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Poetics

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/poetic](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/poetic)

## Paying with change: The purposeful enunciation of material culture<sup>☆</sup>

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Culture  
Cognition  
Materiality  
Purposeful enunciation  
Computational methods

### ABSTRACT

Recent work in cultural sociology has called attention to constraints imposed by material objects on interpretive processes, but is unclear as to how actors use such constraints to produce new meanings. In this article, we use novel newspaper data of people attempting to pay with large amounts of small cash and coins as a form of protest to highlight the material conditions under which actors are able to convey an alternative meaning of an object to an audience. We use computational linguistic and quantitative methods to examine when changes in the meaning of money are more likely to lead to emotionally-charged media reception. We find that emotionally-charged media reception is more likely when, typically, actors consciously attend to money and yet do not have to put in much cognitive work to assign meaning to it in the setting where the protest is attempted. We conclude by considering the implications of the study for broader projects within cultural sociology, economic sociology, organizational theory, political sociology, and social movement studies.

### 1. Introduction

Recent work on materiality in cultural sociology has called attention to the constraints imposed by material objects on interpretive processes (e.g., [Griswold, Mangione, & McDonnell, 2013](#); [Klett 2014](#); [McDonnell, 2010, 2016](#); [Rose-Greenland, 2016](#); [Zubrzycki, 2013](#)). This is a significant move forward as it offers a corrective for strong constructivist positions presuming objects simply “reflect people’s self-definitions” ([Jerolmack and Tavor, 2014, 64–65, 71](#); see also [Barad, 2003](#); [Domínguez Rubio, 2012, 2014](#); [Martin, 2010, 2011](#); [Mukerji, 1997](#)). What remains to be further elaborated is whether and how actors use such constraints to create new meanings in social situations. In this article, we focus on situations where a condition is usually satisfied with the use of particular material objects, but can nonetheless be satisfied with different yet *unexpected* objects. More broadly, we considers how actors are able (or not able) to *intentionally communicate an alternative meaning of an object to an audience by using it in an unexpected way*.

Rather than focusing on how materiality restricts meaning-making processes, we focus on how people put these constraints to use,

<sup>☆</sup> Acknowledgements: Early versions of this paper were presented at the 40<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Social Science History Association and the 111<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association. The authors would like to thank the editors and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback on this paper. They would also like to extend gratitude to the following people and groups who contributed thoughtful comments on earlier versions of the article: Omar Lizardo, Ann Mische, Rory McVeigh, Kraig Beyerlein, Terence E. McDonnell, Sarah Quinn, Joseph Klett, Daniel Winchester, Fiona Rose-Greenland, Lindsey A. Freeman, Brandon Sepulvado, Michael Wood, Justin Van Ness, Robert Mowry, Matthew J. Chandler, Abigail Ocobock, Julie Dallavis, Nicole Perez, Andrew Hoyt, participants in the Notre Dame Culture Workshop, and participants in the Notre Dame Studies in Politics and Movements (SPAM) workshop.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2017.07.003>

Received 16 February 2017; Received in revised form 23 May 2017; Accepted 25 July 2017

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and the limitations of such attempts. We refer to these attempts, broadly speaking, as “purposeful enunciation.” This is when an actor tries to deliberately attract attention to alternative uses of a material object and in so doing communicates a new message. To develop this concept, we integrate recent work from the cultural sociology of materiality with work from culture and cognition studies. Specifically, we use dual-process models of *attention* and *sense-making* to understand how materiality evokes certain types of cognitive processing from actors in these settings.

Understanding the mechanics of purposeful enunciation is significant because communicating by using objects in uncommon ways is a pervasive form of contention and innovation. This includes making obstructive, ironic, rebellious, or humorous statements, which may result in subversion, oppression, resistance, or controversy (e.g., Halfmann & Young, 2010; Kaminski & Taylor, 2008). The field of art offers the most readily accessible examples. Famously, Marcel Duchamp submitted a urinal, titled *Fountain*, for the first annual exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York City. The explicit criteria included a six-dollar fee, otherwise anyone who wanted to could display their art; there would be no adjudication of submissions. Implicitly, *Fountain* challenged the Society’s prototype of art, causing controversy and shaping American art thereafter.

Purposeful enunciation is not restricted to art or even overt statements; it may also be deployed to subvert authority and obscure one’s intentions. For example, importers of costumes—e.g., Santa suits—struggle to avoid paying tariffs on clothing by attempting to classify their item as a “festive article,” which is not taxed. A costume, by virtue of its materiality, straddles this consequential divide. While the cheaper Santa suits, for instance, are more easily categorized as a festive article, the more expensive, finely tailored suits are often considered clothing. If the manufacturer uses Velcro instead of a zipper closure, however, it is less likely that it will be classified as an article of clothing, and therefore less likely to be taxed (Smith & Goldstein, 2015).

The examples provided show that purposeful enunciation may result in a variety of consequences. In our empirical analysis we focus on one specific such outcome: audience reception. We use newspaper data of people paying with large amounts of small cash and coins—often as an attempt to perform explicit protest. Such protest efforts qualify as attempts at purposeful enunciation given that, while small cash and coins are certainly legal tender, their use in large quantities is generally unexpected. This creates situations where actors can construct an alternative meaning of money and project this meaning to an audience. Audience reception of such acts of protest is an outcome of attempts at purposeful enunciation. Reception, we argue, is a function of certain qualities of the setting within which the protest takes place. We analyze these data with computational linguistic and standard quantitative methods.

We proceed in four steps: (1) we develop our theoretical framework, which combines affordance theories of materiality with dual-process theories of cognition, (2) discuss our key theoretical concept, purposeful enunciation, and (3) outline our main hypothesis. Following this, (4) we provide an empirical demonstration by applying computational text analysis and regression models to a corpus of newspaper articles involving the case of “coins as protest” described earlier. We conclude by considering the implications of the phenomenon of purposeful enunciation for future work in cultural sociology, economic sociology, organizational theory, political sociology, and social movement studies.

## 2. Material affordances and dual-process cognition

How do materials constrain meaning-making in situations? The strand of research that has most explicitly addressed this question is affordance theory. According to the theory, objects in an environment delimit what can actually be done in that environment (Gibson, 1986). These objects constitute tangible, material arrangements that constrain human cognitive capacities to influence interpretive processes (see also DeNora 2000, 38–41). An affordance, then, “is a relationship between the properties of an object and the capabilities of the agent that determine just how the object could possibly be used” (Norman 2013, 11).

McDonnell (2010) adds theoretical flesh to the role of affordances in interpretive processes with the concept of “object-settings” (see also Griswold et al., 2013; Klett, 2014). Object-settings are sites of “material interactions of cultural objects and their settings” (McDonnell 2010, 1802; McDonnell, 2010). It is within object-settings that objects impose themselves on interpretive processes through their ecological positioning (Gibson, 1986; see also Domínguez Rubio, 2016). Two dimensions of ecological positioning relevant to the present discussion are *perceptibility* and *legibility* (McDonnell 2010, 1804; McDonnell, 2010).

Perceptibility refers to the degree to which an object can be detected or handled, as well as how it demands actors’ attention. Therefore, an object’s perceptibility is determined by the extent that actors can or must interact with, and cognitively attend to, the object in a deliberate way. For example, for those in the United States an ATM (automated teller machine) at the edge of a parking lot would be considered “more perceptible” than a drive-through ATM at a bank. With the former, the machine may “stick out like a sore thumb”—it is a giant, isolated box on a piece of asphalt, there for observation for anyone who may pass by it, and is an object that not every parking lot possesses. When the machine is located at a bank drive-through, however, it may not require as much cognitive attention: one often has to drive around the bank to see it and almost every bank in the United States possesses one, meaning that it can easily recede into the background.

An object’s legibility refers to the degree to which its *intended* meaning is clear or unclear. Put another way, a legible object is one with a relatively unambiguous intended meaning in that setting. An ATM may be highly legible for most audiences in the United States regardless of whether it is located at a bank or in a parking lot, given that it serves an explicit functional purpose of which most are aware. The intended meaning of an ATM, then, is relatively clear.

To summarize, an audience’s interpretations resulting from interactions with an object in any given situation are therefore determined in large part by how physically and cognitively available the object is (perceptibility) and the extent to which the intended message is clear and known, and the demand for *ad hoc* meaning construction is limited (legibility).

Recent work in cognitive social science argues that human cognitive processes can be described as two types (Lizardo et al., 2016; Moore, 2017; Smith & DeCoster, 2000; Vaisey, 2009). Following convention (Evans, 2008), we will refer to these as deliberate

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