

Miscommunication: The Other of Communication or the Otherness of Communication?

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Unlike most studies of miscommunication, which understand it as the opposite other of communication, I reconceptualize it in this article as involving the otherness of communication. Using the resources of deconstruction, and taking into consideration the irreducible necessity of mediation through an other, I rethink communication without reducing its complexity. My rethinking is inspired by deconstructive readings of Austin's *How to Do Things With Words* and Lacan's "Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*." In the end, I contend that miscommunication cannot be definitively separated from communication, indicating communication's differential makeup. Miscommunication uncannily resides in communication.

Keywords: miscommunication, communication, dissemination, iterability, adestination

Given the present tendency, in some metropolitan centers of the world, to move away from "theory" to "a more humanist ethos and what are regarded as more politically or instrumentally 'useful' modes of research and analysis" (Hall & Birchall 2006, p. 1)—and, within theory, from deconstruction and associated suspects such as *l'écriture féminine* to big, masculine, system-building ontologies¹—my deconstructive orientation in this article may, perhaps, seem out of step with the times to some readers. So, let me state from the outset that my interest in deconstruction is not because of its fashion value but because I find that Derrida's work, and other work produced in his wake, enable us to understand and deal with the contradiction, the difference within communication without reducing its Janus-faced complexity. Realizing how misunderstanding is not the other of understanding but what makes understanding both impossible and possible (Weber, 1978) has led those working in the tradition of Derrida and deconstruction to pay attention to a wide variety of knowledges somewhere between knowledge and nonknowledge such as spectrality (Derrida, 1994), stupidity (Ronell, 2002), the uncanny (Royle, 2003), and more. Working on the relation between miscommunication and communication, this line of work is indispensable. In that sense, too, I find deconstruction both timely and useful. As Derrida (1988) puts it, "deconstruction does not exist somewhere, pure, proper, self-identical, outside of its inscriptions in conflictual and differentiated contexts" (p. 141)—for example, confined to a particular time indicated by fashion or institutional acceptance—rather, "it 'is' only what it does and what is done with it, there where it takes place" (p. 141). Furthermore, it only takes place in its iteration, and its iterability (repetition with difference) opens it, and keeps it open, to its future (becoming). I offer my article as an example of such iteration.

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¹ Hall and Birchall (2006) and Hall (2008) note and address such a shift in cultural studies.

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Communication is commonly defined teleologically as a predestined, goal-driven, intentional act, whose completion is marked by the realization of its purpose when the predestined destination is reached. Hence, Briankle Chang (1996), who sets out to deconstruct this widespread understanding of communication, refers to it as "the onto-hermeneutical understanding of communication as destined delivery" (p. 172). Examples range from textbooks to advertising.² Often, it is understood as an intended message in transit between origin and end, one whose origin aims for its destination, as leading to an understanding that is (finally) cleansed of the otherness of mediation and representation. This view ignores the arguments of those such as Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska (2015), who point out that mediation is not an "intermediary layer between independently existing entities," but is rather "all-encompassing and indivisible," and that "'we' have never been separate from mediation" (p. xv), as well as the work of Jacques Derrida (1988), who argues that "representation regularly supplants presence" (p. 5). In the teleological view of communication, because its destination is predestined, its origin is its end. However, this end/origin is to be reached after an alienating diversion or detour through another, introducing a delay and a gap between origin and end. I maintain that this relationship of the self with another or with its own otherness is the communication relationship. This is not only because communication involves always more than one within the person in the case of so-called "intrapersonal communication" (consider the split between our consciousness and our unconscious or between the signifiers and the signified of the person) as well as more than one person in other forms of communication involving subjects, but also because it is supplemented by signifiers, mediators, representatives, translations that are other than the aimed-for destination/understanding.

In the teleological conceptualization, the task of communication is then understood as making sure that no miscommunication obstructs and obscures communication, that the delivery from origin to end is not derailed by miscommunication, that the end intended or destined is finally reached, following an alienating detour. A survey of work on *miscommunication* in Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) journals yields titles such as "Cross-Cultural Communication and Miscommunication: The Role of Cultural Keywords" (Wierzbicka, 2010), "Sexual Miscommunication? Untangling Assumptions About Sexual Communication Between Casual Sex Partners" (Beres, 2010), "Carrying Too Heavy a Load? The Communication and Miscommunication of Emotion by Email" (Byron, 2008), and "Recognizing and Avoiding Intercultural Miscommunication in Distance Education: A Study of the Experiences of Canadian Faculty and Aboriginal Nursing Students" (Russell, Gregory, Care, & Hultin, 2007). Notwithstanding their merits in dealing with the particular issues they investigate, all seem to follow this understanding of miscommunication as an alien outsider to communication proper. Angeliki Tzanne (2000) notes how most such studies relate misunderstanding to "cross-cultural (mis)communication," assuming that "communication failure is closely related to interlocutors' differing linguistic and social backgrounds" (p. 6). Tzanne questions this assumption by pointing out that "people misunderstand each other's words, silences, gestures or attitudes all the time" and that "such incidents happen not only between people with

² For example, Belch and Belch (1999) argue that "for effective communication to occur, the message decoding process of the receiver must match the encoding of the sender. Simply put, this means the receiver understands and correctly interprets what the source is trying to communicate," and they inform us that "advertisers spend millions of dollars every year . . . pretesting messages to make sure consumers understand and decode them in the manner the advertiser intended" (p. 143).

different languages or cultures, but also between close friends, spouses, adults and children, doctors and patients or teachers and students" (p. 1). Yet, despite these observations, and despite using an opening epigram that says, "What we call relationships, conversations, contacts, are nothing but long chains of misunderstandings. Usually we communicate so long as our misunderstandings coincide," Tzanne continues to maintain a polar oppositional conceptualization of misunderstanding in the rest of the book.

According to the polar oppositional conceptualization, miscommunication is understood either as having no place within communication proper, being alien and other to it, and hence as an external threat to its taking place like "noise," or as a diversion off course, which, however, is destined to get back on the course proper to it.³ The diversion in the latter, therefore, also has its eyes set on the telos of communication, is internal to the working of communication, acting like a relay, and therefore, assuring the fateful end of communication. Nevertheless, the fact that this "alienating detour" through the other(s) of communication (signification, mediation, representation, translation—writing in the generalized Derridean sense) is necessary, that it has to occur every time there is communication, should alert us to other possibilities of understanding communication. Hence, unlike most studies on miscommunication that understand it as the opposite other of communication, I reconceptualize it, in this article, as involving the otherness of communication itself. In developing this stance, I rely mainly on Derrida and Derrida-inspired body of work, such as Samuel Weber (1978), who argued, decades ago, that "recognition can never be simple, nor understanding undivided," and that "as an ineluctable aspect of iterability, misunderstanding no longer excludes understanding" (p. 7). More recently, Anolli, Ciceri, and Riva (2002) have also argued that "the borderline between what is communicated and miscommunicated cannot be split up and partitioned in two separate and discrete fields" for "communication and miscommunication are simply the two faces of the same coin" (p. x).

Using the resources of deconstruction and taking into consideration the irreducible gap between the signifier and the signified as well as the irreducible necessity of mediation through an other, and the disseminating, differing, and deferring character of such "detours" in any communication, which makes their "return to course" a re-turn, that is, a new and different heading, I attempt to rethink communication in this article without reducing its complexity. My rethinking is inspired not so much by the more familiar "models of communication," which I find untenable fundamentally, but by deconstructive readings of John Austin's (1975) *How to Do Things With Words* and Jacques Lacan's (1988) "Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*," which provide promising alternatives, the former to the objectivist and the latter to the subjectivist versions of the teleological understanding of communication. My reading benefits from

³ Metaphor is called a metaphor (meaning *transfer*, moving someone or something from one place to another, a displacement, in the original Greek) because it is thought that it has carried you away from the signifier's alleged goal of the primary or literal meaning, which stays as the referent of its definition as metaphor. Although Jacques Lacan (1988), whom I discuss later, has displaced the signified as the point of reference of the signifier, he describes a similar relationship regarding the journey of the signifier. In discussing the title of *The Purloined Letter*, he writes, "we are quite simply dealing with a letter which has been diverted from its path; one whose course has been *prolonged* . . . since it can be diverted, it must have a course *which is proper to it*: the trait by which its incidence as signifier is affirmed" (Lacan, 1988, p. 43).

Jacques Derrida's interventions in both cases. In the end, I contend that miscommunication, misunderstanding, and the misses of communication in general cannot be absolutely and definitively separated from communication proper as they are part and parcel of communication, indicating communication's difference within, its differential makeup. Miscommunication uncannily⁴ resides in communication.

Models of Communication

It is not possible to refer to a strictly canonical definition of communication in the field of communication and media studies because the field is transdisciplinary, and is thus conspicuously intertextual in its weave, as well as being informed by perspectives such as cultural studies that resist disciplinary canonization or attempt to make such resistance canonical (Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992). One of the first things that students of communication learn is that there are many and sometimes incompatible and incommensurable definitions of communication—as my title also implies. In his dictionary of communication, for instance, Erol Mutlu (1998) states that there are close to 200 different definitions of communication. What comes closest to a canonical definition of communication, the one that seems to have the most popular appeal in and out of the field of communication and media studies, relies on the use of, basically similar, "models of communication." Referring to the basic structure that they share, these models are commonly referred to, in the singular, as the "S→M→R" model, where *S* stands for the sender, *M* stands for the message (or, more complicatedly and rarely, for the meaning of the message), and *R* stands for the receiver. The *M* originates from the *S* and is aimed at the *R*; hence, the model posits a unidirectional "line of communication." Perhaps the best known is Harold Lasswell's (1948) "5W Formula," so called because the model is made up of five questions that start with the letter *W*, which then serves as a mnemonic device: Who (says) What (to) Whom (in) What Channel (with) What Effect? Indicating the popularity of models of communication in this part of the world, a well-known news program on television in Turkey, which was also watched in North Cyprus, was called 5N1K, the Turkish transliteration of Lasswell's 5W formula.

A similarly popular model is provided by Claude Shannon's (1948) "schematic diagram of a general communication system" (p. 381). Shannon's model introduces additional complications to Lasswell's model. First, a nonhuman transmitter and a corresponding receiver are introduced in between Lasswell's sender and receiver—a complication necessary for telecommunication—that translate the message into a signal and then the signal back to the message. Although with this complication the new model seemingly introduces the problem of translation as an irreducible part of communication, this opening is foreclosed by Shannon's framing of communication as an "engineering problem," for he writes, "Frequently the messages have meaning . . . [but] these semantic aspects of communication are irrelevant to the engineering problem" (p. 1). Second, the model introduces an external source of "noise" that interferes with the aim of communication from completing itself and reaching its end. Noise is thus

⁴ *Uncanny* is the conventional translation of the German *unheimlich*, which literally means "unhomely." As Sigmund Freud (1919/1955) explains, "*Heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or another a sub-species of heimlich" (p. 226).

identified as the culprit responsible for miscommunication. Because noise interferes from outside the line of communication in the model's representation, the solution that will overcome miscommunication is to keep noise out where it belongs, by insulating and isolating the "inside" of communication to make it one with itself, and to make it impermeable to "outside" interference, so the two will not end up in a relationship, get mixed up, become heterogeneous, and contradict each other.

Yet, this representational excommunication of miscommunication to communication's outside can hardly be successful and needs to be seen as what it is: an excommunication of something inside. However much Shannon enframes and tries to limit his discussion of communication within an "engineering framework," the engineers, too, will have experienced, at least some of the time, along with the rest of us, miscommunication and misunderstanding even with the reception of a perfectly clear "signal" and the "exact" or "approximate" reproduction of a message that is not the least bit or little corrupted by "noise"—these being Shannon's characterization of communication proper. That miscommunication can still occur despite keeping noise out of the line of communication indicates that, perhaps, the source of miscommunication lies within communication itself, and that it is only projected to the outside in such representational stagings of communication such as Shannon's model. That is why I referred to this projection as an excommunication.

How, then, does communication accommodate what is projected from the inside, the miscommunication? There is, for starters, the irreducible polysemy of all signifiers used in every communication, with one signifier leading to many signifieds, which tells us that no communication is one with itself, undivided and self-same. Accordingly, we do not have only one line aimed, like an arrow, at only one destination, but a dissemination,⁵ a division and dispersal of lines without the fateful guarantee of a final convergence on a singular goal.⁶ We observe this differential excess that overflows a simple unity at the other end also. Despite certain structuralist representations such as "primary meaning" (denotation or literal meaning) and "secondary meaning" (connotation or metaphorical meaning), polysemic difference and plurality are irreducible to an indivisible, self-same, origin/end. "Literal" is itself a metaphor whose metaphoricity we have forgotten. That is, what is represented as the primary or original meaning itself rests on difference and is the product of a displacement, a deviation from an earlier, more "original" heading. In discussing metaphor, which "is determined by philosophy as a provisional loss of meaning . . . a certainly inevitable detour . . . with its sights set on . . . the circular reappropriation of literal, proper meaning," Derrida (1982) argues that "de-tour is a re-turn" (p. 270), another change in heading.

The S→M→R model of communication has been criticized extensively for its one-way linearity, and for assuming a passive, noninterpretive stance for the receiver, which is then derided by likening it to

⁵ *Dissemination* is Jacques Derrida's (1988) term that describes the "irreducible polysemy" (p. 14) and the ungovernable excess or loss that breaks with the circuit of intention in any communication. For a performative example and discussion, see Derrida (1981).

⁶ In contrast to such a teleological "line of communication," we may also recall Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of "lines of flight," which "the signifying chain cannot tolerate" and which "cross right through" the "dualism machines" (pp. 116, 277).

a “hypodermic needle” or a “magic bullet.” The critiques then call for a two-way exchange and interaction to replace the model’s one-way linearity. In its revision, neither the sender nor the receiver is exclusively such, and they alternate in assuming those roles, with the direction of communication changing accordingly, rather like an alternating electric current changing polarity. Even with this alternation added, however, the model is still singularly linear, $S \leftarrow M \rightarrow R$, and the message or the meaning of the message still originates in the conscious intention to mean or the hermeneutic ability to interpret of a simple, undivided subject. In fact, such simplicity is the distinguishing characteristic of these models if we heed Denis McQuail and Sven Windahl’s (1993) definition of a model of a communication process as “a consciously *simplified description in graphic form* of a piece of reality” (p. 2, emphasis mine).

What I find most remarkable about these models that purport to explain what communication is, is that they either completely ignore language or at most reduce it, to the extent that it is implied, into a neutral and transparent carrier of communication. For these models, language seems to be a transparent vehicle of transport without any affectivity of its own on communication and on what is communicated. I now take a different turn and change my heading to discuss a couple of inspiring theories that make up for this deficiency and take the productivity and affectivity of language to be of central importance in communication. I have chosen these also because they rupture, in their different ways, the line of communication posited in the “models.”

John Austin’s Speech Act Theory

If we recall McQuail and Windahl’s (1993) definition of a communication model quoted earlier, it sets up a certain relationship between “a piece of reality” and a “description” of it. Such statements can then be factually verified and judged to be “true” or “false” by reference to their referent. This is because in a “reality versus representation of reality” relationship, the description here is taken to be dependent on and correspond to a pre- and self-existing reality, which is assumed not to need a representation, a mediation, or a communication to make itself fully and completely self-present. The description is thus seen as originating from and aiming for that reality’s self-presence in a relationship of correspondence and adequation.⁷ Therefore, such a judgment could also be used to determine whether a communication has reached its destination and fulfilled itself. John L. Austin (1975) calls such statements “constatives” and tells us that they are the typical statements of a philosophical discourse that he has “an inclination to play Old Harry with.”⁸ Austin’s work is of interest here for us primarily because of another kind of communication, the “speech acts” that he calls “performatives,” which do not depend on a previously present reality, and, therefore, problematize its originality vis-à-vis the speech act.⁹ His work thus

⁷ Ann Game (1991) discusses how “in sociological discourse critique is framed in terms of adequation” (p. 7). This notion of the adequacy of representation suggests the phrase “mirror of nature” to Richard Rorty (1980), an understanding of knowledge that he questions.

⁸ More precisely he writes, “I admit to an inclination to play Old Harry with, viz. (1) the true/false fetish, (2) the value/fact fetish” (Austin, 1975, p. 151).

⁹ Although Austin (1975) starts with the performative–constative distinction as a distinction between “doing and saying” (p. 47), that distinction turns out to be problematic, and he soon introduces questions about the tenability of an airtight distinction after observing “our initial and tentative distinction . . .

represents an interesting departure from the concept of communication as a purely semiotic, linguistic, or symbolic concept.

According to Austin (1975), performatives "do not 'describe' or 'report' or constate anything at all," they "are not 'true or false,'" but they "are a part of the doing of an action" (p. 5), and he stresses that they are not "just saying something" (p. 5), that is, the performative utterance "is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it" (p. 6). When the official says, "I now pronounce you man and wife" in a marriage ceremony, for example, the pronouncement makes the couple man and wife, it is not a description of "man and wife." Other examples Austin provides include "I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth" uttered in a naming ceremony, "I give and bequeath my watch to my brother" as in a will, and "I bet you sixpence it will rain tomorrow" (p. 5) uttered to make a bet.

Performatives, thus, cannot be deemed true or false by reference to pre-existing facts in the way language is theorized "in the favorite philosophical sense" as "an utterance of certain noises with a certain meaning . . . i.e., with a certain sense and with a certain reference" (Austin, 1975, p. 94). In other words, the performative does not have its referent outside of itself. It is a reference without a referent (that predates it, is external to it). Against this "descriptive fallacy," which is "too prone to give explanations in terms of 'the meaning of words,'" Austin argues that "the occasion of an utterance matters seriously and that the words used are to some extent to be 'explained' by the 'context' in which they are designed to be or have actually been spoken in a linguistic interchange" (p. 100); therefore, "what we have to study is not the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation" (p. 52), indeed, what we need to consider is "the total situation in which the utterance is issued—the total speech act" (p. 139).¹⁰ This is because "a good many other things have as a general rule to be right and to go right if we are to be said to have happily brought off our action"; otherwise, the utterance will be "infelicitous" or "unhappy" and will fail to bring about the fact of its action (Austin, 1975, p. 14).

Austin (1975) then lists the "necessary conditions" that define the "context in which [speech acts] are designed to be" and will make them happy:

breaking down" (p. 54), with "a shift from descriptive to performative utterance and wavering between them" (p. 85), and concluding that "unhappiness nevertheless seems to characterize both kinds of utterance, not merely the performative; and that the requirement of conforming or bearing some relation to the facts, different in different cases, seems to characterize performatives, in addition to the requirement that they should be happy, similarly to the way which is characteristic of supposed constatives" (p. 91), and that "statements *are* liable to every kind of infelicity to which performatives are liable" (p. 136). So, there is something about his work on speech acts that problematizes and complicates the received understanding of constatives as well. The discussion of performatives, thus, turns out not only to be about another kind of communication, but also about another way of understanding communication.

¹⁰ As is becoming clear from these statements, the title of Austin's (1975) book, and the footnote that says, "still confining ourselves, for simplicity, to spoken utterance" (p. 114), his discussion of language is limited to the spoken language, giving speech a privileged, exemplary status.

There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, and further, the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked. The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and completely. Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further must actually so conduct themselves subsequently. (pp. 14–15)

Unless these conditions are met, and met “completely” to the last detail, the speech act will fail. This is a very tall order to meet, especially as Austin (1975) also tells us that “infelicity is an ill to which all acts are heir which have the general character of ritual or ceremonial, all *conventional* acts” (pp. 18–19). But this is not all that is required. Even more is needed to keep speech acts happy and clear of the infelicity of misunderstanding, “a type of infelicity to which all utterances are probably liable” (p. 39). All “parasitic” uses of language, which are parasitic on its “normal use,” and which fall under “the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language” (p. 22) are to be excluded from consideration because they are not serious and genuine in their intention but are pale imitations. Austin thus argues that “a performative utterance will . . . be . . . hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy” because in such cases language is not used “seriously” (p. 22). Although it may be easier to distinguish the above examples by their settings, even when the “appropriate circumstances” are there, the speech act could still end up as a “misfire” (Austin, 1975, p. 16), “misinvocation,” or “misapplication” (p. 17) for lacking the seriousness that separates it from a pallid imitation; I could, for instance, “say, ‘I promise’ and have no intention of keeping it” (p. 16).

Austin’s (1975) theory of speech acts thus recognizes the myriad ways that a speech act could go wrong, and hence requires that an overwhelming number of conditions are met, and met to the last detail, as well as spotting and excluding the etiolations when those conditions are seemingly met, so we do not end up with a miscommunication still. Yet, while trying to establish the required distinctions and exclusions, Austin also recognizes that “these distinctions [between ‘purported’ and ‘professed’] are not hard and fast” (p. 16), “the boundary between ‘inappropriate persons’ and ‘inappropriate circumstances’ will necessarily not be a very hard and fast one” (p. 34), “the distinctions [between ‘feelings,’ ‘thoughts,’ and ‘intentions’] are so loose that the cases are not necessarily easily distinguishable” (p. 41):

There [is] certainly no one absolute criterion [to distinguish the constative from the performative]: and . . . very probably it is not possible to lay down even a list of all possible criteria; moreover, they certainly would not distinguish performatives from constatives, as very commonly the *same* sentence is used on different occasions of utterance in *both* ways, performative and constative” (p. 67)

Finally, “these formulas are at best very slippery tests for deciding whether an expression is an illocution as distinct from a perlocution or neither” (Austin, 1975, pp. 131–132).

Despite the leaky and porous borders that make the "distinct" identities "indistinct" and rift by difference, however, Austin (1975) still wants to maintain that "words used are to be explained by the context in which they are designed to be" (p. 100). The leaky, contaminating, hybridizing ambiguity and ambivalence of these communication acts are thought to be reducible by the limits of a "context," a context that is teleologically determined in terms of the conscious intention of the speaking subject that centers the totality of his speech act. However, as Derrida (1988) points out, the difficulty in distinguishing unhappy, pallid imitations that are not serious from serious and happy utterances is that "no criterion that is simply *inherent* in the manifest utterance is capable of distinguishing an utterance when it is serious from the same utterance when it is not" (p. 68), and "as marks do not constitute their contexts by themselves, nothing prevents them from functioning in another context" (p. 12). These problems do not go unnoticed by Austin as the above qualifications from him demonstrate. He thus looks behind the phenomenal utterance to find what he is looking for, the *telos* of intention.

Before further examining this "solution" to the problems he encounters, let us note how ironic and self-defeating this is for Austin (1975) as a solution. It is ironic in that Austin defines himself as the theorist of "ordinary" speech but ends up considering the inescapable possibility as well as occurrence of "infelicities" and "etiolations" of ordinary speech as "accidental" by means of an idealization in which "ordinary" is determined by reference to an ideal purity. It is also self-defeating in that, as Derrida (1988) points out, Austin's solution "is rather remarkable and typical of that philosophical tradition with which he would like to have so few ties" (p. 15). For example, it takes us back to the phenomenological simplification of the "ideal model" of communication discussed earlier. There, too, the complexity of communication, its polysemy or dissemination for example, was reduced to a simplicity cleansed of the play of *differance*, contradiction, aporia—in a word, of miscommunication.

Austin's work interests and excites Derrida (1988) because it represents a novel departure from the conventional understanding of communication but whose project is troubled by the "tenacious and most central presuppositions of the continental metaphysical tradition" (p. 38). Derrida notes how Austin's procedure in dealing with the difficulties encountered consists "in recognizing that the possibility of . . . failure is an essential risk of the operations under consideration" (Derrida, 1988, p. 38), that failure is "in fact a structural possibility" (p. 13), while at the same time excluding "that risk as accidental, exterior, one which teaches us nothing about the linguistic phenomenon being considered" (p. 15). Austin's (1975) "ordinary language" is thus marked by the exclusion of the "nonserious," the "parasitism," the "etiolation," and the "nonordinary," as we noted earlier. Derrida then notes how "it is as just such a 'parasite' that writing has always been treated by the philosophical tradition" (p. 17). We have already noted how Austin had confined himself, "for simplicity, to spoken utterance," and excluded writing (see footnote 10). The reasons for this exclusion, not elaborated by Austin but taken up by a self-declared follower John Searle and that are a main concern for Derrida, are ambivalent and are worth going over. As far as the simplicity argument is concerned, writing is understood as being no more than an extension in space and time, without alteration, of voice or of gesture and, as such, is thought to have "no effect on either the structure or the contents of the meaning it is supposed to transmit" (Derrida, 1988, p. 4).

Although it is noted that writing communicates in the absence of the sender or of the receiver, this absence is thought to be "a progressive extenuation of presence, not as a break in presence" and

"idealized in its representation as distant presence," where representation is understood in turn "not as supplanting presence but as its continuous reparation" (Derrida, 1988, pp. 5-7), one that uses "analogy" to link presence to absence as we have seen in the "models of communication" in the first section of this article. In such an understanding, writing is phonetic and, thus, reducible to speech. Therefore, there is no need to take up writing as exemplary to understand communication. Writing is thought to be genetically derived from speech, so if you know about speech, you know about writing, too. But if this was true, and writing was genetically derived from speech, it would not hurt us to use writing as an example of communication together with other examples. But writing is also actively excluded because of the danger it poses to the idealized property of communication.¹¹ In Austin's case, it would be excluded as that which prevents the taking place of proper communication, as an *etiolation*, a pale imitation far removed from the presence to self of a conscious intention. Why is that? How can writing be both an extension and simple derivative of communication and, at the same time, an obstacle to it?

We may look for clues in Austin's (1975) "solution," which relies on metaphysics of consciousness and its teleology of conscious intention, where the presence to self of a conscious intention constitutes the "utterance origin." As Derrida (1988) points out, conscious intention is what Austin considers to be the "organizing center" of an "exhaustively definable context," thus making possible a "teleological jurisdiction of an entire field," leading Derrida to conclude that "performative communication becomes once more the communication of an intentional meaning, even if that meaning has no referent in the form of a thing or of a prior or exterior state of things" (p. 14). A context exhaustively determined via a teleological jurisdiction means that "no irreducible polysemy," that is, "no dissemination," escapes "the horizon of the unity of meaning" (Derrida, 1988, p. 14). There is to be no remainder that does not add up to a unified totality for a speech act to be happy.

It is precisely here, in the constitution of that exhaustive contextual totality, that writing proves to be troublesome, leading to its excommunication. First, "a written sign carries a force that breaks with its context" and "ruptures presence" (Derrida, 1988, p. 9). The dreaded absence "is originary in writing" (Derrida, 1988, p. 7), and this is not an absence that can be understood as a modification of presence but is a radical absence, an irreducible absence of intention, because it is what enables the written sign to break with any given context and still to act and to communicate in a structure of *iterability*, that is, repetition with or as alterity. To be read as such, a written sign must be repeatable, but be repeatable with a difference, which is to say that it must be recognizable in displacement from another context, that it must already be a citation "out of context," that it must be a parasitic imitation, an *etiolation* of itself. The *differance* of iterability thus means "the irreducible absence of intention" (Derrida, 1988, p. 18); this

¹¹ Consider the following pronouncements: Aristotle of Stagira (384-322 BC): "Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience, and written words are the symbols of spoken words." Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778): "Languages are made to be spoken. Writing serves only as a supplement to speech" and "Writing is derivative. It merely represents speech. It is a poor substitute, a weak extension. It's not essential. Do without it if you can." Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913): "The spoken word alone is the object of linguistic study. Writing is a trap. Its actions are vicious and tyrannical. All its cases are monstrous. Linguistics should put them under observation in special compartments" (quoted in Collins & Mayblin, 1997, p. 42).

does not mean that signs of communication are "valid outside of a context," for "there are only contexts" (p. 12), but that contexts lack a governing center that can exhaustively constrain and control their intertextuality.

It should thus be clear why a speech act theory that relies on an exhaustive context determined in terms of a teleology of conscious intention would not want to consider written utterances as exemplary. However, Derrida's (1988) analysis of writing with regard to speech acts has implications that go much farther: He argues that the "absence attributed to writing is proper to every communication" (p. 7), and that iterability "is generative of all marks" (p. 11). Speech, like writing, is also *differant* and iterable; it too is always-already citable and quotable, repeating itself in duplicity, differing from and deferring itself every time. So, writing, after all, turns out to be exemplary. This is not to say that speech is writing, for difference, including the speech-writing difference in the classical sense, is irreducible and is generative of their respective identities—as of all identities—and we should not erase their difference. However, this necessitates for Derrida "a certain generalization and a certain displacement of the concept of writing" (p. 3), leading in turn to a generalized understanding of "text," and he uses the term "archi-writing" elsewhere in his work for this notion of a general writing. Thus, what Austin wants to exclude as etiolations turns out to be the condition of possibility of all utterances, all marks of communication. Derrida points out, for example, that "what Austin excludes as anomaly, exception, 'non-serious' *citation* (on stage, in a poem, or a soliloquy) is the determined modification of a general citationality—or rather, a general iterability—without which there would not even be a 'successful' performative" (p. 17).

As noted earlier, Austin (1975) acknowledges that all conventional acts are exposed to failure, but wants, nonetheless, to exclude such failure without reflecting on the consequences of that exposure as a necessary possibility that could teach us about communication as necessarily divided, duplicit, and impure. Noting Austin's acknowledgment that there is no "pure" performative, Derrida (1988) then concludes that "a successful performative is necessarily an 'impure' performative" because what makes a performative utterance possible is a "citational doubling" that comes "to split and dissociate from itself the pure singularity of the event" (p. 17).

Although Austin's work, especially his concept of the "performative," is very useful and inspiring in questioning the objectivist means of categorically distinguishing communication from miscommunication, his reliance on the subject's intention to distinguish and exclude miscommunication is self-defeating and reproduces the teleological conception of communication that is put in question. I now turn to a discussion of Lacan's (1988) seminar on *The Purloined Letter*, which is radically at odds with such reliance on the subject's intention.

Jacques Lacan and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter*

Jacques Lacan has devoted a seminar to Edgar Allan Poe's story *The Purloined Letter*, and has selected this seminar as the opening piece of his *Ecrits* (selected writings; 1977) because, it seems, he

uses Poe's story as a parable to advance his own conception of psychoanalysis.¹² What Derrida (1987) calls the "parergonal logic" that frames Poe's story—whereby a literary fiction puts truth on stage such that "the literary example yields a *message*...to be deciphered on the basis of Freud's teaching" (p. 427) is made transparent by Lacan's use of the story as "an example destined to 'illustrate' . . . a law" (p. 425–426) where his "demand for truth leads [him] to putting aside the scene of writing" (p. 436)—is an issue examined by Derrida in his reading of Lacan's seminar. I look at both.

Lacan's reading of Poe is of interest for us here because it rests on a critique of semanticism that would jump over the signifier and hastily go after the signified content of a text as the teleological end of communication like we observed in the logic of the "models." Lacan (1988) thus takes the organization of the signifier into account, arguing that "the signifier is not functional" (p. 40), positing the signifier to be prior "in relation to the signified" (p. 42), and attempts to demonstrate, through Poe's story, "the decisive orientation which the subject receives from the itinerary of a signifier" (p. 29). The latter point is especially promising as regards the problem of the teleology of conscious intention as in Austin's (1975) speech act theory that we looked at in the previous section.

Edgar Allan Poe's (1988) story tells of the displacements of a letter. The Queen is perusing a letter in the royal *boudoir* when the King interrupts with his entrance. She wants to conceal the letter from him, and, in her haste, is forced to put it on a table with the address uppermost, the contents thus unexposed. At this juncture, Minister D enters, perceives the letter, recognizes the handwriting of the address, observes the Queen's confusion, and fathoms her secret. While transacting his business with the royal couple, he produces a similar letter, places it casually next to the Queen's letter and proceeds to take her letter while leaving behind his unimportant replacement, and exits the room when he finishes his transaction. The Queen observes the robbery but cannot dare call attention to the fact in the King's presence. The Queen then employs the Prefect of Police to reclaim the letter from the Minister in question. The Prefect of Police searches the Minister's office and home thoroughly when he is not around, going through every possible secret hiding place, but is unable to find the letter. This is when he brings the matter to the attention of Dupin, who is the friend of the narrator in the story and asks for his help in return for sharing the very large sum of reward money. The Prefect of Police complains that the matter is simple and yet has baffled them, to which Dupin responds with remarks such as "Perhaps the mystery is a little *too plain*" and "A little *too self-evident*" (Poe, 1988, p. 7), which the policeman finds amusing and odd. The story continues with the friends discussing the antics of "policial action in searches for articles" (Poe, 1988, p. 19) based on the assumption that "*all men proceed to conceal a letter*" (p. 16), comparing mathematical reasoning and poetic foolishness, and betting that had the Minister been a "mere mathematician, he could not have reasoned at all, and thus would have been at the mercy of the Prefect" (p. 17), and observing how "over-largely lettered signs and placards of the street escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious" (p. 20). With these insights, Dupin is convinced that "the Minister had resorted to the comprehensive and sagacious expedient of not attempting to conceal it at all" (Poe, 1988,

¹² "Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*" is not included in the original English translation of Lacan's *Ecrits* (1977). Alan Sheridan, who translated that work into English, states in a note that Lacan had selected the essays to be included in that volume. It may be that, for whatever reason, Lacan later changed his mind about the exemplary status of this seminar.

p. 20) and is then able to rob the letter from the Minister by substituting a facsimile regarding external details but with a quotation inside for the Minister.

Lacan (1988) begins his seminar by asking us to recognize that “the repetition automatism (*Wiederholungszwang*) finds its basis in . . . the insistence of the signifying chain,” this being “a correlate of the ex-sistence (or eccentric place) in which we must necessarily locate the subject of the unconscious,” since “psychoanalytic effects . . . such as foreclosure (*Verwerfung*), repression (*Verdrangung*), denial (*Verneinung*) . . . follow so faithfully the displacement (*Entstellung*) of the signifier” whereupon we observe “the specific law of that chain that governs those psychoanalytic effects” (pp. 28–29). He then tells us that he has “decided to illustrate” for us “today the truth . . . that it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject—by demonstrating in a story the decisive orientation which the subject receives from the itinerary of the signifier” (p. 29).

Lacan (1988) divides the story into “two scenes,” one designated as “the primal scene” and the other considered as “its repetition in the very sense we are considering today” (p. 30). The *quotient* of the primal scene is that “the Minister has filched from the Queen her letter and that . . . the Queen knows that he now has it, and by no means innocently,” with “the letter abandoned by the Minister” being the scene’s significant “*remainder*” (Lacan, 1988, p. 30). The quotient of the second scene “is that the Minister no longer has the letter, but far from suspecting that Dupin is the culprit who has ravished him, knows nothing of it” and, again, “what he is left with is far from insignificant” (Lacan, 1988, p. 31).

What makes the two scenes “similar,” and one a repetition of the other, for Lacan (1988) is “the intersubjectivity in which the two actions are motivated . . . as well as the three terms through which it structures them” (p. 31); thus, there are “three moments, structuring three glances, borne by three subjects, incarnated each time by different characters” (p. 32). Hence, in the story, (1) “a glance that sees nothing: the King and the police”; (2) “a glance which sees that the first sees nothing and deludes itself as to the secrecy of what it hides: the Queen, then the Minister”; and (3) a glance that “sees that the first two glances leave what should be hidden exposed to whoever would seize it: the Minister, and finally Dupin” (Lacan, 1988, p. 32). To let us “grasp in its unity” this “intersubjective complex,” Lacan offers a “model” that he names “the politics of the ostrich” (involving a word play in French that may also mean “the politics of the other”), which is explained as “the second believing itself invisible because the first has its head stuck in the ground, and all the while letting the third calmly pluck its rear” (p. 32). What Lacan finds interesting in this intersubjective complex “is the manner in which the subjects relay each other in their displacement during the intersubjective repetition” and how “their displacement is determined by the place which a pure signifier,” like the purloined letter of Poe’s story, “comes to occupy in their trio,” and it is the determining place occupied by the pure signifier that confirms the status of what is going on as “repetition automatism” (p. 32).

Lacan (1988) then reminds us how Martin Heidegger “discloses to us in the word *aletheia* the play of truth” whereupon “we rediscover a secret to which truth has always initiated her lovers, and through which they learn that it is in hiding that she offers herself to them most truly” (p. 37) because Lacan discerns such a “trick” in Poe’s tale: “so perfect a verisimilitude that it may be said that truth here reveals its fictive arrangement” (p. 34). To illustrate, he begins with a question: “What could be more

convincing . . . than the gesture of laying one's cards face up on the table?" (p. 36). That would persuade us "momentarily . . . that the magician has in fact demonstrated . . . how his trick is performed, whereas he has only renewed it in still purer form: at which point we fathom the measure of the supremacy of the signifier in the subject" (p. 36). Then a suspicion and a further question:

Is not the magician repeating his trick before our eyes, without deceiving us this time about divulging his secret, but pressing his wager to the point of really explaining it to us without us seeing a thing? *That* would be the summit of the illusionist's art: through one of his fictive creations to *truly delude us*. (Lacan, 1988, p. 37)

Now, Dupin's insinuation in his dialogue with the Prefect of Police assumes a new significance: "Because a problem is too simple, indeed too evident, it may appear obscure" (Poe, 1988, p. 37). Lacan (1988) describes their dialogue as "played between a deaf man and one who hears," presenting "the complexity of what is ordinarily simplified, with the most confused results in the notion of communication" (p. 34). This confusion comes about because "an act of communication may give the impression . . . of allowing in its transmission but a single meaning," and theorists too often stop at this impression, considering "the highly significant commentary into which he who understands integrates it" null because it is "unperceived by him who does not understand it" (Lacan, 1988, p. 34). Therefore, if we approach a dialogue as a report of meaning, "its verisimilitude may appear to depend on a guarantee of exactitude," whereas "dialogue is more fertile than it seems," which necessitates a "transition . . . from the domain of exactitude to the register of truth," which is situated "at the very foundation of intersubjectivity" (Lacan, 1988, pp. 34–35).

To clear up the confusion regarding the communication-by-letter in the story, Lacan (1988) asks, "For a purloined letter to exist . . . to whom does a letter belong? Might it be that the [addressee] was never the real receiver?" (p. 41). Reaffirming the signifier's "priority in relation to the signified" (Lacan, 1988, p. 42), he answers, "we are quite simply dealing with a letter which has been diverted from its path; one whose course has been prolonged (etymologically the word of the title)" (p. 43). Because "it can be diverted, it must have a course *which is proper to it*," leading us into an "alternating operation, which is its principle, requiring it to leave its place, even though it returns to it by a circular path," the very "repetition automatism" that the Seminar began with (Lacan, 1988, p. 43). Thus, in this alternating operation of the repetition automatism,

The subject must pass through the channels of the symbolic . . . it is not only the subject, but the subjects, grasped in their intersubjectivity, who line up, in other words our ostriches . . . more docile than sheep, model their very being on the moment of the signifying chain which traverses them. . . . The displacement of the signifier determines the subjects in their acts, in their destiny, in their refusals, in their blindness, in their end and in their fate, their innate gifts and social acquisitions notwithstanding, without regard for character or sex, and that, willingly or not, everything that might be considered the stuff of psychology, kit and caboodle, will follow the path of the signifier. (Lacan, 1988, pp. 43–44)

Because for Lacan (1988), repetition automatism proceeds according to a predestined destination, he concludes that “what the ‘purloined letter’ . . . means is that a letter always arrives at its destination” (p. 53), and he even changes the first part of the note Dupin leaves in his substitute letter at the Minister’s office from “Un dessein si funeste” (so sinister a plan) to “Un destin si funeste” (so sinister a destiny; p. 52).

In reading Lacan’s seminar, Derrida (1987) argues that in that text “the displacement of the signifier is analyzed as a signified” for “the signifier has its place in the letter, and the letter refinds its proper meaning in its proper place” (pp. 428, 436). This is a refinding and a reconstitution of the proper because we are dealing with a purloined letter, that is, “the proper, the place, meaning, and truth have become distant from themselves for the time of a detour” (p. 436). This troubles Lacan’s idea that there is an itinerary that is proper to this detour, which then enables a readequation, according to which “the letter is found in the place where Dupin and the psychoanalyst expect to find it: on the immense body of a woman, between the ‘legs’ of the fireplace . . . the terminus of its circular itinerary” (Lacan, 1988, p. 440); therefore, according to Lacan’s theory of the proper place, “the signifier must never risk being lost, destroyed, divided, or fragmented without return” (p. 438). And yet, for Derrida (1987), this risk is constitutive of all signifiers as marks of communication, indeed, “there is no destination” but rather *adestination*, for “within every sign . . . there is distancing” (p. 29), a difference and deferral. Thus, no instance of communication can escape *adestination*. That is to say, “the condition for it to arrive is that it ends up and even begins by not arriving” (Derrida, 1987, p. 29). Although every communication arrives somewhere—this is Barbara Johnson’s (1988) partial objection to Derrida, that a letter always arrives at its destination because “its destination is wherever it is read” (p. 248)¹³—they do not arrive at a predestined, intended destination, but they are always off course by the measure of a difference, a deferral, a gap, a division, a re-turn. In the iterable structuration of difference and deferral discussed earlier, the communication is always haunted by its future arrival, and lives in the undecidable, spectral state of having arrived and yet to arrive.

We can observe these differed and deferred arrivals in Slavoj Žižek’s (2008) defensive discussion of Lacan’s “a letter always arrives at its destination” thesis as well. Žižek employs unabashedly teleological formulations such as “‘the letter arrives at its destination’ as if some hidden ‘cunning of Reason’ regulated the chaotic flow of events” (discussing Eric Ambler’s spy novel *Passage of Arms*) and how “this chaos of comic encounters seems to be run by the hidden hand of a benevolent destiny which provides for the final reconciliation” (discussing Mozart’s opera *Le Nozze di Figaro*; p. 24). However, he also tells us “how far we are at this moment when ‘the letter arrives at its destination,’ from the usual notion of teleology” and “from realizing a predestined telos” (Žižek, 2008, p. 9), that “the letter arrives at its destination” through “failure” (p. 22), and goes on to list a series of setbacks and deferrals such as the “surplus of what is effectively said over the intended meaning” (p. 17), “the leftover, the remainder” (p. 4), “a gaze destined for another” led “astray” (p. 5), how Žižek’s own reading “leads beyond Lacan’s ‘Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*’” (p. 27), and how “there is . . . another side” to the Bette Davis melodrama, *Now, Voyager* (pp. 31, fn. 35). Each one of these “surpluses” that somehow “remain” after the supposed destination has been

¹³ However, she also writes that the sentence “a letter always arrives at its destination” can also mean “the letter has no destination” (Johnson, 1988, p. 249).

reached, leading to additional arrivals that keep coming even after the arrival had supposedly taken place, demonstrate this spectral state of having arrived and yet to arrive.

There is a surplus to every message (material signifier)—what that message means (conceptual signified). The arrival of the message does not mean that its meaning has arrived also. Furthermore, there is a surplus to what the message means also, for meaning is always in process. Its being is always in the process of becoming. Thus, meaning is always yet-to-come and constantly differs from and defers itself in what Derrida has referred to as the “play of *differance*.”¹⁴ The previously mentioned polysemy is, indeed, the result of this *differance*. What this indicates is that, despite teleological projections of a particular destination, the message/meaning is always already off course, missing its teleological destination, and its future heading is not fixed and given but is yet-to-come. Therefore, we can never say with unshakeable certainty that what has been communicated has finally, fully arrived. In what Friedrich Nietzsche (1974) has called “the eternal return of the same,” and what Derrida (1988) refers to as “iterability,” each communication keeps recommunicating, and recommunicating differently every time. If we recall Roland Barthes’s (1974) notion of a “writerly text,” for example, with every rereading of a book or a rewatching of a film, what is communicated arrives again. What is delivered in communication is always haunted by its future arrival, and lives in the undecidable, spectral state of having arrived and yet to arrive.

(In)conclusion

To recall, I started with the conventional, “norm”al communication of communication as a predestined transfer of meaning from origin to end, focusing on the example of “models of communication.” Here, the closing and completion of the gap between origin and end constitutes communication, a reductive operation that reduces their difference to one—communication—so that communication excludes miscommunication. I then argued that these models were miscommunicating, in that miscommunication was in fact being excommunicated from within communication, that miscommunication was inside communication, not outside of it.

I then looked at two promising theories that ruptured and divided the line of communication that led the origin to the end, reducing one to the other. Austin’s (1975) speech act theory, by introducing the notion of “the performative,” ruptured that reductive journey by questioning the adequation relation between a statement and the real fact identified by that statement. Lacan’s (1988) discussion of *The Purloined Letter* ruptured the line of communication enabling the reduction of a signifier to its signified, by doing away with the signified altogether. In both cases, the alleged heading of communication, its destination, is displaced by those divisions.

¹⁴ In response to structuralism’s synchronic exclusion of diachrony to convey a timeless, basic, original sense of “structure,” Derrida (1982) spells difference as *differance* (with an *a*) to indicate both a spatial difference (differing) and a temporal difference (deferring), and how they rely on each other in a supplementary relationship. For a discussion of his notion of “to come” regarding spectrality and a democracy-to-come, see *Specters of Marx* (1994).

However, we also saw that these two theorists were also reductive in their respective displacements. In Austin's (1975) case, polysemy was reduced by its proper context, defined in terms of the presence-to-self of a conscious intention. In Lacan's (1988) case, the fateful journey of communication was dictated by the transcendental signifier, the Phallus, hence the "phather" of all signifiers. The misdirection—from the signified—of Lacanian communication was nonetheless given the directions of a return to course, to the course that was proper to it, and toward which it was destined. And because the directions for the correction of a prolonged course to the proper course were given by the chain of signifiers, governed by the Phallus, we could, perhaps, rename that chain "the phallic chain of command."

What these very different examples illustrate, perhaps, is that the displacement of the destination of communication by itself is not enough to overcome the problems observed by those examples themselves. What we need to be concerned about could rather be that very search for a predestination itself, whose aim is to reduce the play of *differance*, and to close the gap of difference and alterity. I find Derrida's notions of dissemination as irreducible polysemy, and of an irreducible *adestination* indicating the structural necessity of nonarrival conditioning every communication, useful in this regard. Miscommunication, then, refers not so much to the other of communication as to the otherness-within of communication.

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