

Rethinking Fusion: Towards a New Typology for Social Performance

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Abstract: Within the ‘strong program’ in cultural sociology, previous accounts of social performance have lacked precise definitions of ‘fusion’, the main concept that holds the individual elements of the theory together and evaluates the outcome of the performance. In this paper, I aim to examine the current uses of fusion in the research program of cultural pragmatics, both theoretical and empirical, to demonstrate its inconsistencies and the inadequacy of its focus only on case studies with positive connections. The present study proposes a new foundation for the concept of fusion based on a two-dimensional model that considers emotional affection and agreement as two independent axes. With this framework, it is possible to identify and untangle four distinct performative outcomes: *positive fusion*, *negative fusion*, *partial fusion*, and *de-fusion*. The typology contributes to pushing forward the development of the research program for new and more precise inquiries.

Key-Words: Cultural Sociology, Social Performance, Fusion, Emotions, Negative Connections.

Introduction

Inside the cultural turn, the performative turn assigned a crucial role to agency, contingency, and experience while maintaining the autonomy of “culture as text” (Bachmann-Medick, 2016, chap. II). This approach has gained prominence in social science analysis (Berezin, 1994; Butler, 1997; Fine, 2001; Goffman, 1959; Schechner, 2002; Turner, 1974, 1982; Wagner-Pacifici, 1986) and offers valuable reflections on the creation and transformation of meaning in the social realm. Within the sociological models of social performance, the ‘strong program’ in cultural sociology (Alexander, Smith, 2003) has developed cultural pragmatics (Alexander, 2004a; Alexander et al., 2006), a middle-range model that bridges micro theories of pragmatic action and macro theories of cultural structure to scrutinize theoretically and empirically “symbolic actions” (Burke, 1966) or, in other terms, “meaningful communication” (Alexander,

2011, p. 82). In its applications, scholars have used cultural pragmatics to analyze several meaning-making and social change domains, such as social movements (Eyerman, 2006), power (Reed, 2013), intellectuals (Pérez-Jara, Camprubí, 2022), political campaigns (Mast, 2017), arts (McCormick, 2006), and social media (Kaplan, 2023).

The central ambition of the model is to explain the dynamics of social performances, i.e., “the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation” (Alexander, 2004a, p. 529). For that, cultural pragmatics follows the path of dramaturgical performances (see Alexander, 2004a, 2017), with six independent elements that partially determine the outcome of social performance: systems of collective representations (background representations and script), actors, audience, *mise-en-scène*, means of symbolic production and social power. The goal of social performance in the modern world, like the ritual phenomenon described by Durkheim (1968 [1912]), is to convince the audience of the projected script, eliminating the symbolic distance between the performative elements. In a word, the goal of social performance is *fusion*. But if an actor fails to convince the audience, the performance becomes, in cultural pragmatics language, *de-fused*.

The dichotomy fusion/de-fusion functions in the cultural pragmatics paradigm as a mechanism to determine the performative outcomes (Norton, 2014, p. 165). In the data analysis language, they are (or, at least, they should be) the concepts that evaluate the ‘dependent variable’ of each empirical case study. Because of that, the dichotomy holds all the theoretical elements together beyond their relative autonomy and allows empirical explanations and extrapolations. However, as it is now, the dichotomy is still rudimentary to address the complexity of social reality, from theoretical confusions to analytical inadequacies.

Recent efforts in cultural pragmatics have moved towards theoretical advances in fusion. Anne Taylor (2022) points out that the way fusion is conceptualized, the audiences are treated as an element with a secondary and passive role. To solve this problem, Taylor proposed the concept of “arcs of fusion” to understand the audience’s agency in performative success or failure. Timothy Malacarne’s analysis (2021) offers a new comprehension of multiple audiences – an idea that is well-stated but poorly addressed. More than multiple, the author argues that performative audiences are connected. That means that the way one audience fuses or de-fuses with the performance may influence

the response of another audience. Finally, Vanessa Bittner (2023) shows how contestation and controversy about the performance's meaning do not represent a de-fusion. Instead, Bittner demonstrates a performative type in which the interaction of the opposed interpretations makes the meaning projection even more remarkable and the audiences more fused.

All these advances operate in a logic of adding theoretical innovations in the model gaps, a “positive heuristic” within the research program to construct a “protective belt” of auxiliary hypotheses in the paradigm's development (Lakatos, 1970). Nevertheless, the theoretical ground of cultural pragmatics for these additions (the “hardcore” assumptions, in Lakatos language) is still not solid enough, since the foundation of the model presents a series of contradictions and holes that cannot sustain new additions without falling into more ambiguities. With these minor revisions, the central proposition is still untouched, and the confusion about the concept remains. Therefore, we need to go back to its basis to construct a proper foundation of the model, an explicit and systematic argument in the framework that can sustain assemblies of new empirical observations and the organic development of the research program.

In this paper, I develop an in-depth analysis of the conceptual dichotomy of fusion/de-fusion. I will begin by examining the theoretical foundation of the model, i.e., the article *Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance Between Ritual and Strategy* (Alexander, 2004a). Subsequently, I will delve into how fusion and de-fusion are used in empirical research, aiming to reveal preferences in employing the concept by the prominent authors that follow this paradigm. My argument centers around the idea that fusion, despite its centrality in the cultural pragmatics framework, presents two major problems. First, it suffers from terminological confusion due to the lack of clear definitions and inconsistencies in its founding propositions. Consequently, the empirical application of the concept becomes compromised without methodological guidance. Second, there is a tendency to restrict the concept's scope to solely positive cases, when the audience identifies with the actors and agrees with the script. My following argument is that this previous understanding is too narrow for a good comprehension of the phenomenon, as it disregards the possibility of negative connections – a topic historically neglected in sociology (see Offer, 2021).

Hence, my theoretical endeavor in this paper goes beyond the critique of cultural pragmatics' account of social performance. To rework the “hardcore” assumptions in the

performance paradigm, I will properly organize the meanings of fusion and propose a new definition based on a two-dimensional model, with emotional affection on one axis and identification and agreement on the other. This model can provide clarity of the conceptual meaning of fusion (what it is) and a more precise methodological comprehension of performative outcomes (how to use it). The clarification of fusion's conceptual definitions is crucial for further development in the theoretical model; after all, "real life is already sufficiently confused and shuffled [...]. Concepts, categories, definitions are our work tools, and tools have to be good and adequate for what is expected of them" (Pierucci, 2003, p. 37). Thus, rethinking fusion, more than an end in itself, is a way to improve the model's conceptual language and, with that, enhance its analytical applicability to social reality.

Meanings of Fusion in Theory and Practice

In *Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance Between Ritual and Strategy* (2004a), Jeffrey Alexander develops a model of action within the collective research project of the 'strong program' in cultural sociology. Despite his early interest in "the problem of action" (see Alexander, 1987, 1988), there was no account of social action in the 'strong program' yet. Regardless of the innovative and thought-provoking model proposal, several main points present inconsistencies that need to be reframed. In particular, the term 'fusion,' a key concept in the framework, is used over 100 times without a clear definition ("fusion is..."). It appears as a verb (e.g., "ritualized social actions fuse the various components of social performance", p. 536), as a motivation (e.g., "fusion remains the goal of performances even in complex societies", p. 537), as a cause of specific effects (e.g., "fused performances creating ritual-like effects", p. 537), and as a characteristic (e.g., "the elements of social-dramatic performances are de-fused, not automatically hung together, which is precisely why the organizational form of social drama first emerged", p. 547).

These examples show how fusion is used vaguely, without a precise meaning or a methodological orientation of how the phenomenon could be observed. Nevertheless, beyond myriad ways 'fusion' is introduced into the text, I synthesized the main aspects presented in Alexander's paper and arranged them into four propositions:

- 1) The audiences are convinced of the meaning projected, identifying with the actors, and agreeing with the script (p. 530-1);
- 2) “Emotional connection of audience with actor and text” (p. 547);
- 3) Re-fusion, i.e., “sew back together the elements of performance to make them seem connected seamlessly” (p. 529);
- 4) Authentic performances, in opposition to insincere and faked (p. 548).

The first proposition is based on the cognitive comprehension – automatically or deliberately – of the script, the meaningful text projected. For that, the persuasive and rhetorical skills of the actors are the central aspect of convincing the audience of the script. In turn, the audiences might agree (or not) with the script projected and identify (or not) with the actors on stage. Following this proposition, if all these elements align harmoniously, we can conclude that the performance has achieved fusion. The most prominent field in which this proposition can be seen is the application to electoral performances. In this case, political candidates “want to *convince* us of how things are. If their performances are successful, we are *persuaded*” (Alexander, 2010, p. 286, emphasis added).

The second definition is the audience’s emotional connection with the actor and text. “Emotion is an indication of intimate participation” (Dewey, 1929, p. 390), that is, fusion with the performance. This one can seem similar to the first proposition, but its means are different. The performer should appeal not only to the audience’s understanding (*logos*) but also to their feelings (*pathos*). According to Aristotle’s *Poetics* (1967), for a drama to succeed, it must accomplish an emotional catharsis with the audience. Similarly, social performance actors must project a script that touches not just the mind but the audience’s soul, making them cry, laugh, and get excited with what is being told. This proposition evidences how cultural pragmatics is not just a theory of convincement or persuasion. It is also a theory of affection.

The third proposition about fusion corresponds to the theory of modernity inside the sociological model. In a similar direction followed by the early Durkheim (see 2013 [1893]), Alexander argues that, in simple collective organizations, the six performative elements were less segmented. That would be an initial state of natural fusion. As the collective organizations become more complex, they also become more differentiated and segmented, that is, de-fused. Thus, modern society should engage in a process of re-

fusion. In the sociological model, re-fusion is a synonym of fusion that calls special attention to this ‘time diagnosis’ of differentiation and fragmentation. Re-fusion also signifies the possibility of overcoming this diagnosis and producing meaning in the modern social world, a kind of “resonance” (Rosa, 2019) of performative elements. Nevertheless, Alexander is categorical: even though fusion performances remain essential, “as society becomes more complex, such moments of fusion become much more difficult to achieve” (Alexander, 2004a, p. 547).

The last proposition in the conceptual net of fusion refers to the existential problem of authenticity. Following Charles Taylor (1989, see also 1991), Alexander sees the authenticity of symbolic action as a nomenclature that accurately communicates the meaning of performative success. In Taylor’s (1991) use, the concept evokes the dialogical character of human agency and the “culture of authenticity” to encourage communitarian association. For Alexander, authenticity has an opaquer connotation, as whether the actor is seen by the audiences as “real” or “pulled like a puppet by the strings of society” (2004a, p. 548). Therefore, in his argumentation, the attribution of authenticity is a synonym for successful performance, which in turn is a synonym for fusion: “If authenticity marks success, then failure suggests that a performance will seem insincere and faked” (Alexander, 2004a, p. 548).

The relation between these four propositions in Alexander’s text assumes an ambiguous position. Although not explicitly stated, each definition is separately employed as distinct meanings that can be derived from the same term. Still, there are instances where these propositions intersect in specific ways. Considering when audiences agree with the actors and script, these parts become connected (re-fused) as one indistinguishable substance. Here, the idea of approximating the elements has a more explicit connotation. The emotional connection and agreement might also be aggregated, albeit with the former being an epiphenomenon of the latter. Anticipating an argument I will develop in subsequent pages, the analytical potential of fusion is downgraded when emotional connection and agreement are merged, as it hinders an accurate comprehension of performative impacts beyond positive associations. In that case, the emotional response assumes a complementary role, rather than an independent one, in the analysis. Consequently, the emotional connection merely reinforces agreement instead of representing a separate element composed of a whole range of affections.

In summary, the theoretical landscape for fusion presents a lack of systematization, confusion of terminologies, and unclear considerations about how the concept's multiple meanings can get along. Considering the four propositions, we can say that the term 'fusion' is trying to do too many things at the same time without conceptual distinctions. This entanglement is already a red flag. Propositions one and two, if better elaborated and disaggregated, might have the potential to be a proper definition; on the other hand, propositions three and four, even being interesting aspects of the phenomenon, are not very useful in defining the concept. Nevertheless, a sociological model is not just about its theoretical formulations but also its empirical applications. Thus, we should look closer to the leading empirical research that draws on the cultural pragmatics paradigm to reveal preferences in the operationalization of fusion. If there is a consensus, a clear and satisfactory definition that every research mobilizes, it would not be necessary to worry about inconsistencies. However, this is not what happened. In the following, I will analyze step-by-step how fusion appears in empirical research.

The primary issue in the empirical analysis is the absence of the conceptual use of fusion in studies that announce cultural pragmatics as their theoretical framework. For instance: outlining a performance perspective for the sociology of music, Lisa McCormick (2006) mentioned fusion just six times; analyzing the performance of the 2017 UK general election, Marcus Morgan (2022) mentioned it four times; Jason Mast (2017), on a cultural pragmatics analysis of Donald Trump's election in 2016, mentioned it three times; in the performative approach applied by Ron Eyerman (2012) to talk about the recognition of Harvey Milk, mentioned the term just once; and Ateş Altınordul (2017), on a cultural pragmatics research about a coup attempt in Turkey, did not mention it at all¹. Despite the merits exhibited by these papers in advancing theory within their respective empirical domains, the omission of the concept crucial for unifying the theory indicates significant inconsistencies regarding the categorization of performative outcomes.

The problem is more than just absences. When fusion appears in the text, it is done without any significance in the construction of the analysis. It is often mentioned in the introduction as a way to present the theoretical model. When the text moves to the empirical section, the term is basically forgotten, becoming a secondary concept for the

¹ All my counts are based on fusion and its variants (e.g., de-fusion, fuse, de-fused, fusing, etc.).

case study. Moreover, when defining fusion, scholars of performance repeatedly emphasize Alexander's inaugural description of the phenomena (typically following the third proposition presented above) without any additions, adaptations, or relativizations. As a result, the concept maintained its original lack of precision. This evidence might explain why fusion is not employed during the empirical analysis, as it is unclear how to use it. Some examples of the 'ceremonial citation' of fusion can be seen as follows:

Effective social performances are those that succeed in "fusing" together the six elements of performance: systems of collective representations, actors, observers/audience, means of symbolic production, *mise-en-scène*, and social power (Alexander 2004). (McCormick, 2006, p. 122)

The exercise of power, Alexander's theory suggests, has transformed from (a) fused performances, in which the elements of performance work together to create a kind of synchronicity in process and authenticity in role embodiment characteristic of rituals in tightly bound, socially and culturally homogenous social groups, to (b) contingent performances under defused conditions, in which political actors struggle to persuade audiences by seeking to strike the right constitutive chords in their scripts, by crafting them with an ear sensitive to the familiar background cultural tunes long found in a collectivity's songbook. In the real, empirical world, the challenge of cultivating and inhabiting political legitimacy under the conditions of defusion becomes one of "re-fusing" the elements of cultural performance. (Mast, 2012, p. 21)

The theoretical framing of this paper draws upon the 'strong program' in cultural sociology both in its attempt to 'anchor causality in proximate actors and agencies' (Alexander and Smith 2003, p. 14), as well as in its stress upon the importance of collective representations, audiences, means of symbolic production, power, and *mise-en-scène* in helping shape whether performances are able to achieve successful 'fusion' (Alexander 2004). (Morgan, 2022, p. 381)

The aforementioned uses of fusion demonstrated the tautological line of thought in Alexander's inaugural argument. There is a circularity in which the premise (successful performances) and conclusion (fusion) are synonymous, and what was supposed to be

elucidative for the empirical analysis becomes even more confusing. Following the cultural pragmatics common sense, scholars take beforehand what was introduced in the foundation of the model as unquestionable facts that need to be followed (and generically cited). Furthermore, this is not true just in the concept of fusion. The ‘time diagnosis’, that fusion is more difficult to achieve in modern times due to differentiation and increasing social complexity (Alexander, 2004a, p. 547), is also taken for granted in the whole cultural pragmatics program (e.g., Mast, 2012, p. 16; McCormick, 2020, p. 328; Morgan, 2020, p. 280; Taylor, 2022, p. 75). The only time that it was deeply revisited, as an open topic of discussion and not as a ‘fact’, this thesis was highly criticized:

By associating successful performance with the recapture of lost social unity, this understanding of performance risks a conservatism in its conception of society. Alexander’s original framework functions best when groups share a sense of a foundational sacred, even if social differentiation has led to conflict over its relationship to other elements in society. But it is not clear that this describes modern pluralistic society. In examining social performance with connected audiences, we see that audiences need not share a set of meanings to performatively interact with one another. *In fact, this disconnect can be a precondition for a successful performance in certain performative configurations* (Malacarne, 2021, p. 22, emphasis added).

This criticism leads us to another preference for the empirical use of the concept. Although researchers define fusion as bringing together the performative elements (third proposition), when they evaluate the empirical case studies, successful performances are considered the ones in which the audiences identify with the actors and agree with the collective representations projected (first proposition). If the emotional response is incorporated into the analysis, it occurs as a mere reinforcement of the identification/agreement, a secondary consequence of the phenomenon. The result of this focus is that all cases considered as fused performance are a positive and cohesion-making connection. We can see some examples as follows.

For Danny Kaplan, to succeed in social media performance, the actors must “establish solidarity by negotiating and attempting to convince others of their shared interests and reaffirming shared values and collective identity” (Kaplan, 2023, p. 5). In Taylor’s theoretical investigation of the role of audiences, she affirms that “fusion can be considered an alignment or a symmetry in meaning, and de-fusion as a result of an

incoherence or disagreement” (Taylor, 2022, p. 76), separating clapping and booing as two radical opposed reactions². In another text conceptualizing cultural pragmatics, Alexander states: “For an action to be successful, an individual or collective actor must be able to communicate the meanings of their actions that they consciously or unconsciously want others to believe”. He continues: “If they [the audiences] are to identify with you [the actor] and to connect emotionally with your script, then they must believe you. They must *accept* your symbolic projection” (Alexander, 2011, p. 83, emphasis added). This last quotation is a perfect example of how the emotional connection becomes subordinates to an agreement.

If we look at the big picture, the sample selection of case studies in cultural pragmatics reflects this bias. The most prominent analysis domain is politics, especially political campaigns, in which the actors must convince the audience of their symbolical coalition to gain votes (Norton, 2017). Thus, scholars in the performance of politics (e.g., Alexander, 2010; Alexander, Jaworsky, 2014; Mast, 2012, 2017; Morgan, 2022; Taylor, 2022) conceptualize fusion as agreement with the political script projected. In this regard, fusion is understood as the “attempt by individuals to achieve stability, order, and contentment through ritual” (Fordahl, 2020, p. 117). Even though it is a fruitful domain of analysis with high-quality research, the emphasis on political elections in cultural pragmatics makes it seem to be the only sphere possible for investigation, undermining a myriad of different topics that the theory could address.

Disentangling Fusion

Against these theoretical infelicities, recent works of ‘strong program’ sympathizers have shown the importance of negative reactions in social performance (see Bittner, 2023; Malacarne, 2021). For them, negative relationships would be as relevant as positive ones for achieving successful connections. In my understanding, this conceptualization addresses only part of the problem, as it emphasizes an aspect overlooked in the framework but still maintains the main presupposition untouched. Both

² Taylor has the merit to be the first to take the concept of fusion seriously and propose a proper definition, to say “fusion is...”. If the term “fusion” varies in the other cultural pragmatics papers from six to zero uses, Taylor mentioned fusion 106 times, which indicates her severe concerns with the concept. Nevertheless, she continues to follow the theoretical inadequacy that considers positive connection the only possible fusion type.

still call the negative reactions as de-fusion, and suggest it would function just as a way for another audience to connect with the performance more strongly with an agreement. Thus, although Bittner and Malacarne affirm that negative reactions are crucial in creating fusion, they fail to see how this ‘negativity’ is also a successful connection.

Disregarding the possibility of negative connections between audiences, actors, and scripts engenders significant theoretical discrepancies. An example of this issue is cultural pragmatics’ difficulties in defining Donald Trump’s electoral performance (Fordahl, 2020)³. As usually conceptualized, the performance of politics should address the sacred codes of national political culture (Alexander, 2010; Bellah, 1967) to resonate with the citizens-audience. Trump not only profaned these codes with particularistic ideals but also created a vast backlash movement against his person. However, this adverse reaction of part of the audience was not about ‘disconnection’ with the performance: they strongly engaged with Trump as an iconic evil character that embodied a “negative charisma” (Smith, 2000), even without agreeing with the script or identifying with the actor. A corroboration of this connection is how the backlash against Trump turned out to be a ‘movement’ in which their whole life became directed toward him. Trump conducted the negative feelings of this part of the audience, which was so in sync with him as the ones that possess positive connections. Thus, beyond the solidarity bond created with part of the electorate, the connection with the group he antagonizes was also inherent to his performance.

The existent theory would call this de-fusion. Is that really the case? Or is this something more? Conceptualizing this negative connection as a failed performance seems unfair to the actor’s motivations and accomplishments. Moreover, defining in the same way as an irrelevant and forgettable performance – both would be ‘de-fusion’ in the traditional definitions – seems imprecise. Thus, the dichotomy fusion/de-fusion, more than just vague and confusing, does not reflect a satisfactory account of social reality, as competently different phenomena would be classified in the same way. The deliberate attempt to shock, the performance in which the actor expected (and wanted) to be hated, and the manifestation of violence and terror towards an opposed audience are also forms

³ Ironically, my counter-example to demonstrate the unsatisfactory account of cultural pragmatics is on the performance of politics, the most prominent research topic in the program. This irony illustrates how the inherent bias within the concept was hiding a more precise understanding of the phenomenon in general, even when it is usually well-addressed.

of meaningful communication, even if their ambition is not a positive and solidarity connection. These phenomena cannot be neglected in the framework. That is why we need a proper foundation for the concept to incorporate this type of connection.

In order to construct a more precise and nuanced comprehension of performative outcomes, the model must disentangle the notion of agreement/disagreement from the emotional impact that the performance may generate. With that, the collective emotions will be conceptualized as a domain with analytical autonomy (Emirbayer, Goldberg, 2005, p. 494), not as something “adjunct.” Then, it will be possible to consider outcomes in which the audiences disagree with the performance while being emotionally affected (and acknowledge that this is fusion). Love connected us as much as hate. Excitement affects us as much as fear. Feelings, both positive and negative, reflect a commitment towards the object.

In the foundation of the ‘strong program’, Jeffrey Alexander (2003, p. 4) affirms that “[c]ultural sociology is a kind of social psychoanalysis”. Although this idea is not developed further in the program, I claim it is a productive insight for cultural sociologists to assimilate. If Alexander’s affirmation is accurate, we should remember one essential lesson from psychoanalysis: love and hate, in effective terms, are not so different as we usually claim. When taken together, the binomial love-hate (fusion) is opposed to a state of indifference or insensibility (de-fusion) (Freud, 1915). For psychoanalysis, both positive and negative feelings towards an object reflect a relation with it. By the end of the day, this relation, this invested emotional energy, connected us with the performance. The matter is the bond and its intensity, not necessarily the positive status of this energy. A sociological model of fusion must incorporate this insight.

Towards a Model of Performative Outcomes

So far, I have demonstrated that emotional affection and identification/agreement are the propositions presented in the foundation of cultural pragmatics that, if analytically disentangled⁴, could be used to define fusion. Even though both dimensions must be

⁴ To avoid misunderstandings, the qualification of the disentangle as analytical rather than empirical highlights that I am *not* suggesting that cognition and emotion are independent or unrelated phenomena. In a compelling argumentation, Charles Taylor (1985, p. 61) points out that “We often say ‘I know that X, but I feel that Y’, or ‘I know that X, but I don’t feel it’. But it would be wrong to conclude that knowing can be simply opposed to feeling. What I know is also grounded in certain feelings. It is just that I understand these

considered, the previous exposition of the psychoanalytical insight shows how the invested emotional energy is the decisive aspect for the connection between actor, text, and audience, that is, fusion with the performance. In addition, the exemplification of Donald Trump’s case illustrates how emotions (in this instance, negative ones) elicited by the performance means fusion, even without the convincement of the text projected. Thus, the emotional engagement of an audience should be conceptualized as the main axis to define fusion, whereas identification (or not) and agreement (or not) tell us the valance of such engagement (positive or negative).

With that in mind, I proposed the construction of a two-dimensional model of fusion, as illustrated in Table 1. These two dimensions result in the disaggregation of four different outcomes: *positive fusion*, *negative fusion*, *partial fusion*, and *de-fusion*. At the same time, this variety is not just a qualitative distinction of four types of outcomes; it is also a quantitative matter of how much emotional energy we embody in the performance: from zero (de-fusion) to plenty (positive/negative fusion). These four types can be considered ‘ideal-types,’ in which the transition between them can be seen as a continuum, from a high emotional charge to a low emotional charge.

Table 1. Two-dimensional model of fusion.

	Emotionally Affected	Emotionally NOT Affected
Identification with the Actor and Agreement with the Script	Positive Fusion	Partial Fusion
Disagreement or Indifference with the Actor and Script	Negative Fusion	De-Fusion

Positive Fusion

feelings to incorporate a deeper, more adequate sense of our moral predicament. If feeling is an affective awareness of situation, I see these feelings as reflecting my moral situation as it truly is; the imports they attribute truly apply.” In a sociological connection of the terms, James Jasper (2018) has proposed a precise terminology to nominate our emotional body reactions: *feeling-thinking process*. “Feeling is a form of thinking,” Jasper (2018, p. 7) suggests. Acknowledging both authors’ insights (and many others that I will not cite to avoid repetitions), my proposition of disaggregating cognition and emotions is not to deny their empirical connection, likewise Emirbayer and Goldberg (2005) claim that emotions have an analytical independence and also a mutual constitution with the other environments of action. Instead, I aim to offer a comprehensive model for more precise inquiries of performative affection and its outcomes.

In terms of emotional connection, positive fusion represents the most powerful outcome. It aligns closely with the ritual in the Durkheimian sense, characterized by a deeply fused performance. Even without a theoretical emphasis on the role of emotions, positive fusion is what cultural pragmatics often focus on, simply referring to it as ‘fusion’. For instance, Martin Luther King skillfully projected a script that effectively persuaded the white audience about the black struggle (Alexander, 2017, chap. I). Similarly, the “dramatic intellectual” Karl Marx crafted an apocalyptic theory of capitalism as a performance-oriented script to inspire the proletariat to embrace revolutionary actions (Alexander, 2017, chap. 4). Following an electoral performance, Barack Obama became the president in 2008 due to his “gift of making people see themselves in him” (Michael Powel *apud* Alexander, 2010, p. 65). This identification process established a compelling and persuasive script, transforming Obama into a collective representation that embodied the discourse of civil society (Alexander, 2010, p. 29).

However, it is relevant to note that the cases mentioned in the literature on fusion extend beyond mere agreement or identification. The positive emotional response plays a crucial role in creating a genuine engagement, capturing the audience’s mind and soul. MLK did not only convince the white audiences; he emotionally attached them to the civil rights narrative. Marx’s fusion with proletarian audiences wasn’t solely based on identification but on eliciting feelings of injustice, outrage against capitalism, and fostering an intense sense of hope and change in communism. Obama’s identification with American audiences was not exclusively a result of shared comprehension of politics; it was also due to his ability to “enter into the heart of citizens audience” (Alexander, 2010, p. 18).

Negative Fusion

Like the positive ones, *negative fusion* produces a powerful attachment to the performance. If we hate someone – suppose, a political candidate – we can completely disagree with everything they are saying. Nevertheless, we will continue to be hypnotized by their speeches (following them on Twitter, watching every interview, seeing all the news about them, etc.). We do not just pay attention to whom we hate; we also mobilize the circulation of feelings like fear, anger, annoyance, and outrage while watching their

performance. The audience might know they will feel that way, but even if they try to avoid it, they will continue to fuse with the actor. The performance is effective, and the meaning projected is made real.

In cultural pragmatics literature, one example of the negative fusion is the performance of terror on 9/11. As Alexander (2004b) acknowledges, the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center was highly successful. However, the analysis points to a performance of terror that paradoxically fused some Arab-Islamic audiences while de-fused with the American ones: “What was heroism for one audience was terrorism for the other” (Alexander, 2004b, p. 99). The statement of successful terrorism as de-fusion is not accurate. Could we say that 9/11 was seen by American society as a fake, artificial, and unauthentic performance? Did they not get connected with the actors involved within an oppositional relationship, especially bin Laden, an icon that symbolized the “radical evil” (Alexander, 2012) against the Western civilization that should be persecuted and killed? Did the population not feel fear, scared, and threatened not only physically but also ontologically? Alexander’s analysis effectively highlights these points. However, it fails to recognize them as fusion. If we call fusion the reaction of both audiences, one positive and one negative, the analysis would be straightforward and more precise. It also offers a better understanding of the American counter-performance, the ‘War against terrorism’, as a reaction possible due to their connection with the performance.

With negative fusion, we open cultural pragmatics to studying compelling analytical environments, such as massacres and extreme violence cases. Nevertheless, this new tool can also be used inventively for others instigating cases. For example, we could use this concept to talk about ironic humor. Laughing is also an emotional reaction that could be triggered for several reasons. One is when the performance is interpreted as ridiculous, embarrassing, or producing a sense of cringe. With that, the audiences engage in a risible emotional reaction even though they disagree with the script (“that is bad...”) and even less identify with the actor (“he/she is a fool...”). What is compelling in this situation is how, for the wrong reasons, the performance becomes remarkable, and the actor gets (probably unintended) the audience’s attention. The ironic humor is remarkable in social media, in which ‘likes’, ‘comments’, and ‘sharings’ do not always represent an empathic identification. Someone can become a ‘trend’ due to its ridiculousness.

Partial Fusion

As Alexander (2004a, p. 531) states, “observation can be merely cognitive. An audience can see and can understand without experiencing emotional or moral signification”. This affirmation is, in fact, true. However, the result of the “merely cognitive” connection is considerably different – and weaker – compared to both types of emotional connection mentioned above. This audience response is what I call *partial fusion*. The lack of the actor’s charisma and story-telling appeal creates an incomplete type of fusion that misses the emotional affection to be complete. Without that, the audience cannot become fully committed to the performance, even agreeing with what is being said.

This performative outcome might be illustrated by Joe Biden’s performance of power as US President. Even his colleagues in the Democratic Party would agree that Biden’s discourse, despite its accuracy and intellectual format, does not produce any passion in the audience. “There’s a charisma issue”, said an insider of the democratic party to The New York Times (2022). In Fox News (2023), Jesse Waters was radical: “Joe Biden has ‘the charisma of a turtle’”. Thus, even with a successful performative election (proven by his victory), he is not seen as a leader who embodies the spirit of the nation, someone who should be followed until the end. Therefore, the connection with the audience is just partial.

De-fusion

Last, *de-fusion* is a complete indifference to the story being told. The performance is not remarkable at all. It does not touch our body or soul, positive or negative, and falls into oblivion as if it has never happened. Disagreements move us; indifference does not. In the cultural pragmatics applications on empirical cases, the analysis of the UK response to the covid-19 pandemic (McCormick, 2020; Morgan, 2020) is a remarkable case of de-fusion. The government would have failed to convince and persuade the audiences that the pandemic was an apocalyptic crisis that should be feared, and the audiences ended up being indifferent towards the event. Thus, the governmental action did not have efficacy as there was neither emotional nor cognitive comprehension that it was a situation that demanded intervention.

Outside the analysis of cultural pragmatics, the sociological literature on collective forgetting provides Rosa Parks as a compelling example of de-fusion (Schwartz, 2009; see also Kubal, Becerra, 2014, p. 869). In this case, it would not be exactly Rosa Parks the performative de-fusion, but all the other activists – the “invisible leader” (Barnett, 1993) – that Parks’ fame cast a shadow over. She was not the first to rebel against the segregated seating policy in the 1950s and was not the only one to do that consciously as a political performance. Nevertheless, she is the one who stays in the collective memory and becomes iconic in the Civil Rights Movement. All the other performative actors were almost completely forgotten, as if she acted alone. Thus, we could say that the individual performances of the other activists were de-fused (forgotten, indifferent), even though their backstage work made both Rosa Parks and the Civil Rights Movement triumphant.

Consequences of the two-dimensional model to performance theory

In this section, I will demonstrate some related theoretical consequences of the model presented in this paper. Thus, beyond the clearness provided by the model, it also triggers a series of aftereffects that open the field in a fundamental direction toward its development. The reader could understand this section as a suggestion for a research agenda to further inquiries on social performances.

Intentional and unintentional fusion productions and responses

As the dichotomy of fusion/de-fusion indicates, fusion is the actor’s goal in every performance, whereas de-fusion is the outcome that must be avoided at any cost. Nevertheless, as we expanded the fusion typology, we might see different motivations in performative actions. That is the case of Donald Trump, which I have already mentioned, with a performance that has as motivation the simultaneous production of negative and positive fusion. However, even intending a specific performative outcome, there are other possible unintentional ends for the performance (and probably with unintended audiences). One example would be book censorship, a de-fusing action that has the potential to make the book more popular. For instance, Art Spiegelman’s comic book *Maus* increased sales by 758% after being banned by an American school in 2022 (see Forbes, 2022). As the intention was to disincentivize people to read the book, the result backfires. Thus, the typological expansion of fusion opened sociological

researchers to see success and failure in other directions: regardless of its type, was the motivation realized? Did the performance capture (or not) the audience's attention the way the actors desired?

Moving from actors to audiences, conceptualizing emotional affection as the main definition of fusion results in a new comprehension of audiences' responses to the performance. Even if fusion is all about the audiences (Malacarne, 2021; Taylor, 2022), "the 'I' [...] is not master in its own home" (Freud, 1917, p. 247). This Freudian insight casts attention on how the audiences do not entirely deliberate if they will be fused or not, as "emotional configurations not only enable, but also constrain action" (Emirbayer, Goldberg, 2005, p. 498). In that way, audiences are not rational judges of the situation – "arbiters" that "decide" and "choose to fuse", as Anne Taylor (2022, p. 75) claims –, at least not all the time. Following Margaret Archer's definition, emotions are "commentaries upon our concerns" that "are emergent from our human relationships" (2000, p. 195). With this statement, Archer separates emotions in a first-order and a second-order phenomenon, that is, a pre-reflexive and a reflexive moment of these "commentaries." The crucial thing is that, in this pre-reflexive moment, the "emotions are *elicited* by significant events" (Frijda, 1986, p. 6, emphasis added). When provoked, they automatically emerge. With that in mind, we could ask: did the left-wing social movements deliberate to fuse negatively with Trump? Or did he provoke negative emotions in that part of the audience due to his attacks on their concerns? I would say that the latter is a more accurate way to frame the performance.

Theorizing violence, conflict, and exclusion

The bias on the positive case sample selection creates a theoretical lag in which fusion is understood only as the production of solidarity and reintegration. The disaggregated model presented here, especially with the concept of negative fusion, is a valuable addition to the framework for accounting for violence and social conflict within meaningful communication. Now, we can open performance theory to other empirical domains that escape the current scope of cultural pragmatics. As a general model of action – and considering that every action is symbolic somehow –, the model should be capable of addressing every situation of action, not only the discursive construction of narratives and representations (as usually is done), but also physical actions (that are also

meaningful!). This would include violence as performative, a symbolic act that, if effective, projects an aggressive meaning with the audience target, a negative fusion that spreads fear, outrage, or at least physical pain in the one hit.

A theoretical model that simultaneously incorporates conflict and solidarity, exclusion and inclusion, is also crucial to understanding how one affects the other. Some classical sociological works already point in this direction. Simmel (2009 [1908]; see also Coser, 1956) shows how conflict and cohesion coexist in all forms of association and how the former has, as a consequence, the production of the latter. For Sigmund Freud (1990 [1921], p. 53), the “hatred against a particular person or institution might operate in just the same unifying way, and might call up the same kind of emotional ties as positive attachment”. Following Freud, Norbert Elias and John Scotson’s *The Established and the Outsiders* (1965) demonstrate a social configuration in which the connection of polar groups occurs based on in-group solidarity and out-group exclusion, with one reinforcing the other.

In all these authors, the equation of cohesion with conflict creates a broader view that is more appropriate to address social reality: “society as it exists is the result of both categories of interaction” (Simmel, 2009 [1908], p. 228). With the disentangled model of types of fusion, cultural pragmatics would be capable of addressing cases of cohesion, conflict, and especially both simultaneously. In-group solidarity and out-group conflict come together to produce the interaction of antagonistic audiences. We could define this interaction as positive fusion creating negative fusion (and vice-versa).

Processual analysis and fusion changes

The two-dimensional model, with four cells on it, opens cultural sociological research toward a processual analysis of how performative acts might move around the types of fusion (e.g., from positive fusion to negative or partial fusion) over time. For many Germans in the 1920s and 1930s, Adolf Hitler’s charismatic political performance produced a positive fusion (see Smith, 2000). However, after the end of World War II, his image started to become polluted, reframing the audience’s meaning of the performance to a strongly negative one. Nevertheless, this shift did not decrease the emotional energy that his image evoked.

A different example would be Abraham Lincoln. The former president and leader in the Civil War had an undoubtful positive fusion with American audiences, as he was recognized as one of the most influential men ever alive. During the last third of the twentieth century, however, his memory had declined in significance (Schwartz, 2008), becoming closer to a partial fusion than everything else. The new generations are not emotionally attached to him; they have different concerns about what and who is important (Schwartz, 2008). Nevertheless, they continue to recognize him as a relevant figure in American history. Now, people have more of a cognitive (“I know that he is important”) rather than emotional (“I feel that he is important”) connection with Lincoln. These shifts in collective memory are an insightful way to frame performative outcomes considering audiences’ emotional attachment over time and how actors perform to maintain the level of the emotional energy of fusion.

In conclusion

Since the foundation of the ‘strong program’ in cultural sociology, several concepts have been revisited, criticized, and reevaluated. That is the case of ‘*the discourse of American civil society*’ (Alexander and Smith, 1993), which evolved into a field that recognized the multiplicity of civil and incivil codes around the world (see Alexander, 2006; see also Alexander and Tognato, 2018; Alexander et al., 2019; Alexander et al., 2020), or the broad term ‘narratives,’ transformed into the structural model of genre (see Smith, 2005), or even the Durkheimian ‘sacred,’ with the discrimination of sacred evil from the profane (see Kurakin, 2015). Nevertheless, despite the importance that cultural pragmatics has purchased in the program, there was no major revision of its key concepts. Fusion, in particular, was a notion that had terminological issues and was never treated as it deserved. For further developments in the field, it was necessary to rethink fusion.

While other work on fusion usefully identifies and labels new complexities (e.g., Bittner, 2023; Malacarne, 2021; Taylor, 2022), this paper recognizes the need to simplify and organize the concept from the ground up. That was my endeavor. With the disaggregation proposed in this study, I redefined the “hardcore” assumption within the cultural pragmatics paradigm, considering fusion the emotional affection of audiences, whereas the agreement and identification with actors and script qualify the value of it (positive and negative). By opposition, de-fusion is the audience’s indifference to the performance, when any emotion is evoked. My ultimate goal in constructing this model

is to offer a solid basis that can be used for new (and more accurate) considerations in performance theory on topics already studied but also on creative applications in phenomena that cultural pragmatics does not usually address. Instead of choosing the same performative stage and black-and-white case studies where there is (or not) a fusion to explaining them *post hoc*, scholars in the research program should dig into gray areas to more ambitious and complex interpretative grounds. About this matter, the introduction of negative fusion as a conceptual tool significantly adds a new comprehension of meaningful communication beyond the preference of focusing on merely positive cases of connection.

At the same time, in this paper, I shed light on a ‘promise’ that was neglected. If for the ‘strong program’ “culture is no longer understood as a narrowly cognitive dimension, but mythological, which also implies an affective dimension” (Weiss, 2019, p. 98), I demonstrate how the affective dimension is overlooked in some assumptions in the program, especially in the empirical applications in which this dimension function just as a reinforcement to cognition. Recovering the idea of cultural sociology as a psychoanalysis of society, I pointed out the need to challenge the view of emotions as mere epiphenomenon to develop a broad incorporation of collective feelings, positive and negative, as independent variables. Then, in an “emotional sociology” style of inquiry (Emirbayer, Goldberg, 2005, p. 497), cultural pragmatics will have a better alternative to explain the deep cultural meanings that are performed and affect human society.

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