# Module 8: Performance, Performativity, and the Constitution of Communities

## Before you read

Much of what we do in our everyday lives involves some form of **performance** or **performativity**. In many ways, this module is about how we **do** things with language. At the outset of chapter 8, Ahearn presents with three ethnographic examples of phenomena that can be studied using the concepts of performance and performativity:

1) a normal, everyday conversation can be studied for dysfluencies, repetitions, and false starts (like, umm, etc).

2) A wedding ceremony in and of itself is a performative event. It takes on even more significance under circumstances such as when octogenarians Phyllis Lion and Del Martin got married in the [first same-sex wedding](http://youtu.be/8HksGMTXRxA) to take place after the California Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in 2008.

3) The creation of a Spanish-language version of [“The Star Spangled Banner”](http://youtu.be/Baf7nmYaTDw) from which controversies emerged over issues relating to language and national identity.

In this module, we will be learning about different ways in which linguists and linguistic anthropologists theorize performance. We will revisit **Chomsky**,and learn about the very important work of **J.L. Austin** and **Judith Butler**, who posit that we **do** things with words. Finally, the module considers performance as a display of verbal artistry, introducing the work of **Bauman** and **Briggs**. The peer-reviewed article I’ve assigned for this week by Brenda Farnell considers the performance of [Nakota Storytelling](http://www.jstor.org/stable/30028824). The article is challenging but quite interesting, so be sure plan your time carefully.

Remember, anything that is **bolded** is likely to appear in exams and quizzes and should be present in your graded discussions.

## Focus points

As you read, pay special attention to these focus points.

* **Chomsky’s** definition of **performance** in opposition to **competence.**
* **Dell Hymes’** further work on **communicative performance.**
* **J.L. Austin** and his work on **performativity.**
* **Judith Buttler’s** ideas about **gender** as **performative.**
* Performance as **display of verbal artistry**

## Performance defined in opposition to competence

For **Chomsky**, **competence** refers to the **abstract** and usually **unconscious** knowledge that one has about the rules of language, and **performance** refers to “the **actual use of language in concrete situations**.” As you may remember from module 1, Chomsky’s primary interest lies in the abstract and universal aspects of language use rather than in how language is used every day. In this course, when we talk about performance in opposition to competence, this simply means **the everyday use of language in real situations**. In other words, in this particular viewpoint, anytime you **use** language, you are engaging in **performance**.

Others, building on Chomsky’s work, have tried to explore what Chomsky calls **performance** or **E-language** (E standing for external). Famous linguistic anthropologist **Dell Hymes** argued that true competence also required a **competency for use**: specific and usually unconscious knowledge that one has to have in order to *use* language in the real world.

## Performativity

J.L. Austin’s book, *How to do things with words* was a game changer when it was first published in 1962. In it, Austin begins by differentiating sentences that mere *say* something (**constantives**) from sentences that *do* something (**performatives**).

For example:

**Constantive:** “It is raining outside.” Simple statement of fact.

**Performative**: “I promise to study harder.” A statement of action.

Think, again, of the wedding vows you just saw. Mayor Newsom is in fact *doing* something when he says “I now pronounce you spouses for life.” By merely **saying** something, Mayor Newsom is in fact transforming these two persons’ legal status.

**Performative** utterances can be **felicitous** or **infelicitous** depending on whether they are uttered at appropriate times. For example, if instead of saying “I now pronounce you spouses for life” at a wedding ceremony, Mayor Newsom had made this utterance while giving a commencement speech, this utterance would be **infelicitous** because it would not actually **do** what it was supposed to do.

Austin goes on to divide utterances into three categories:

* **Locution** is the simple stating of something (another way of identifying a **constantive** utterance).
* **Illocution** is the doing of something by simply stating it (another way of identifying a **performative** utterance).
* **Perlocution** the consequences of stating something –the long-term effects of whatever has been uttered.

But is there any utterance that doesn’t **do something**? This about Jakobson’s multifunctionality here. If every utterance has at least one **function**, couldn’t we argue that all utterances are performative? Austin responds in the affirmative: “every genuine speech act is both [**locutionary** and **illocutionary**]” (Ahearn, p. 165).

The work of famous feminist writer **Judith Butler** falls within this intellectual tradition. Butler uses Austin’s insight that to *say* is to *do* and transforms it into a claim that to *say* or *do* is to *be*. **Gender**, she concludes, is not something you **have**, but something you **do**. This will become particularly relevant in a couple of weeks when we look at the connection between language and gender.

## Performance as a display of verbal artistry

At the beginning of this module you watched a video of the 2006 song *Nuestro Himno*, a Spanish-language rendition of *The Star Spangled Banner*. Unsurprisngly, the song sparked tremendous controversy about patriotism, language, and national identity. I chose this example for this module in order to bring to life Ahearn’s example. The act of listening to a song –especially a song that is a powerful emblem such as *The Star Spangled Banner—* is different than reading about it. Perhaps this particular song provoked an emotional reaction. Maybe you felt uncomfortable, or you connected emotionally to the familiar melody even if you didn’t understand the words. Maybe you even found it offensive. The point is that **verbal artistry** is not meant to be understood intellectually, but rather to produce a subjective reaction.

Take a few minutes to read pages 171-174 in your textbook.

This [video](http://youtu.be/sbAWT0peS0o) is of a song by Mexican rock band Molotov. Notice that the song engages in different plays on language itself, including code-switching. Please note that the video contains material that may be offensive to some.

How is this performance framed? How might this song and video appeal to a specific community? How might this performance serve to actually **constitute** or **build** a community? How would you say this performance exemplifies the linkage of language with cultural practices and social relations?

## Ethnographies of Performance and Performativity

Take some time to review Ahearn’s examples of studies done on the topic of performance and performativity before reading Farnell’s article. Write down terms that are unfamiliar to you and questions you might have about the material.