Performativity: Model and meaning in a post-Austinian frame

Michael Strand [iD]
Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, USA

Samantha Leonard
Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA, USA

Abstract

This article proposes a post-Austinian approach to performativity by drawing from Peircean semeiotics. The argument proceeds on three fronts. First, we establish how the performativity approach of John L. Austin has served as a model case for performativity research, but the problems of this are currently being seen in the fragmentation and nominalism of the field. Second, we argue that the problem with Austin's 'doing things with words' approach to performativity is that it cannot account for performativity on its own terms as *sui generis*. Third, using Peircean semeiotics, we reconstruct certain post-Austinian tendencies in performativity research and propose a formal model of performativity that draws especially from what Peirce called an Immediate interpretant. We conclude the article by discussing three distinct performativities not related by a model case but as examples of the same objective possibility.

Introduction

The concept of performativity has been wildly successful over its relatively brief history, at least judging by some basic quantitative measures. While the word 'performativity' does not seem to have existed in the English language in any wide use prior to the late

Corresponding author:
Michael Strand, Department of Sociology, Brandeis University, 415 South Street, Waltham, MA 02453, USA.
Email: mstrand@brandeis.edu

1970s, its usage has increased immensely over that time.[1] In social science, the story is the same and not unrelated. A quick social science database search reveals over 1200 articles published on 'performativity' since 2020.[2] Increasingly, the things that have been rendered 'performative' is expansive and encompassing: from gender performativity in rural northern Ghana (Akurugu, 2021), to the performativity of ethics (Kerr et al., 2020), disability performativity (Kasnitz, 2020), theory performativity (Bowden et al., 2021), the performativity of participatory methods (Gomez & Criado, 2021) and the performativity of trap music (Miles, 2020). But as studies of proliferate, has the research has outrun the theory? The danger of its popularity has left some with a performativity hangover. Is it simply a vague, overextended version of social construction (Kuorikoski & Pöyhönen, 2012)? Has it 'lost its punch' (Hirschman, 2015)? This article attempts to reground performativity and provide it with a different orientation, one less inclined, it is hoped, towards continued fragmentation into multiple 'performativities' at the threat of simply becoming a nominal designation (Reed, 2020, p. 74). To do so, we propose that performativity leave its early mentor behind, that it become post-Austinian and that it be modeled *semeiotically*.[3]

   To claim the research has outrun the *theory* is not exactly accurate; performativity research outruns what we will argue is the 'model case' (Krause, 2021) of performativity inherited from the mid-century philosopher John L. Austin. Rather than develop a new theory of performativity, or provide another case of it, this article reconstructs a model beyond Austin's 'doing things with words' approach using semeiotic concepts from Charles Sanders Peirce. Rarely have semeiotics and performativity been put into conversation (though see Habermas, 1995), even though both transcend disciplinary thought; seemingly no field across the social science and humanities has been left untouched by either of them.

   We therefore start by accounting for the extended influence of Austin, before reconstructing a post-Austinian model drawing from prominent performativity theorists and adding key elements from semeiotics. We then describe three different performativities, seemingly unrelated to each other. They *are* related, we argue, but not because they share the Austinian model case. As we conclude, a semeiotic way to avoid nominalism is to say that different performativities are related when they share the same 'objective possibility'.[4]

Austin and beyond

J. L. Austin and modelling performativity

What Austin argues in his printed lectures *How to Do Things With Words* (1962 [1955]) and in his essays from the late 1950s, especially 'Performative-Utterances' (1979 [1961]) and 'Performatif-Constantif' (1963 [1958]) is generally considered to be the *discovery* of performativity. Austin, who died in 1961, would likely be surprised by his contemporary reputation. He appears to have known little or nothing of the various fields in which his arguments have persisted the longest. Austin's approach was originally developed in the context of post-war Oxford and the development of 'ordinary language philosophy' as a reaction against logical positivism using a synthesis of Wittgenstein's

late philosophy and the Socratic method. Less well known is how indebted Austin's approach is to American pragmatism (Rowe, 2023, pp. 139, 544). Fittingly, the occasion on which Austin first presents performativity were the 'William James Lectures' he gave at Harvard in the winter of 1955. Austin deliberately entitled his lectures 'How to *Do* Things With Words' in direct homage to James, who had a large influence on him (Rowe, 2023, pp. 561–562).

Starting with these lectures, Austin seems to have had a large, if diffuse influence on American intellectual life.[5] In philosophy, the departments at Harvard and UC-Berkeley, and prominent figures like Stanley Cavell and John Searle, took Austin and ordinary language philosophy seriously. Searle (1969) codified performativity within his 'speech act theory'. If this were the only line of influence, however, performativity would likely have remained entirely insular to Anglophone philosophy, and Austin would be only a minor curiosity for social theorists today, if he were discussed at all.

Despite Searle's attempt at housekeeping (see Moati, 2014), engagement with Austin's performativity claims by high profile post-structuralists like Jacques Derrida (1977[1971]) made Austin relevant to wide-ranging discussions in metaphysics, gender and cultural studies, setting the stage for Judith Butler's (1990) influential performative approach to gender. A different influence runs though Wittgenstein (Bloor, 1983) and comes from the Edinburgh science studies scholar Barry Barnes (1983, 1988). His approach to 'bootstrapped induction', which he frames (1983, p. 526) using Austin, has proven seminal for performativity in contemporary economic sociology (MacKenzie, 2006) and adjacent applications (Healy, 2015). Pierre Bourdieu (1991) engages extensively with Austin to help designate the social effects of 'symbolic power' ranging far beyond language use. Meanwhile, actor–network theory's (ANT) version of performativity might seem to be an exception, as it starts, if anywhere, with Bruno Latour's (Strum & Latour, 1987) attempt to shift 'the social' from its implicitly (Durkheimian) 'ostensive' meaning to a (more Tardean) 'performative' meaning. He makes no mention of Austin. This provides the basis for Michel Callon's (2007) version of performativity, and other ANT and ANT-adjacent approaches that centre non-human actors and technology (Law & Singleton, 2000). Nevertheless, Callon (2007) still pays homage to Austin, arguing that the ordinary language philosopher was the first to envision the impossibility of separating 'language from pragmatics'. Callon suggests that his own version of performativity picks up that mantle.

Thus, while performativity scholarship finds multiple centres of gravity, yet the influence of Austin remains persistent across all of them. Why has predecessor selection in the study of performativity focused so heavily on him?[6] It might be because, to use Michael Guggenheim and Monika Krause's suggestive concept, Austin provides performativity with a 'model system' or 'model case', as his approach stands as an '[exemplar] for a specific kind' process, and thus serves as must-know knowledge capital, receiving a 'disproportionate amount of attention' (Guggenheim & Krause, 2012, p. 114). The Austinian (1962 [1955], pp. 5–7) image of speaking something into existence, like a marriage, establishes performativity's working order, in this regard, which according to philosophers of science like Mary Morgan and Margaret Morrison (1999), whom Guggenheim and Krause reference, is what models do in scientific research: they 'mediate' between and are 'autonomous' from both theory and data.

Table 1. Comparing Austinian and post-Austinian performativity.

Model elements	Austinian	Post-Austinian
Working order	Enunciative creation	Creation through semiosis
What *does* performativity?	*Ex nihilo* invention	Immediate interpretant
Source of creativity	Fiat imposition within felicity conditions	Self-evidence
Source of duration	Originary	Repetition

In the multiple strains of performativity listed above, we will find a whole host of additional factors (materiality, technology, ceremony, clothing, theatre and, of course, power) thrown into the performative soup. Typically, we will find mention of the Austinian model case of performative utterances, but we will also, and in some sense more primarily, find ingredients drawn from theorists and philosophers not specifically theorizing performativity, like Jacques Lacan and his concept of 'symbolic order' (see Butler, 1990, pp. 55–56) or ideas like 'constitutive power' that trace back to figures like Carl Schmitt.[7] As opposed to being rooted entirely in a 'bottom-up' model case, then, performativity *also* reflects 'top-down' modelling that uses 'media expressly removed from any particular data' (or at least uses data less directly about performativity) (Krause, 2021, p. 29). This tension between the model case and a formal model could explain why performativity strikes many as a theoretically dense conversation torn between social science and philosophy (see Fouweather & Bosma, 2021). It might also contribute to the semantic discord about performativity. Some scholars remark upon the popularity of 'performativity', but 'refrain from using it' as they find it to be more a 'vague slogan than a useful analytical tool' (Kuorikoski & Pöyhönen, 2012, p. 202). Those who do use it sometimes try to prevent semantic confusion by making a provisional distinction between what 'performativity' will mean and what it will not mean for their study (see Healy, 2015, p. 181, note 3; Reed, 2019, p. 361, note 37). Some have pointed out how this results in a frustrating heteroglossia of purportedly unrelated 'performativities' (Reed, 2020, pp. 74ff.).

From Austinian to post-Austinian performativity

What if, rather than bracket new performativities under an increasingly nominal 'performativity' label, we find a way to become post-Austinian? Our suggestion is that performativity resembles a remotely coherent research paradigm mostly because of Austin's model case. To move past him would not entail leaving 'doing things with words' behind for good, or even forbid the profusion of performativities; but it would require an ascent above (or behind) Austinian performativity with clearer recognition of a formal model rather than a model case.

What difference would it make if semeiotics were enlisted for the purpose? Table 1 attempts to identify different points of distinction between Austinian performativity and what we reconstruct and develop below as post-Austinian performativity. For the

Austinian model case, performativity concerns *enunciative creation*, which we can specify as follows.

Austin (1962 [1955], p. 110, 1979 [1961]) divides performativity into three separate aspects, which he calls the *locutionary, illocutionary* and *perlocutionary*. For Austin, the locutionary refers to 'uttering a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference', while the perlocutionary refers to 'what we bring about or achieve by saying something'. The mystery comes with illocution as a kind of mediator between locution and perlocution, and which Austin (1962 [1955], p. 120) associates with 'having a certain force'. In his early formulation, Austin makes a series of distinctions to discern what is performative and what is not. Between 'constative' utterances and 'performative' utterances (1962 [1955], pp. 3ff., 46–47), the former consists of statements that can be either true or false ('The weather is sunny outside'), while the latter consists of doing something by saying something ('I will meet you downtown at 3 pm today'). Austin concedes this distinction is ultimately not sustainable (1962 [1955], p. 94), and so he replaces it with locution, illocution and perlocution to capture the performative potential of *any* utterance. This reformulation draws attention away from the actual content of what is said. Performativity comes to rest on the mystery of illocution, which Austin demonstrates (1962 [1955], p. 98) in 'such acts as promising' ('I promise I will finish the paper by Monday'). The obligation generated by the statement binds an actor to a future course of action.

To focus on illocutionary force makes performativity a function of disambiguated word use, so that the words enunciated can be mirrored in action. This is particularly apparent as the main differences between performative utterances that Austin catalogues involve how explicit, inexplicit or implicit they are (see Austin, 1962 [1955], p. 83). Austin's exemplary model, then, directs attention to finding the equivalent of an enunciative creation, then, is retrievable from the explicitness offered by a theory and its continuation in the action that 'makes it true', or a cultural interpretation, with a semantically accessible (rather than tacit) meaning, that is performatively enacted. In these instances, performativity happens when meaning is, likewise, clearly retrievable from an equivalent to Austin's 'words' (whether, in this case, it be a theory or cultural object like a worldview), and this assumes the form of an interpretation when enacted. The problem, as we will claim below, is that this presumes *continued* interpretation and that presumption is difficult to reconcile with how performativity is creative when set alongside other models of creativity like problem-solving and communicative action.

Part of the appeal of performativity is that it offers a way to explain instances of unanticipated creation, which draws our attention to those factors that, despite the variables that would seem to prevent them from being creative, remain active nonetheless. Yet Austin's model cannot account for *ex nihilo* creation in a way that does not reduce performativity to ancillary factors like power or interactional norms. As Austin (1962 [1955], pp. 89, 136–137) suggests, a performative utterance is closely analogous to a fiat statement ('I define X as Y') uttered by someone who has authority by convention.[8] Authoritative speech generates an obligation in the act of definition (Austin 1979 [1961], p. 235ff.). This is important for perlocution because it creates an expectation of sanctions that will apply from contradicting the performative utterance. We must get a divorce, for example, should we no longer wish to be married after having been 'pronounced'

married. The act of promising arranges the future in such a way that even if we forget what we promised, forgetting still counts as perlocution. Austin (1962 [1955], pp. 17ff., 130ff.) proposes 'felicity conditions' that could be responsible for activating this illocutionary force, and later speech act theory follows his lead; but contemporary performativity research pivots away from the Austinian exemplar in this particular regard, as attention shifts from explaining what makes particular speech acts unique towards what makes certain institutions either themselves performative or highly productive of performative effects.[9] Such an approach conjures up a problematic image; however, because like Austin's speech act theory, it cannot account for 'felicity conditions' *sui generis*. Erving Goffman (1983), in a posthumous publication, makes an adjacent claim by bringing Austin's felicity conditions into 'the interaction order'. In Goffman's (1983, p. 25) words, felicity conditions get 'from what an individual says to what that individual means'. Yet, this also means that performative utterances are essentially linked to the interaction order as their necessary condition.

As independent from theory and data, models are used to 'explore the implications of theories in concrete situations', as they provide a basic sense of working order (Morgan & Morrison, 1999, p. 19). But to use Austin in this way comes with a cost. Arguably the biggest pitfall of Austinian performativity is that it lacks a clear sense of the temporality or duration of performativity, which means it places far too much emphasis on what we might call the 'originary' moment (e.g. when a couple is declared married). Later theorists (Butler, 1990, p. 185) have emphasized repetition as the temporal process underlying performativity. Our suggestion is this: performativity always occurs in complicated settings, but to draw a contrast between performativity and external (unnecessary) conditions like power or interactional conventions requires a way of modelling performativity *on its own terms*. Performative action must become more akin to habit, in this revised version, that involves a kind of self-evidence, or what is a *limit* or even a complete *stop* of interpretation. This may (and often does) include fear of punishment for breaking rules sanctioned by power or 'infelicity' from breaking the codes of the interaction order. The point, however, is that performativity can still happen even in cases where none of this is found.

Semiosis and performativity

If the shortcomings of Austinian performativity make a post-Austinian version of performativity attractive, how can a model of performativity offer a simplification and approximation to performativity as a *sui generis* phenomenon, with its own necessary conditions, but not leave it so restrictive that it cannot capture the sense in which performativity has a general, rather than isolated or exceptional, significance in social life (see Abbott, 2016, p. 31; Boltanski, 2011, p. 133; Graeber, 2012)? Semeiotics is meant to provide a generalized vocabulary for understanding signification of every sort (Halton, 2004; Forster, 2011). This is one reason why it can be useful for modelling performativity. Another reason, and appealing more to specificity than generality, is that semeiotics gives performativity reference classes, and thus a sense for what *could* be performative but is not, and what something that is performative could *otherwise* be. It specifies how power and interactional conventions are sufficient but not necessary for performativity.

For Peirce, a sign is something that can represent something (its object) to another sign (its interpretant). This means that for a sign to function as a sign requires an interpretant that can itself be interpreted. In the process of interpretation, a sign becomes more determinate; but to remain a sign it can never be *completely* determinate (Halton, 2004). This means that the essential continuity of signs, or the process of semiosis, is not incompatible with limiting, channelling or even stopping interpretation.[10]

All of this is built into Peirce's theory of perception, as it features three irreducible layers, each of which indicates how many distinct elements are included (Forster, 2011). Firstness is the percept itself in a kind of 'basic' state, the state of pure possibility or 'chance' in Peirce's terms. Secondness includes the perceptual judgment of an interpretant that perceives and experiences an object. Thirdness is triadic, involving an object, the interpretant and a sign. Putting this all together, Peirce arrives at the conclusion that no object bears an inherent meaning, but rather the meaning that any object has conveys something about its interpretant and the habits of thought and action available to experience it. What we perceive forces itself upon us as an object; but this does not mean it has authority to change what it will signify to us.

That Peirce distinguishes these three layers does not mean that something like complete 'firstness' is ever a possibility. Our experience is defined by 'thirdness' (Bernstein, 2010, chapter 1). Nevertheless, by attending to all three, it becomes clear that semeiotics is a *process* and not a static formation. This becomes particularly apparent when Peirce augments his classic semeiotic triad to identify the following distinct kinds of signification:

> But it is necessary to distinguish the Immediate Object, or the Object as the Sign represents it, from the Dynamical Object, or really efficient but not immediately present Object. It is likewise requisite to distinguish the Immediate Interpretant, i.e. the Interpretant represented or signified in the Sign, from the Dynamic Interpretant, or effect actually produced on the mind by the Sign; and both of these from the Normal Interpretant, or effect that would be produced on the mind by the Sign after sufficient development of thought. (1998 [1906–1908], p. 482)

As Peirce indicates, there are at least three different types of Interpretant and Object, all of which can be augmented by differences in signs.[11] For our purposes, it is the Immediate interpretant that is most important for performativity, as here an Object *inheres* in the sign; it is *Immediate* (e.g. 'unmediated') in that sense. When Peirce refers to the 'Dynamic Interpretant', he makes the important point that Objects that signify Immediately are not contingent on whatever they might 'bring to mind'. It is truer to say that when they signify Immediately they simply *are*, with their existence not 'given a second thought' and not open to this secondary layer of interpretation. *Self-evidence* becomes the experiential effect of Immediate signification, and its practical consequence can be conveyed as establishing what is the case. This conveys a kind of signification that, while it features 'thirdness', is bound to something in perception that does not trigger further interpretation. If Immediacy means anything on these terms, then it means that which does not *become* Dynamic or Normal within the process of interpretation (Peirce, 1998 [1906], p. 388).

To draw the contrast: the Dynamic and Normal interpretant are not called forth entirely by the sign itself. Rather, practical efficacy in the world or what a community would approve of take precedence. Only the Immediate interpretant is called forth by the sign itself, and thus it can be *creative* through semiosis in a different way than the creativity of the Dynamic or Normal interpretant. Signification for the Normal interpretant is tied to the capacity of signs to give and create assent within a community. For the Dynamic interpretant, signification is tied to a reduced sense of indeterminacy or doubt. The Immediate interpretant is, by contrast, one for whom signification is *not* contingent upon an external, and potentially chancy, object or one that needs to find the agreement of a community. Signs are forged, rather, through an interpretation that cannot be dispensed with as useless or wrong.

Peirce gives a basic example of these differences, and much like the declaration of marriage provides a kind of prototype for Austin (1962 [1955], pp. 5–6), the following scenario can provide a sort of basic demonstration of performativity. Suppose, Peirce asks us to imagine, we wake up in the morning and ask our partner 'What sort of day is it?' They tell us 'it is a stormy day'. The weather outside is our object, and in being told this we become an Immediate interpretant. We become a Dynamical interpretant as we start searching for clues about the day, in turn having ideas about what we might do (e.g. how we might dress) depending on the weather. As Peirce (1998 [1909]) continues, an 'Ultimate, or Final Interpretant' consists of the ultimate effect our 'answer will have on [our] plans for the ensuing day'. He puts this all together as follows:

> Here is another sign. Its Immediate object is the notion of the present weather so far as this is common to her mind and mine – not the character of it, but the identity of it ... The Immediate Interpretant is the schema in her imagination, i.e. the vague image or what there is in common to the different images of a stormy day. The Dynamical Interpretant is the disappointment or whatever actual effect it has upon her. The Final Interpretant is the sum of the Lesson of the reply, Moral, Scientific, etc. (1998 [1909], p. 498)

Here, Peirce runs through a process of semiosis. We are told it is a stormy day; we peek outside the window and respond to what 'the day' now signifies to us. Ultimately, semiosis stops when we reach a 'Lesson' about the day and what it would mean for anybody who experiences it.

For Peirce, semiosis will unfold in this manner automatically. As discussed below, this is one reason why Jurgen Habermas (1995) critiques semiosis. We want to say that performativity can only emerge if semiosis does *not* unfold automatically; if, that is, the Immediate Interpretant can remain in place rather than become Dynamic or Normal. This would mean that the only available objects to experience would be relative to the Object contained in Immediate signification as a kind of controlled experiential effect.

Theorizing *sui generis* performativity

In semeiotic terms, any Immediate signification like in the scenario described above has the potential to become Normal or Dynamic. An Object can come to signify what it must to find the assent of all who would be affected by it, thus making signification contingent

on deliberation (*Normal*) (Habermas, 1995). It can 'resonate' or signify based on how it helps actors solve problems (*Dynamic*) (McDonnell et al., 2017). We might speculate that for a sign to remain Immediate, in this sense, is something of a rarity. The greater tendency is open signification up to deliberation or problem-solving. In both cases, this involves breaking apart the semeiotic structure by making the Object signified more independent from its sign (and vice versa), allowing it to elude its Immediate significa-tion, thus having different experiential effects, like demanding that its significance be contingent on finding good enough reasons for *why* it should signify in this way (Habermas, 1995, pp. 259ff.).

In this regard, *deliberative assent* and *problem-solving resonance* become reference classes for performativity. In contrast to both, performativity maintains a kind of frozen and repeating semiosis, which means that the 'practical consequences' in Peirce's words of acting according to a performative sign can appear creative in the ways often used to characterize performativity. For instance, if 'a theory makes *itself* true', then this sig-nification ('true') is not contingent on what Peirce would call a Normal or Dynamic Interpretant. Performativity must, by contrast, *avoid* the need for Objects to signify through deliberation and its space of reasons, not to mention the resolution of doubt in problem-solving. In performativity, a signified Object will have no actual grounding in the world that is more important than signification itself.

The performative interpretant

For Habermas (1995), the illocutionary force that Austin mentions must always, and can only, have the effect of 'giving assent'. This means that performative utterances are always oriented to reaching understanding. To account for this more fully, however, Habermas takes a step beyond Austin, a fruitful one we believe, and situates perfor-mativity within the wider framework provided by Peirce's semeiotics, while supple-menting Peirce with 'action oriented to reaching understanding'. As Habermas (1995, p. 250) argues,

> as early as . . . 1866 Peirce emphasizes this *pragmatic aspect* of representation: "a symbol may be intended to refer to an interpretant or to have *force* . . . It is intended . . . to inculcate this statement into an interpretant." An assertion receives illocutionary force through the fact that a speaker offers – at least implicitly – a reason or an argument by means of which he wants to bring the addressee to give assent.

Illocutionary force must take the form of assent to result in anything resembling perlocution, Habermas (1995, p. 250) claims, which widens our gaze from 'language per se [toward] communication among those who demand explanations from each other in order to reach an agreement with one another about something in the world'.

Thus, Habermas consults Peirce to amend the version of performativity inherited from Austin. This is in part because, in his own version of a post-Austinian performa-tivity, Habermas wants to maintain its irreducibility to power. Yet, his approach makes semiosis largely subsidiary to a more particular concern with communication. As Haber-mas (1995, p. 250) takes note of Peirce's later thought he remarks upon the particular

emphasis that Peirce gives to the 'stream of interpretation . . . [It] takes on a direction . . . The *telos* of a complete representation of reality is already inscribed in the structure of the first sign'. For Habermas, Peirce provides a limited understanding of the Normal interpretant, however, as he remains trapped in a philosophy of consciousness (e.g. semiosis essentially consisting of a disembodied mind).

For Habermas, a sign is waiting to have its contingency removed from it; he finds the same point in Peirce, based on their common reading of Hegel. But, for Habermas, there is no natural tendency towards self-correction. Built into the stream of interpretation, rather, is the tendency for signification as an 'ideal consensus'. This is only achievable through communication oriented to reaching understanding, with 'assent' signifying the interpretant effect produced by signs via 'a sufficient development of thought'. According to Habermas, all of this is implied by Austin's 'doing things with words' approach, as a form of communicative action. His reconstruction essentially digs out the way that performativity requires a regulative ideal like 'final consensus'. While, in this sense, Habermas notices a similar problem in performativity as we do, he makes performativity less about signification and more about deliberation in route to a final meaning. He therefore overlooks a different way performativity is semeiotic.

Consider the case of an Army captain who gives an order to a private to clean the latrines, a textbook example of 'doing things with words' (see Bourdieu, 1991, p. 98). In following the order, the private would assent to the captain, in Habermas' view, ultimately because the captain can give reasons why the private should follow the order; but the private's assent only works when the utterance is received self-evidently. It does not, in this sense, *require* their assent to work. If there is any lingering ambiguity, the captain can enlist aspects of performance, like threatening gestures and emotional valence, to restate the obvious: 'I gave you *an order* private!' But when a captain gives a private an order, they signify to the private in such a way that the private does not need to be an assent-granting subject to put their words into action. The private becomes, instead, more like what we might call a *performative interpretant*.[12] This means the private remains in an immediate relation to the order as signified. Their interpretation is limited or stopped by power when it could otherwise go on; the authority structure of the army *channels* their interpretation. They do not dispute it even if they disagree with it, nor do they follow it because they believe the order will solve the problems affecting the troops. Power is certainly present in this situation, and power is sufficient to have this kind of effect. It can freeze semiosis and repeat the original signification. Importantly, however, power is not *necessary* for performativity to occur, and neither for that matter is communicative action.

Is performativity irreducible to power?

The question of power is important for finding the limits of Austin and his model case. But how, then, is performativity irreducible to power (see Graeber, 2012; Reed, 2013)? Our suggestion is that among the major theorists of performativity over the last few decades, their efforts converge on a topic that often does involve power, but which cannot work simply as an expression of power. It is also a topic that carries deep semeiotic implications, though these connections are never clearly established by these theorists. Take Barry Barnes' notion of 'bootstrapped induction':

> An S in [a] situation is whatever the individual calls an S. What is properly referred to as an
> S is something, anything, which has been properly referred to as an S . . . Even though the
> actual situation is typically more complicated, it is easy in these cases to perceive a basic
> process whereby the declaration 'this particular is an S' makes the particular an S. An S is
> simply a particular identified as having been properly declared to be an S. (1983, p. 526)

The 'basic process' noted here more than likely occurs in a complicated context of
power, rationalization and materiality; yet for any performativity to occur, something
equivalent to the declaration 'this particular is an S' *must* occur. While Barnes associates
this with classification, more fundamentally it implies signification: 'this particular is an
S' signifies something about something to someone. For Barnes, the catch is that it does
so in an incredibly durable way, bootstrapping those to whom it signifies into subsequent
situations with this specific expectation.[13]

Further clues appear in Bourdieu's (1991, p. 106) influential claim about the symbolic
appropriations that constitute a state:

> . . . the spokesperson endowed with the full power to speak and act on behalf of the group,
> and first of all to act on the group through the magic of the slogan, is the substitute for the
> group, which exists solely through this procuration. Group made man, he personifies a
> fictitious person, which he lifts out of the state of a simple aggregate of separate individuals,
> enabling them to act and speak, through him, 'like a single person'. Conversely, he receives
> the right to speak and act in the name of the group, to 'take himself for' the group he
> incarnates, to identify with the function to which 'he gives his body and soul', thus giving a
> biological body to a constituted body. *Status est magistratus*; 'l'Etat, c'est moi'. Or, what
> amounts to the same thing, the world is my representation.

The proposal here is weighted towards power but reading between the lines we find
performativity in the twofold sense of *speaking in the name of* and also *to name*. Louis
XIV names himself ('c'est moi') the state ('l'Etat'), which means both that he incarnates
the state and that the state speaks in *his* name (see also Bourdieu, 1991, pp. 96, 129, 204).
Thus, whatever other factors are involved (court regalia, the Palace of Versailles, ela-
borate coronation), they are performative only in conjunction with naming a sovereign,
which is nothing if not signification (see also Brundage, 2023).

In Butler's (1997) critique of Bourdieu, 'acts of nomination' like the one described
are far too limiting a focus for nomination, though Butler agrees with Bourdieu that
naming is indispensable. Bourdieu links performativity too strongly to extensive social
preconditions, assuming that something comparable to a coronation must be found lest
performativity *not* be found. On the contrary, Butler argues, we can easily bear witness to
'authority-producing sites' with similar effects but none of these same features (p. 124).
Everyone, regardless of whether their subjectivity is an official nomination or not, has an
extended 'corporeal history of having been named' (p. 125); for instance, as a gendered
subject continuously conveyed through gender pronouns.

Thus, Butler, Barnes and Bourdieu all single out *naming* as integral to performativity,
perhaps even constituting its sole necessary condition, though they offer little further
elaboration. In this sense, they all appear to deviate, at least partially, from Austin's

'doing things with words'. For his part, Habermas is more explicit about his deviation. He breaks with the Austinian exemplar using semeiotics. For him, performativity must feature a sign–object–interpretant structure, and thus to name a sovereign or gendered subject, as the case may be, is to engage in performative signification. The question that Habermas answers that these other theorists do not is, having established that performativity is a matter of signification, how can signification be performative? For Habermas, signification can be performative when communicative action leads interpretation towards the final meaning of a sign. Habermas thus associates performativity with what Peirce designates as Normal signification. We have argued that this ignores Immediate signification as more able to distinguish performativity on its own terms, something which Barnes, Bourdieu and Butler all attempt to do, in our view, in their concentration on naming. Without a well-designated model, their versions of performativity are all too easily reducible to simply the exercise of power (see also Graeber, 2012). So, how can signification be performative *without* communicative action and *without* power?

Performative semiosis

In any semeiotic process, according to Peirce, a sign signifies to an interpretant; but an interpretant is also a kind of signification. Their interpretation can itself be interpreted, in other words, by an outside observer or analyst of the situation. In their action, the performative interpretant does not signify to observers that they are open to communication and problem-solving action, respectively. *Self-evidence*, rather, is how the performative interpretant signifies, which in this sense, is just another way of accounting for what Peirce calls Immediate signification. On these terms, significance 'emanates' performatively within a 'socio-spatio-temporality [that is] slower and more scale-encompassing' than the dynamic problem-solving situation or the teleological deliberative interaction (see Silverstein, 2013, p. 362).[14] But we can make the model more specific than this.

Using the terms 'laboratory,' 'theory' and 'drama', we refer to something akin to 'strategic research sites', in Robert Merton's (1987, p. 10) terms, as in a sense contemporary performativity research has arrived at them not by design, or by following the auspices of the Austinian exemplar, but because they provide advantageous 'empirical material', though it is not really clear why. Compare this, for example, with Habermas' (1989 [1962], pp. 31ff.) eighteenth-century London coffeehouses, which he appears to treat as a kind of model case for communicative action. While this precedes Habermas' (1995) engagement with semeiotics and performativity, it nevertheless lays the groundwork for how he will read those arguments. In this instance, deviance from or similarity with this model case defines the range of empirical material on the public sphere (see Negt & Kluge, 2016 [1972]). On our terms, by contrast, *a* laboratory, theory or drama provides empirical material based on our understanding of performativity as an 'objective possibility' (Forster, 2011, pp. 60–61). Each case demonstrates a possible way of generating significance with broad scale and slower duration, akin to 'habit', but which is not useful or true. This requires no model case. Rather, each of the following cases signifies the objective possibility of performativity that may or may not happen.

Laboratory

A laboratory refers to an experimental or testing format: induce uncertainty, then *reduce* it by solidifying an outcome. From within such controlled conditions, an object can appear that had not been signified before and could not be signified anywhere else (see Knorr-Cetina, 1992, pp. 116–117). It can thereafter build a larger assemblage through emanative semiosis from the laboratory to subsequent contexts. Laboratories generate objects by, among other means, testing their mettle in trials or experiments (Latour, 1999, p. 72). From the perspective of science studies, the 'material enunciation' from a laboratory as a testing site concerns what Trevor Pinch (1993) identified as the 'problem of representation' and which more generally concerns the effects of proxies. Moreover, objects that signify through tests do not have to be translated into a real-world avatar; they can instead make 'testing situations . . . unfold across settings' and persist, in other words, so that the 'the test environment [becomes] part of social life' rather than the reverse (Marres & Stark, 2020, pp. 438–439). In this case, the Object cues signification, and the Object controls the Interpretant rather than the other way around. There is only one way for a laboratory-derived Object to signify, after all, because there is only one possible experience of it.

We can draw an example more directly connected to performativity in its contemporary mode: the famously documented case of performativity involving the Black–Scholes–Merton (BSM) model, its creation of option prices and its impact on options trading (MacKenzie, 2006). At the heart of that account is the argument that the model used by traders to identify discrepancies in option prices 'was the same' as what academics used to assess the accuracy of the same model (MacKenzie, 2006, pp. 165ff.; see also Healy, 2015, for a similar account using network analysis). If the BSM model predicted that stock volatility would decrease when the strike price for an option approached a flat line, traders used the strike price so that the aggregate outcome *was* a flat line.[15]

A laboratory control of objects can maintain the *same* Object as found in a lab-like demonstration across all situations. This prevents a dynamic adaptation to emergent problems that would change the Object by finding unpredictable ways of using it. A laboratory impedes the possible ways the Object *could* be significant as taken into consideration of a larger community.[16] The laboratory controls its signification because, to exist, the Object must pass 'through [its tests] and then out of [them]' (see Latour, 1990, p. 56).

Theory

Theory focuses on the *Interpretant* binding to Objects in signification, or Secondness in Peirce's terms, that characterizes the subject who perceives. Rather than the pure possibility or chance in perception that cannot be entirely controlled, theory has a performative effect when it dictates perceptual judgment independent of the potential surprises in objects. Theory does not have to be a performative signification; but in its semeiotic constitution of an Object, it has the capacity to gather seemingly unrelated particular objects (e.g. 'Feminist' in film, clothing, politics, music, etc.), make them significant and allied (or competing) within a coherent interpretation.

Among the clear delineations in social theory, for example, distinctions are made and remain in the fixed as a *type* of theory with invariant traits ('feminist', 'Marxist', 'critical race'). To distinguish between these different types, especially to know to interpret anything through any one of these lenses or be commonly characterized as this or that type of theory, presupposes something that cannot be subject to a surprise that would render it 'Dynamic', in Peirce's sense, in coming explicitly to mind. This prevents as kind of pushback from objects and thus actually *limits* possible interpretation, as theory maintains its distinction from the unexpected particularities of objects encountered in the world. This is not a kind of 'testable' theory, in other words; it is not subject to 'abduction', in Peirce's words, that would ultimately culminate in a kind of 'Final' interpretant.

For those who come out explicitly 'against theory' (Knapp & Michaels, 1982), immediacy of this sort is both what makes theory distinct and problematic as a mode of interpretation (see also Eagleton, 2003). Theory provides an 'account of interpretation in general' at the same time as it engages in interpretation, which means that it can 'stand outside practice to govern practice from without' (Knapp & Michaels, 1982, p. 742). In the practice of interpreting, something will always be kept immediate to *all* the interpretations thereby created. This avoids a vulnerability that arises from objects as pure possibility or chance (e.g. what Peirce calls 'firstness'). Because it has this capability, using theory performatively creates an affect like the 'change of consciousness', for which revelation, 'escaping the cave' and metaphors of awakening appear as interpretations of the experience itself. Many critical theories highlight this (e.g. 'the struggle for consciousness is a struggle for world' [MacKinnon, 1989, p. 115; see also Marx, 1978 [1843]; hooks, 1991) as being of an integral political importance, and it suggests that theory can (*pace* MacKenzie, 2006, pp. 17–18) be more than a generic brand of performativity.[17]

Drama

If laboratory and theory are performative through their effects Object and Interpretant, respectively, then drama involves the ground for creating performative effects, as the basis upon which semeiotic connections unfold and sign formation happens. This also emanates, but in a more holistic manner than either laboratory Objects or theory Interpretants. It can alter the ground of both. In drama as opposed to laboratory, objects (e.g. a flag, a heroic figure) appear through a 'founding performance' in which signification is constructed through dramatic felicity. Given the semeiotic connections and signs that form there, what happens thereafter occurs within a period of time colligated together by signs set in place during the original dramatic event. While Interpretants can change a particular understanding of an event (e.g. a Burkean versus a Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution), they remain grounded in that event; specifically, the event in question has significant entailments with which a theory needs to come to grips (see Furet, 1981).

Thus, the performativity of drama is often understood as a *founding*. This is in part why it has proven useful to explain sovereignty (Brundage, 2023). A ground needs to be made as part of state-formation, as the state itself must signify something in common to all those who will be part of it (see Reed, 2020, chapter 6). An emphasis on founding

performances embraces contingency, though it conveys the kind emanation when the analysis centres on its 'binding' effect that extends the meaning of the event in time and space.

Dramatic felicity is perfected in the arts, especially theatre and cinema, as they historically become relatively autonomous performance spaces (see Alexander, 2004, pp. 542ff.; Deleuze, 1986). Drama is performative because it creates a 'new beginning' that can thereafter be maintained as implicit to sign-formation of all varieties. If laboratories are sites that have performative effects by controlling the Object available signification, and if theory is a site that controls the Interpretant to whom an object will signify in some way, drama is a site more aligned to Peircean 'thirdness'. What stops further interpretation are the habits (which may assume the form of 'myths' in Barthes' (1972) sense) maintained by a community based, somehow, on a founding event made significant as drama.

Conclusion

A post-Austinian performativity can cast performativity's net wider while adding precision. A semeiotic approach offers a way for performativity to not remain bound by Austin's model case but work within the auspices of something more like a formal model (Krause, 2021). The basis for that model is not that unusual. In fact, Austin (1963) himself drew a contrast between 'constative' and 'performative' utterances. According to Austin, a constative utterance can have truth-value: 'under the heading of "truth" what we have in fact is, not a simple quality or relation, not indeed one anything, but rather a whole dimension of criticism' (Austin, 1963, p. 359). A constative utterance is tested by this 'whole dimension of criticism', while a performative utterance is not. Austin, here, distinguishes performative utterances on specific terms, essentially by finding a reference class for them – that is, by defining what does *not* apply to them – but it remains an open question why *not* exposing a performative utterance to 'criticism' would make that utterance performative.

To explain why performativity appears to have an inverse relationship to exposure to a 'whole dimension of criticism' is something only a model can do, because any answer requires some approximation of how performativity basically works, essentially delimiting what it is and what it is not (Morgan & Morrison, 1999). Drawing performativity in relation to problem-solving and assent, as two different potential points of semiosis, offers practical guidance in this regard. Consider, briefly, what remains the most known and influential case of performativity. Butler (1990, p. 141) describes gender as performative because it is 'neither true nor false', and because there is no 'preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured'. Should we ask gender to be true or practical, it will turn 'parodic' according to Butler.

A formal model with these contrasts and alternate possibilities can help frame the clues and indicators of performativity, making it more observable in complicated concrete settings, perhaps even leading to a way of measuring it. It can also allow for communication and synthesis across the various theoretical frameworks within performativity research while building connections to research streams outside it. This could lend the research to studying strategic sites rather than accumulating more cases and

stretching the Austinian exemplar further and further. The result could be more a 'communistic', in Merton's (1942) sense of the word, performativity – collaborative and dialogic, as opposed to a domain of independent entrepreneurs.

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ORCID iD

Michael Strand   https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6820-5358

Notes

1. Google nGram search, 19 December 2023.
2. Sociological abstracts search, 19 December 2023.
3. We use the term 'semeiotic' rather than the more standard 'semiotic' to draw attention to Peircean debts as opposed to Saussurean ones (see Halton, 2004, p. 97).
4. Peirce alludes to this possibility in his fight against nominalism: '[objective possibility] may be defined as that mode of being which is not subject to the principle of contradiction since if it be *merely* possible that *A* is *B*, it is possible that *A* is not *B* . . . Possibility is that mode of being in which something is held in reserve, so that actuality is not attained' (quoted in Forster, 2011, pp. 60–61).
5. Rowe (2023, p. 567) mentions Austin's influence on Noam Chomsky and his 'semantico-pragmatics of natural language' (they met when Austin was visiting Harvard) and even on Susan Sontag (who studied briefly at Oxford when Austin was there), particularly her popular essay 'Notes on 'Camp'' (p. 573).
6. Others could be included. In addition to Derrida's (1977 [1971]) attempt to reformulate Austin as 'citationality', Robert Merton's (1948) 'self-fulfilling prophecy', which some (MacKenzie, 2006, pp. 19–20) have suggested is at least proto-performative, precedes Austin's claims by a few years and is native to sociology. Isaac Reed (2020, p. 75) has made connections with Max Weber's (1946 [1921–1922]) analysis of 'charisma' as providing an anticipation of contemporary performativity theory. In a related vein, Jeffrey Alexander (2004) has pushed the conversation more towards performance, finding a different lineage of canonical figures (like Richard Schechner or Victor Turner). Still, none of this appears to have supplanted the privileged position of Austin.
7. We thank the reviewer for drawing our attention to these connections.
8. In Austin's words, 'The performative 'I define X as Y' (in the *fiat* sense say) commits me to using those terms in special ways in future discourse, and we can see how this is connected with such acts as promising' (1962 [1955], p. 137).
9. Callon (2007) argues that illocutionary force reflects a 'context of enunciation' and the 'materialities in that context', putting the onus less on utterances. Bourdieu (1991, p. 74) moves in a similar direction, arguing that 'illocutionary acts are acts of institution' that could

not work unless they have 'the whole social order behind them'. Both are attempts to explain the strange magic of illocution, yet the actual utterance of words is not the focus.

10. We thank the reviewer for suggesting this.

11. Hereafter, we capitalize Interpretant and Object to emphasize they are analyst's constructs, not concrete things and maintain Peirce's own conventions. This also applies to Normal and Dynamic, so as not to mistake those for their typical meanings.

12. Weber (1946, p. 95; emphasis original), in fact, provides a nice delineation of this interpretant in his interpretation of bureaucratic action: '...to execute conscientiously the order of the superior authorities, exactly *as if* the order agreed with his own conviction. This holds even if the order *appears wrong* to him and if, despite the civil servant's remonstrances, the authority insists on the order'. Performativity, here, is contained in the '*as if*' portion of the process, as the interpretation of an order 'as if' one agreed with it (and thus acts on it) and *especially if* they do not really agree with it and can see no use for it (though that is not necessary).

13. Notably, when Barnes mentions the 'basic process' of performativity he includes the following footnote (1983, p. 542, note 8): 'Consideration of the re-identification of particular S's raises extremely interesting issues, which unfortunately I cannot go into here. Kripke (1972) offers some useful insights on the matter'. Barnes references the philosopher Saul Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*, which is suggestive, given its concern with proper names as 'rigid designators' that repeat in every possible world.

14. See also Brundage (2023) on performativity and scale and Moore (2022) on performativity and duration.

15. As MacKenzie (2006) concludes, this is 'a form of performativity' because as the BSM model was used in 'the practice of arbitrage...the effects of that arbitrage seem to have been to move patterns of prices towards the postulates of the model' (p. 166).

16. Haraway (1997) recognized something similar in the early laboratory studies and scientific practices rooted in the construction of objects, particularly by Shapin & Schaffer (1985). What laboratories, which 'guaranteed the clarity and purity of objects', carried was the 'earth-shaking capacity to ground social order *objectively*, literally' (Haraway, 1997, p. 24). Moore (2022) observes a similar effect involving the US Supreme Court.

17. What Bourdieu (1991, p. 133) calls (largely dismissively) the 'theory effect' attempts to account for theory's performative potential. Bourdieu takes Marxist theory as his prime example. It seems that Marx, particularly the young Marx, would find no problem with this. After all, as Marx put it (1978 [1843], pp. 60–61), 'theory *ad hominem*' could be understood as trying to *create* just such a theory effect. 'Radical' theory will gladly reduce social complexity to get to what is 'at stake', with the purposes of using theory to '[grip] the masses'.

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Author biographies

Michael Strand teaches sociology at Brandeis University. His current interests revolve around looping effects, objective probability and autonomous morality. His work has appeared in *Theory & Society*, *Sociological Theory*, and *History of the Human Sciences*.

Samantha Leonard teaches sociology at Mount Holyoke College. Her current research interests include gender violence, collective action, culture, and temporality. Her work has appeared in *Affilia* and *Ethnography*.