

# Violence through language

## Rhetorics of wounding speech

9-11 November 2006

Annual Conference of the Sonderforschungsbereichs 447 *Kulturen des Performativen*  
Freie Universität Berlin

Institut für Theaterwissenschaft  
Hörsaal  
Grunewaldstr. 35  
12165 Berlin

### Program

THURSDAY, 9 NOV

- 14.00 – 14.15      *Opening*  
**Erika Fischer-Lichte** (FU Berlin)
- 14.15 – 15.15      **Sybille Krämer** (FU Berlin)  
*Gewalt der Sprache – Sprache der Gewalt. Zur Einführung in die  
Tagung*
- 15.15 – 16.15      **Rae Langton** (MIT Cambridge, MA)  
*Speech, Subordination and Silence*
- 16.15 – 16.45      Coffee break
- 16.45 – 17.45      **Ekkehard König/ Katerina Stathi** (FU Berlin)  
*Gewalt der Sprache: Grundlagen und Manifestationen*
- 18.00 – 19.00      *Keynote lecture:*  
**Homi Bhabha** (Harvard University):  
*Words and Wounds*
- 19.00                Reception

FRIDAY, 10 NOV

- 10.00 – 11.00      **Helga Kotthoff** (PH Freiburg)  
*Humor mit Biss zwischen sozialer Konjunktion und Disjunktion*
- 11.00 – 12.00      **Christian Kiening** (Universität Zürich)  
*Versehrungen des Körpers – Transgressionen der Rede. Überlegungen  
zu spätmittelalterlichen Kurzerzählungen*

- 12.00 – 14.00 Lunch break
- 14.00 – 15.00 **Claudia Richter** (FU Berlin)  
*Heilige Gewalt: Prophetie und Fluch im elisabethanischen Theater*
- 15.00 – 16.00 **Johannes Schwitalla** (Universität Würzburg)  
*Sprachliche und bildliche Gewalt gegen den ideologischen Gegner in Flugblättern und Flugschriften des 16. Jahrhunderts*
- 16.00 – 16.30 Coffee break
- 16.30 – 17.30 **Mireille Schnyder** (Universität Konstanz)  
*Offenes Ohr und gefesselte Zunge: Schweigen und Gewalt in der Literatur des Mittelalters*
- 17.30 – 18.30 **Gert Mattenklott** (FU Berlin)  
*Gewalt gegen Gewalt. Sprachhegemonie und Deutungshoheit*
- 20.00 *Poetry reading:*  
**Imre Kertész**  
*„Von der Freiheit der Selbstbestimmung“*
- Introduction: Gert Mattenklott

SATURDAY, 11 NOV

- 9.00 – 10.00 **Burkhard Liebsch** (Ruhr-Universität Bochum)  
*Das verletzte Selbst*
- 10.00 – 11.00 **Ulrike Popp** (Universität Klagenfurt)  
*Praktiken verletzenden Sprechens und sprachlicher Gewalt unter Schülerinnen und Schülern*
- 11.00 – 11.30 Coffee break
- 11.30 – 12.30 **Randall Kennedy** (Harvard University)  
*The status of „Nigger“ in American Culture*
- 12.30 – 14.00 Lunch break
- 14.00 – 15.00 **Pascal Delhom** (Universität Flensburg):  
*Zwischen Identität und Integrität. Verletzt werden durch das fremde Wort*
- 15.00 – 16.00 **Hannes Kuch/ Steffen Kitty Herrmann** (FU Berlin)

*Die Grammatik sprachlicher Mißachtung*

16.00 – 16.15

General discussion

## Exposé

We are not merely capable of depicting violence or locating its consequences with language; rather, our speech in its execution can be a form of enacting violence. In the context of a performative orientation, we are concerned with the analysis of this relation between language and violence. How can the force and power of language to wound be explained? The planned conference should focus the discussion of this question on the following five levels, which we believe to be crucial to the topic:

- the definition of linguistic violence as injury of the social person
- the embedding of linguistic violence in power and authority relations
- the description and differentiation of techniques of linguistic violence
- the historicization of the relation between language and violence
- the focus on the corporal aspects of violence-forming/formed speech

Violence can be defined as an instance of someone inflicting injury upon someone else. The addressee of violence is always a person. In the concept of “person,” however, there is already a “double corporeality” attached; we are always both physical and symbolic bodies, we are unquestionably individuals and at the same time part of a community. As a result, we can give and receive both physical and social injuries. One’s existence as a person remains dependent on the recognition and confirmation of others. Injurious words put this existence as a person into question to a greater or lesser extent; our status as the embodiment of a community is thereby refused or belittled.

Verbal injuries, like all acts of violence, are not purely individual acts. Physical as well as verbal force always appears together in historical and social orders as symbolically coded, i.e., as legitimate, recognized, or illegitimate violence. Like Max Weber’s sociological analysis of violence, violence-forming/formed speech acts can be adopted for the implementation, reproduction, or resistance to power and authority relationships. On the one hand, violent speech acts presuppose authority relationships in order to be effective at all, but on the other hand function as instruments to construct or transform these relationships. In light of the embedding of linguistic violence in power and authority relationships, different institutionalizations of linguistic violence must be distinguished. These, in turn, determine the legitimacy and consequentiality of the injury. A judge’s decision or a disparaging word from an authority figure have more lasting effects than the raillery of barflies. Linguistically inflicted injuries may aim at a collective whose individuals may nevertheless respond differently to the injury. This raises the question of whether the degree of violence in language can be measured and what space the speech act opens for the debating of power claims.

The technical repertoire of linguistic violence is large: an injury can be inflicted by insult, humiliation, degradation, vilification, debasement, and much more. Consequently, there is a demand for a differentiated description of the “rhetorics of injury” which are applied in violence-forming/formed speech. What mechanisms are used? Contempt, for example, can be realized distinctly through different forms of linguistic violence – as the distinction and distancing of the speaker from the addressed subject, or as the barbed reminder of the addressed subject’s social place. During the investigations of these processes, it is worthwhile to reflect on the independence of the performativity of contempt from its immediate

conditions for success. Over and above these conditions, the discursive horizon and the societal norms inscribed in it are important. Wounding speech acts live on the historically built up use of discriminating stereotypes and practices within a culture, while the identity of cultures also always live on the marginalization and the creation of “sacrifices/victims.”

Because the performative effectiveness of language as socially wounding or symbolically dispossessing violence is dependent on context, the relationship between violence and language cannot be determined trans-historically. Linguistic violence is marked by historically specific conditions, which it aims to reflect exemplarily. The insult, which holds good as the example *par excellence* for violence-forming/formed language, should be defined differently for modern western cultures than for pre-modern societies in which concepts of honor as social currency are of particular importance. In a historical perspective, the textual mediation of the object is a further aspect that must be considered. This is an instance that strengthens the demand for a rhetoric of violence-forming/formed language. This dimension should be expanded to the level of aesthetic reflection. Cultural stereotypes and social practices in which violence is crystallized and habituated through and in language are acted out in literature, manifested as *topoi*, aesthetically reflected, and partly functionalized in the struggle for symbolic and other capital. Therefore, the staging of linguistic violence and violent speech merits particular interest.

Injurious speech leads into a border zone of language and body. Here it is valid to analyze the combined effects of gestures, posture, and body movement, as well as the role of the voice. Next to the bodily aspects of linguistic expressions in a strict sense, the language-like executions of symbolic violence come to the fore in this perspective – perhaps as silence, or also as gestures that strengthen or undermine the words, or even display the words’ effects while doing without them altogether. Violence is not only executed bodily through language, but also suffered bodily. The party injured by linguistic violence can experience words like punches to the gut and can be placed into affective bodily states like shame or blushing. Above and beyond the bodily reality of execution, the relationship between violence and language, embedded in the context of authority, should be conceptualized as one of embodiments: as *habitus*, as the embodied precondition of the effect of performative utterances. The effects of violence are bound through linguistic expressions to the incorporation of social structures, dispositions, and relations of authority.

### **Contact and registration:**

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