

Deliberating Articulation: A Postmodern Appropriation

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Abstract

Articulation theory is a recent phenomenon which has gained currency in the recent times for the reasons which can fairly be attributed to the zeitgeist. Articulation, which might simply mean “to express” and which, in sociological terms would mean appropriation of certain forms and practices gets extended and convoluted as it enters the postmodern domain. Articulation as a concept walks a tight rope as within its broad rubric it subsumes all expressions and manifestations. The current paper tries to deliberate upon the conception of articulation by conceptualising the distinction between deliberate articulations and unconscious articulations. As it does, the paper delves into the Freudian theory of Unconscious which holds the fundamental problems for such a dyad by explicating unconscious articulations like ‘bundle actions’ and ‘Freudian slips’ which are more expressive than conscious attempts. The paper, thus, eventually looks at the postmodern appropriation of the concept of articulation which transcends words as well as linguistic and paralinguistic mediums. It couches the discourse of articulation within the embryo of sublime, the most powerful postmodern force, which defines postmodernism more prominently as opposed to words and artifacts. The paper, as it brings the argument home keeps the debate open for all essential deliberations vis-à-vis articulation and tries to necessitate the dialogue further.

Keywords: *Articulation, Postmodernism, Unconscious, Freud, Sublime*

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Articulation theory is a recent phenomenon which has gained currency in the recent times for the reasons which can fairly be attributed to the zeitgeist. Articulation, which might simply mean “to express” and which in sociological terms would mean appropriation of certain forms and practices gets extended and convoluted as it enters the postmodern domain. The term might have emerged from the works of Antonio Gramsci and then further developed or appropriated by theorists like Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe and Stuart Hall, but the idea of articulation is not new to the readers but in the recent times, it has heralded a discourse which invites a dialogue. Articulation theory extends the idea of articulation further wherein it not only jumps the semiotic and semantic domains but it also counter-questions the very idea of articulation. And as Humboldt (1999) writes,

The articulated sound, the foundation and essence of all speech is extorted by man from his physical organs through an impulse of his soul; and the animal would be able to do likewise, if it were animated by the same urge. (p. 23)

Humboldt, in talking about articulation talks about language which is the basis of articulation and something which is “Already in its first and most indispensable elements [...] is so utterly and exclusively rooted in man’s spiritual nature, that its permeation is sufficient, though necessary, to transform the animal sound into the articulated one” (p. 24). Articulation happens through the linguistic medium, but it transcends the linguistic domain and happens otherwise through the medium of sound, actions, and expressions as well. A work of literature qualifies as the articulation of the author’s ideas and mind; likewise, a painting, a piece of music and a sculpture also qualify as articulation of the artist’s state of mind. Any speech or action by a person qualifies as articulation, which proposes the fundamental problem of defining the very concept. Humboldt, when talking about articulation says that it is more the will and power to articulate than the medium, which may be multifarious. Humboldt alludes to deaf and dumb people who despite being at loss of senses articulate and express their ideas and views and he thus writes,

All access by ear is closed to them, but they learn to understand what is said by the movement of the speaker’s vocal organs, and from writing, whose essence already consists wholly of articulation; and they speak themselves, when guided as to the position and motion of their vocal organs. (p. 32)

Humboldt, thus, talks about the power of articulation or the desire to express vis-à-vis the medium wherein the former supersedes. And hence it is the intent to articulate rather than the medium (linguistic as well as the paralinguistic) which gains supremacy in this discourse.

One could deduce from here that the power to express through words, sound, actions or expressions could come under the broad rubric of articulation. Irrespective of the medium, it is the latent desire which gets prominence in the discourse of articulation and the idea gets enunciated herewith. But the very idea that the term escapes any straitjacketing might take one into the reductionist logic of anything and everything being articulation. One could look at a plethora of definitions which are trying to articulate the very idea of articulation. Lawrence Grossberg (1986) for example defines articulation as

the production of identity on top of differences, of unities out of fragments, of structures across practices. Articulation links this practice to that effect, this text to that meaning, this meaning to that reality, this experience to those politics. And these links are themselves articulated into larger structures, etc. (p. 52)

Hall, in defining articulation gives a skeptical view of the idea wherein the uniform connection makes sense under certain conditions, and it is something which might not be an absolute or certain which holds true for all times. As he avers:

...the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made? The so-called 'unity' of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary 'belongingness.' The 'unity' which matters is a linkage between the articulated discourse and the social forces with which it can, under certain historical conditions, but need not necessarily, be connected. (p. 78)

Several other theorists and critics have tried to give a well formulated and encapsulating definition to articulation, but the idea still holds conceptual, foundational problems for the readers. Bruno Latour in his book, *Pandora's*

Deliberating Articulation: A Postmodern Appropriation

Hope (1999) tries to ascribe another definition to articulation which is rather complex in its right and fogs the very concept. According to one of the critics, it is a sort of definition that needs a lot of other definitions. Latour writes of articulation:

Like translation, this term occupies the position left empty by the dichotomy between the object and the subject or the external world and the mind. Articulation is not a property of human speech but an ontological property of the universe. The question is no longer whether or not statements refer to state of affairs, but only whether or not propositions are well articulated. (p. 303)

All these definitions open new horizons from where it becomes an endless play of signification and interpretation vis-à-vis articulation. Where do we draw the line then? What would quintessentially be articulation and what would escape the idea of articulation which covers almost everything from words to sounds to actions and any other kind of expression. One could perhaps differentiate the thoughts, actions, sounds and expressions which are a conscious and deliberate attempt of the human mind vis-à-vis other expressions which are unconscious. Humboldt connects the idea of articulation to the power of mind per se which attaches a kind of conscious deliberate leveling to it. Humboldt writes that “Articulation rests upon the power of mind over the vocal organs...” (p. 36). When privileging the mind, the idea of deliberateness becomes pertinent in the understanding of articulation. A deliberate uttering, thus, would qualify as articulation and something which is not deliberate might not fall under the ever so broad rubric of articulation. An accidental utterance, sound, expression or action is not immediately the concern and result of a conscious mind, and the action thus might not qualify as articulation if we may consider it so. An accidental action, utterance might not be an articulation of the person’s state of mind, but this point can be further contradicted by Freudian theory of psychoanalysis wherein prominence is given to the unconscious actions rather than the conscious, deliberate actions as they express the state of mind of a person more piercingly than any conscious action. A Freudian slip thus would very well be considered and read as an articulation as it reveals more about the human mind. This understanding furthers the entire discourse of articulation wherein conscious and unconscious actions get complexly intertwined. As Zaria Gorvett writes in a 2017 BBC article:

Ah, the Freudian slip. There are the things you want to say, the things you could get away with saying and the things it would be utterly disastrous to utter – which, invariably, are what actually comes out of your mouth. It's the greatest fear of any public speaker. But what really causes these errors? And do they have any hidden meaning?

Otherwise known as parapraxis, these verbal stumbling could reveal forbidden urges – such as sex and swearing – which were usually locked safely within the unconscious mind. Verbal errors aren't random at all, but puzzles to be decoded. (p. 1)

An unconscious bundle action as explicated by Freudian framework as well as a conscious deliberate actions and utterances would thus qualify as articulation, but a further distinction can be drawn between an action which is unconscious that reveals more about our repressed desires and something completely accidental and incidental which might have no relation with the human mind (conscious as well as unconscious), whatsoever. One could explain this idea through a fictional example: one could imagine an actor in the middle of a performance on stage who deliberately falls on the stage owing to a sequence in the play and another person walking on a street who 'accidently' stumbles on a boulder and falls. 'Accident' being the keyword here, one notices that the two incidents cannot be equated since former was a deliberate, conscious action to express something (to act) whereas the latter was a mere accident. The former incident is an 'articulation' of a certain act by the actor through his body whereas the latter corresponds to no 'articulation' of any kind. Therefore, when something is uttered accidently i.e., a sound/action happens accidently with the articulator not being aware of it, that might not qualify as articulation since the idea of articulation upholds some power and agency and it cannot be undermined by making anything and everything qualify as articulation.

The dyad can be constructed as deliberate/accidental vis-à-vis articulation but such a straitjacketing or pinning down would raise questions and queries in a postmodern world which is plagued by multiplicity and escapes all kinds of definitional parameters. Hall says that "Postmodernism is the biggest success story going" (p. 222) primarily because all the subjective and diverse ideas come into play under postmodernism and differences are celebrated as much as they are acknowledged. Articulation in a postmodern world then becomes

Deliberating Articulation: A Postmodern Appropriation

as much about in-articulation as much as it is about articulation. The very idea of something which cannot be articulated puts us at the center of postmodern debate wherein all signification and meaning breaks loose. A deliberate attempt then to articulate something through any medium, linguistic as well as paralinguistic might fail when the representation per se escapes the cognitive apparatus. Jean Francois Lyotard, the most notorious of postmodern thinkers writes that postmodern manifests itself through sublime rather than words or artifacts. And in enunciating the postmodern discourse he writes:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. (1984, p. 75)

Lyotard makes a case for sublime and in defining the very idea of sublime, Lyotard goes back to Immanuel Kant and his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) wherein Kant defines Sublime as this peculiar amalgamation of fear and pleasure which in its entirety escapes representation and thus is inarticulate-able. “The sublime feeling is therefore a kind of ‘rapid alternation’ between the fear of the overwhelming and the peculiar pleasure of seeing that overwhelming overwhelmed” (Branco, 2022, p. 1). The very idea of something which cannot be articulated or represented gets fore-grounded in postmodern times because as Lyotard says, the cognitive apparatus conceives but fails to represent and this failure primarily becomes the most explicit feature of sublime wherein the deliberate attempt at articulation fails and renders the very idea of articulation awry in some sense. If that be the case, the very idea of re-thinking articulation gets reiterated in postmodern times wherein the play of representation or articulation transcends the very mediums through which one can articulate and rests and rejoices in the unrepresentability. To explain the idea further, Lyotard gives the example of early Malevich whose ‘White on White’ makes an excellent case. Kazimir Malevich was a Russian Avant-Garde artist, one of the key figures of Suprematism and art theorist who made Suprematist Composition, “White on White” in 1918 which was abstract oil on canvas painting:

Part of a series of “white on white” works begun by Malevich in 1916, the

work depicts a white square, portrayed off centre and at an angle on a ground which is also a white square of a slightly warmer tone. The work measures 79.5 by 79.5 centimetres (31.3 in × 31.3 in). Malevich dispenses with most of the characteristics of representational art, with no sense of colour, depth, or volume, leaving a simple monochrome geometrical shape, not precisely symmetrical, with imprecisely defined boundaries. Although the artwork is stripped of most detail, brush strokes are evident in this painting and the artist tried to make it look as if the tilted square is coming out of the canvas. Malevich intended the painting to evoke a feeling of floating, with the colour white symbolising infinity, and the slight tilt of the square suggesting movement. (Wikipedia, para. 2)

Various ideas and theories related to this work of art suggest that the painter wished to articulate something immense, “a feeling of floating” (Branco, 2022, p. 1) and yet the literal understanding of the work would make a case for the fact that the artist has stripped the artwork to nothing. Invoking a strong feeling through nothing which has latent ideas embedded in it is what calls for the aesthetic of sublime. Sublime is contained in a very subjective experience determined by a certain relationship between the power of reason and the power of imagination. Kantian definition or enunciation of these aesthetics happens primarily through the idea of unavailability and therefore Malevich’s art work becomes a prime example. Aesthetic judgment is referred to a form that is precisely not a conceptual form imposing its law to the manifold of sensation. And therefore, when Lyotard develops this idea he also takes recourse in paralinguistic elements and seems to say that “we know the world through language but it cannot be reduced to language” (1984, p. 79). The concept of articulation thus gets challenged and redefined in the postmodern times wherein no straitjacketing is possible, and no definition can fully encapsulate the concept, and it flows freely challenging not just the intention, conscious or otherwise but also the medium through which one tries to articulate as well as what can and cannot be articulated. Linda Hutcheon (2014) called postmodern “a contradictory enterprise” in her work, *The Politics of Postmodernism* and the concepts which come into contact with the postmodern become equally contradictory and un-definable. Postmodernism not only allows deliberations around articulation, but it also challenges the very plinth of it. When the very idea contests with the discourse of sublime, a newfound understanding of

Deliberating Articulation: A Postmodern Appropriation

it springs forth that allows for a cessation of words, excess of which almost always overwhelms. As many debates and expressions as postmodernism allows at the heart of it, the other side of postmodernism also aspires towards an aesthetic which articulates with a sense of profound numbness, that is enchanting. It deliberately asks and invests in the aesthetic of sublime as it recognizes the covert power of the discourse. Lyotard necessarily borrows from Kant because it is in Kant that the idea is foregrounded in a manner that allows for a postmodern appropriation of it. When this powerful discourse shakes hands with the discourse of articulation in the postmodern times, it not only broadens the horizon for both but also challenges the literary expressions. Sublime allows for a rendering of the concept which is replete with multiplicity but also aspires towards a wholesomeness that is contradictory. And in the context of articulation, the postmodern idea is of going beyond the very idea of representation and rendering it in a space where there is a free play not only of the idea of articulation through various linguistic and paralinguistic mediums but also an internal play of articulation and what cannot be articulated.

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Deliberating Articulation: A Postmodern Appropriation

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