Magic (of) Words: the Pragmatics of Signification in Popular Talismanic Practices
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Introduction
Linguists, anthropologists, and philosophers since at least Socrates and Cratylus have advanced numerous theoretical accounts of, and explanatory approaches to, the relations between the signs of human communication, their meanings, and empirical reality. Some implicit formulation of these relationships lies at the heart of epistemologies of magical practice, and of ritual activity generally. Perhaps the most essential form of the problem presents itself when words are used to effect change in the world, at least subjectively, not by conveying semantic content, but rather by virtue of some autonomous power in the signifier or signifying act itself.

Words are "magical" in such instances not because they necessarily comprise a distinct arcane vocabulary, but because the very act of deploying them possesses an effective force. The idea of magic presents us with a radically pragmatic context in which the media of human communication realize practical ends in an unmediated way. A striking example of this phenomenon can be seen in a material manifestation of popular religious culture: the construction and use of magical talismans consisting primarily of text.

A Theory of Magic Words
J. L. Austin (1962: 144-5) has argued that the implicit performance of strictly non-linguistic acts is a pervasive aspect of normal language use, more or less abstracted from the idealized generality of the pure 'statement' in any particular instance. As Austin (1962: 6) describes it, the 'performative utterance', and more precisely the 'illocutionary act', is the "...performance of an act *in* saying something as opposed to... *of* saying something..."(1962: 99). In other words, there is an unmediated causal relationship between saying and happening; the linguistic act *per se* instantiates the extralinguistic act.

Implicit within Austin's (1962: 47, 138) delineation of the conditions for a performative utterance's success - or, to use his terminology, its "happiness" - is the assertion that the intersubjective state of reality is constructed by prior linguistic acts, as opposed to the more familiar scheme in which we expect language to describe an *a priori* state of reality.

Making use of these concepts, I suggest that understanding the linguistic act as a cause accomplishing its own effect presents a novel way of theorizing how words in and of themselves can come to be invested with efficacious power. Writing or speaking, in a magical context, derives its instrumental force from a structural similarity or phylogenetic relation to natural language acts conceived of as means of accomplishing some effect.

So, while Webb Keane (1997: 48) has observed that religious language - and I will, provisionally, grant an epistemological status to the category of magic equal to that of religion - is distinctive in terms of its subjective "...interactions, textual practices, or speech situations", I hold that these differences in context and mode of deployment conceal an essential similarity with everyday language use in the final cause of its efficacy, determined by the internal structure of language itself.

Moreover, whereas Christopher Lehrich has argued (2003: 167-8) that ritual action, in its resistance to contingency and disorder, is most productively understood as a form of written communication - and as Austin (1962: 69) explicitly draws the analogy between performative utterances and ritualized actions - I will argue, reciprocally, that the magical efficacy of the act of writing can best be explicated by understanding it in terms of ritual action.

Popular Magic
By way of a superficially ethnographic introduction, a few observations: a recent search for the term 'talisman' on peer-to-peer e-commerce website Etsy returned over twenty-three thousand results, representing practical applications of religious traditions ranging from Judaism to Norse Paganism. An article by May Jeong (2015) in British newspaper *The Guardian* from September 1 of this year profiles an Afghan fortune-teller whose "...most popular service is a *taweez*, a tailor-made amulet containing Qur'anic verses that serves as a talisman". Japanese *o-fuda* scrolls, talismanic inscriptions traditionally sold at Shinto shrines, have of late become a catch-all signifier of supernatural power in anime and related media, and the formally- and functionally-similar *omamori* talismans remain a ubiquitous sight in Japan, often assimilating elements of pop-culture to become suitable fashion accessories (Mendes 2015). If these examples of self-consciously spiritual material culture, these technologies of magic, have managed to thrive in the modern, secular environment of the global marketplace, it is at least partly due, I would suggest, to the fluid nature of writing, which has made it an ideal medium through which individuals can project, make tangible, capture, and manipulate their own desires and fears - that is, perform magic.

As Eric Mendes (2015: 154-6) demonstrates through an analysis of the functional evolution of *omamori* talismans over just the past three decades, textual amulets adapt to address the needs and concerns of individuals at whatever place and time they are produced. The inherent modularity of language as a medium for describing, and thus for containing and structuring, supernatural power renders text a much more versatile and flexible resource for the construction of talismans compared to those which rely upon the static qualities of a substance for their efficacy.

Ritual Words
Edmund Leach (1966: 407) has argued that it is erroneous to segregate magical words categorically from the unified complex of ritual, that producing those words is itself a ritual act, and Stanley Tambiah (1968: 176) observed that the very efficacy of a ritual frequently depends upon the perceived power in its words.

For example, the methodology outlined in Ahmad ibn 'Ali Al-Bunī's 13th-century talismanic manual *Shams al-Ma'ārif* invokes the powers of Allah through the alphabetic analysis of his names and the theosophical correspondences revealed therein, while explicitly situating this essentially linguistic contemplative-mystical procedure within a cosmological framework for the regimentation of ritual activity drawn from Hellenistic astrological considerations (Al-Saleh 2014: 48-76). And, as Yasmine Al-Saleh (2014: 114-5) observes, the same logic, whereby invocation is embedded within a program of ritual prescriptions, can be found in Ibn Al-Murajjā's 11th-century visitors' guide to the Dome of the Rock, *Faḍā'il Bayt al-Maqdis*.

Going beyond the use of textual inscriptions as mere elements of ritual, I wish to suggest that inscribing and wielding the text can be an efficacious linguistic act, and thus a potentially magical, ritual act in itself. The inscription may not comprise the entirety of the ritual, but for that matter neither does Austin's (1962: 8) illocutionary speech act typically consist only of uttering the necessary verbal formula. If a ritual is conceptually a script of actions - fixed, coherent, timeless and thus reproducible (Lehrich 2003: 170-1) - then perhaps a concrete piece of writing, in which those same determinations no doubt obtain, is no less a locus of ritual efficacy.

For instance, the visual composition of most extant Chinese Buddhist talismans containing the *Incantation of Wish Fulfillment* dhāraṇī appears to closely reproduce the structure of ritual spaces

prescribed in that dhāraṇī's own sutra and other ritual manuals (Copp 2014: 91, 95), and Paul Copp (2014: 98-102) has convincingly argued that this kind of mandala-like simulation of ritual enactment came to be regarded in medieval China as effecting the same benefits as performing the ritual actions iconized therein. The talismanic coordination of words and images *was* the ritual. A very similar relationship appears to obtain between a number of spell prescriptions from the Greek magical papyri and contemporary talismanic gemstone inscriptions (Michel 2005: 152-3), and of course one of the most pervasive forms of text-based amulet in every culture which has produced such things simply comprises transposing the act of prayer from an oral to a textual medium (cf. Al-Saleh 2014: 99; Skemer 2006).

The performance of verbal and somatic adjuncts was sometimes regarded as necessary to 'activate' a textual talisman either during its use or initial construction (Robson 2008: 145), and the graphic or formal elements of some talismans, such as tabular lists of divine names, could serve to prompt such actions (Al-Saleh 2014: 212; Skemer 2006: 155), further blurring any distinction between magical device and ritual act.

If manipulation of the physical artifact or visual engagement with ritual cues or graphic images within a talismanic text could evoke a constellation of mnemonic and emotional responses in the user, it is nonetheless through the significance of the text itself that any juxtaposed icon is defined and validated as a talisman (Al-Saleh 2014: 162), just as the framing of scriptural language with formulaic performative phrases denotes the talismanic nature of a passage taken from a holy book (Al-Saleh 2014: 201-2). This recontextualization gives the sacred words new semantic and pragmatic possibilities (Skemer 2006: 126), without abrogating their essential meaning. Indeed, just as Austin (1962: 14-5) predicates the social efficacy of a performative utterance upon its conventionalized form, so a talisman draws its efficacy from the conventional ritualized language inscribed upon it (Al-Saleh 2014: 206).

Magical Discourse
As described above, the state of intersubjective reality comes to be defined to some extent according to the illocutionary discursive acts performed within it. This relationship sees its analogous magical expression in many instances of language directed toward supernatural entities, where the spell or prayer's explicit reference to the identities of interlocutors and the purpose of the communication is called for by the ambiguity surrounding participants' presence and location relative to one another (Keane 1997: 50); it is necessary to construct the discursive setting through the conversation itself. Catherine Bell (2009: 87-8) has suggested that ritual in general operates in much the same way, circumscribing its universe of action within boundaries set by the capacities and predispositions of its own methods, and if, as Marcel Sigrist (2005: 312) argues, myth aims to conform the universe to the constraints of narrative, and ritual is the enactment of myth, then I contend that ritual is the moment at which language becomes magic.

The analogy between form of semantic expression and the magical definition of reality is well illustrated by the use of *historiola* in apotropaic amulets, wherein a mythic narrative represents a particular quality which the amulet's words transmit to the user's present circumstances (Frankfurter 1995: 465). This kind of 'magical storytelling' frequently drew upon episodes and characters from sacred scripture which would have been familiar to the talismans' users, as when a pair of Mamluk Egyptian talismans described by Yasmine Al-Saleh (2014: 136), meant to be employed when one is granted an audience at court, quote Qur'anic verses in which Moses and the Israelites are admonished to be fearless in confronting powerful opponents.

While Stanley Tambiah (1968: 202) has argued that ritual is performed for the sake of its actors,

Michael Swartz (2005: 235) points out that the semiotic codes of ritual action are in fact presented for interpretation to both the ritual's immediate social environment and its supernatural addressees.

The rhetorical constructions within many medieval Chinese talismans, for example, take the form of commands to the spirits, sometimes simulating the language of official government decrees (Robson 2008: 145-7, 154). Likewise, Aramaic incantation bowls often framed the adjurations of the demons they intend to rebuke as legal formulae, such as those which would have been found in contemporary writs of divorce (Geller 2005: 62-3), and the clauses delineating the spell's purpose are made magically binding in the same way that the documents of human bureaucracy are made so legally: by the authority of undersigned witnesses - albeit the appeals for justification found in spells are often made to gods or spirits.

As Kateřina Horníčková (1998: 246) has observed, in using magic, people are seeking to expand their network of possible social relationships to include the non-human, to understand that parallel world in terms of human social categories and norms, and language, according to Webb Keane (1997: 49) "...is one medium by which the presence and activity of beings that are otherwise unavailable to the senses can be made presupposable, even compelling, in ways that are publicly yet also subjectively available to people as members of social groups." So, even in the radically pragmatic context of magical ritual, language nevertheless retains its function as medium between communicative agents.

Even unintelligible ritual speech or script, such as the 'heavenly writing' of some Chinese Daoist and Buddhist amulets, may be conceptualized as effecting communication, albeit of meanings, and directed toward audiences, of an altogether inhuman order (Robson 2008: 138-9). Indeed, the legitimacy of a genuine talismanic inscription is predicated upon adherence to an internal logic (Robson 2008: 155); some recognizable ordering principle is the characteristic that implies a script or an utterance's linguistic nature in the absence of decipherability.

Constructing Experiences
As I hope to have conveyed so far, magical practices, as complexes of signifying actions, are in a fundamental way linguistic, and hence tend to evolve along with technologies of language. So it is that David Frankfurter (1994: 190) argues that spell-bearing amulets "...reflect in subtle ways the indigenous concepts of the oral and written word of a given culture."

The divergent modes of signification evident in the distinction between magical text as ritually-empowered object, and magical text as independent power source, would seem to correspond to Baudrillard's distinction between simulation and simulacrum: the former 'copies' and perpetually reproduces a ritual, whereas the latter has no such antecedent, and subsists as a ritual in its very inscription. The abstract *characterês*, vowel liturgies, and *voces magicae* of the Greek magical papyri, for instance, do not appear to correspond to any semantic content, but rather draw their power from what Frankfurter (1994: 201, 205-7) calls "...the *idea* of a sacred alphabet or writing system." These elements of magical vocabulary do not so much comprise a discursive system of technical terms, as they do a matrix into which the desires of the magician are projected.

How, then, do words as free-standing signifiers, unmoored from semantic referents, operate within the analogical relationships of magical practice? Privileging the subjective experience of participants, the role of language in a ritual can be understood in terms of its phenomenal cohesion with the overall complex of practice. In formal structure, possibly even moreso than in content, words must be congruent with, and act in support of, the ritual's purpose. As Christopher Lehrich (2003: 144) observes, "...writing shifts the locus of control from producer to recipient"; the meaning that users

project onto a magical text is a function of its imagined effect.

Just as Austin's (1962: 8) illocutionary speech act must cohere with its discursive context in order to be effective, the way that language is used in a magical act must be consistent with the systems of ritual efficacy in which the participants operate, and those very systems do not subsist in a vacuum. Congruence of language and function is not necessarily a matter of intuitively perceived qualities; the expected effects of particular ritual forms may need to be established more overtly. For example, the didactic invocations accompanying medieval Chinese incantatory texts, as well as the colophons appended to their counterpart textual amulets, explicitly construct users' understanding, and thus phenomenal experience, of the texts' magical efficacy (Copp 2014: 143).

As Paul Copp (2014: 7) suggests, the particular syllables of any given dhāraṇī text "...were *incidental* to... the 'stuff of spells' - the components of their imaginative depiction, interpretation, situatedness, and practice." Likewise, Shaul Shaked (2005: 2-3) has argued that the Aramaic incantation bowls of late antiquity were frequently written by Jews and Mandaeans for clients belonging to other ethno-religious and linguistic populations, and Karl Schaefer (2006: 50) suggests that the evidence of a bi-lingual Arabic-Coptic block-print amulet indicates that, in at least one Egyptian marketplace, Muslim and non-Muslim customers could be expected to use identical talismans. The texts' alien languages and liturgical presuppositions were no barrier to utilizing their magic. As I believe many of the examples adduced in this paper have shown, magic - whether we mean by that a performance or an object - entails a negotiation of meaning among all of the agents implicated in its situation.

Conclusion
In modern, secular, globalized societies where many individuals claim not to 'believe' that things like magical talismans in fact 'work' (Mendes 2015: 156, 161) - and yet, continue to purchase and carry them nonetheless - it is difficult to disentangle social signification, unconscious ritualization, the inertia of tradition, and belief in practical efficacy. The extent to which this complex of social and psychological factors mediated the beliefs of amulet-users in any given historical context is a question demanding far more attention than can be devoted in this paper. But, in arguing that the efficacy of textual talismans for their users is founded upon inherent structural qualities of human communication, I hope to have not only provided a theoretical explanation for their historical and cross-cultural ubiquity, but also demonstrated, as Yasmine Al-Saleh (2014: 99-100) has observed, that "[t]he practice of creating talismans was not just part of the vocabulary of the learned elite or the underworld, but part of the daily life of the practitioner." And, those of you familiar with the work of comic book writer Alan Moore may know what his creation, John Constantine, says about magic, but I won't repeat that in polite company.

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