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'Start-Up Nation': The Making and Performativity of an *Empty Signifier*

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Abstract

The article sheds light on the process of fabrication of a polysemous, ambiguous, and mocking French entrepreneurial expression – the 'start-up nation' – construed as an *empty signifier*. The fabrication of such empty signifiers in the discourses of entrepreneurship and management, what creates them and what they create, remains little explored questions. This article addresses the following question: how do repeated quotations of an empty signifier enable it to perform entrepreneurship? We trace the circulation of the expression from its first utterance in the political sphere by Emmanuel Macron, then French minister of the economy, through to the media and the scientific sphere, using a communicative analysis of Emmanuel Macron's speeches ($n = 4$), press articles ($n = 210$) and academic productions ($n = 30$). We show the shifts in meaning and values that take place, in particular the way in which the 'start-up nation' takes on denunciatory and pejorative values, and is transformed from a political *formula* into a pejorative, decontextualized *little phrase*. Our results enrich the critical literature on management and entrepreneurship, particularly the analysis of the performativity of entrepreneurial discourse. By describing the manufacture of an empty signifier through its circulation in social space, the study reveals the counter-power potential of performativity. The results also highlight the surprising absence of an academic critical dimension.

A 'Start-up Nation' is also a nation where everyone can tell themselves that one day, they'll be able to create a start-up.

E. Macron, April 13, 2017

Some French people don't recognize themselves in our dialectic, so we need to stop using the techno-speak of the 'HRD of the start-up nation'. Politics is about humanity and empathy.

P. Vignal quoted in M. Rescan, and A. Lemarié[1], December 10, 2018

At the VivaTech trade show in Paris on June 15, 2017, Emmanuel Macron, the president of the French Republic, announced an economic policy in favor of business creation and innovation and used the expression 'start-up nation' (hereafter 'SUN') for the second time. While Emmanuel Macron has only used the expression four

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[1.] Epigraphs translated by the authors (Rescan & Lemarié, 2018).

times in his official speeches, it has been and continues to be taken up by all types of media. Blogs, newspaper articles (Cassini, 2018), radio broadcasts (France Inter., 2018; Gardette et al., 2019), videos (Le Média, 2024), and songs (Keep Dancing Inc., 2020; Verycords, 2019) offer portrayals of an enterprising France that range from enthusiastic to critical, humorous, and even denunciatory. The resonance of the SUN concept in the public arena is far greater than its occurrence in the speech by the President of the French Republic. As the excerpts above illustrate, this multiplication of the presence of the SUN in the public sphere is coupled with a strong polysemy, presenting opposing understandings of the expression and distancing it from Emmanuel Macron's original speech.

This article ensues from the astonishment of a researcher in information and communication sciences (ICS) at the abundant and polymorphous media treatment of the expression SUN in a tense social context, and that of a researcher in

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entrepreneurship who has noted the appearance of an entrepreneurial term in unusual spaces: a France Inter comedy show that aired at prime time; a Leclerc (French hypermarket) aisle end display, etc. It is worth investigating how this entrepreneurial term become polysemous, denunciatory, and mocking.

Referring both to innovative entrepreneurs who are supported by public policy and to the social anger of the Gilets Jaunes, SUN is fundamentally ambiguous. It can be understood as an 'empty signifier' (Laclau, 2000; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001): an expression offering no specific or fixed meaning, typical of the discourse on entrepreneurship (Jones & Spicer, 2005, 2009). The critical literature has highlighted the effects of this type of discourse, specifically domination (Ahl & Marlow, 2021; Bröckling, 2016), the reproduction of social inequalities (Gill, 2014) and the taming of an anxiety-inducing reality (Kelly, 2014). Nevertheless, studies of concrete empty signifiers are rare, with most work focusing on a general level of discourse. Conceptually, the making of an empty signifier, namely what creates it and what it creates, that is, *performs*, remains a black box to be explored.

This article sets out to address the following question: *How do repeated citations of an empty signifier enable it to perform entrepreneurship?* Regarding the expression SUN, we address this question by analyzing its circulation in different social spheres. We also describe the ambivalent performative effects thus produced.

Our study is based on a communicative analysis inspired by the ICS, focusing on the communicative process (Jeanneret, 2008; 2014) and the analysis of language. We reinforce the analysis by drawing on an approach to performativity inspired in particular by the work of Judith Butler (2018), which understands performativity as citationality.

We begin by presenting our interdisciplinary theoretical framework (1), followed by the methodology deployed (2). Our analysis is based on data including Emmanuel Macron's speeches ($n = 4$), press articles ($n = 210$) and scientific documents ($n = 30$). The article focuses on three social spheres: from the initial political enunciation of the expression SUN France as an import of an Israeli public policy concept (3) to its circulation in the media (4) and scientific spheres (5). Our analysis sheds light on how the polysemy of an entrepreneurial expression is constructed and how its value changes: from an optimistic, meliorative value of innovation and change linked to digital technology to a pejorative and polemical value denouncing French social fractures. We identify linguistic forms (formula, little phrase, anglicism) that underlie the manufacture of the empty signifier SUN and its performativity. In the discussion section (6), we explain how our results refine our understanding of the notion of 'empty signifier' and contribute to the study of performativity.

An interdisciplinary theoretical framework

We bring together perspectives from ICS and management sciences, in particular critical approaches and theories of performativity.

The entrepreneur as 'empty signifier': A black box

The production and dissemination of entrepreneurial discourses are an important focus of critical studies in entrepreneurship (Germain & Jacquemin, 2017). The authors deconstruct the *taken-for-granted* assumptions mobilized by the producers of political discourses (Ahl & Marlow, 2021), as well as by the media (Anderson & Warren, 2011; Gill, 2014), and in academic and practical discourse (Hamilton, 2013; Jacquemin et al., 2017). They ask 'how the language of entrepreneurship works' (Jones & Spicer, 2009, p. 14). In so doing, critical studies have helped to shape the discourse of and about entrepreneurship (related to risk taking, seizing opportunities, mastering one's life, individual choices, etc.). They have denounced its underlying representations and ideologies, in particular its reified, mythical, heroic, individual, and ethnocentric dimensions (Nicholson & Anderson, 2005; Ogbor, 2000). Another significant contribution of this stream has been to highlight the performative dimension of entrepreneurial discourse, in terms of its consequences (Jacquemin et al., 2017) on the self and on economic and social relations. The discourse of the 'entrepreneurial self' (Bröckling, 2016) conveyed in different social spheres (political, media, academic) constructs a regime of subjectification that provides individuals with a truth about themselves, their actions, and their social relations. These studies have highlighted the portrait of the entrepreneur constructed by this discourse (male, white, from a privileged social class). They have also emphasized the reproduction of social inequalities (Gill, 2014) and relationships of subordination (Ahl & Marlow, 2021) thus engendered.

In particular, we mobilize the concept of the 'empty signifier' (Laclau, 2000; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001) used in critical works in management (Kelly, 2014) and entrepreneurship (Jones & Spicer, 2005), which refers to a 'signifier without a signified' (Laclau, 2000, p. 36). Understood as an empty signifier, the term SUN signifies nothing specific or fixed but serves to 'create the conditions of possibility for many competing and complementary definitions, meanings and interpretations' (Kelly, 2014, p. 906). The empty signifier does not offer a single meaning but instead creates a space within which different meanings can be negotiated and mobilized. In contrast with a monolithic and coherent vision of entrepreneurial discourse, as conveyed by the literature on 'enterprise culture', Jones and Spicer (2005) emphasized the fundamentally ambiguous and vague dimension of entrepreneurial discourse. If decades of entrepreneurship research have continually failed to stabilize

concepts, to define a 'center' of entrepreneurship, if the character and structures of entrepreneurship are impossible to grasp and constantly elude researchers, it is because of the very structure of entrepreneurial discourse (Jones & Spicer, 2005): a discourse filled with holes, ambiguities, and gaps, which produce an elusive, empty structure (Jones & Spicer, 2009). The 'entrepreneur' is thus an empty signifier or empty space, an absence that 'does not exist in the usual sense but to structure phantasmic attachments' of individuals (Jones & Spicer, 2005, p. 235). From a Lacanian psychoanalytical perspective, the empty signifier 'entrepreneurship' is conceived as an object of desire, catalyzing individual desires and feeding on lacks. It is precisely the unattainable and vague nature of this signifier that underpins both its desirability and its social and ideological efficacy (Jones & Spicer, 2009).

Thus, the empty signifier 'entrepreneurship' is devoid both of a clear, graspable definition and of realism, when it designates heroic, exceptional entrepreneurial figures such as Bill Gates or Steve Jobs, instead of the many more mundane, trivial, and diverse facets of entrepreneurship. The empty signifier then offers an illusory means of 'discursively taming' an anxious world that eludes our understanding and capacity for verbal expression (Kelly, 2014, p. 915). The performativity of an empty signifier is considered through its appropriation by subjects and its effects in terms of power, resistance, and organization. This includes the construction of a critical theory that examines 'why some can be called entrepreneurs and others cannot, what kind of power relations this creates and how this power works' (Jones & Spicer, 2009, p. 26). The manufacture of the empty signifier, however, remains to be understood: how does a signifier concretely empty itself of meaning? What reality does it create and what does *it perform*?

A communicative approach to performativity as citationality

To answer these questions, a communicative approach, focusing on the circulation of the word, is particularly relevant. We associate this approach with the theoretical framework of *performativity*, which considers that language constructs reality rather than describing a reality that is already there (Aggeri, 2017; Gond et al., 2016), while questioning the effects of language. This dual perspective invites us to concretely follow the empty signal word in its various enunciations.

Within ICS, organizational communication has focused on entrepreneurial discourse. This stream studies the production of norms, rules, and conventions; the logics of organized and processual action and the situations and logics of use and appropriation of the devices at play in organizational communication phenomena (Alemanno et al., 2016). It emphasizes, as in management science, the fundamental dimension of discursive practices in the constitution of the organizational phenomenon (e.g.,

Arnaud et al., 2018). This research also draws attention to the prescriptive power of the idea of entrepreneurship: it seeks to understand the effects of entrepreneurship and its discourses, in line with the current critical approach to entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, their semiological sensitivity enables researchers to explore through *what* and *whom* the prescriptive power of the idea of entrepreneurship passes.

The political economy of triviality (Jeanneret, 2008, 2014; Mœglin, 2015) is a particularly fruitful field for exploring this contribution from organizational communication and studying the manufacture of a polysemous signifier (i.e., the SUN). It examines the *communicative processes* that give rise to one or more 'sets of ideas and values that embody [one or more] objects of culture in a society, while constantly transforming themselves through the circulation of texts, objects and signs' (Jeanneret, 2014, pp. 11–12). The analyst's primary focus is on 'the processes that enable the sharing, transformation and appropriation of objects and knowledge within a heterogeneous social space' (Jeanneret, 2014, p. 20, our translation). By paying attention to material, symbolic and sociological dimensions, we can take the process of communication, together with its social, political, and cultural significance, more seriously, including forms of categorization, normalization, and domination.

This perspective resonates with Butler's theory of *performativity* (Butler, 2011). Gond et al. (2016) highlighted the multiple interpretations of the concept of performativity in management research. This interdisciplinary stream originates in the work of the philosopher-linguist Austin, who proposed the concept of performativity in *How to do things with words* (1962). Austin was interested in 'speech acts' or 'performative utterances', which do not describe states of affairs but rather create and *perform* reality. Butler construed performativity as 'the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse [the empty signifier] produces the effects it names' (Butler, 2011, p. 16). When, in *Bodies That Matters* (2011), she questions the relationship between the performativity of gender and the materialization of the body; she analyzes these effects of categorization and structuring in the process of communication as the establishment of boundaries. She argues that what makes it possible to define what is human is 'naming', which is 'at once the setting of a boundary and also the repeated inculcation of a norm' (Butler, 2018, p. 24). Naming what is human imposes norms of humanity and excludes what is more or less human or inhuman. This contributes to the process of materialization, which is inscribed in time and ensures the naturalization of matter. Similarly, the term 'sex', for the philosopher, is not the biological counterpart of gender, but the result of a process of naturalization through its repeated naming. By extension, naming the SUN would be a way of defining the boundaries of entrepreneurship and enabling its materialization through acts, words, and human figures. This approach to

performativity as citationality includes 'a regulatory apparatus' (Butler, 2011, p. 12) of entrepreneurship that reiterates itself through enunciations such as the SUN. The performativity of this regulatory apparatus of entrepreneurship theoretically resides in the citation that brings about what it names without itself being perceived and revealed. In other words, summoning the SUN into discourse as a self-evident fact that dispenses with explanation but offers a significant whole is part of the phenomenon of citation on which the strength of entrepreneurship rests.

To analyze the performativity of entrepreneurship and its effects through the manufacture of the SUN, we propose to examine SUN through two linguistic forms present in our corpus: the *little phrase* and the *formula*. The *little phrase* [petite phrase] 'is used by many social actors to describe fragments of discourse, more or less decontextualized, that are repeated in and by the media, notably because of their remarkable or polemical character' (Krieg-Planque & Ollivier-Yaniv, 2011, p. 18). This quotational form enables us to understand the transition from Emmanuel Macron's use of SUN to its citations in the media sphere. In addition to the circulation of the SUN phrase in the media, the *formula* allows us to consider its wider social and political performativity. There are various criteria that specify a formula as a discursive phenomenon: the fact that a given formula is expressed through one or more linguistically describable and relatively stabilized units, discursive functioning (a formula is not a fact of language, but rather a fact of discourse observable in situated corpora and contributing to socio-political issues), the character of a social referent (a formula is seen as an obligatory passage when dealing with a given subject), and a polemical dimension (the formula gives rise to antagonistic interpretations), often heightened by a relative semantic indeterminacy that allows the formula to be invested with diverse meanings (Amossy et al., 2014). The mobilization of these quotational forms enables a communicative analysis capable of penetrating, interrogating, and understanding the empty signifier.

Methodology

We explore the circulation of the expression SUN through the analysis of three corpora that mobilize the expression: Emmanuel Macron's speeches (*n* = 4), press articles (*n* = 210), and scientific documents (*n* = 30).

In order to identify Emmanuel Macron's four speeches, in June 2019, we carried out searches on the Vie publique website, a portal administered by the French Administrative and Legal Information Department. Two search modalities were followed to ensure the relevance of the corpus: using the keyword 'Emmanuel Macron' (2,222 results), then adding the filter 'Emmanuel Macron' as the author of official speeches (511 results). Opening each of the results showed that 63 speeches mentioned 'Start-up' and only four mentioned 'SUN'.

The press corpus was compiled from searches via Europresse. We set temporal boundaries (from January 1, 2016, i.e., the launch of the 2017 election campaign; to June 30, 2019, covering his presidency until that date), chose keywords associating Macron and SUN, and selected nine press titles: three newsmagazine titles (*L'Express*, *Le Point*, *L'Obs*), three national daily press titles (*Libération*, *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde*) and three regional daily press titles (*Ouest-France*, *Sud Ouest*, *La Voix du Nord*). This selection corresponds to a classic choice for a media corpus analysis (Blandin, 2018). It serves three purposes: to ensure that journalistic treatment is representative of political sensitivities; to provide broad coverage in terms of readership; and to diversify journalistic treatment of information by choosing to focus on dailies and magazines. After consolidation, the corpus comprised 210 articles.

The analysis of the circulation of the SUN concept was complemented by a scientific corpus. Firstly, we conducted a search of the EDS, Ebsco, and Cairn scientific databases for books and research articles that included 'startup nation', 'start up nation', or 'start-up nation' as a keyword in the title or text. This search identified 490 articles and books mentioning the SUN. More than half of these texts (60%) were published in social science journals and 27% in management science journals. We then narrowed the search to articles that included both the term SUN and 'Macron'. This focus made it possible to eliminate the numerous references to the Israeli SUN. This qualifier has been used since the 1990s by Israeli political powers and media to refer to their country, which hosts the highest density of start-ups in the world (Tawil, 2015). Senor and Singer (2009) are often credited with coining the term SUN, which refers to the Israeli SUN. We identified 30 articles mentioning the SUN and Macron. After consolidating and analyzing our literature review, we decided, in April 2021, to consider this literature review in the empirical corpus, owing to its characteristics (notably the naturalization of the SUN).

We carried out a semio-discursive analysis of these corpora. Using Tropes software, we sought to identify the styles (argumentative, narrative, enunciative, descriptive), the settings (identifiable through the use of verbs and personal pronouns in particular), and the universes of reference (grouping of the main nouns, which enabled us to grasp the context of the discourse) of the SUN. The aim was to identify the ways in which the SUN is mobilized, its universes of reference, depending on the contexts of enunciation, the enunciators, and the wider social and political context. In the videos of Emmanuel Macron's speeches, the analysis focused on the physicality and staging of the expression.

The presentation of our results follows the temporal logic of the expression's dissemination in the three areas that interest us (see Table 1): firstly, the political sphere (2 speeches in 2017 out of 4), then the media sphere (114 articles published

Table 1. Three corpora analyzed and tonality (value) of SUN

Value	Political corpus (until June 2019)		Media corpus (until June 2019)			Scientific corpus (until April 2021)		
	Meliorative	Negative	Descriptive	Meliorative	Negative	Descriptive	Meliorative	Negative
2015	0	0	3	0	1	0	0	0
2016	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0
2017	2	0	15	3	30	1	0	2
2018	1	0	24	12	75	0	0	2
2019	1	0	16	4	24	4	0	9
2020	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	4	0	8
Total	**4**	**0**	**61**	**19**	**130**	**9**	**0**	**21**

Source: own elaboration.

in 2018 out of the 210 in our corpus), and finally the academic sphere (19 papers published in 2019 out of a total of 30).

SUN France, the political sphere and the emergence of a formula on the French political scene

The analysis revealed a surprisingly small number of Emmanuel Macron's political speeches including SUN. We highlighted the universes of reference attached to this expression, of meliorative value, as well as several semio-discursive elements that facilitate the very strong circulation of SUN in the media and academic spheres, along with its changes in values.

SUN's tenuous presence in political discourse

The political corpus is made up of four speeches in which the expression SUN appears 14 times. At the closing speech of the Second Start-up Summit (April 13, 2017), Emmanuel Macron first announced his intention to run in the presidential election. This event brought together entrepreneurs around different themes: capitalizing on the successes of French Tech, learning from best practices abroad, identifying new unicorn territories and offering a springboard to five young companies. This speech includes 10 appearances of the expression, including its French translation, 'nation des start-up':

'We need to become the "start-up nation" within five years'.

'And what I want for the next five years is that, together, we can create this France that becomes the "nation of start-ups."'

'A "nation of start-ups" or a "start-up nation," as you decided to title your day in a nod to what Israel has achieved, is a nation where start-ups are encouraged to innovate'.

'Being a start-up nation also means being a nation where we liberate work, where we support entrepreneurs'.

'A "start-up nation" is also a nation where everyone can say to themselves that one day they'll be able to create a start-up'.

'And that's why, the transformation over the next five years, if we want to be a start-up nation, it's cultural, very deeply cultural'.

'This ambition, to become the "nation of start-ups," we can achieve in the next five years'.

'And so, to rediscover the core of this promise, to be fully a "start-up nation" also means succeeding in imposing this culture, transforming it, and multiplying it at the European level'.

'And so being a 'start-up nation' as of tomorrow is possible for France'.

The second speech took place at the VivaTech trade show, dedicated to innovation and start-ups, on June 15, 2017. Emmanuel Macron spoke as president of the Republic. There are two occurrences of the expression:

'Today, France is becoming the "start-up nation," and it must succeed in this challenge'.

'I want France to be a "start-up nation."'

His third speech unfolded at the opening of the France-Israel season on June 5, 2018. It followed that of Benyamin Netanyahu, prime minister of Israel, who wanted France to exit the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. Only the English expression was used:

This season will be the meeting of the 'start-up nation' and 'French Tech', to give birth to new cooperative ventures in the service of the common good.

Finally, a fourth speech was given by Emmanuel Macron jointly with Reuven Rivlin, the president of the State of Israel, on January 23, 2019. Following up on the promises made in the previous speech, Emmanuel Macron reiterated the country's commitments to fight anti-Semitism and affirmed France's willingness to maintain a cordial understanding with Israel. Only the English version of the SUN appears:

This season, which mobilized 180 French and Israeli partners around 400 events, attracted nearly 900,000 spectators, brought together players from the 'start-up nation' and 'French Tech', and numerous exchanges in many fields.

Signifying the SUN through political exercise

Two distinct uses of the SUN appear in these four speeches: on the one hand, the SUN in the first two speeches of 2017 was used to state what France must become; on the other hand, the SUN delivered as part of the Franco-Israeli entente, in 2018 and 2019, qualified Israel. With regard to the first use, the main contents are identical in both speeches. Indeed, the reference universes are entrepreneurship, nation, innovation, rapid change, and digital. The performative 'I want' is used alongside factive and stative verbs. The topics addressed in both cases are simplification of the entrepreneurial process and tax support, inclusion of all individuals (of all genders, nationalities, and ages), cooperation with European regulation, and digital revolutions (political, educational, cultural, terrorist, economic and social). Finally, the SUN is described by meliorative qualifying adjectives: it is 'indispensable', 'inclusive', 'new', 'profound', 'necessary', 'collective', 'formidable'. The few disparaging adjectives are attributed to behaviors linked to the past: 'rigid', 'absurd', 'shady', 'blind', 'intensive', 'cynical', 'greedy', and 'selfish', which Emmanuel Macron said he was changing. The concept's vision is expressly optimistic.

Nevertheless, the two speeches differ in form. The recurring use of the expression in the April 13 speech clearly aims to define what a SUN is and to associate it with France. When Emmanuel Macron defined the SUN ('A start-up nation is…'), he deliberately read the definition, while when he referred to France as a start-up, he focused his gaze on the audience. He concluded with conviction: 'Being a start-up nation tomorrow is possible for France'. By comparison, his speech at VivaTech was more confident and inclusive (the pronoun 'we' had supplanted 'you') than the first: as the president of the Republic, his speech was also more technical and concrete, with the announcement of the French Tech visa and the creation of a 10-billion-euro innovation fund. The SUN must therefore be born of the president's desire ('je veux') and be supported by him and the collective of enterprising people.

As for the second category of SUN usage, it likened Israel and its economy to a 'start-up nation', whereas French innovation was described as 'French Tech'. While the context of the four speeches differed, the vocabulary attached to the Israeli SUN confirmed Emmanuel Macron's optimistic vision of a SUN.

Establishing a formula

Our analysis shows that SUN France has the characteristics of a formula: It is a relatively stable linguistic unit, since Emmanuel

Macron uses an existing expression, and it is a fact of discourse in presidential speeches. Moreover, Emmanuel Macron highlighted a fragment of his text, encouraging its use as a quotation by emphasizing it in the sentence. In his first utterance, Emmanuel Macron began each new argument with the same phrase, creating a parallelism of construction between paragraphs: 'Being a start-up nation means […]', 'A start-up nation also is […]', 'Fully being a start-up nation also means […]'. While the president constructed the definition of the SUN in this way, he also, and above all, made the term an event in his speech, placing it at the center of attention. In the second speech, the expression was emphasized this time not by repetition, but by its positioning as the closing element of the speech. His speech lasted 33 min and 34 s, and he spoke in French to an international audience for 30 min and 35 s. However, it was during his conclusion in English, lasting 2 min 59 s, that he chose to utter 'start-up nation'. The change of language and the positioning of the closing remarks emphasize the expression and create a strong resonance in the audience's minds. Conveyed by the French Republic president with force and conviction, the SUN was fixed in his speeches as a model to be attained, associated with his person and plural contexts of enunciation. As a result, it resembles a social referent and has a polemical dimension, typical of the formula.

The SUN thus emerged from these speeches as a formula, ready to circulate and participate in the phenomenon of citation that makes entrepreneurship performative. In fact, although Emmanuel Macron made only four speeches in which he mentioned the SUN, two of which constructed the SUN as a central event, this usage sparked an unparalleled craze for the expression, linked to the president, in the public space and particularly on the Internet. In April 2021, over four million results appeared on the Google search engine for the query 'SUN Macron'. We now explore the driving forces behind this media circulation and its effects on the formula through the study of a press corpus.

SUN France, the media and the making of a 'little phrase'

A semantic analysis of the 210 articles indicates a strong evolution of the formula, through its circulation in the press and its transformation into a *little phrase*.

SUN and the choice of anglicism

The first noteworthy point is the French media's choice to retain the English expression ('SUN'). The French expression ('nation des start-up'), linked to Emmanuel Macron, appeared only twice in the headlines of our press corpus, compared with 210 occurrences for 'start-up nation'. The media's choice of the English term was made as early as 2017 and 2018 although the

differentiation of languages was not as radical in Emmanuel Macron's speeches. Why this media preference for linking the politician to an Anglicized vocabulary? According to Maillet (2016), the use of an English lexicon in a French speech reflects a desire for domination and even pretension, as English is used in the business world, particularly in sectors affected by globalization. The choice of English or French is therefore not only a matter of linguistic debate; it also creates a social divide. This observation can be correlated with the presence of two types of articles in our corpus. The first type consists of articles that imbue the SUN and Emmanuel Macron with positive values (or are merely descriptive). They pertain to entrepreneurship and the state's desire to promote this activity. The use of the English expression is explained by the dominance of a lexicon full of anglicisms in this field of activity, to which journalists are accustomed. In contrast, other articles used the English expression to more strongly denounce the multiplication of social conflicts attributed to this political vision linked to Emmanuel Macron. The media thus deemed this use of 'franglais' (blend of French and English) pretentious and an element that widens social divisions.

Decontextualizing and personifying the SUN

Secondly, a study of the corpus shows that no entire phrase uttered by Emmanuel Macron is cited in the media, it is exclusively the SUN formula that is extracted from its context: neither the speech in which it appeared nor the date of its utterance was mentioned. Specifically, the expression is embodied by Emmanuel Macron. More precisely, 180 appearances of the formula in our corpus provided no context: SUN was placed in a new context, chosen by the journalist who then became the new enunciator. An example from *Le Figaro* illustrates this perfectly. Neither Notre-Dame Cathedral nor the theme of architecture was mentioned by Emmanuel Macron in his speeches, yet the journalist established a link between the expression and the burning of the monument, without explaining where he got the expression SUN from:

> The progressives who govern us are incapable of conceiving that the masterpieces of the past, such as the Paris cathedral, are ahead of us, the philosopher warns. Decidedly, for the past few months, whatever happens, President Emmanuel Macron has been reminded of this truth, cruel for him: he is not at the head of a start-up nation but of a people, that is to say, of a historically constituted community, heir to a long, very long history. (Levet, 2019)

No link is made between the formula and the four speeches or even the themes they address. There is only a connection between the formula and the politician and their supposed political will without any contextual justification. The expression SUN can thus be considered an aphorization (Maingueneau, 2012), that is, a statement attributed to an individual, detached from its initial text, and susceptible to decontextualization. This characteristic allows the SUN to circulate in the media space, changing its value. Of the 145 articles in which Emmanuel Macron is credited with coining the term SUN, the majority ($n = 104$) featured a negative assessment of him. While he was defined by many of his functions, such as 'investment banker at Rothschild' or 'minister of the economy', the use of disparaging nicknames tarnished his image in readers' eyes. Further, Emmanuel Macron came across as arrogant: 'The current president of the Republic still seems to despise counterbalances', 'This France of indignant reason is forcing Macron to come down to earth', and 'the insolent youngster'. The articles also emphasise Emmanuel Macron's claim to totalitarian power. Monarchical metaphors are frequent: 'When you have theorized about republican monarchy, can you come down from your throne without going up on the scaffold?' 'Monarch president', 'Monarch-thaumaturge-president Emmanuel the 1st', even the emperor metaphor 'President Bonaparte'. He is also described as an impatient person: 'the calendar of the timekeeper since his election', 'a spoiled child stamping his feet with impatience, even before an inventory had been drawn up, Emmanuel Macron was setting a deadline'. Finally, Emmanuel Macron was compared to a business leader: 'a ''control freak'' manager', 'Emmanuel Macron, CEO of the multinational France?' A glaring difference thus emerged between Emmanuel Macron's eminently positive vision of the SUN and the predominantly negative one conveyed by the press. The association between Emmanuel Macron and the SUN mostly did the concept no credit; it was sullied with the depreciatory image attributed to its original enunciator.

The polemical and pejorative SUN: A little phrase

Apart from its link to Emmanuel Macron, the SUN has experienced changes in the universes of reference associated with it. Whereas Emmanuel Macron's speeches were expressly optimistic about the concept, the press portrayed a predominantly negative image of the SUN (see Table 1). The lexicon used to describe it also differed greatly from official discourse: the SUN is seen as misleading ('the ''start-up nation'' is nothing but fluff') and utopian ('Welcome to ''startup nation,'' Emmanuel Macron's dream country'); it is a model of exclusion that arouses incomprehension. The formula's media circulation turned it into a little phrase, a fragment of decontextualized and pejorative political discourse, denied, criticized, denounced, or condemned. In the articles analyzed, we found Emmanuel Macron's five universes of reference, which clash with the universe of reference of social conflict that was absent from presidential speeches. For example, the Gilets jaunes crisis was

linked to the SUN by five newspapers (*L'Obs*, *Le Monde*, *Libération*, *Ouest-France*, *Sud Ouest*): the SUN was described not as being at the root of social conflict but rather as increasing inequalities that already exist. In fact, the rhetoric developed in all the newspapers is based on opposition. According to the media, the SUN is built on oppositions, which the article 'Classes populaires : le cri d'alarme de Darmanin' in *Le Figaro* (06/06/2019) condensed particularly well: 'The opposition between two Frances—the one that benefits from globalization and the one that feels victimized by it, the one of the 'insiders' and the one of the excluded, the one of the heart of the metropolis and the one of the urban periphery and rurality—is not new'.

The rampant circulation of the SUN formula, which has become a *little phrase*, decontextualized, pejorative, and polemical, coupled with its high frequency and its appearance in various editorial lines, implies that it has pervaded many societal debates. It has penetrated and settled into the texture of language, repeated like a shared truism. Readers, not to mention researchers, cannot ignore this expression of entrepreneurship.

SUN in the scientific world

Overview of a research non-object

In parallel with the media, the academic world has largely seized upon the SUN. Interestingly, the majority of the term's references (26 out of 30) were found in contributions dealing with a subject other than Emmanuel Macron's economic policy in favor of start-ups, while only four articles dealt directly with the SUN. The main subject matter of academic productions citing the SUN can be grouped into four broad categories, close to those of the media sphere: the SUN (4 articles), French social fractures (the Gilets jaunes movement) (5), public policies and the exercise of power (notably by Emmanuel Macron) (13), entrepreneurship, and start-ups (8). The list of articles is presented in Appendix 1.

In the 26 contributions devoted to another main subject, the expression SUN was used by the authors in a totally anecdotal, incidental manner. The term appeared very sparingly, usually only once or twice in each text. SUN is hardly an academic research subject in its own right.

A decontextualized, embodied expression

As in the press, SUN is generally used in a decontextualized way in academia, without reference to the context in which Emmanuel Macron uttered it. The expression appears to be self-evident, a concept that has entered common parlance, with a stabilized meaning. It is an element of context, unquestioned and unquestionable, used in an argument on another theme. It is thus naturalized. For example:

At a time when the cause of the reindustrialization seemed lost, and where France affirmed itself as a start-up nation, industrial policy seems to rise from the ashes where it was least expected, in Germany and in Europe. (Buigues & Cohen, 2019)

The fable of emergence, where faith in the technological revolution and the market would like to take the place of common hope with the former metropolis, no more convinces the man in the African street than the discourse of the start-up nation convinces the Gilets jaunes. (Giovalucchi, 2020)

Of the four articles dealing explicitly with SUN, only two (Canut, 2018; Quijoux & Saint-Martin, 2020) traced the genealogy of the expression and cited Emmanuel Macron's speeches containing it. The other two made a more decontextualized use of the term (Martinache, 2019; Schmelck, 2018).

In addition, as in the media sphere, SUN is personified. Firstly, in the French context, the paternity of SUN was attributed to Emmanuel Macron; secondly, SUN was described as a key element, even a matrix, of his policy, a descriptor of his desire to renew politics. Thus,

Macron's start-up party for a start-up nation—neoclassical economics, a hollowing out of the last vestiges of democracy and authoritarian policing, topped off with a slick communications strategy—surely represents a certain limit-point in the slow and uneven unravelling of neoliberalism. (Bristow, 2019)

It's true that the youth of the major metropolises, both graduates and ultra-connected, have recognized themselves in the start-up nation candidate and his promise of an 'open and mobile' society. (Devecchio, 2019)

The productions devoted directly to the SUN explained, while denouncing it, how Macronism, formulated by this expression, aimed to bring about 'a state in start-up mode':

The aim is to make public action more efficient and low-cost, to dematerialize it as close as possible to the needs of users, to 'modernize' it and adapt it to the 21st century. The 'modernizers' have no shortage of creativity. Since 2013, they have devised the unlikely alloy of the 'state start-up' to transform French administration from the inside out. (Quijoux & Saint-Martin, 2020)

Reinforcement of the depreciating values of SUN France

This circulation of the expression SUN helps provide a 'turn-key' analytical framework for the objects that preoccupy researchers. In so doing, the expression takes on analytical frameworks. Quoted, it names and performs entrepreneurship implicitly and in a generally depreciatory mode (in 21 out of 30 articles), criticizing both the political world and the social bond:

To date, the radical transformation of French society based on risk and innovation has not been supported by any form of popular consent or cultural production. The 'start-up nation' is a Californian myth that hasn't caught on on this side of the Atlantic […]. Everything seems to be playing out in the mode of dislocation, a dislocation marked by mutual mistrust, fear and hatred between the people and the elites. (Lapaque, 2020)

The remaining nine articles offer both a neutral evocation of the SUN to qualify a political context in which companies and start-ups evolve and an in-depth analysis of the SUN that follows an axiological neutrality. As one example, Canut (2018) argues that managerial language in politics (the SUN is part of this 'novlangue') 'however, ignores just one thing: language precisely. Language as the foundation of the speaking subject: its very impossibility. Language that masters us far more than we master it. Language that constantly escapes, dissolves boundaries and leaves us open to alteration of the self' (2018, p. 65). Finally, it is interesting to note that not a single scientific article approached the SUN from a meliorative point of view.

The circulation of the SUN in the academic world therefore tends to reinforce not only its polysemy, and its status as an empty signifier, but above all its pejorative character, due not only to the absence of a meliorative gaze but also to the scientific and social legitimacy of the enunciators, namely the researchers. Generally choosing to appropriate, without questioning, the little phrase circulating in the media, rather than discussing the formula proposed by Emmanuel Macron, the researchers' discourse performs a pejorative figure of entrepreneurship.

Discussion

Our results shed light on the materialization (or 'manufacture') of an empty signifier through its circulation and citation in social space. They reveal the power of performativity to destabilize social order and to generate collective resistance. Finally, they underline the absence of a critical scientific discourse and thus question the role of the researcher in manufacturing the performativity of entrepreneurship.

The making of an empty signifier through its circulation

We chose a singular term as the unit of analysis and followed it through its circulation over time and different social spheres. This perspective, centered on the performative process (Cabantous & Sergi, 2018) of citation, is singular in the field of organizational theory scholarship on performativity (Gond et al., 2016). It enables us to grasp the making of an entrepreneurial empty signifier, that is, its polysemy, vagueness, and the strange attractiveness that accompanies

it (Jones & Spicer, 2005; 2009; Kelly, 2014; Laclau, 2000), generally amplifying the presence of the expression (Bowden et al., 2021).

The phenomenon of circulation through citation engenders a gradual naturalization of the SUN that feeds entrepreneurship, a quasi-*commodification* of the expression (Cabantous & Gond, 2011): It signifies, in an obvious and taken for granted way, the arrogance, elitism, and politics of Emmanuel Macron. The signifier then becomes devoid of realism, denying the complexity of what it contains and what underpins political and entrepreneurial practices. Nevertheless, if the signifier SUN is emptied of any rational, stable interpretation, it is because it has implied the complexity of reality behind a figure (Marin, 1969). We can say that the signifier is 'full' of this reductionism. It homogeneously represents the President of the Republic and entrepreneurship as representative of social inequalities and an arrogant executive power that ignores those left behind, namely the losers of capitalism.

Between emptiness and fullness, the 'sublime object' of entrepreneurial discourse, the empty signifier SUN is not only attractive – it resonates and circulates abundantly – but also repulsive, in that it is mainly charged with denunciatory and pejorative values. The expression is effective. It enables us to tame a world that is distressing because it excludes us (Kelly, 2014) and to crystallize a set of 'phantasmagorical attachments' (Jones & Spicer, 2009) – disappointments, expectations, frustrations, and anger (against social fractures and a policy deemed arrogant and elitist).

Communicative analysis makes it possible to combine a study of word content, enunciator, and context with consideration of linguistic elements (aphorization, *formula*, *little phrase*, anglicism), a whole that underpins the performativity of an entrepreneurial signifier, allowing the term to be decontextualized, personified, and made polemical. In this way, our article intertwined two theoretical anchors that are generally mobilized independently in the literature on management and organizations: those based on the concept of *empty signifier*, mainly applied to 'leadership' (e.g., Edwards & Bolden, 2021; Kelly, 2014), and those mobilizing theories of 'performativity' (see Gond et al., 2016 for a literature review). We showed that a discussion between the two streams is fruitful and recommended the continuation of this hybridization, beyond the theme of leadership and the work of Spicer and Jones (2005, 2009). In particular, our approach empirically deploys the theoretical framework of performativity developed by Butler (2011). This framework calls on researchers in management and organizational studies to collaborate with researchers in CIS in order to juxtapose their methods and conceptual frameworks and uncover specific linguistic mechanisms underpinning the performativity of discourses and theories.

Performativity and power: the empty signifier as a space of counter-power

The repeated citations of the SUN *perform* entrepreneurship as a highly ambiguous figure. Indeed, the SUN gives rise to a figure of entrepreneurship as a vast, elusive social object, covering techno-economic (innovation, growth), social (the Gilets jaunes crisis and social inequalities) and political (a political power and a president) dimensions. It also depicts entrepreneurship as a social and political threat, which is the subject of denunciation. Our research enriches work seeking to link power and performativity (Simpson et al., 2021)**.** As Butler asserts with regard to the contemporary public mobilization of the word 'queer', which enables us to 'work abjection to transform it into the power of political action' (Butler, 2011, p. 45), our research shows that the word SUN acquires, through citation and circulation, a destabilizing power that enables a resignification of entrepreneurship. The citation of the (empty) signifier SUN then offers matter for collective resistance and can engender the institution of a space of counter-power.

Criticizing a signifier that performs entrepreneurship constitutes an act of 'micro-emancipation' (Spicer et al., 2009). Our research complements critical work in entrepreneurship that investigates the discourse structures or regimes within which individuals shape their subjectivity, for example the political incentive for women to become entrepreneurs (Ahl & Marlow, 2021), social norms, and expectations of entrepreneurial behavior (Anderson & Warren, 2011; Gill, 2014) or the *entrepreneurial* self (Bröckling, 2016). These critical approaches generally construe entrepreneurial discourse as 'acting', in a fairly automatic way. However, while entrepreneurial discourses are supposed to impose themselves on individuals, directly shaping individual and consequently collective representations – entrepreneurial individuals, for example, feel obliged to innovate or grow – our research shows that social actors are not only driven by entrepreneurial discourse; they also make this discourse act. By circulating it, they shape, transform, and subvert it. In this way, they completely warp the positive values that Emmanuel Macron attached to the expression SUN, turning it into a medium of contestation, a polemical object, and an explanatory framework. Choosing the anglicism SUN rather than its French translation is part of this creativity on the part of individuals, similar to the mobilizing by journalists and academics of the political formula to offer an explanatory context for the Gilets jaunes crisis and the reconstruction of Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris. This association of the two figures, presidential and entrepreneurial, resonates with the observation that entrepreneurial discourse, to act as a social norm describing an ideal mode of behavior (of autonomy or risk-taking, for example), must be constantly reactivated by the state (Bröckling, 2016). With the SUN, however, it is as if the social actors themselves recognize this alliance between political power and entrepreneurial discourse, in order to subvert the latter, to mock it. They appropriate the entrepreneurial discourse and its underlying injunctions by activating one of the means of resistance to the 'entrepreneurial force field': irony (Bröckling, 2016). If we follow Butler's considerations of the processes of materialization of 'gender' and apply it to these results concerning the SUN, we can consider that press articles tend to mobilize the SUN from regions outside the boundaries drawn by the SUN itself. This constitutes the 'disruptive return of the excluded from the very logic of the […] symbolic' (Butler, 2011, p. 31) materialized by the SUN. In this sense, following Bowden et al. (2021), we can qualify the performativity of entrepreneurship as a political process.

By understanding the SUN as a linguistic unit performing the real and as a lever of efficiency, our analysis brings together different perspectives on performativity. We thus encourage people to reflect on performativity in conjunction with power. In this way, we respond to the invitation by Gond et al. (2016), who decried the 'one-way' borrowings of theories of performativity, which are sometimes very deficient. The 'creative reappropriation' (Gond et al., 2016, p. 457) we proposed integrates three founding approaches. By taking a singular word as the unit of analysis, we returned to Austin's (1962) primary interest in language per se, in the study of the ordinary uses of language. We mobilized, above all, the approach of citationality as performativity (Butler, 2011) but constituting less the individual *self* in the context of reflections on gender, than the *social*. Finally, we echoed the performativity-as-efficacy approach (Lyotard, 1979) by demonstrating the social efficacy of the SUN citation. This creative combination of different perspectives on the concept of performativity demonstrated the value of not splitting performativity into an act of language and an effect. It allowed us to consider performativity in its communicative process and to fully probe its political character.

Lack of academic critical performativity

The journalists' discourse is close to that of critical work in entrepreneurship (Ahl & Marlow, 2021; Gill, 2014; Ogbor, 2000), which has denounced the structural social inequalities and contradictions lurking in entrepreneurship. However, the critical discourse here is intuitive, operating through ellipses and associations and not based on a systematic and reasoned scientific deconstruction of the representations and facts underlying or produced by the SUN discourse. The astonishing absence of deconstruction by academic actors, as well as this convergence between media and academic discourse on entrepreneurship (Hamilton, 2013), highlights an ambiguous posture on the part of researchers who, by legitimizing a contesting discourse, play a role of social denunciation, without this contestation being the explicit object of their productions.

What is lacking, then, is a purely critical academic discourse embodied by Butler or a 'performative critical' discourse (Spicer et al., 2009, 2016), which would consider the context and constraints of the SUN object. It would also take the term seriously, in its objectives, tensions, and contradictions, and engage in reflexive dialogue. Such a discourse would go beyond mocking, cynical and reductionist metaphors to offer more open signifiers for thinking about entrepreneurship, and for exposing the aporias and ambiguities that lurk within it. Opening up the signifier means piercing its inherent core of symbolization, which remains unexplained, resistant, and psychoanalytical. Our communicative analysis offers tools for opening this black box. Understanding the chain of citation that gives the SUN materiality means avoiding the reification effects of entrepreneurship and helping to combat its hegemonic character, which is a consequence of this symbolic imposition at the heart of the empty signifier. We are tempted to say, as Butler suggests in relation to the public affirmation of 'queer', that what remains to be done is methodically and consciously 'deviating the citational chain toward a more possible future' (Butler, 2011, p. 22) than the single entrepreneurial logic materialized by Emmanuel Macron's SUN. We therefore need to re-symbolize the regulatory ideal of entrepreneurship. This appeal is of interest to researchers in organizational studies and management, confronted with the empty, at times pejorative signifiers that populate the language of organizations.

Conclusion

To find out whether the citation pattern highlighted in our research between 2017 and 2019 continued thereafter, we conducted a search in Europresse and Cairn in March 2023 for the period following that of our data collection, using identical criteria. The press corpus comprised 390 articles published between July 2019 and February 2023. The scientific corpus included 44 scientific productions (29 journal articles and 15 books published between 2020 and 2023). We found that the expression SUN has continued to circulate vigorously after the summer of 2019. A cross-sectional reading of these corpora indicated an overall continuity with our results and confirmed, over the 2020–2023 period, our findings related to the empty signifier. The SUN is often cited in a decontextualized and personalized way. The reference universes are similar. The treatment remains largely ironic, mocking, even denunciatory. However, there has been a slight evolution in the discourse on the SUN, linked to the context of multiple crises. Several articles refer to the end of the SUN ('Where has the SUN gone?' [De Royer, 2020], 'the start-up nation doesn't exist and never has' [Woitier & Vergara, 2020]) and present it as a thing of the past. The covid-pandemic context has replaced the 'frontrunners' with the 'front line', that is, the most vulnerable and the disruptive state with a protective state. The Gilets jaunes crisis, combined with the ecological-climate crisis, has spawned a return to a more classical style of state and a renewed focus on traditional industry and territories. The government reshuffle of 2020 was also seen as the end of the SUN, with the head of state betting on 'the local, the popular'. Nevertheless, beyond this evolution, the SUN still represents and denounces a liberal, unequal, and elitist entrepreneurial economic system and an arrogant, urban, and brutal type of politics.

All in all, our research highlighted the way in which, by circulating through political, media, and scientific spheres, a signifier comes to be emptied of its meaning and performs entrepreneurship, as an elusive and pejorative figure. This dynamic produces ambivalent performative effects, particularly in terms of structuring and reinforcing power relations in society. We emphasized the role of singular linguistic forms in the citation of the signifier.

Our communicative study thus enriches critical research on managerial discourses, here entrepreneurial, by shedding light on the manufacture of 'empty signifiers' and their performativity (Huault et al., 2017). It encourages further study of the modes of construction and action of an entrepreneurial discourse that has become dominant, together with the posture of management researchers toward this discourse. It opens up research questions on the construction of figures of entrepreneurship and management in the political, media and academic spheres, particularly regarding their intersection and reciprocal influences. It also invites us to delve deeper into the anger and frustration that the entrepreneurial discourse catalyzes and to question its specific features.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Academic articles mentioning SUN France

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