How to *Undo* Things with Words: Infelicitous Practices and Infelicitous Agents

**Abstract.** This paper offers a new interpretation of Austin (the *New Austin*) that overcomes the Austin-Derrida debate by dissolving the dichotomy between construction and deconstruction and focusing on the notion of performative *reconstruction*. The essay also contains a discussion of the normative distinction between felicity and infelicity and how it affects the identity of speakers and agents. This discussion draws on recent Gender and Queer Theory and builds a bridge between the literature on identity and Speech Act Theory. The central argument in this paper proposes a negotiating model of performativity and a robust notion of discursive responsibility that underscores the intimate and unavoidable links between the semantic and the socio-political.

**Introduction.**

In his discussions of performative utterances Austin recognized not only our capacity to *do* things with words, but also our capacity to *undo* things with words. To begin with, just as he identified utterances that perform certain linguistic acts such as making a promise, or issuing an apology or a warning, he also recognized illocutionary acts that *undo* things: annulling a marriage, declaring a contract void and null, taking back a promise, etc. And just as the consequences of our utterances (especially their reception by others) can produce perlocutionary effects, such as being persuaded, feeling insulted, being amused, etc., they can also *undo* the perlocutionary effects of other acts, for example, by weakening or undermining prior acts of persuasion, or by undoing an insult, or by consoling or comforting those who have been injured in language by verbal aggressions. Moreover, all these are things that we can do or undo in and through language, not only explicitly and directly, but also tacitly and indirectly. Austin showed that most of our illocutionary acts are not openly and explicitly identified as such (“I hereby encourage you to pursue a graduate degree in philosophy”, “I hereby warn you that there is a dangerous bull in the area”); but they are often performed in tacit and truncated ways (“come on, you can do it”, or “watch out”, or “bull”), and even covertly as mere insinuations (an encouraging look, a disapproving glance, or a reproachful stare). Similarly, it is not difficult to recognize that there is an entire array of things that are tacitly undone in and through our linguistic actions, often unconsciously, often without either the speaker or the audience noticing them, escaping everyone’s attention. More radically, I submit that performative doings and undoings go hand in hand, that we are constantly undoing certain things while doing others, and doing things while undoing others. My goal here is to overcome any radical dichotomy between *doing* and *undoing*, between performative *construction* and *deconstruction*. This issue connects with the debate between Austin and Derrida about whether the force of our words derive from the constructive or from the deconstructive aspects of our speech acts, that is, from their continuation with or from their breakage with customs, institutions, and traditions, from doing or from undoing things within them. As I have argued elsewhere (2005 & 2006), our speech acts always contain continuities and discontinuities.
with the practices in which they are inscribed since these practices always have many possible trajectories. Our speech acts do certain things and undo others within those practices, constructing and deconstructing aspects of these practices simultaneously, that is, constantly reconstructing them as they continue them, reshaping or redirecting them (while discontinuing certain elements in them—whether actual or potential). My suggestion is that it is the pragmatic notion of reconstruction that can dissolve the false dichotomy between performative construction and deconstruction, and offer a better model of linguistic performativity. So my thesis is that, at least tacitly, all our discursive acts involve both doing and undoing things with words. On my view, linguistic performance is both constructive and deconstructive: it is a matter of Redoing or Reconstructing. And the targets of our performative redoings or reconstructions are not only practices and institutions, but also the people who participate in them.

I will develop my argument in two parts. The first part will discuss the performative reconstruction of the norms of a practice through an examination of how the normative distinction between felicity and infelicity is done, undone, and redone through our performance. The goal of this discussion will be to elucidate how our doings, undoings, and redoings can reinforce, challenge, and critically reconstruct the received norms of a practice or institution. The second part of the paper will focus on the reconstructive processes (the performative doings and undoings) that contribute to the construction of different aspects of identity and the articulation of speaking subjectivities. My discussion of the performative construction (or domestication) of identity will focus on the processes of exclusion and stigmatization that operate in our discursive practices and on the spaces available to us for critical resistance against these processes.

I. The Normativity of Linguistic Performance and the Practice of Infelicity.

Our linguistic acts can be felicitous and infelicitous depending on whether or not they successfully achieve what they set out to do. But what determines whether a linguistic act is successfully accomplished? What is the relationship between felicity and infelicity? How do we draw that normative distinction in our practices? I will start this discussion with an interpretative thesis about Austin, which will in turn take us beyond Austin to a discussion of the normative presuppositions of performative doings and undoings.

The received interpretation of Austin^2 has misconceived the normative significance of the infelicities that our speech acts are subject to. The mistake that the received interpretation of Austin makes is to think of these infelicities as purely accidental occurrences, while in fact they are constitutive of the normative structure of the performative. The standard reading of Austin misses the normative significance of performative failures and therefore also their critical potential. I will try to show that these failures are of paramount importance for the reworking of the normative structure of our practices. Let’s start with Austin’s famous claims and definitions:

Performing actions then, as actions, […] will be subject to certain whole dimensions of unsatisfactoriness to which all actions are subject. (1975, p. 21)

We shall call in general those infelicities […] which are such that the act […] is not achieved, by the name of MISFIRES; and on the other hand we may christen those infelicities where the act is achieved ABUSES. (1975, p. 16)

My interpretative thesis is that, on the Austinian view, performative failures—misfires and abuses
— are not mere accidental occurrences. Our performative success requires that these failures can occur; their possibility is constitutive of the very possibility of success, that is, it constitutes what success means in any particular case. This is what I call the Constitutivity Thesis about failure or infelicity. My discussion will try to underscore the enormous normative significance of the fact that our speech acts are always susceptible to misfires and abuses. In order to illustrate these two kinds of infelicities, we can consider the speech act of declaring two people a married couple—one of Austin’s favorite examples of performative utterance. An abuse of this performative procedure or ceremony occurs when it is performed by an impostor—that is, by someone posing as a priest in a religious wedding or as a city-official in a civil marriage. Here we have an instance of a violation of one of the felicity conditions—that the speaker be properly invested with the authority to perform the act—which nonetheless does not prevent the act from being achieved. By contrast, a misfire occurs when the violation of one of the established felicity conditions does prevent the act from being achieved. We would have instances of misfire whenever two people of the same sex are declared married in a jurisdiction in which there is legislation prohibiting same-sex marriage. But note how thin, shaky, and indeed movable are the lines that are supposed to separate abuses from misfires and both cases of performative failure from successful performances. Our example of an impostor performing a wedding illustrates how easily an abuse can become a misfire: it all depends on whether or not the impostor is recognized as such; it is the success of the deception that marks the successful (even if abusive) achievement of the act. On the other hand, the example of same-sex marriage shows how misfires can be turned into successful performances, as indeed recently happened in San Francisco when Mayor Gavin Newsom decided to grant marriage licenses to same-sex couples. But the most cursory reflection on these recent events show that matters are more complicated: some people thought that these locally sanctioned marriages were in fact abuses and the courts should correct them; and so far, they have been declared void by the courts and, thus annulled, these ceremonies have become misfires: acts that were never properly achieved and therefore never happened as such, strictly speaking. So the boundary between successfully accomplished performances and failed speech acts is not a hard and fast one. Even if there seem to be clear cases, there is always room for negotiations.

It is important to note that the negotiations that go into the making of speech acts and establish their felicity conditions can lead to different results from community to community, even within the same social or political unit. So, for example, while in most states of the U.S. same-sex marriage ceremonies are either abuses or misfires, as of now this is not so in Massachusetts where they are felicitous performances when properly conducted, for they have been legalized by the legislature (which was forced to do so by the State Supreme Court)—although the validity of these marriages will surely be challenged in the future. These recent attempts to expand the scope of the institution of marriage underscore the room for normative transformations that is always present in our practices and institutions, no matter how old and rigidified they appear to be at any given time. There is certainly room for different normative attitudes in the assessment of these cases: some people deem these same-sex marriage ceremonies misfires, others abuses, others infelicitous acts of a regular kind, and yet others felicitous acts that are simply adventurous and pioneer in their novel kind of felicity. But no matter how strongly we may feel about these cases, it is clear that the relevant legal, social, and political practices are flexible enough to allow for disagreements and reasonable disputes, leaving different courses of action open to us. Without disregarding the constraints that emerge from established practices, social institutions, and historical traditions, it is important to recognize that, within some limits, it is ultimately up to us how to carve the normative
space that separates felicities from infelicities.\footnote{5}

Our performative procedures and rituals can misfire, and they can be abused; but what is the significance of all this? Infelicities can be seen as occasions to call into question the normativity of our practices, as opportunities to critically interrogate the norms that regulate our speech acts and test their limits. As active members of discursive practices and their institutions, we participate in the reworking of normative structures, in the continuation or discontinuation of discursive norms in particular ways. For this we have to take responsibility. We are always confronted with new contexts and new possible ways of speaking and signifying; and our discursive agency has to take responsibility for opening or closing possibilities in our practices. This responsibility emerges with every use of language; it attaches itself to all utterances and to all silences (insofar as they are speech acts or moves in a language-game). Through our agency the normative structure of our practices can always be modified in a variety of ways. We can try to keep our discursive norms as intact as possible and work hard for maintaining them stable; but we have to remember that the continuity and stability of these norms, if attained, are always performative achievements, and achievements that do not eliminate the ever present possibility of these norms being augmented or expanded, diminished, and even reversed. The openness of discursive contexts grounds the ever present possibility of revising the discursive norms underlying these contexts, of undoing and redoing the normative structure of discursive practices. The rules we follow can always come undone.

The normative failures of the performative have a critical potential and can, at least in principle, be used as the path to undo and/or redo the normative structures of our discursive practices. Failing performances can implicitly or explicitly suggest that things COULD be done differently. Alternatively, they can simply be taken to be a way of calling our attention to the fact that things can NOT (and must NOT) be done in THIS (alternative) way. In this respect it is important to note the crucial critical potential that fictional discourses have. Insofar as standard felicity conditions are suspended in the sphere of the fictional, fictional discourses are failed performatives—and indeed Austin often talks about them in this way. Fiction can be thought of as abusive language or a kind of symbolic misfiring (abortive ‘language’). But this does not undermine the significance of fiction. On the contrary, this gives fictional discourses a special position in our discursive practices: they are very valuable abuses or misfires of language. Their special importance resides in their capacity to critically question the norms of our actual practices by providing alternative normative frameworks. Fictional discourses are invaluable critical tools in experimenting with the felicity conditions of our acts. By giving free rein to the imagination, we are capable of playing with felicity conditions: we can think up different (and often unexpected) ways in which felicity conditions can be violated; we can explore the consequences of these violations; and we can also invent felicity conditions that are altogether different from current ones and explore the consequences of complying with these alternative conditions as well as the consequences of violating them. But of course the distinction between the felicitous and the infelicitous is not only critically questioned through the imagination but also through our agency in real life. Social experimentation and political activism often take the shape of attempts at transforming the infelicitous into the felicitous, subverting this distinction and promoting social change.

As occasions of critical interrogation, infelicities play a crucial role in critically questioning the (movable) boundary or normative frontier between performative successes and failures. The
received interpretation of Austin’s view misses this crucial critical significance of infelicities or failing acts by construing them as something purely accidental and external to the normative constitution of our speech acts. On this interpretation, abuses are simply degenerative cases of speech acts, performativity gone wrong; and misfires are conceptualized as being outside speech altogether, that is, as non-acts, as very peculiar things that simply look like performative utterances: as performative freaks that have the misleading appearance of being linguistic acts but in fact aren’t. By misplacing the emphasis on the contingency and externality of infelicities, speech-act theorists have often missed that performative failures have an internal and necessary character: they are constitutive and unavoidable.

In the first place, the unavoidable character of performative failures follows directly from the fact that speech acts do not fall under the sovereign control of subjects or institutions. It follows from the uncontrollability of discursive agency that there are no guarantees for performative success: speech acts can always go wrong, or simply develop in ways that had not been anticipated (by the individuals and institutions involved, or by the codified norms to which these acts are subject). Occasional performative failures are bound to occur in our discursive practices. Nothing short of a miracle could prevent their occurrence. But, in the second place, independently of their actual occurrence, performative failures are necessary in a certain sense: although their actual occurrence is indeed purely contingent, their possibility is necessary. Whether failures actually occur or not, their possibility is always there, casting a shadow on our successes. Failing is constitutive of the performative insofar as the performative has a normative dimension and can, therefore, be felicitious or infelicitous. The normative dimension of performativity presupposes that things can be done right or wrong, correctly or incorrectly: an act can be achieved properly or improperly; and it can also be attempted without being achieved at all. Successful performances are achieved against the background of infelicities; and performative success depends on the maintenance of this background, that is, on pushing a whole array of possible acts out of the realm of the performative, keeping them in check as failing possibilities. In this sense the Austinian view of performative utterances suggests that the abnormal is the precondition of the normal and, therefore, infelicities are the precondition of felicity.

Whether intentionally or not, performative failures can become critical interventions in the practice in which they occur. The normative significance that attaches to an occasional failure depends on whether and how the failure is echoed and repeated in the actions of others; some failures may be repeated enough times so that it becomes a performative chain that, though initially parasitic on another chain, takes a life of its own and becomes an alternative practice or an extension (or alternative configuration) of the current practice. Performative chains are always vulnerable to failing practice or to what we can call the practice of failure or the practice of infelicity. Repeated failures, or the practice of infelicity, can amount to ways of resisting the established normative order that regulates the practice. The critical potential of the practice of performative failures cannot be overemphasized: the normative failures of the performative can reconfigure normative contexts of communication and reshape our norms. The practice of infelicity can have the effect of weakening and eventually relaxing the felicity conditions of an act, allowing for new kinds of performative success. It calls our attention to borderline cases and cases that are arbitrarily excluded from the realm of the performative. The practice of failure or infelicity can also suggest a more radical possibility, namely, that the infelicities of today could become the felicities or performative successes of tomorrow. Here we have a case of doing or redoing while undoing. This is, for
example, the hope of gay and lesbian activists who are trying to obtain legal recognition for same-sex marriages, thus redoing or reconstructing the secular institution of civil marriage while undoing its exclusionary aspects. On the other hand, the practice of infelicity can also involve undoing things while doing them or redoing them. As Butler (1990, 1993, 1997) has argued, this seems to be the goal of parodic performances that practice infelicity and exploit failing possibilities in order to expose the arbitrary bounds of the felicitous and the normal—i.e. the normal conditions on which preformative successes are supposed to rest.

As Butler puts it, when we examine our discursive practices and their normative consequences we have to ask: “Is there a possibility of disrupting and subverting the effects produced by such speech, a faultline exposed that leads to the undoing of this process of discursive constitution?” (1997, p. 19) Following Austin, Butler argues that the possibility of performative failure is always there and it constitutes the condition of a critical response and resistance, for example, through parodic performance. This omnipresent possibility of failure (which opens up the possibility of critique and transformation in every context) was already emphasized by Austin. But this is something that the received interpretation of Austin has missed and has, therefore, failed to realize that Austin’s account of the performative already contains the theoretical elements required to explain how we not only do but also undo and redo things with words.

The Austinian account of performativity suggests that the critical elucidation of our discursive practices and their normative structures requires the critical reconstruction of felicity: that is, the critical undoing and redoing of felicity, of the felicity conditions and the concomitant infelicity conditions of our speech acts. This critical reconstruction of felicity entails the reconstruction of normalcy, for the felicity and infelicity of acts depend on what are considered to be normal and abnormal conditions. Austin recognizes this when he poignantly remarks: “To examine excuses is to examine cases where there has been some abnormality or failure: and as so often, the abnormal will throw light on the normal, will help us to penetrate the blinding veil of ease and obviousness that hides the mechanisms of the natural successful act.” (1979, pp. 179-180; emphasis preserved and added) There is a taken-for-granted normative background that supports our actions and practices, a background of assumptions and expectations (“the mechanisms of the natural successful act”) that we are blind to. This blindness to what counts as normal is the blindness to the tacit norms of our practices. This normative blindness has also been underscored by Wittgenstein’s discussion of rule-following and in sociology by the critical studies of ethnomethodology.

The critical reconstruction of normalcy requires the inspection of those tacit norms that we are typically blind to. We have to uncover the conditions of normalcy that are assumed and taken for granted. While unreconstructed, these normative conditions remain protected from critical questioning precisely because they have been hidden in the background and have become invisible to us. The reconstruction of normalcy, therefore, involves undoing the normative blindness to which all speakers are subject; that is, it involves piercing “the blinding veil of ease and obviousness”. In order to overcome our blindness to the norms that shape our actions and judgments in the games we play, we have to step outside of what comes “natural”, of what is obvious and taken for granted. Hence the importance of disruptive moments which, by violating normative assumptions and expectations, bring tacit norms to the foreground and render them visible. In this sense, the practice of failure or infelicity can afford us normative lucidity; that is, it can restore our sight with respect to the norms that our own behavior embodies and responds to.
Through the practice of failure or infelicity we can repair our blindness and gain normative sight piecemeal, context by context.

It is of crucial importance to exploit the critical potential of performative failures, which can be taken as occasions for transforming the infelicitous into the felicitous and thus rethinking and redoing the norms underlying our discursive practices. Failing performatives can be used to redirect a practice, to undo and redo its normative structure by rethinking the (often assumed and taken for granted) conditions for felicity and infelicity. The liberating potential of the practice of infelicity—of stigmatized eccentric agency—can be appreciated even more fully when we recognize that the normative distinctions between felicity and infelicity apply not only to our discursive agency but also to our identity as speakers and agents.

II. Doing and Undoing Ourselves: Felicitous and Infelicitous Agents.

The norms of linguistic performativity are of crucial importance not only for the things we do with language but also for the things we are in language. Linguistic performativity has a crucial significance for different aspects of our identity, and not only for their expression, but also for their formation or constitution, as performative theories of identity have argued. As Butler (1990, 1993, 2004), Sedgwick (1990), and other feminist theorists have argued, gender is not simply something that we are, but also something that we do: gender norms are constantly being enacted and reenacted in our linguistic practices. And we can perform our gender felicitously or infelicitously, depending on whether or not our gender performances conform to the established norms of masculinity and femininity. This performative account has also been applied to other aspects of identity such as sexual orientation, race and ethnicity.

We perform these different aspects of our identity through our speech acts in all kinds of ways—through diction, tone, use of specific words and expressions, particular claims and assertions, etc; and the performance of our gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity is deemed felicitous or infelicitous according to its conformity with standardized or normalized social expectations and accepted norms of conduct. But there are different kinds of felicity and infelicity here. I want to propose the following distinction concerning non-conforming performances of identity that are deemed infelicitous. We have to distinguish between the kind of infelicity that is simply incidental and does not affect the identity of the violator or the status or content of the norm infringed—an occasional deviation of a previously established norm that is accepted in the community and can be appealed to straightforwardly (saying, for example, “That is simply not masculine behavior”, “Things are not done that way”, or “One should not speak that way”); and, on the other hand, a kind of infelicity that is constitutive, not because it violates any law written in stone or any essential constitution of the relevant aspect of identity, but, on the contrary, precisely because it institutes what cannot be done, because it exemplifies infelicity and thus becomes an exemplar or prototype of transgression, a paradigm of how things should not be done, setting and reinforcing the norms and normative expectations that structure the relevant practice (doing gender, doing race, etc). The former are infelicitous acts while the latter are the acts of infelicitous subjects. This distinction between infelicitous acts and the acts of infelicitous subjects (between incidental and constitutive infelicities) is a distinction that enables us to recognize different ways in which the normativity of a linguistic practice operates and develops: it is crucial for linguistic normativity that not only speech acts but also speakers can be infelicitous.

Infelicitous subjects are the non-conformists. They may acquire this deviant status in the practice
through an original transgression or series of transgressive acts; the status of infelicitous performers may also be attributed to them quite arbitrarily without any explicit violation on their part (on the basis of a rumor, a fear, a projection, or whatever the case may be). But however they acquire their status, the important point is that deviation or transgression becomes the distinctive mark of these speakers, defining who they are as linguistic agents: their modes of comportment, their linguistic habitus, and their ways of generating speech acts are perceived as having an inescapable deviant or transgressive character. *Infelicity has been inscribed in their very identity*; and they have been deemed inadequate for the performative expression of certain aspects of their identity: everything they say and do becomes a paradigm of how NOT to signify femininity, blackness, Hispanicity, Americanness, or whatever the case may be. No matter what the origin of their stigmatization as linguistic agents happens to be (their accent, their diction, any aspect of their linguistic habitus, certain aspects of their lifestyle, etc.), infelicitous performers play a special role in the normative economy of a practice as living and walking *exemplars of infelicity*, of how things should not be done, and of what can happen to you—to anyone—if you are not careful enough to comply with the established norms and the accepted patterns of behavior. For the normalization of our modes of expression and the disciplining of possible violations and transgressions (which cannot all be anticipated in explicit codes), it is of the utmost importance that infelicity can attach itself (and adhere its negative force) not only to particular acts but also to particular identities, which can produce an indefinite number of transgressions and thus delineate indirectly, in a piecemeal fashion, how things are to be done. Although—as Austin emphasized—there is no complete set of rules or algorithm that can guarantee the attainment of felicity in our speech acts, prudential considerations can be derived in an indirect and negative way from the following general rule of thumb: “Do not associate yourself with infelicitous subjects and stay away from their distinctive ways of producing speech acts.”

Infelicitous subjects are at the normative margins of our practices. They are *border people*, the very embodiment of the normative frontiers between felicity and infelicity which are drawn piecemeal from practice to practice and from context to context, and are used to discipline not only our agency but also our very identity. It is not only particular acts or even whole practices, but also particular speakers and even entire groups of speakers and agents—entire identities—that are deemed *infelicitous*. In the normative economy of our discursive practices infelicitous subjects play the important role of *negative exemplars*. This negative exemplarity is achieved by *inscribing infelicity* in the very identity of subjects through processes of stigmatization and marginalization of particular types of subjectivities and their voices—for example, transgendered and queer subjectivities. It is important to note that, insofar as these infelicitous subjects are negative exemplars, these processes of stigmatization and marginalization are also—indirectly—normative processes for disciplining the linguistic performance of *all* speakers; that is, they are processes to which all speakers are subject, including so-called *normal* speakers who are themselves a product of these normalizing processes.

As an illustration, let’s consider the stigmatization of the language and identity of Chicanos as discussed by Gloria Anzaldúa. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa discusses the language and identity of those who live at the limits or borders between communities—*en la frontera*. She tells us that at the core of her Chicana identity is a cultural duplicity that makes her appear as fully foreign and even deviant to those outside her ethnic group. She emphasizes that those who have frontier identities often display signs of cultural otherness in their faces and bodies, in their manners
and comportment, and in their speech. These are signs that often come under attack, being subject to the domesticating social and cultural forces that conspire to erase them. Our bodies and habits are disciplined; our tongues are tamed. In this respect, Anzaldúa talks about the concerted efforts “to get rid of our accents”, which she describes as a violent attack on one’s identity and basic rights: “Attacks on one’s form of expression with the intent to censor are a violation of the First Amendment. El Anglo con cara de inocente nos arrancó la lengua. Wild tongues can’t be tamed, they can only be cut out.” (p. 76)

It is important to note that the efforts to tame one’s tongue do not come only from outside one’s group. Anzaldúa poignantly remarks that her Chicana tongue is not only tamed —and ultimately “cut out”—by the Anglos, but also by other Hispanics. Chicano Spanish is not recognized and respected by many other Spanish speakers: “Even our own people, other Spanish speakers, nos quieren poner candados en la boca. […] Chicano Spanish is considered by the purist and by most Latinos deficient, a mutilation of Spanish.” (pp. 76-77) And this scorn and disciplining efforts come not just from other Spanish speakers, but from Chicanas and Chicanos themselves, who have internalized the alleged inferiority of their language and, ultimately, of their identity. “Chicanas who grew up speaking Chicano Spanish have internalized the belief that we speak poor Spanish […] we use our language differences against each other.” (p. 80) Thus Chicanos are left speaking “an orphan tongue”.13

The domestication of a border language such as Chicano Spanish leaves its speakers tongue-tied, speechless, indeed as if their tongues had been cut out, for they are rendered unable to express themselves in their own ways. The social stigmatization and cultural orphanage of their forms of expression amount to the marginalization of their very identities:14 “If a person, Chicana or Latina, has a low estimation of my native tongue, she has also a low estimation of me. […] I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself.” (pp. 80-81) This moment of self-empowerment through one’s tongue is a moment of cultural pride and cultural affirmation. It involves a demand for cultural solidarity, for the formation of a proud linguistic community liberated from self-hatred, a community in which the marginalized tongue finds a home and a family and is no longer orphan.15 As Anzaldúa suggests, a common tongue that can express people’s “realities and values” makes possible the cultural process of community formation around a shared form of life. Through a common tongue people can articulate their shared experiences, problems, needs, interests, values, etc.; and thus cultural solidarity becomes possible. For this reason, Chicano Spanish deserves recognition and respect from the members of the Hispanic community as well from other cultural groups. For this reason also, we ought to acknowledge the special cultural productivity of border tongues in general, for they make possible the articulation of new experiences and new forms of identity, facilitating the diversification of cultural norms and cultural expectations. The task of cultural self-affirmation through language is a complex and ongoing task. It is extremely complex because it has to be constantly diversified, making sure that no voices are left out.16 And it is also a never-ending task, for cultures and cultural identities are living things that are always changing.

We need to destabilize whatever cultural borders or frontiers are erected, whatever relations of inclusion and exclusion are established in the cultural landscape. This critical activity of interrogation and destabilization of cultural boundaries has to be performatively carried out through our undoings and redoings, that is, through our reconstruction or rearticulation of the ways in
which identity is expressed and perceived in our practices and communities. And it is important to note that the goal of this critical reconstruction, of undoing performative oppression, is to liberate not only infelicitous speech acts, but also infelicitous speakers with an infelicitous language.

The performative undoing of these processes of stigmatization involves redrawing the normative boundaries between felicity and infelicity context by context. It involves, in the case of Chicanos, creating the conditions in which the cultural pride and cultural solidarity of an ethnic group becomes possible, empowering the members of this group so as to guarantee that their economic, social, political, and cultural agency is on an equal footing with that of other groups. Sometimes acquiring a voice or gaining respect for one’s voice only becomes possible if society commits itself to deep structural transformations required to guarantee equality. In this way, the normative issues of performative felicity and infelicity must be thought of as continuous with socio-economic and political issues. Indeed doing, undoing, and redoing things with language involve shaping and reshaping our communities, the social relations they allow, their norms, and the material conditions and structures in which the lives of these communities take place. In the light of these remarks I want to conclude with the suggestion that we should radically rethink the notion of discursive responsibility, overcoming the minimalist notion that has been made popular in the philosophy of language by recent deflationary tendencies, inflating it if you will, and connecting the responsibility of speakers in their interactions with their ethical and political responsibilities as participants in social practices and political institutions. For, as my critical discussion of performative doings and undoings suggest, the normative issues that affect our linguistic performance are inextricably tied to ethical and political issues concerning equality and social justice. The contribution that my discussion of performative failure and infelicity hopes to make is to gesture toward a more robust notion of discursive responsibility, one according to which we should be held accountable not only for the things we do but also for the things we fail to do and the things we undo with language.

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Notes


3. I have discussed this example at greater length in my (2005) and (2006).

4. But of course the legal and political battle is still ongoing and this decision could be reversed by the Supreme Court.

5. The normative distinctions between felicity, infelicity, and radical performative failures appear to be fixed, absolute, and incontestable only when there is a background agreement about the norms of conduct which is taken for granted by (or simply forced upon) most—if not all—the members of the linguistic practice. This apparently unquestionable normative order can always become unstable.
and sometimes even break down when the background consensus is called into question.

6. As Butler notes, “the question of mechanical breakdown or ‘misfire’ and of the unpredictability of speech is precisely what Austin repeatedly emphasizes when he focuses on the various ways in which a speech act can go wrong.” (1997, p. 19).

7. Thus, by not calling into question the received reading of Austin, Derrida (1982) also misses the critical potential of Austin’s view. It is because of his reliance on the received reading that Derrida contends: “That the value of risk or of being open to failure, although it might, as Austin recognizes, affect the totality of conventional acts, is not examined as an essential predicate or law. Austin does not ask himself what consequences derive from the fact that something possible—a possible risk—is always possible, is somehow a necessary possibility. And if, such a necessary possibility of failure being granted, it still constitutes an accident. What is a success when the possibility of failure continues to constitute its structure?” (1982, p. 324; emphasis preserved and added) My alternative interpretation of Austin—the New Austin—should make clear that these observations should be considered as critical elaborations of Austinian ideas, not as critical challenges to them. See my (2006) for a full articulation and defense of this point.

8. Through a variety of breaching experiments, Garfinkel and his followers studied how the normative assumptions and expectations that structure people’s actions and reactions in particular practices can be revealed and made explicit when they are violated. See Garfinkel (1967) and Garfinkel and Sacks (1970). See also Boden and Zimmerman (1991).

9. I draw especially on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and (1991), but my view also connects here with that of Judith Butler and others.


12. A clear example of infelicitous subjectivity that is produced as a result of processes of oppression and marginalization can be found in transgendered subjects. These subjects have been used as negative exemplars of the violation of gender norms; and, when they have not been silenced completely, their expression of gender meanings have been considered intrinsically unintelligible. See Scheman (1997) and Butler (2004). See also my discussion on pages 84-85 of my (2006).

13. “Deslenguadas. Somos las del español deficiente.” We are your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration, your linguistic mestisaje, the subject of your burla. Because we speak with tongues of fire we are culturally crucified. Racially, culturally, and linguistically somos huérfanos—we speak an orphan tongue.” (Anzaldúa 1999, p. 80).

14. This silencing is certainly gender-specific. As Anzaldúa notes, in the case of Chicanas, the silencing of their ethnic voices converges with the silencing of their female voices. In this sense she describes how she was raised, as a woman, in a “tradition of silence”: “Ser habladora was to be a gossip and a liar, to talk too much. […] Hocicona, repelona, chismosa […] are all signs of being
mal criada. In my culture they are all words that are derogatory if applied to women—I’ve never heard them applied to men.” (p. 76) This double oppression and marginalization as woman and Chicana that Anzaldúa describes reminds us that there are multiple and converging fronts of oppression. The phenomenon of *multiple oppression* has been discussed and theorized by Lugones (2003). It is also the topic of my (2003).

15. Anzaldúa makes this point in very Wittgensteinian terms, calling for the construction of a “We”— *un ‘Nosotras’*—around a common tongue that corresponds to a shared form of life. She writes: “Chicano Spanish is a border tongue which developed naturally. […] Chicano Spanish is not incorrect, it is a living language. […] for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castillian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves.” (p. 77).

16. As Anzaldúa points out, “there is no one Chicano language just as there is no one Chicano experience.” (p. 80) Even for a single individual, taking pride in one’s tongue is typically not a single, unified task, but a plurality of tasks, with multiple fronts, for we speak in many tongues: “because we are a complex, heterogeneous people, we speak many languages.” (p. 77).

REFERENCES


