



**Speech, Recognition, and the Limits of the Cogito: Subjectivity in *Doctor  
Faustus, Hamlet, and The Birthday Party***

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**Abstract**

This paper re-examines René Descartes' formulation *cogito ergo sum* by placing it in tension with dramatic representations of speech, subjectivity, and recognition. While Cartesian philosophy locates existence in interior thought, this study argues that early modern and modern drama reveal subjectivity to be constituted through speech acts embedded in structures of power. Through close textual analysis of Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, the paper demonstrates how utterance functions not merely as expression but as performative action. Drawing on J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts, Michel Foucault's account of discourse, Judith Butler's concept of performativity, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critique of voice and recognition, the analysis shows that identity depends upon the conditions under which speech is acknowledged. Faustus's contractual language binds him within theological discourse; Hamlet's theatrical speech produces truth through performance; Stanley's fragmented speech and eventual silence reveal the collapse of subjectivity under coercive discourse. The study concludes that dramatic literature challenges Cartesian interiority by articulating a relational ontology in which being is constituted through speaking and being recognized.

**Keywords: *Speech Act; Subjectivity; Dignity; Performativity; Discourse; Recognition***



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## 1. Introduction

This paper examines how dramatic literature reconfigures subjectivity by shifting its basis from thought to speech. In drama, characters are constituted through speech rather than silent thought, and their identity depends upon the recognition of utterance within structures of power.

The argument is developed through close textual analysis of key speech acts in the plays. René Descartes' formulation *cogito ergo sum*—"I think, therefore I am"—establishes a foundational model of subjectivity grounded in interior consciousness. In the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), existence is secured through the certainty of thought, independent of external validation. The Cartesian subject is thus conceived as autonomous and self-certifying, its being guaranteed by the act of cognition alone. However, such a formulation presupposes that subjectivity can be fully constituted without reference to language, social interaction, or recognition.

Twentieth-century theoretical developments have called this assumption into question by relocating subjectivity within discourse. Language is no longer understood as a transparent medium for expressing thought but as a constitutive force that shapes identity. Human beings do not merely think; they speak within systems that determine the intelligibility and legitimacy of their utterances. In this context, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question—"Can the subaltern speak?"—marks a decisive shift from cognition to voice. The issue is not whether one possesses thought, but whether one's speech can be recognized within dominant discursive structures (Spivak 28). Subjectivity, therefore, becomes contingent upon recognition rather than self-certainty.

Drama provides a particularly revealing field for examining this shift. Unlike philosophical discourse, which privileges inward reflection, theatre externalizes subjectivity through speech. Characters are constituted through what they say and how their speech is received. The stage becomes a site where language operates not merely as expression but as action, and where identity is negotiated within structures of power. Speech in drama is inherently performative: it produces effects, establishes relations, and, at times, fails to secure recognition.



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This paper argues that dramatic literature challenges Cartesian interiority by demonstrating that subjectivity is constituted through performative speech rather than silent thought. Focusing on Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, the study examines how speech acts operate within distinct discursive frameworks—respectively theological, political, and institutional—and how these frameworks determine the efficacy of utterance. Faustus's contractual declarations, Hamlet's theatrical strategies, and Stanley's linguistic disintegration collectively reveal that speech is inseparable from power and recognition.

Methodologically, the paper adopts a close reading approach grounded in speech-act theory and discourse analysis. Drawing on J. L. Austin's distinction between performative and constative utterances, it examines how specific lines in the plays enact rather than merely describe action. Michel Foucault's account of discourse is used to analyse how institutional structures regulate what counts as meaningful speech, while Judith Butler's theory of performativity informs the understanding of identity as produced through repeated linguistic acts. These theoretical perspectives are brought into direct engagement with textual analysis, ensuring that claims about subjectivity are grounded in the language of the plays themselves.

By integrating theoretical frameworks with sustained close reading, the paper demonstrates that dramatic subjectivity is fundamentally relational. Existence, in these texts, is not secured by thought alone but depends upon the conditions under which speech is recognized. In this sense, the plays collectively propose an alternative to the Cartesian cogito: being is constituted not through thinking in isolation, but through speaking within—and being acknowledged by—structures of discourse. Faustus's contractual language, Hamlet's theatrical staging of truth, and Stanley's progressive linguistic disintegration form the central analytical focus of this study.

## **2. Close Reading & Analysis**

### **2.1 Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*: Speech as Binding Act**

Faustus's invocation—

*"Come, Mephistopheles"* (1.3)

—appears as a simple imperative, yet its force lies not in intention but in ritual legitimacy. It places the most explicit dramatization of speech as performative action. The verb "come"



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functions as what J. L. Austin calls an illocutionary act: it does not describe an event but brings one into being. As Austin insists, “*the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action*” (Austin 6). Faustus’s speech thus produces presence, but only because it operates within an already authorized magical discourse.

This dependency becomes unmistakable in the contract scene:

*“I give them my soul for four-and-twenty years”* (2.1)

*“Faustus gives to thee his soul”* (2.1)

The repetition is not rhetorical excess but performative necessity. The verb “give” enacts transfer; the subject “Faustus” naming himself in the third person introduces juridical formality. The utterance resembles a legal declaration, suggesting that identity itself is constituted through institutional speech. As Austin notes, performatives succeed only under “felicity conditions”—appropriate authority, context, and recognition (14). Faustus satisfies these conditions at the moment of contract.

The most striking linguistic moment follows:

*“Consummatum est”* (2.1)

The phrase, echoing Christ’s final words (“It is finished”), is recontextualized to signify damnation rather than redemption. Here, the authority of discourse persists even as meaning is inverted. Michel Foucault’s insight is crucial: “*discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle*” (Foucault 52). Faustus does not control language; he enters into a system that precedes him.

Faustus’s confidence in linguistic power is earlier articulated:

*“A sound magician is a mighty god”* (1.1)

The phrase “sound magician” foregrounds speech itself—magic as utterance. Yet this belief collapses under the pressure of institutional limits. When Faustus later attempts repentance—

*“When I behold the heavens, then I repent”* (2.3)

*“My heart’s so hardened I cannot repent”* (2.3)

—the contradiction reveals a failure of performative consistency. The speech act of repentance cannot take effect because Faustus’s prior utterances have repositioned him outside the discursive structure that would validate it.

The final scene intensifies this failure:



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*“Ah, Christ, my Saviour, seek to save distressed Faustus’ soul!” (5.2)*

Despite its rhetorical urgency, this plea lacks efficacy. It demonstrates precisely Austin’s notion of “infelicitous” performatives—utterances that fail because conditions are not met. Faustus speaks, but his speech is no longer recognized within the relevant discourse. His tragedy lies not in thinking wrongly but in speaking within—and ultimately beyond—the structures that determine meaning.

## 2.2 Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: Speech as Theatrical Truth

Hamlet is often read as the embodiment of introspective consciousness, yet Shakespeare systematically undermines the sufficiency of thought. The soliloquy—

*“To be, or not to be—that is the question” (3.1)*

—appears philosophical, but its structure reveals that thought is already mediated by language. The infinitive “to be” functions not as essence but as verbal construct. The opposition between “to be” and “not to be” reduces existence to a linguistic binary.

The line—

*“Thus conscience does make cowards of us all” (3.1)*

—introduces a crucial shift. “Conscience” here operates as internalized discourse, suggesting that thought itself is dialogic. As Stanley Cavell argues, subjectivity depends not merely on knowing but on *acknowledgment*—a recognition that is inherently relational (*The Claim of Reason* 389). Hamlet’s hesitation emerges from this discursive multiplicity rather than from isolated reflection.

Recognizing the inadequacy of inward thought, Hamlet turns to performative speech:

*“The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King” (2.2)*

The noun “thing” is deliberately reductive; theatre becomes an instrument. The verb “catch” implies entrapment, suggesting that truth must be produced through external performance rather than internal certainty.

During the Mousetrap, Hamlet actively directs perception:

*“Give him heedful note” (3.2)*

This command positions Hamlet as both actor and director, orchestrating the conditions under which truth can emerge. When Claudius reacts, Hamlet interprets the moment:

*“What, frightened with false fire?” (3.2)*



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The phrase “false fire” is ironic; the staged illusion produces real guilt. Judith Butler’s understanding of performativity clarifies this dynamic: “Speech is always in some ways out of our control” (Butler 1). Hamlet’s theatrical speech does not reveal a pre-existing truth; it creates the conditions under which truth becomes publicly visible.

Hamlet’s self-description—

*“I am but mad north-north-west”* (2.2)

—further illustrates identity as linguistic performance. Madness is not essence but strategy, enacted through controlled speech.

In the final scene, Hamlet’s appeal—

*“Report me and my cause aright”* (5.2)

—transfers subjectivity to narrative. His identity depends on Horatio’s speech. The concluding line—

*“The rest is silence”* (5.2)

—marks not the triumph of inwardness but the limit of self-articulation. Silence here necessitates recognition by others, reinforcing the relational nature of subjectivity.

### **2.3 Pinter’s *The Birthday Party*: Speech as Domination and Silence**

Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* presents a radically destabilized linguistic world in which speech no longer guarantees subjectivity. Stanley’s initial question—

*“Who are you?”*

—appears to assert identity through relational positioning. The interrogative establishes a boundary between self and other. However, this boundary is quickly dismantled.

Goldberg and McCann’s interrogation proceeds through a barrage of questions:

*“Why did you betray us?”*

*“Why did you leave the organization?”*

*“Why did you come here?”*

The repetition of “why” creates the illusion of coherence, yet the questions lack logical connection. This fragmentation disrupts the conditions necessary for meaningful response. As Martin Esslin observes, absurd drama exposes “*the breakdown of language as a means of communication*” (Esslin 86).

Stanley’s responses begin to disintegrate:



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*“I don’t know what you mean”*

*“I... I don’t understand”*

The ellipses signal a collapse of linguistic control. Speech becomes hesitant, incomplete, and ultimately ineffective. Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of linguistic capital is relevant here: Bourdieu notes, “authorized language: the authority comes to language from outside” (Bourdieu 109). Stanley lacks the authority required to make his speech count.

Commands such as—

*“Sit down!”*

*“Stay where you are!”*

—further reinforce this hierarchy. These imperatives are performative in the most coercive sense; they do not invite response but enforce submission.

Stanley’s eventual silence is therefore not absence but the culmination of discursive exclusion. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s formulation becomes crucial: Spivak argues that subaltern speech remains structurally unheard within dominant discourse (Spivak 28). Stanley speaks, yet his speech fails to enter a framework where it can function as meaningful.

Silence, in this context, is the ultimate form of erasure. It signifies not withdrawal but the destruction of subjectivity within a system that denies recognition. Pinter thus presents the most extreme version of the paper’s central argument: when speech is stripped of recognition, being itself collapses.

### **3. Discussion**

The preceding close readings of *Doctor Faustus*, *Hamlet*, and *The Birthday Party* collectively demonstrate that subjectivity in dramatic literature is not an interior certainty but a discursive construct shaped through speech and its recognition. While Descartes’ cogito posits that existence is guaranteed by thought alone, these plays reveal that existence—particularly existence with dignity—is contingent upon communicative validation. Speech, rather than thought, emerges as the decisive medium through which identity is constituted, negotiated, and, in some cases, denied.

A useful point of departure for this discussion is J. L. Austin’s distinction between constative and performative utterances. In each of the three plays, language functions not merely as description but as action. Faustus’s declaration, as seen in the line “*I give them my soul*”, does



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not describe a decision; it enacts a binding contract. Hamlet's staging of the Mousetrap does not simply represent truth; it produces it. Stanley's interrogation, as evident in the repeated questions "Why did you betray us?", does not seek information; it dismantles identity. These examples illustrate Austin's insight that speech acts operate within specific conditions of felicity (Austin 14). However, what the plays further demonstrate is that these conditions are not neutral but structured by power.

Michel Foucault's concept of discourse provides a framework for understanding how these conditions operate. In *Doctor Faustus*, speech is governed by theological discourse. Faustus's invocation and contract are effective because they align with a system that recognizes such utterances. However, when he attempts repentance, his speech fails because he has already repositioned himself outside the discursive framework that would validate it. The failure of his final plea—"Ah, Christ, my Saviour"—is not due to lack of sincerity but due to lack of institutional recognition. His speech no longer "counts" within the system he has entered.

In *Hamlet*, the governing discourse is political rather than theological. Hamlet's soliloquies demonstrate that thought alone cannot produce action. His famous hesitation is not merely psychological but discursive; he lacks a legitimate framework within which his speech can be recognized as justifiable action. The Mousetrap becomes necessary precisely because private knowledge is insufficient. Truth must be externalized and made visible within a public arena. When Claudius reacts, the truth of the murder is no longer a matter of thought but of recognized performance. Hamlet's identity as avenger emerges not from cognition but from successfully staging a speech act that compels acknowledgment.

Pinter's *The Birthday Party* presents a more modern and unsettling version of this dynamic. Here, discourse operates as an instrument of control rather than recognition. Goldberg and McCann's interrogation does not seek truth; it produces disorientation. Their questions are not logically structured, and this lack of coherence is precisely what undermines Stanley's ability to respond. Language becomes a mechanism of domination, demonstrating Foucault's claim that discourse is both productive and repressive. Stanley's eventual silence is not simply a psychological collapse but a discursive erasure. He is denied the conditions under which speech could constitute him as a subject.



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Judith Butler's theory of performativity further clarifies the implications of these examples. Butler argues that identity is not an inherent essence but a product of repeated linguistic acts. She insists that subject formation is inseparable from the repeated norms governing speech and social intelligibility (Butler 1–3). In this sense, Faustus, Hamlet, and Stanley can be understood as performing different modes of subjectivity. Faustus performs the role of the ambitious scholar through rhetorical mastery, yet this performance ultimately binds him within a system that exceeds his control. Hamlet performs madness as a strategic identity, demonstrating that subjectivity can be manipulated through language. Stanley, however, is prevented from performing identity; his speech is disrupted to the point where repetition—and therefore subjectivity—becomes impossible.

This distinction highlights a crucial point: subjectivity depends not merely on the ability to speak but on the ability to sustain speech within recognizable frameworks. Butler's emphasis on repetition suggests that identity requires continuity, yet Pinter's play demonstrates how such continuity can be forcibly interrupted. Stanley's fragmented speech—"I... I don't understand"—reveals a breakdown in the iterative process through which identity is produced. Without the capacity to repeat and stabilize linguistic acts, subjectivity collapses.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's analysis of subalternity provides a powerful lens through which to interpret Stanley's condition. Spivak argues that the subaltern is not simply silent but structurally unheard. The problem is not the absence of speech but the absence of recognition. Stanley's situation exemplifies this dynamic. He speaks, but his speech is rendered meaningless within the discursive framework imposed by Goldberg and McCann. His eventual silence is therefore not a failure of expression but the result of systematic exclusion. In this sense, Stanley becomes a modern embodiment of the subaltern subject, whose voice cannot be acknowledged within dominant structures.

Stanley Cavell's concept of acknowledgment further deepens this analysis. Cavell distinguishes between knowing and acknowledging, arguing that subjectivity depends upon the latter (Cavell 389). One may know that another exists, but acknowledgment requires recognizing them as a subject. In all three plays, the failure or success of subjectivity hinges on acknowledgment. Faustus is acknowledged by the demonic forces he invokes, but not by the divine authority he ultimately appeals to. Hamlet seeks acknowledgment from both the court and



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Horatio, understanding that his identity depends upon how his story is told. Stanley, by contrast, is systematically denied acknowledgment, resulting in the collapse of his subjectivity.

Pierre Bourdieu's notion of linguistic capital provides an additional dimension to this discussion. Language, for Bourdieu, is not merely a medium of communication but a form of symbolic power (Bourdieu 37). The ability to speak effectively depends upon one's position within a social hierarchy. Faustus initially possesses linguistic authority as a scholar, yet this authority becomes ineffective within the theological system he engages. Hamlet's rhetorical skill allows him to manipulate perception, yet he struggles to translate this skill into legitimate action. Stanley, lacking any form of linguistic capital within the imposed system, is rendered powerless.

The comparative analysis of these plays thus reveals a progression in the relationship between speech and subjectivity. In Marlowe, speech retains a degree of metaphysical potency; it can summon demons and bind souls. In Shakespeare, speech becomes more explicitly theatrical and political, functioning as a means of producing truth within a corrupt system. In Pinter, speech is stripped of its constructive potential and becomes a tool of domination. This progression reflects a broader historical shift from a belief in the power of language to a recognition of its vulnerability within structures of power.

At the same time, the plays share a common insight: subjectivity is relational. It emerges not from isolated thought but from interaction within discursive frameworks. Descartes' cogito assumes that the subject can exist independently of others, yet dramatic literature consistently demonstrates that existence with dignity requires recognition. Thought may guarantee a minimal form of existence, but it cannot secure identity within a social world.

This insight has significant implications for understanding dignity. Dignity is not an inherent attribute but a relational achievement. It depends upon the ability to speak in a way that is recognized and validated by others. Faustus's final pleas fail to secure dignity because they are not acknowledged within the relevant discourse. Hamlet's dignity is preserved through narrative, as Horatio is entrusted with telling his story. Stanley's dignity is destroyed through the denial of recognition.

Thus, the plays collectively challenge the Cartesian assumption that subjectivity is grounded in interiority. Instead, they propose a performative ontology in which being is constituted through speech and its reception. The shift from "I think, therefore I am" to "I speak



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and am heard, therefore I am” is not merely philosophical but ethical. It emphasizes the responsibility of listeners as well as speakers. Recognition becomes a shared act, one that determines whether speech can function as the basis of subjectivity.

In conclusion, the comparative analysis of *Doctor Faustus*, *Hamlet*, and *The Birthday Party* demonstrates that dramatic literature provides a powerful critique of Cartesian subjectivity. By foregrounding speech as the medium of identity, these plays reveal the limitations of inward models of existence and highlight the importance of recognition within social and institutional frameworks. Subjectivity, in this context, is not a given but an achievement—one that depends upon the fragile and contested process of speaking and being heard.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that dramatic literature challenges Cartesian subjectivity by foregrounding speech as the basis of identity. Through close analysis of *Doctor Faustus*, *Hamlet*, and *The Birthday Party*, it becomes evident that existence is not secured by thought alone but by communicative recognition. Faustus’s failed performatives, Hamlet’s theatrical truth, and Stanley’s silence demonstrate that subjectivity depends upon the recognition of speech within structures of power.

Faustus’s downfall reveals the binding power of language, Hamlet’s journey highlights the necessity of performative speech, and Stanley’s silence exposes the consequences of discursive exclusion. Together, these works redefine subjectivity as relational and performative. The questions around identity are those bound up with dignity and, thus, the analysis supports the formulation that to exist with dignity is not merely to think, but to speak—and to be heard.

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