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Performing the revival:
Performance and performativity
in a colonial discourse in South India

One of the central theoretical concerns of colonial discourse theory, for a long time, has been the problem of representation and the political implications of representing the colonized in anthropology, Indology, literature and even art. Another line of theoretical reflection is related to the areas of anti-colonial resistance, counter-discourses, pre-colonial knowledge, knowledge subjugated in the dominant discourse, agency of the colonized, subaltern consciousness etc. In both fields of concern, the question of subjectivity or position of the subject is at stake. For further theoretical interventions into the field of colonial discourse – historically oriented as well as concerned with the present – the question of how these subject-positions are constructed seems relevant. While, during the 1960s and 70s, the focus of academic concern was predominantly on the social aspects of colonial encounter, postcolonial studies, since the 1980s, have shifted the emphasis of critique to a deconstruction of colonial knowledge and its underlying assumptions. The focus of attention has been moved from social aspects to the question of culture.¹

The widely discussed ‘Cultural Turns’² have furthermore led to a deferral in the validation of culture, from a constraint of culture as a predominantly mental affair and a moment of representation to an estimation of culture as a dynamic product and force of human activity and social practices. It can be argued that an anti-essentialist characterization of culture, as undertaken in various fields of cultural studies today, is a result of one of the major innovative theoretical shifts that took place in the late 1980s. “Cultures”, James Clifford has maintained, “do not hold still for their portraits. Attempts to make them do so always involve simplification and exclusion, selection of a temporal focus ...”³ This widespread analytical conviction has informed a variety of postcolonial attempts to analyse the colonial encounter as hybrid, unbounded, as ‘in-between’ spaces and the like. There is, nevertheless, a theoretical as well as practical problem in this emphasis on the fluidity of culture in postcolonial contexts. The estimation of culture as fluid seems best to serve the postmodern theorizers

¹ Thomas 1994.

² Bachman-Medick 2006.

³ Clifford 1986: 10.

of western academia, but it rarely matches with the self-estimation of those who have been forced to establish new or transformed identity-positions in a colonial or postcolonial context. The essentialization of cultural identity as original, divinely created, national, racial, and the like, is widespread not only among fundamentalist but among a wide range of cultural agents in all postcolonial contexts. Therefore, hybridity or fluidity as analytical tools for those who analyse colonial encounters, to my mind, seem to be insufficient. How are colonial as well as postcolonial identities formed? What are the means to convincingly formulate identity-positions? I would like to argue that performance studies and theories of performativity have contributed to highlight the practical dimensions of producing culturally valid experience and meaning. Therefore, they could play an eminent role in analysing various colonial discourses.

Contesting the language of representation

Postcolonial studies have been at the forefront in pointing critically at the connection between the representation of the 'other' and power; or, to put it differently, they have attempted to deconstruct the politics of representation. Although Edward Said's *Orientalism* is often considered to be the key document of this critical theoretical move, at about the same time, similar critical shifts or turns in various fields of cultural and historical studies took place. The writing culture debate,⁴ Hayden White's *Metahistory*,⁵ Jacques Derrida's critique of western logocentrism, Richard Rorty's reflections on the *Mirror of Nature*⁶, and several other theoretical interventions coming up around 1980, have been concerned with the problem of representation and in a way have questioned the assumption that language, speech and written texts are referring to the world 'out there'.

Words do not only name, describe, and judge; they also produce, constitute or create reality. Edward Said has called this relationship of reality and text, "the worldliness of a text". The question arises, how do words like Orientalist texts constitute the reality they describe? How do they function? Said has reflected on this question in his theoretical essay, *The World, the Text and the Critic*, in which he pointed out that every text is a text-in-the-world. All texts according to Said are worldly, "even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless part of the social world,

⁴ Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986.

⁵ White 1973.

⁶ Rorty 1987.

human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted.”⁷

Said’s understanding of the worldliness of the text and his conceptualisation of Orientalism as a discursive formation, therefore, is an attempt to read texts in relation to an extra-textual, socially, and historically determined reality, which provides texts with a certain authority to function. Texts carry traces of the context in which they are written. They exceed by far that which is immediately visible and obvious in their words as signs.⁸ The role of the critic is to “speak truth to power” by laying open these historically and socially determined discursive layers that inform a certain predication. Literary criticism, according to Said, implies a scrutinizing of stereotyped terms and words and their usage that contribute to form reality. If discursive formations shape the Orientalist and colonial speech, and if the Orientalist textual representations exercise a certain power on the colonized, the generative power of speech as such has to be analysed.

The ‘contact zone’

Postcolonial theoretical interventions, by connecting anti-essentialist theoretical shifts with the question of power, differed largely from the classical paradigm of anticolonialism by challenging the unacknowledged essentialist assumptions of the latter regarding history, origin, race, subjectivity, culture, and even caste and language. The debate between postcolonial and anticolonial approaches, time and again, circulates around questions related to power and agency. Epistemologically the problem arises, whether postcolonial studies, by emphasising the epistemic force of colonial representation of the other, are at all able to recognize counterforce and resurgent movements.

Edward Said has consistently been criticized for presenting Orientalism as a single, monolithic formation of knowledge in which power is assigned only to the West; and thereby Europe, in a way, is essentialized as the central dominant force of all discourses, even in postcolonial criticism. Laura Ann Stoler and Frederic Cooper have accused postcolonial studies of adopting a “Manichaeian conception”⁹ of colonialism by giving Europe and the West a dominant and separated position in the study of the colonial period. Stoler and Cooper claim that Europe has been trans-

⁷ Said 1997: 11.

⁸ Compare also Ma Castro Varela and Dhawan 2005: 46.

⁹ Cooper and Stoler 1997: 3.

formed as well in the colonial encounter and that postcolonial studies should not be limited to the effects of colonialism in the colony.

Mary Louise Pratt has introduced the term 'contact zone' for an analysis of travel accounts in colonial contexts; a term which helps to describe the space in which the interactions and processes of exchange in intercultural colonial encounters are to be located.¹⁰ Pratt's intention is to reject the idea that these encounters are predominantly shaped by Western conquest and dominance. Contact zones are places of compromise, resistance, hybridity, adaptations, acculturation and imitation, and the term denotes a change in cultural studies from a chronologically structured discourse of identity that searches for roots to one that is structured in terms of space.

Dialogue in South India?

The assumption that power only runs from the Western metropolitan centre to the colonial periphery has also been questioned in historical studies on South India.

The historian Eugene Irschick, in a conscious bid to differ from Said's arguments, has termed the dispute between colonial authority and Tamil interests as a 'dialogue'. His book, *Dialogue and History*, published in 1994, is a striking example of an attempt to interpret the formation of a new Tamil identity during the 19th century as a product of dialogical processes, which were shaped by several agents from inside India as well as from abroad.¹¹ Irschick describes the changes in the rural society in the Chingleput District near Madras (Chennai) as a result of the joint project of British colonial officials and native inhabitants. Both Englishmen and the dominant South Indian groups in the society worked together in the construction of the 'Hindu-Past', which was presented as an internally very well ordered one in order to serve as a model for future cultural policy. Irschick's model of a colonial dialogue ensues from the idea that such a dialogue is possible, even if the dialogue partners have differing status in society and unequal access to power. He, therefore, questions the thesis that the political dominance of the British meant, at the same time, a sovereign power over representation. He suggests instead "that changed significations are the heteroglot and dialogic production of all members of any historical situation, though not always in equal measure".¹² By repudiating the authorship of the discourse, Irschick's approach elabo-

¹⁰ Pratt 1992.

¹¹ Irschick 1994.

¹² Irschick 1994: 8.

rates the discursive order of the cross-cultural encounter in a more consistent manner than Said's.

The argument here focuses less on the willed or repressive aspect of a colonial state as part of the construction of knowledge than on the dialogic, heteroglot productive process through which culture is formed.¹³

Cultural change is, therefore, not induced by colonial power alone, but by the indigenous as well as by the dominant participants of colonial dialogue. The heteroglot aspects of this dialogue are contained in every form of meaning and institution, and Irschick emphasizes, therefore, that it is impossible to reconstruct the pure origins of these meanings and institutions, irrespective of the fact whether they are 'British' or 'Tamil' in origin. In contrast to Ronald Inden, to whom the western representation of India appears as a closed discourse, Irschick adheres to the position of not 'essentializing' the different dialogue positions. The results of this dialogue – in this respect, Irschick as a historian comes closer to the post-colonial deconstructions of Orientalism as expressed by Homi Bhabha – are 'hybrid', that is, authorship cannot be fixed beyond doubt. However, in the case of Irschick, a problem has to be pointed out: does not the rejection of the question of authorship justify, at the same time, colonial authority? If there are no identifiable 'natural speakers' in the colonial encounter, be it traditional Indian society or concrete colonial interests, and if colonialism cannot simply be understood as the destroyer of indigenous culture, then we are left with only the creative process of inter-cultural dialogue in our analysis of the colonial discourse. This also means that even the criticism of colonialism can only be related to discursive structures.

I agree with Irschick's historiographic attempts to locate what he calls a 'dialogue' within a discursive formation which is deeply shaped by colonial power structures. As long as we talk of dialogue, encounter, exchange, and so on, we implicitly make use of concepts such as agency, subject-position, identity and the like. The insistence, however, of colonized groups on a subject-position or on self-identity as a counter-position to a colonizing centre is, as Gayatri Spivak has emphasised, not an easy claim. Her seminal essay, *Can the subaltern speak?*, is not only a critique of western conceptions of political representation, but also a caution against uncritical claims of subaltern subject-positions, untouched by dominant hegemonic power.¹⁴ Not unlike Homi Bhabha, Spivak has emphasized that it would be a simplified view of these processes to

¹³ Irschick 1994: 10.

¹⁴ Spivak 1988.

differentiate radically the dominating forces and the subalterns as active and passive discourse partners respectively.

In his book on colonialism and the making of modern India, *Castes of Mind*, the South Asia historian, Nicholas Dirks, has been raising this question concerning the centre of power, which he specifies as a question of agency and a subject-position. I would like to follow Dirks, in the sense that to interpret the exertion of colonial power as a dialogue, like Eugene Irschick has attempted, hides the actual transaction of this power. Dirks interprets culture principally as an effect of power and insists “that contemporary assumptions about cultural difference have been largely produced out of the long history of colonial domination”.¹⁵ But how, then, is power exercised in the colonial encounter or, if you like, ‘dialogue’. Since these “contemporary assumptions about cultural difference” Dirks is talking about are the manifestations of a discursive representation of what is central and what is marginal, some critics of the colonial discourse argue that the effect of this discursive production is that all counter-narratives are constantly entering the dominant culture. It was Edward Said who alluded to this aporia in his book on the Palestinian struggle, *After the Last Sky*:

We can read ourselves against other people’s pattern, but since it is not ours ... we emerge as its effects, its errata, its counternarratives. Whenever we try to narrate ourselves, we appear as dislocations in their discourse.¹⁶

And Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his well known essay *Provincializing Europe*, argued that all histories of African or Asian countries have the tendency to be nothing but variations of a European master-narrative.¹⁷

Saiva Siddhanta Samaj

How, then, if we do not consider this ‘narration of oneself’ as an encounter or dialogue in the sense of equal communication and mutual exchange, can such a reading of oneself “against other people’s pattern” be interpreted. I suggest that some of the most prominent recent reflections on performance and performativity can shed a different light on single incidents as well as on religious, political and social movements in colonial India.

As an example, I take the Saiva Siddhanta Samaj (Tam. caiva cittānta-camājam) and the publication *The Light of Truth or Siddhanta Deepika*

¹⁵ Dirks 2001: 313.

¹⁶ Said 1986: 140.

¹⁷ Chacrabarthy 1992.

(referred to here on as *Siddhanta Deepika*). I will only focus on a small aspect in the history of the Saiva Siddhanta Samaj, namely the encounter with protestant missionaries in the first decade of the 20th century.

J. M. Nallasvami Pillai (Tam. je. em. nallacāmi-p piḷḷai, 1864–1920), the publisher of *Siddhanta Deepika*, a journal appearing since 1897, which has taken upon itself the publishing of Tamil and Sanskrit texts in the vernacular and in English translation, sketches the motivation to publish the magazine in its first issue:

We have considered it a shame that we should be coached in our Veda and Vedanta by German Professions on the banks of the Rhine and the Ouse, and that an American from a far off country should be the first translator of the foremost work in Tamil philosophy and that an old Oxford Professor should sit pouring over the Tamil ‘Word’, and render it into English verse. All these facts redound greatly to the glory of the European, who could forget for the time being his narrow bit of native land, and his own selfish wants and go out to distant lands and to remote antiquities, in search of the diggings of the past and bay living laborious days, live to finish the task he had set to himself, in a thoroughly universal and truly Christian spirit. Noble examples these! May we follow!¹⁸

Nallasvami, a Tamil Vellalar (Tam. veḷḷāḷar), is regarded as one of the spiritual leaders of the Saiva Siddhanta movement, and his son, J. N. Ramanathan, was one of the outstanding representatives of Saivism and a patron of Tamil culture in the ‘Justice Party’. The significance of Nallasvami to the Saiva Siddhanta Samaj has been compared to that of Vivekananda for Advaita Vedanta. In 1897, on the ‘commemoration day’ of Queen Victoria’s coronation, he began to publish the monthly magazine *Siddhanta Deepika*, with the intention:

To transplant in the Indian soil some of those activities in the field of Indian religion and literature and history which are carried on in far off countries by Western Savants, and to stimulate indigenous talent to work and achieve a moderate share of success in these departments.¹⁹

Besides the publication of classical Tamil texts in the English language, *Siddhanta Deepika* consists of reports of conferences of the Saiva Siddhanta Samaj and essays by Europeans and Tamils on Tamil literature and Saivism. Nallasvami himself, who was considered an outstanding non-Brahman scholar in the Tamil movement, wrote extensively about Saiva Siddhanta (Tam. caiva cittāntam, Skt. śaiva siddhānta) and he taught on various occasions about the relationship of Saiva Siddhanta and Advaita Vedanta.²⁰ From 1905 onwards, he was involved in the organisa-

¹⁸ *Siddhanta Deepika* 1 (1897/1898) 14.

¹⁹ *Siddhanta Deepika* 1 (1897/1898) 14.

²⁰ Nallasvami Pillai 1911/1984. Cf. also M. Bergunder ‘Saiva Siddhanta as a Universal Religion’ in this volume: 30–88.

tion of annual conferences with the intention to unite the already existing Saiva organizations into a larger structure.²¹ The Saiva Siddhanta Samaj was founded at the conference in December 1906 and in 1911, and the *Siddhanta Deepika* became the official organ of the Saiva Siddhanta Samaj. The essential aspects of the missionary work of the Saiva Siddhanta Samaj were laid down during this conference and recommended as a strategy for the individual local sabhas during the 1910 conference in Ramnad:

1. The publication of Siddhanta works and classical writings in Tamil;
2. Courses and lectures on Saiva Siddhanta during the year;
3. Social service for the downtrodden castes;
4. Improvements in temple administration, especially the opening of temples to the members of the lower castes.

R. S. Subramanyam gave a lecture entitled *The Work Before Us*, in which he proposed these points. He advised the conference to emulate the missionary work of the Bible-Societies. Yet, another important event was the talk given by Swami Vedachalam Pillai (Tam. *cuvāmi vētācālam piḷḷai*, 1876–1950) at the conference. Vedachalam was a co-founder of the Saiva Siddhanta Samaj, but had distanced himself from the conference in 1910 for political reasons. In a speech on the “social aspects of Saiva Siddhanta”, he levelled similar criticisms against the ethical implications of Hindu idealism, especially the Advaita Vedanta, as often made by the western Orientalists, including the missionaries. Against this, Saivism was presented as a religion in which equality of all castes and social justice had been realized. Vedachalam, who, since 1911, referred to himself as Maraimalai Adigal (Tam. *maṛaimalai aṭikaḷ*), is regarded as a noted Tamil anti-Brahman reformer, who stood for the purity of the Tamil language and culture. He propounded a theory that the Vellalars were the original representatives of Tamil *iṇam*.

The Saiva Siddhanta Samaj regarded the Swaraj movement with reservations, because it was chiefly dominated by North Indian Brahmans. To be sure, the Dravidian movement had, in 1910, not yet been consolidated into a political entity, but even people like Vedachalam were, from the very outset, critically opposed to the Swaraj movement because of its Sanskrit domination. It was only in 1916 that the ‘Justice Party’ was formed, which stressed, in its manifesto, the loyalty of the non-Brahmans to the Crown and refused the ‘Home-Rule’ politics of Annie Beasant, the president of the neo-Vedantic Theosophical Society.

The above elucidated dialogic or hybrid moment in the colonial discourse in Tamilnadu becomes especially explicit in the reception of

²¹ Balasubramaniam 1965: 98.

Christianity by the Saiva Siddhanta Samaj. Nallasvami had expressed positive sentiments towards Christianity at an annual Saiva Siddhanta Samaj conference in Tiruchirapally, when some Christian missionaries, who participated, expressed their gratitude for the invitation:

The missionaries are people, who teach the truth according to their own conscience and are prepared to accept it where and when it encounters them ... We are especially grateful to them, because it is they who have initiated this revival of Siddhanta. If it were not for them, we would hardly have come together ...²²

One German missionary from Leipzig, Hilko Wiardo Schomerus, published a report of this conference. He does not contradict Nallasvami's assessment. He even sees in Saiva Siddhanta a comrade for the Christian mission. His résumé of the conference, along with the annotations of the publisher of *Siddhanta Deepika*, not only illustrates the mutual interpretation of Christian mission and Saiva Siddhanta, but also shows how, in the light of post-colonial discourse analysis, the discursive conditions of Orientalist power can likewise result in the subversion of the dominance structures of representative authority. Schomerus writes:

Several speakers quoted passages from the Bible which were almost every time received with applause, especially the beautiful verses from Hebrews XII about chastisement. So much are the Indians impressed by the sublimity of the Bible that they use it as a Pramāṇam, an observation I have often made. They endeavour to revive their religion in opposition to Christianity, but one sees they try to do it with the aid of thoughts and ideas derived from Christianity, which, of course, they will disclaim, but which is nevertheless a fact, and with a high esteem towards Christianity. Particularly the leaders are strongly influenced by Christian Mysticism, as I had occasion to learn from talks with them, and from their writings.²³

To this estimation of a Lutheran missionary, V. V. Ramana Sastrin, the editor of *Siddhanta Deepika*, gives the following comment:

The Hindus have, as Orientals, the greatest esteem for the Christian Holy Bible, because it is an oriental book in matter and manner, in spirit and in truth. They use the Holy Bible as an accessory in the interpretation of their own scriptures, solely to guide the present-day missionaries of the Christian faith in understanding the sense of the Holy Bible aright. The contention of the Hindus is that the Holy Bible is an exceedingly weighty document, but that it is being grossly misinterpreted by the Westerners. Consequently, what the Hindus do, is calculated more to open the eyes of the Christian missionaries, brought up in the schools of European materialism and commercialism, to the real truths enshrined in this

²² Schomerus 1910.

²³ *Siddhanta Deepika* 11 (1910/1911) 228.

Holy Bible, than to help themselves. The greatest problem now is, how best to teach the Holy Bible to the West.²⁴

The discourse in which the Gospel was supposed to have been brought closer to the Indians neither silenced individual dissenting voices, nor did it initiate a spate of conversions. Nallasvami's claim of a Gospel from the East and the eastern interpretation of Christ as the door to *śiva-darśanam* placed the missionary project of conversion, in view of its approximation to Bhakti, in a hopeless situation.

One could, in the words of Homi Bhabha, describe this association with Bhakti, which at first glance seems to reveal the intercultural nature of the Gospel, as 'mimikry', as a 'subversive mimesis', which exposes the ambivalence and the limitations of the Orientalist discourse. Bhabha launches his post-colonial criticism with the observation that the colonial power-discourse was interrupted time and again by native voices, which created for themselves a free space in their own language within the limits of the discourse. Bhabha's reading of the post-colonial texts reveals the voice of the colonial subjects that is always present in these texts, but which is brought to life only through a deconstructive reading of the text. He rejects Said's insistence that the post-colonial discourse was dominated one-sidedly by Europeans and tries to show the breaks and framework of the discursive authority in the various colonial texts. For this purpose, he refers to Michael Bachtin's model of linguistic hybridity that expresses a basic ability of the language to be identical and at the same time to be different, and to utter in the same statement two different social languages. Homi Bhabha interprets Bachtin's model of linguistic hybridity as a subversion of the monologic authority of the language and applies it to the colonial situation. Hybridity describes a situation in which the western representational monologues of the Orientalist discourse undermine the effects of colonial authority by expressing in the words of the natives something other than that intended. Colonial authority, according to Bhabha, does not mean suppression of the voice of the natives, but it is from the very beginning ambiguous. Bhabha sees in it a possible opportunity for the subversion of the colonial discourse.

Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities: It is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the 'pure' and original identity of authority). Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through repetition of discriminatory identity

²⁴ *Siddhanta Deepika*, 11 (1910/1911) 228.

effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination.²⁵

The report that Schomerus gives on his encounter with members of the Saiva Siddhanta Samaj, is an attempt to understand the Tamil Saivites, but more importantly it reveals the authoritative claim of the European to be able to represent Indian religiosity and changes that have been initiated by the Samaj.

Then followed another Tamil paper on Guru-worship ... After him, a Brahmin read a paper on the esoteric meaning of the four paths, Śariyai, Kiriya, Yogam and Jñānam. Unfortunately the preface was so long, that on the theme proper almost nothing was said. Nevertheless I take the liberty to delineate here in short the doctrine of the Siddhānta on the four paths.²⁶

The very same report of Schomerus does, however, also reveal a difference, by showing that the Tamils have accepted in toto the representational forms of the European, in order to articulate something totally different from what was intended by the Europeans.

After the recess, the Secretary of the Conference delivered a lecture in elegant, finely-sounding Tamil on the Śivaliṅgam. He tried to explain the whole of idolatry symbolically. Even Kant's theory of the origin of the world had to submit to be used for that purpose, although Kant's name was not mentioned.²⁷

Bhabha sees in the mimicking of European representational structures by the colonial subjects, which are never the copy of the European originals, a permanent interruption of the 'Master Discourse' that reveals the ambivalences of the Orientalist texts.

The Bible as the basis of the missionary claim of discursive dominance is taken away from the Europeans and made into a book from the East, which thus also justifies its hermeneutic legitimization against the West. The associative-strategy of the missionaries, which seeks to make the Siddhanta an instrument of the missionary work in Tamilnadu, was not rejected in toto, rather, its intentions were taken seriously and used against the work of the missionaries themselves.

²⁵ Bhabha 1994: 112.

²⁶ *Siddhanta Deepika* 11 (1910/1911) 26. H. W. Schomerus' book on Saiva Siddhanta (Schomerus 1912) was nevertheless considered to be "the most valuable and systematic treatise on Saiva Philosophy in the German language and the author has gone fully into the metaphysics and mysticism of the Philosophy". Balasubramaniam 1965: 51.

²⁷ *Siddhanta Deepika* 11 (1910/1911) 25.

Mimicry as performance

The assumption that words have power has informed Edward Said's criticism of Orientalism. Words and symbolic acts, under certain circumstances, have the power to create non-symbolic facts by mere execution. The central critical point of Said's intervention has been that he interpreted Orientalism not as a representational field that could be exploited by colonial power but as a field that exerted power by itself. Speaking is doing something.

Only recently, Thomas Blom Hansen has suggested studying the political role of Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, not in terms of its ideological background but in terms of its performance in society.²⁸ Blom Hansen is convinced that the performative approach to the role of Shiv Sena as a political organisation is fruitful because of two connotations that the term performative carries. Similar to Judith Butler, referred to later, he suggests that the term has, on the one hand, the meaning of dramatic action and, on the other, non-referentiality.²⁹ The whole debate about performance and performativity focuses on these two aspects. On the one hand, there is a concept of performance, as used in theatre or performance art, which refers predominantly to the act of playing or the moment of staging. On the other hand, there is a concept of performativity that is rooted in theoretical reflections on speech-acts. Culturalistic approaches to performance, as represented by Marvin Carlson,³⁰ Shoshana Felman,³¹ Judith Butler, Sybille Krämer,³² Erika Fischer-Lichte³³ and some others, try to bring together these two aspects and intend to describe the interface between performance and performativity.³⁴ Both aspects, I would argue, are present in various colonial discourses and the interface can be exemplarily seen as reflected in the annual conventions of the Saiva Siddhanta Samaj.

There is hardly any other basic conviction that has been more influential on the philosophical reflections on language than the one that assumes a connection between language and action; a connection which has been expounded first and foremost by John Longshaw Austin in his famous 1955 William James Lectures *How to do Things with Words*.³⁵ Austin, in the first of his lectures, differentiated between 'constative' and 'perfor-

²⁸ Hansen 2004: 19–36.

²⁹ Hansen 2004: 23.

³⁰ Carlson 1996.

³¹ Felman 1983.

³² Krämer 2004.

³³ Fischer-Lichte 2004.

³⁴ Cf. Bublitz and Butler 2002: 21 ff.

³⁵ Austin 1979.

mative' utterances. He proposed that while there are constative expressions that say something about the reality and can be validated as right or wrong, there are other predications that do not describe, report, or claim something, but do something.³⁶ Austin has used, as is well known, some ritual expressions as examples for his discovery of performative speech-acts: the baptism of a ship and the entailment of a watch. With the predication of "I baptize this ship ..." or "I entail this watch to ..." a certain act is performed.

Like all actions, a speech-act can fail if something goes wrong. Speech-acts depend on certain conditions in which they take place, on the authority of the performer, on the proper execution, and so on. Predications are always predications in a context. Austin, therefore, in a later lecture, dropped the differentiation between constative and performative expressions, since he realized that even constative expressions are subject to the conditions of success. All meaningful predications according to Austin's later conviction, therefore, are actions. Language has a communicative dimension and has to be seen as a predominantly social activity.

Pierre Bourdieu has taken up Austin's reflections on speech-acts and has emphasized the importance of the non-lingual context for the success of all predications. Bourdieu has criticized all language philosophy that neglects the social and cultural conditions under which utterances are produced. According to him, the power, position, authorization or legitimacy of the speaker in a certain situation is central for the performative success of any utterance. Speech-acts are institutionalized rituals and, as such, expressions of symbolic power, which are effective because of an authority which is itself outside of language.³⁷ Following Bourdieu's argument in the interpretation of colonial discourses, various Orientalist predications on other cultures by Europeans, such as racist devaluations, romantic admirations, critical editions of classical texts in Sanskrit or Tamil, as well as ethnological researches on society and caste in India, are significant not by themselves but by the authority of certain European institutions that legitimise them. If we would, specifically, apply Bourdieu's argument to an interpretation of the meetings and publications of the Saiva Siddhanta Samaj, the question would arise, as to who had been authorized and through which institutions to perform meetings and publish speeches that led to the formation of Neo-Saivite movement in Tamilnadu. Can the performative power of language in a colonial context be interpreted as a representation or incorporation of a non-verbal force? How, then, is power attributed to a non-Brahman Vellalar group of Saivites in Tamilnadu? Is the invocation of Queen Victoria and the inau-

³⁶ Austin 1979: 37 ff.

³⁷ Bourdieu 1990: 52 ff.

guration of the magazine *Siddhanta Deepika* an attempt to secure this extra-lingual legitimation? For a critical reading of *Siddhanta Deepika* and the success of the Saivite movement in a colonial context, the challenge is to highlight why language not only represents power, but executes power by itself.

Austin's disciple, John R. Searle, even more than Austin himself, emphasized the institutional character of language, which he considered as a standardized product of conventions, rules and regulations. The success of a speech-act, according to Searle, depends on the congruence with these conventions. All usage of language that is regarded as inauthentic – like quotations, theatre recitations, lyrics – Austin had disqualified as parasitic and not normal and, therefore, irrelevant for the understanding of performative speech-acts. How then do we interpret the performance of Bible-quotations by Saivite Hindus during their annual meetings?

For a critical analysis of colonial discourses, it is of eminent importance that this differentiation of language as authentic and parasitic has been criticized by Jacques Derrida, who has accused Austin and Searle of overlooking the iterability of language. Language functions by repetition. Derrida holds that structured language is only possible because of its inherent quotationability. Language includes the echoes of former predications or speech-acts. Quotationability or iterability is a necessary presupposition of any performative predication, since it can only be successful if it is recognizable as a repetition that is in conformity with a model. In other words, performative speech-acts are only successful if they are in some ways identifiable as quotation.

Derrida nevertheless cautions that the iterability of speech-acts should not be confused with mere repetition of the same. Iterability, as Derrida has emphasized, implies alteration, since every quotation is a repetition of former predications in a new context. Due to the contextuality of any meaning, every predication necessarily is a deferral of meaning, or as Derrida puts it, it is *différent*.³⁸

Judith Butler has taken up Derrida's idea that the meaning of signs cannot directly be connected to the context of its usage since a sign is predominantly defined by its iterability, its ability to be repeated. What makes Butler's thoughts so interesting for the analysis of colonial discourses is that she has related this observation to the question of power. Butler is interested in challenging hegemonic discourses and hegemonic constructions of reality.

The challenge for the study of a movement in a colonial context, as for example reform-Hindu movements like the Saiva Siddhanta Samaj or

³⁸ Derrida 1988: 311.

Ramakrishna Movement or any other, is to dispute the very premises that have conventionally governed its politics. One needs to interrogate the manner in which certain concepts come to be seen as foundational to such movements and have come to acquire a hegemonic status in their new context. How does Tamil Saivism articulate itself? For Butler, one of the aims of radical political intervention is to challenge and critique the very terms in which political debates are expressed. We are reminded here of the long and ongoing debate about the antiquity of Tamil culture in which Nallasvami played a key role.³⁹ We can follow the deferral of concepts of origin, developed in western ethnographic and romantic views on culture in the 19th century, straight down to Tamilnadu.⁴⁰

If speech, as predication of a discursive formation, has the power to change the world, it is only possible since the discourse has a history that not only precedes the present usages of language but informs them.⁴¹ “[W]hen words engage actions or constitute themselves a kind of action, they do this not because they reflect the power of an individual’s will or intention, but because they draw upon and reengage conventions which have gained their power precisely through *a sedimented iterability*.”⁴² Butler argues for an iterative model of the subject, relying upon Derridean citationality as her primary theoretical tool:

In the first instance, performativity must be understood not as a singular deliberate act, but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.⁴³

The sedimented iterability, according to Butler, is closely connected to what she calls materialization. There is a constitutional link or an undissolvable entanglement between discourse and matter. Performative speech acts, in this sense, are quotations of conventions and discourses that have sedimented in historical processes. In a sense, they are comparable to rituals or ceremonial acts.

What is striking about the annual conventions of the Saiva Siddhanta Samaj, and of course of many other religious, cultural or political organizations in the late 19th century, is that in many ways they adopted European modes of expression and rituals that determined these meetings. If performativity can be explained in terms of a logic of iterability, as Butler intends,⁴⁴ and if predications gain their power through the historicity of

³⁹ See, for example, Kanakasabhai 1904; Raja 1909.

⁴⁰ Cf. Iyengar 1925; Savariroyan 1907.

⁴¹ Butler 1997: 310 ff. This point has been emphasized by Sybille Krämer to whom I will refer. Krämer 2001: 252.

⁴² Butler 1995: 134.

⁴³ Butler 1993.

⁴⁴ Butler 1998: 208.

conventions, then, the concept of performativity can help to highlight how power is effective in colonial discourses.

However, if performativity would just be a continuation of conventional speech-acts, it would be a continuous and conservative affirmation of already existing structures. Therefore, the question remains as to how change is possible and how hegemonic power can be broken or at least changed by discourses.⁴⁵ In the concluding part of her book, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Butler asks whether a certain performative power results from the repetition of conventional rituals in non-conventional forms:

I would insist that the speech act as a rite of institution, is one whose contexts are never fully determined in advance, and that the possibility for the speech act to take on a non-ordinary meaning, to function in contexts where it has not belonged, is precisely the political promise of the performative, one that positions the performative at the center of a politics of hegemony, one that offers an unanticipated political future for deconstructive thinking.⁴⁶

The staging or performance of citational rituals, like the quotations of Bible-verses in the annual meetings of the Saiva Siddhanta Samaj, subverts the hegemonic evangelical missionary discourse by repetition and quotation. Whatever materializes in the colonial discourse, be it related to the question of identity or to alterity, is not the reflection of an ideal or universal concept but a sedimentation of repetitive predications. The performative approach, in my understanding, can contribute to explain the various religious, cultural and political identity-positionings that we are investigating in the colonial contact zones of South Asia.

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⁴⁵ Krämer 2001: 252.

⁴⁶ Butler 1998: 228.

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