alone. As a performer, they try to give to a word a certain contextual interpretation. Normally in a performative situation, there are also spectators watching them as a person or character who finds themselves in a life situation and who behave therefore in some specific manner. On this basis, we can once again make a series of observations:

– A single word can open a myriad of different life worlds. Insofar as a word can be totally meaningless, it can also be full of meaning. One can use a single word to denote an indefinite number of things or use it in an indefinite number of ways and, thereby, open an indefinite number of practical situations where that word can become meaningful. In this respect, every word can work like a pronoun, or a 'shifter'[8] whose semantic and contextual capacity is basically infinite. That same capacity also explains why, reciprocally, every noun can always be replaced by a pronoun, by 'it' for instance. In each context, the word that is used not only means or does something; it also gains a certain affective tone, reflecting mimetically its surroundings and having mimetic effects. Unlike the case of the meaningless word, which was attuned in an open way, the word is now attuned in a specific way. A word is not just a mark of another thing but a multimodal agent whose agency you have just performed and made appear.

– At the same time, the demonstration reproduced a discursive way of using language based on grammar and conventional semantic relations. The performance constituted a citation or a quote from the life of some other person, or of my own life, past, future, or imagined. In Schechnerian terms, we are dealing here with 'restored behavior' (Schechner 1981, 35–116).

– If one now compares Task 3 with the second version of Task 2, where the relation of the words pronounced was metonymical, one can have an idea of two modes of performing, where one is more scenic or theatrical whereas the other is semantically more open and therefore applicable in other modes of artistic performance.[9] The comparison highlights the simultaneous continuity and difference, the logic of variation between different modes.

Task 4: An unidentified verbal object

Now, take the two words you used in Task 2 and make of them a new word either by connecting one to another, like in a compound word, or by merging them, so that the resulting fusion differs from the words implied. The aim is to create a word that has no semantic correlation in the actual world. Repeat the word and try to imagine the thing it could refer to or a situation where it would become meaningful. Can you imagine contexts where that kind of word could be used? Hopefully, you like your creation!

Commentary to Task 4

– The resulting word is like the words one can encounter in literature, dreams, psychopathology, or magic. It is simultaneously meaningless and full of meaning. Yet, every word whose meaning we do not know, such as the words in a foreign language, can basically appear to us in a similar, semantically ambiguous or nonsensical way. In this respect, it resembles a linguistic agent that below is called a 'floating signifier'.

– Any word can be combined with any other word, and the resulting object is still a word. Depending on the context, its meaning can be ambiguous or defined. That is a usual way to generate new discursive terms. Correspondingly, a word would be split into smaller parts, such as syllables that, in turn, can be treated as words, at least in poetry. Both operations manifest the extraordinary mutability or plasticity of language.

Floating Words

All my observations so far have been obvious and not necessarily that surprising. What is more surprising, and worth considering, is what one can finally testify as their sum.

So that a word can function as a word, it apparently must comprise all the mentioned and demonstrated aspects *at the same time*. But how to conceive of such a complex entity? What do we get as a result if, as our final task, we try to imagine a word, any word you like, in all its complexity, comprising 1) its total meaninglessness and materiality, 2) its endless metonymic affinity with other words, 3) its infinite metaphoric capacity, and 4) poetic ambiguity and plasticity? As I try to do that, then, at least in my imagination, the word starts to gain a body that is independent of my physical body and that changes constantly in its form, its mimetic likeness, and its affective feel, oscillating between meaninglessness and meaningfulness; a body which performs, not metaphorically but literally; a body comparable to that of a human performer.

Of course, a word does not have a human figure, no head, arms, or legs. However, as Task 1 tangibly demonstrated, words do have a plastic torso that, after Antonin Artaud, one might even call 'a body without organs', as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have famously suggested (see Cull 2013, 64). As I have tried to indicate elsewhere, this is the way that the scenic performer conceives their body during their performance. Phenomenologically, the embodiments the performer's body emits are not primarily anthropomorphic (Kirkkopelto 2022).

So far, we have observed and played with the semantic aspects of words. But is the relation between words and human bodies only semantic, metonymic, or metaphorical? Do linguistic entities only *resemble* human mimetic and linguistic behaviour, or is there a more intrinsic link between the body of the word and the human body? What finally authorizes us to speak about a 'body' in the same sense in both cases?

It seems that the identity between words and human body comes forth crucially in a linguistic function that the structuralists have called a 'floating signifier'. The term was initially coined and introduced by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in his famous essay devoted to the work of his predecessor Marcel Mauss (Lévi-Strauss 1987, 63). Ever since, the idea has significantly informed post-structuralist thought, as in Lacan, Derrida, or Deleuze.

By a floating signifier, Lévi-Strauss refers to signifiers that paradoxically signify what remains non-signified in each lifeworld as a system of reference. According to him, every human language is born instantaneously as a totality, which covers everything encountered within the given

circumstances (59–60). A linguistic world has no holes. However, that does not imply that everything within a world would be named and known. The floating signifier refers paradoxically to all that remains without a signifier. Insofar as it signifies the not-named and not-known, it simultaneously signifies the whole linguistic system and its symbolic power. It is both meaningful, as meaningful as the world it denotes, and meaningless, without any meaning *within* that world. Therefore, in human cultures, its function and power are often associated with various magic and ritual objects or words, such as amulets, fetishes, or spells.

Secondly, and now more in conformity with structuralist theory, the floating signifier functions as an instance that connects and mediates between different frames of reference without belonging to either of them. Those frames may consist of different worlds and their respective languages, or of a signified order, where words and things have their established correlation, and a signifying order, which scouts and denotes the former. This also explains why in different established discursive orders, floating signifiers and their representatives play a seemingly liminal or marginal role.[10]

Finally, José Gil, in his seminal study *Metamorphoses of the Body*, proposes that the human body itself can function as a floating signifier, as a 'mediator or interchanger among codes', as he calls it (Gil 1998, 95). According to Gil, the body's semantically and syntactically floating function comes forth particularly in different kinds of healing rituals described by anthropologists, as well as in artistic performances, such as in the art of 'mime' (106–111). In the former case, the floating bodily signifier still works at the service of the given and established symbolic systems, the discourses, whereas in the latter case, it can manifest its potential more artistically and freely. As it does that, like it just did in our workshop, we may finally start to understand how integrally our understanding of our bodies, both our own and those of others, relates to our understanding of language and our linguistic capacity.

Conclusions

In the above workshop, we have considered phenomenologically the process of verbal expression in the moment of it taking place, focusing on the appearance of its outcomes, the pronounced words, and their transformative qualities. I hope that the logic that I have traced through these exercises now helps us to rethink language beyond the disciplinary framings discussed above. If that is not the case, and if someone wants to retain their assumed theoretical stance, then at least they should be able to comprise the evidence rising from these experiments in their theoretical framework and give it a corresponding interpretation and practical implementation.

However, at least to me, these experiments, like many others that I have accomplished in the field of artistic research, have opened a new way of thinking about our corporeal and linguistic co-existence. It is not that human bodies are first born and then thrown into (or abandoned in) the symbolic universe of language and subjugated to its order. It rather seems that our bodies are born linguistic; our embodiment and language acquisition are reciprocal processes, where the mimetic and affective attuning between bodies plays a crucial role (Zlatev 2007). Our linguistic

capacities, both discursive and artistic ones, are based on a structural isomorphism, which resides between our embodied experience and the ephemeral bodies of (spoken, written, gesticulated) words or their more objective representatives (like animated objects). I call this isomorphism *the idea of the linguistic body*. According to this idea, verbal objects are no less material, although their materiality may differ from that of our physical bodies, and no less corporeal, although their corporality is not living.[11] Correspondingly, a living organism can conceive of itself and others as bodies only insofar as it is capable of actualizing that idea. Finally, the isomorphism in question constitutes the object of the preliminary understanding, according to which we recognize our specifically 'human' relation to language.

That relation is primarily neither discursive nor artistic. Instead, both registers are interdependent and born from each other as a result of a process that is hard to imagine and that barely has a name, a process which extends beyond the human sphere and finally connects us with everything that is, has been, or that is yet to come. In discursive use, words and bodies have their established or conventional, that is *forced*, meaning. Whereas in the arts, words can manifest their more corporeal nature and bodies their more linguistic nature. Language as the medium of appearing is as real as the bodies that take form within it. Bodies do not cease to imagine themselves in contact with other bodies, but those inter-corporeal encounters are also always linguistic, no matter what kind of bodies they are, human or more-than-human. It is this process of embodiment/languaging that is witnessed at the occasion of every artistic performance and that today can be studied through the performing arts.[12]

Notes

[1] Despite the terminological proximity, I am not referring here the Austinian 'performatives', which most often occur and function in various discursive contexts.

[2] I have touched upon the mentioned debate earlier in a previous *Performance Philosophy* article (Kirkkopelto 2016). The present article, where my focus shifts from performing objects to performing words, can be read as a continuation to my former argumentation.

[3] Johan Wilhem Ritter's (1776–1810) speculative physics provide an idea of that kind of argumentation. If all natural phenomena are accompanied by oscillation, oscillation associated with tone, tone understood as a primordial music, and music as the most original form of language, then it is possible to state: 'Also in the world of phenomena one still sees words and writing inseparable. All electronic excitation is accompanied by oscillation even if it only appears external at the isolators. Basically, however, there is no oscillation—even no internal one—without being external. All oscillation yields tone, and therefore word' (Ritter 2010, 475).

[4] According to some thinkers, there is no ideologically neutral language. Instead, every actual language pursues certain socio-political interests. I think here in particular of Valentin Voloshinov's Marxist theory of language in Voloshinov (1973). The observation adds another layer to the present analysis and sets a question of its interests. In my case, my most obvious interests relate to artisthood and the claim of artists to be acknowledged as capable of knowledge formation. I thank Petri Tervo for this reference.

[5] The fundamental mediality of language also comes forth in the Goffmanian 'frame analysis', where the pre-existing interpretative frame defines how a performative action should be understood on each occasion (Goffman 1974). Insofar as those agents use language, the frame also defines the agential role of the latter. What the

Goffmanian analysis takes as granted is what I am questioning here—that is, the mutability of linguistic agents themselves.

[6] My analysis can be considered as an example of 'performance phenomenology', if only one bears in mind that phenomenology is understood here more as a research method than as a philosophical theory. The idea of performance phenomenology as a branch of performance philosophy has been introduced in Bleeker, Sherman, and Nedelkopoulou (2015) and in Grant, McNeilly-Renaudie, and Wagner (2019).

[7] Here, I refer to Ben Spatz's argument, which enables the consideration of techniques of performing as 'epistemic' practices. The relevance of singular techniques of performing should not be assessed according to their originality or 'authenticity of transmission' but according to the function they assume in each system of training, to start with the order in which the tasks are accomplished (Spatz 2014, 272–274).

[8] For a linguistic analysis of shifters, see Jakobson (1984). Concerning their philosophical bearing, see Agamben (1991, 73, 84–85). Notice also how Bert O. States, in his phenomenological analysis of acting, compares actors' different performative attitudes ('self-expressive', 'collaborative', and 'representational') to different 'pronominal modes' (States 1985, 160).

[9] Peggy Phelan has used the distinction between metonymy and metaphor to highlight the critical potential of performance art as compared to more conventional modes of performance (Phelan 1993, 150).

[10] The intermediary role of the floating signifier is in particular focus in Gilles Deleuze's analysis of structuralism (Deleuze 2004, 184–186).

[11] At this point, I debate with contemporary thinkers of performance who promote a division of 'material' and 'immaterial' as an alternative to the mind–body division and other metaphysical binary oppositions. According to my view, the so-called 'immaterial' things, such as linguistic phenomena and constructs, are still material, albeit in another way (see, for example, Camilleri 2020, 99–107).

[12] This conclusion is sustained more systematically in Kirkkopelto (2025).

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Biography

Esa Kirkkopelto is a philosopher, artistic researcher, and performance artist. He has worked as a professor of artistic research at the University of the Arts Helsinki (2007–2018), Malmö Theatre Academy (Lund University, 2020–2022). From 2024 onwards, he continues in that same position at the Tampere University. He holds the title of docent in aesthetics at the University of Helsinki. He has a PhD degree in philosophy at the University of Strasbourg (2003). He is a former board member of the Society of Artistic Research (2022–2024), a former core-convener of the Performance Philosophy association and the organiser of the Helsinki 2022 Performance Philosophy Biennial. He is the founding member of the Other Spaces performance collective (2004–). His research focuses on the deconstruction of the performing body both in theory and in practice. His monograph titled *Logomimesis: A Treatise on Performing Body* is forthcoming at Routledge in 2025.