Divided subjects, no subjects, or standardized subjects? The interdependence between subjectivity and social practices in communication

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Abstract Two recent articles have drawn attention to special kinds of speech acts inviting reflection on subjectivity in linguistic interactions: Bianchi (2024) refers to them as «unfinished speech acts»; Terkourafi (2025) as «partial speech acts». In both cases, the speech act being actually performed has to be finalized by the hearer. However, while Bianchi focuses on speech acts involving strategic speakers' intentions, Terkourafi emphasizes instead the indeterminacy of communicative intentions, suggesting the idea of speech acts without antecedent subjectivity. I argue that this idea must be understood in terms of the absence of a coherent and transparent subject, while the literal claim of speech acts with no antecedent subjectivity is problematic for various reasons. Here, I focus on the risk of diverting attention from the fact that, in normal cases, speakers' communicative intentions tend to align with social practices: our subjectivities are indeed *standardized* by the *standardizing* effect of social regularities. I will present this idea of *standardized subjects* with reference to three domains: the interdependence between social structures and subjects; the cognitive infrastructure this presupposes; and the role of conventions in linguistic behavior.

Keywords: speech acts, subjectivity, social practices, social cognitive infrastructure, conventions

0. Introduction

Two recent articles (Bianchi 2024; Terkourafi 2025) have drawn attention to an intriguing set of phenomena that invite reflection on subjectivity in linguistic interactions. Within the framework of speech act theory, both authors explore cases of what might be called imperfect speech acts, respectively labeled «unfinished» by Bianchi (2024) and «partial» by Terkourafi (2025). How does subjectivity come into play? On this point, the two analyses partially diverge.

Bianchi's definition of "unfinished speech acts" (USAs) is as follows: «USAs are speech acts intentionally designed by the speaker as, in some way, incomplete, and intended to be finalized by the hearer» (Bianchi 2024: 2). Here, the emphasis is on the fact that the speech act is "intentionally designed": a communicative intention on the part of the

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speaker is presupposed, preceding – even if only logically – the execution of the speech act.

On the other hand, from Terkourafi's perspective, the emphasis is on what the «partial speech act» leaves indeterminate, particularly on «the possibility to perform speech acts without a fixed prior intention by the speaker» (Terkourafi 2025: 16).

The two approaches may be considered compatible to this extent: the speaker may have a "determined" intention to convey an "indeterminate" intention, that leaves unspecified which speech act is performed. This indeterminacy of the intended act is foregrounded in Terkourafi's perspective but is also present in Bianchi's idea that the speaker leaves the determination of the performed speech act to the hearer.

However, each approach captures certain cases better than others. Sometimes the speaker appears to use indeterminacy strategically to achieve specific intentional effects, while in other cases, indeterminacy may reflect the speaker's indecision regarding the speech act to perform – or even their lack of awareness of ambiguity. While Bianchi's emphasis on the presence of intentions is particularly suited to capturing strategic uses, Terkourafi's approach is built around the idea that «speakers cannot control what their language means». In a rather radical formulation, «speech acts can be [...] performed without an antecedently and independently given subjectivity or intentionality of the speaker» (*Ivi*: 22).

This second approach, centered on the absence of a prior intentionality, seeks to capture a plausible idea: that the subject manifesting in language is far from perfectly coherent and transparent to itself. On the contrary, it is «a partial (or conflicted) subject» (*Ibidem*) – a *divided subject*, if we want to indicate the absence of synthesis, whether this results in conflict or not. In Terkourafi's view, the notion of «partial speech acts allow us to realize ourselves as flesh-and-blood (not model) speakers with conflicting goals and offer a theoretical account of how this (conscious or subconscious) ambivalence of our social action lives on in discourse» (*Ivi*: 7).

Conceived in this way – that is, as the absence of a completely coherent and transparent subject – the idea of the absence of a subjectivity is entirely plausible. Nonetheless, I believe there are various reasons to approach that expression with caution.

To begin with, denying the existence of an antecedent subjectivity may have the unintended effect of justifying forms of denial of others' subjectivity, with a range of possible manifestations, from impoliteness to offense, to outright aggression. If there is no antecedent subjectivity, there is nothing that merits or demands our recognition[1].

Second, the "conflicted subjects" Terkourafi describes bear conflicts not only within themselves but also between themselves and others: they convey positions, impulses, and demands that continually risk clashing with those of others. Failing to recognize this fact risks legitimizing the utopian notion of their spontaneous peaceful coexistence – a tendency observable in identity politics[2].

In this article, however, I intend to address a different reason for prudence. The rejection of an antecedent subjectivity can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, even subject's stable social traits are the product of prior social practices. On the other hand, these *relatively* stable traits can be negotiated and modified in interactions. The absence of antecedent subjectivity in the first sense does not negate – rather, it implies – that, over time, interactions constitute subjects with relatively stable social traits. In sum, the subjects involved in communicative interactions, however divided, possess characteristics that precede those interactions, some of which might be deeply rooted and difficult to

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[1] On the notion of *recognition* of subjectivity, see Honneth (1995); for its application in the domain of linguistic (im)politeness, see Sbisà (2021).

[2] I have addressed this topic in Mazzone (2024).

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modify. These characteristics are the result of the pressure exerted by stable social structures on the individual. In this sense, I will speak of *standardized subjects*.

Section 1 reviews research that helps us refine this notion, by considering how social structures are *standardized and standardizing* – characterized by regularities that shape subjects in predictable ways. Moreover, it describes the main cognitive features that make individuals susceptible to being shaped in this way.

Section 2 draws on insights from pragmatics to show that linguistic interactions, far from lacking an antecedent subjectivity, require standardized subjects shaped by social practices.

Section 3 revisits the idea of interactions without antecedent subjectivity, highlighting a paradox: removing a robust notion of subjectivity risks legitimizing an idealized conception of individuals as unconstrained – a tendency evident in post-structuralist thought, but which also resurfaces in contemporary politics of difference.

1.   Standardized subjects within standardizing societies

As we have seen, Terkourafi argues that speech acts are «performed without an antecedently and independently given subjectivity or intentionality of the speaker» (*Ivi*: 22). Are there reasons to distinguish between a weak interpretation of this claim – where subjects are "divided", i.e., not entirely coherent or transparent – and a stronger interpretation, which denies antecedent subjectivity altogether? In this section, I argue that such a distinction is crucial: the stronger interpretation risks overlooking, on the one hand, the existence of social structures that have the power to constitute relatively stable subjectivities and, on the other hand, the cognitive mechanisms that make individuals susceptible to this power, producing social conformity[3].

This theme is far from new: we need only reconstruct it and draw some consequences.

To begin with, in his *Studies of the Routine Grounds of Everyday Activities*, the ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel introduced the notion of "moral order", as the shared background of beliefs and values through which individuals shape and comprehend their interactions. He describes it as «perceivedly normal courses of action – familiar scenes of everyday affairs, the world of daily life known in common with others and with others taken for granted» (Garfinkel 1964: 225).

The moral order consists of «socially standardized and standardizing, "seen but unnoticed", expected, background features of everyday scenes» (*Ivi*: 226). In sum, the features constituting the moral order are «seen but unnoticed», «taken for granted», and perceived – if noticed at all – as «the natural facts of life» (*Ivi*: 225). Furthermore, these features are standardized and standardizing: repetitive and exerting pressure on individuals, shaping them to varying degrees.

This highlights an essential aspect of our framework: the interdependence between the individual and social dimensions. Garfinkel assumes the existence of social regularities: "normal courses of action", "familiar" and "standardized", characterized by repetition and regularity. At the same time, he emphasizes their imprint on individuals: these regularities are standardizing, influencing individuals' perception and conditioning their behavior.

This interdependence between individuals and society was already evident to Mead, according to whom the individual self is essentially constituted through the internalization

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[3] I do not wish to suggest the idea of perfectly coherent and unified social structures to which individuals can only conform. There are reasons to believe the opposite: no hegemony can establish itself without generating forms of resistance and counter-hegemony (Mazzone submitted b). This opens spaces of choice for individuals; but even in making such choices (whether hegemonic or counter-hegemonic), the cognitive mechanisms that generate conformity are still at work.

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of social rules, but, on the other hand, social structures could neither exist nor function without this internalization:

> This getting of the broad activities of any given social whole or organized society as such within the experiential field of any one of the individuals involved or included in that whole is [...] the essential basis and prerequisite of the fullest development of that individual's self: only in so far as he takes the attitudes of the organized social group to which he belongs [...], does he develop a complete self [...]. And on the other hand, the complex co-operative processes and activities and institutional functionings of organized human society are also possible only in so far as every individual involved in them or belonging to that society can take the general attitudes of all other such individuals [...] and can direct his own behavior accordingly (Mead 1934: 155).

Mead's famous notion of the "generalized other" refers precisely to the construction, within the individual, of a complex image of society and their role in it – an image that resides within the individual and governs them:

> It is in the form of the generalized other that the social process influences the behavior of the individuals involved in it and carrying it on, i.e., that the community exercises control over the conduct of its individual members; for it is in this form that the social process or community enters as a determining factor into the individual's thinking (*Ibidem*).

Another relevant reference is Erving Goffman and his notion of the "primary framework" as a schema of interpretation. Goffman's aim is «to try to isolate some of the basic frameworks of understanding in our society for making sense out of events» (Goffman 1974: 10).

This highlights another key point: while the internalization of the "moral order" places individuals under social control, it also provides them with frameworks of beliefs and values that give meaning to their experiences. Social structures are not merely mechanisms of control; they also fulfill needs, including the need to construct a symbolic identity.

In this context we could also consider the notion of "script" introduced by Schank and Abelson: «a script is a predetermined, stereotyped sequence of actions that defines a well-known situation» (Schank, Abelson 1977: 210).

This list could, of course, continue. In Section 3 we will also mention Bourdieu. Here, I conclude with the group gathered around the cognitive anthropologist Roy D'Andrade and, in particular, Naomi Quinn. D'Andrade and colleagues center their research on "schemas", cognitive structures through which individuals capture the regularities of the surrounding world – including social relationships, norms, and values[4]. These schemas are essential to the constitution of subjectivity. As Quinn states: «schemas that organize our stable understanding of ourselves and our relations to the world, including other people, comprise one very important class of schemas ordinarily experienced as needs and obligations to do something» (Quinn 1992: 92).

Some high-level schemas provide the values that, once internalized by individuals, orient their behavior: «one important way cultural schemas like achievement or love or work or marriage become high-level goal-schemas in individuals' goal hierarchies [...] is by supplying us with our understanding of ourselves» (*Ivi*: 91).

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[4] There is a close historical and theoretical connection between the notions of schema and script. Scripts, as conceived by Schank and Abelson, are a specific type of schemas pertaining to categories of social events.

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Having introduced the idea of standardized social structures shaping subjectivity, we now turn to the cognitive mechanisms that make individuals subject to this power. To do so, we refer to Michael Tomasello's theoretical framework.

At a first level, conformity to groups is ensured by imitation, a tendency we share with other primates, but which manifests more robustly in humans – thus leading to "overimitation":

> A basic requirement of membership in a cultural group is conformity, including to its social norms. From early in development young children imitate the actions of others, but by 3 years of age they are actually conforming to the group by overriding their own individual preferences to do what others are doing (which other apes do not do [...]). This conformity often takes on a kind of objectifying or normative quality. For example, 3-year-old children engage in so-called overimitation, in which they copy aspects of adult behavior that are clearly not related to goal attainment [...]. One interpretation of this behavior is that when children see an adult performing an instrumental action with extra unnecessary flourishes, they do not interpret this as an individual idiosyncrasy of the actor, but rather as a manifestation of «how it is done» in the culture (Tomasello 2020: 8).

Although «both chimpanzees and human children are biased to follow the majority», only in humans does this tendency override individual experience, such that «humans do not just learn from others, they actively conform to others» (*Ibidem*).

This idea of *active* conformity extends beyond imitation. As Tomasello states, at a certain point in evolution

> Early humans' skills of imitation [...] became modern humans' active conformity, and from early in ontogeny, in ways that other primates do not. This might be based on a desire to fit in with the group and/or to avoid negative sanctions from group members who are expecting conformity. The mutual expectations of the group – that is, standards of behavior that are mutually known to all and expected by all – are often called social norms. And these expectations are indeed normative in the sense that those who deviate will suffer some sort of negative consequence, at the very least some sort of negative evaluation of their reputation. (Tomasello 2014: 191)

This second evolutionary step toward active conformity involved «a scaling up of the collaboration of two or a few individuals to collaboration among all of the members of a more or less large social (cultural) group» - Tomasello refers to this as «group-minded identification» - and it was «perhaps due to increased competition with other human groups» (*Ivi*: 188).

Another factor may have contributed to the emergence of active conformity and moral norms: the need to curb «strategic» and non-cooperative individual actions. An increase in the capacity for individual planning of actions – and thus for manipulating other agents – may have necessitated the addition of a further level of social control, beyond imitation. Hence the emergence of mechanisms based on reputation, and in extreme cases, the use of actual sanctions.

This framework, articulated into two main levels of conformity, is not incompatible with accounts that emphasize the plurality of mechanisms through which group behaviors impose themselves on individuals (Westra, Andrews 2022).

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2. Standardized communication

In the previous section, we explored the complementary ideas of i) standardized societies, which exercise a "standardizing" power over individuals, and ii) individuals predisposed to be standardized, by virtue of a "cognitive infrastructure" that drives them toward conformity[5].

Here, I examine the consequences of this scenario in linguistic interactions.

A key argument against communicative intention in pragmatics is that, while we cannot directly access a speaker's intention, social regularities allow us to identify the meaning *made available* by the speaker – the one that the speaker is socially *accountable for*. In other words, we should distinguish between private intentions, which are inaccessible, and the meaning established by social rules[6].

While valid, this view does not imply that intentions are irrelevant but rather that they should be understood in publicly accountable terms (Mazzone submitted a). For our purposes, this means recognizing that communicative intentions are essentially shaped by social practices: they are *standardized*, and thus (normally) accessible to the hearer.

Contrast this with the view that what matters is social practices, *not* communicative intentions – as if considering linguistic phenomena in social terms required abandoning speaker intentions. An example can be found in Tirrell:

> [The traditional] framework, which treats *speaker's intentions* as primary [...] is too centered on individuals, as if we each could control the meanings of what we say. Surely, we do try, but often the meanings and actions associated with what we say extend far beyond our own awareness and control. In contrast, I focus on *linguistic practices*, which are non-individualistic and communal (Tirrell 2012: 187; emphasis added).

Similarly, Beaver and Stanley claim: «in the standard ideal model, the speaker has a specific communicative intention [...]. Yet in looking at political speech, it is important to drop this idealization» (Beaver, Stanley 2019: 517).

However, this skepticism toward individual intentions – as Tirrell's quotation shows – assumes speakers struggle to impose their communicative intentions *against* linguistic practices, while in fact, in the normal case, speakers' communicative intentions align with social practices – due to the force of precedents and conformity[7].

Consider Geurts' example: a speaker utters, in the appropriate context, "I hereby declare the cricket season open". According to Geurts, it shows that «the speaker's mental state [their communicative intention] is not always relevant to the successful performance of a speech act»; it is sufficient that there is «an accepted convention to the effect that the cricket season is to be opened at a certain time, by a person who is licensed to do so, using a formula along the lines of [the utterance above]» (Geurts 2019: 2). But why assume the speaker's intention diverges from the conventional meaning? Only ignorance or unconsciousness would cause such a disconnect. In normal cases, speakers' intentions

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[5] The expression "cognitive infrastructure" is used by Tomasello (2008).

[6] The literature supporting this position is extensive. Among the most significant contributions are Sbisà (2001, republished as 2023); Saul (2002); Arundale (2008); Haugh (2008); Geurts (2019); Hansen, Terkourafi (2023).

[7] "In the normal case" primarily means "barring errors" (and only in exceptional cases can it mean "barring attempts to modify the norm"). It is always possible for speakers and hearers to make mistakes in applying the social rules governing communication. However, error is not "the normal case", in both the sense of frequency and socially established norms. Recall Garfinkel's reference to «*normal* courses of action», consisting of «standardized and standardizing [...] expected, background features of everyday scenes» (Garfinkel 1964: 225, 226). Conventions could not even exist if not for this standardization of behaviors.

align with linguistic practices, since speakers are trained – indeed, *standardized* – within those practices.

Institutional linguistic practices (such as the one in the example) represent an extreme case, where social standardization is maximal: conventions specify the expressions to be used, the circumstances in which to use them, and the expected effects. Therefore, speakers could hardly utter conventional expressions without expecting to achieve the corresponding effects – and thus, without having the corresponding communicative intentions. Speakers internalize the communicative intentions prescribed by conventional practices and normally re-enact them in present interactions[8].

Even in less conventionalized instances, however, communicative intentions are standardized.

Consider Judith Butler's analysis of the power exerted by slurs, that is, insults targeting social categories. What holds true for them holds true for linguistic acts in general: if these are successful «it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes prior actions» (Butler 1997: 51). Current speech acts succeed not because current intention "governs" them, but because prior speech acts shape them *and the intentions involved*. Intentions are standardized by a history of prior speech acts.

With specific regard to racial slurs: «the speaker who utters the racial slur is thus citing that slur, making linguistic community with a history of speakers» (*Ivi*: 52). By using certain expressions, the speaker cannot help but conform to a history of prior uses[9], as practices have left their mark on the linguistic expressions employed.

In general terms, conventions function through this dynamics of regularity and expectation. An expression is conventional insofar as (i) it has been regularly used to produce certain effects, and (ii) as a result, it carries with it the expectation that it will again produce those effects. Therefore, any speaker trained in speech practices cannot use conventional expressions without knowing – and, barring error or irrationality, *intending* – their conventional meaning.

The case of slurs is just an instance of a broader category characterized by a high level of conventionality, albeit lower than "institutional" conventions. Morgan (1978) referred to these cases as "conventions of usage", and Kecskes (2010) analyzed them under the label of "situation-bound utterances". Certain expressions, through repeated use in specific circumstances, can become the preferred (standardized) means of expressing certain meanings in those contexts.

One example offered by Morgan is the use of sentences like "This is X" or "X speaking" to identify oneself on the phone. Although other semantically acceptable expressions, such as "Here is X" or "Here is X speaking", could be used, speakers tend to converge on one or a few expressions that become more familiar – and conversely, the more familiar they become, the more they are preferred over alternatives.

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[8] This view distances itself from both positions in the debate initiated by Strawson (1964). Strawson distinguished between "ordinary illocutions" and "convention-constituted procedures" (what I refer to here as "institutional" conventions), arguing that while the latter are essentially governed by conventional rules, the former require consideration of the speakers' intentions. This distinction, in my view, is misleading if taken to imply that "institutional" conventions do not presuppose individual intentions and their recognition. It is more accurate to say that in these cases the identification of intentions is most certain, as speakers cannot utter the relevant statements without being fully aware of what conventionally follows. On the other hand, proponents of socio-normative approaches have rejected Strawson's position, arguing that all communicative behaviors are governed by conventions *rather than* by speakers' intentions. Unfortunately, this position risks to take us even further from understanding the close connection between standardizing conventions and standardized intentions.

[9] Except in rare cases of "break" in the chain of uses: see below Section 3.

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These "conventions of usage" produce a strong association between expressions and their contexts of use. As Kecskes explains, utterances of this sort «encode the history of their use», and as a consequence, «these expressions can create their own situations» (Kecskes 2010: 2892).

Another example from Morgan is the sentence "I've got a headache". Simply mentioning this sentence evokes a familiar context: a wife using a physical ailment to decline sexual activity. Since this expression has become a standard way to convey a specific meaning in a specific context, it alone is enough to trigger that context – it carries the weight of its previous uses. As with slurs, this makes it impossible to use the expression without evoking a particular communicative intention. This is clear to both the hearer, who holds the speaker accountable for that intention due to convention, and the speaker, who therefore – barring error – would not use that expression unless they *intended* that precise effect[10].

Thus, standardized intentions are not limited to "institutional" utterances but extend to less conventional cases such as "conventions of usage". Speakers cannot use those expressions without conveying the associated intentions.

But even in cases that are less standardized still, similar considerations apply.

Consider Grice's example: «a man who calls for a "pump" at a fire would not want a bicycle pump» (Grice 1957: 387). To understand which "pump" the speaker means, we must infer «which [communicative] intention in a particular situation would fit in with some purpose he obviously has» (*Ibidem*). Faced with a fire, the speaker presumably has a communicative intention consistent with the context.

One might think that referencing contexts complicates the identification of communicative intentions. However, the opposite is true, insofar as contexts are socially standardized.

Levinson developed this idea by introducing the notion of "activity types", intended to account for the «embedding of language within human activities» (Levinson 1979: 368). An activity type is defined as «a fuzzy category whose focal members are goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded events with constraints on participants, setting, and so on, but above all on the kinds of allowable contributions» (*Ibidem*).

This concept aligns with the notions described earlier (moral order, scripts, schemas, etc.), which describe the social regularities individuals internalize, use to interpret others' behavior, and tend to replicate in their own behavior. Shared knowledge of extralinguistic practices constrains both the interpretation of linguistic expressions and their production. That is, speakers use linguistic expressions to convey the meanings that are expected, given the activity types in which they are involved.

Whether we are dealing with (i) institutional expressions, (ii) conventions of usage, or (iii) any linguistic expressions, one thing remains constant: communicative intentions are generally recognizable because they are standardized. In the first two cases, they are *directly* standardized, being strongly associated with linguistic expressions and contexts. In the third case, they can be *inferred from standardized contexts (activities),* which constrain the meanings linguistic expressions can convey.

3. The unlikely freedom of empty subjectivity

In the previous sections, we argued that social structures are both standardized and standardizing, shaping individuals who, in turn, convey standardized intentions in communication.

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[10] Otherwise, the speaker will use other available conventions to modify the hearer's interpretation: for instance, they will provide hints that it is an ironic usage or otherwise block the implicature.

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I now wish to highlight a theoretical risk in focusing exclusively on social practices, as suggested by Tirrell (2012) and Beaver and Stanley (2019). This risk is that if we discard the idea of an "antecedent subjectivity" (even if shaped by social practices), subjects may be seen as inherently empty, lacking internalized constraints.

As noted in the introduction, identity politics assumes subjects are free of internal conflicts, fostering the illusion of a pre-established harmony among them. A related issue arises here: if individuals enter social interactions without prior subjectivity, they lack not only conflicting drives but also constraints that limit their freedom.

This issue has roots in post-structuralism, due to its radical conception of the power of social structures over subjects. Paradoxically, precisely because these subjects are conceived as empty except insofar as they are shaped by social structures, they end up being seen as radically unconstrained when attention shifts to their freedom and agency. I will first examine this paradox through Foucault's thought, then explore Butler's (1997) analysis contrasting Bourdieu and Derrida[11]. Via Derrida and Butler (mediated by Leezenberg 2015), these ideas influence Terkourafi's (2025) work on "partial speech acts". A new image of Foucault has emerged, suggesting that his later work provides a solution to a problem found in his earlier writings: the complete lack of freedom for the subject in relation to "regimes of power". Starting with Foucault (1982), his move from "regimes of power" to "governmentality" and from "biopower" to "pastoral power" is intended to open spaces of freedom. As Bevir states: «whereas biopower, the discipline of the body, can control the subject without his collusion, pastoral-power has to pass through the consciousness of the subject, and, in doing so, it necessarily creates a basis for resistance» (Bevir 1999: 72).

Foucault's shift is evident in his well-known statement: «Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free» (Foucault 1982: 221).

However, as Villadsen and others point out, there is a well-founded concern that Foucault's late work went too far in that direction:

> Foucault is paradoxically criticized for portraying freedom and resistance as impossible in his 1970s work on discipline, sexuality, and biopower, whereas, conversely, he allegedly viewed the subject's freedom as too unconstrained in his late work on ancient self-care. (Villadsen 2023: 84)

Yet, this later freedom is not a real escape from regimes of power but an inner, private freedom. As some commentators claim, «Foucault's late work represents a turn away from politics and towards individual self-cultivation as an aesthetic practice» (*Ivi*: 74).

In a way, then, Foucault's early and late phases share a common issue: an idealized subject, devoid of characteristics that would both enable resistance to regimes of power *and* constrain its freedom. We are left with an empty subjectivity, unconditionally malleable either from the outside or the inside.

This issue resurfaces in Butler's contrast between Bourdieu and Derrida. On the one hand, Butler embraces Derrida's notion of «iteration», which holds that signs are repeated in contexts that escape the intentions of their authors. In her view, speech acts

> Are not guided by an antecedently and independently given subjectivity or intentionality of the speaker, but by what Derrida [...] calls «iteration»; that is, by a

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[11] It is not possible, within the limits of this paper, to do justice to this issue in post-structuralist thought. My aim is merely to suggest some directions for further reflection on subjectivity and communication. In any case, the interpretation of Foucault proposed here has been developed more extensively in Mazzone (submitted b).

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logic of quotation in new contexts which inevitably and systematically exceed the speaker's intentions. (Leezenberg 2015: 223; cited by Terkourafi 2025).

In fact, Derrida's "iteration" aims to capture not so much the «normal» cases in which prior uses determine intentions, but those cases in which current contexts cause a «break». In Butler's words, «the force and meaning of an utterance are not exclusively determined by prior contexts [...]; an utterance may gain its force precisely by virtue of the break with context that it performs» (Butler 1997: 145). In short, what Derrida seeks is a space for freedom from social regularities.

Butler contrasts this view with Bourdieu's, who emphasizes the unconditional power of social structures in shaping subjects. In her view we should find a balance between these extremes:

> Whereas Bourdieu fails to take account of the way in which a performative can break with existing context and assume new contexts, [...] Derrida appears to install the break as a structurally necessary feature of every utterance [...], thus paralyzing the social analysis of forceful utterance. (*Ivi*: 150)

In short, while Bourdieu leaves no room for individual freedom, Derrida underestimates the power of social regularities in establishing conventions – i.e., standardized behaviors. However, in a sense, the two approaches seem to imply each other. If subjects are conceived as "empty" – totally malleable by social structures – they can be thought of as capable of adapting without resistance to even the smallest change in context.

To overcome this paradox – where subjects are both overly constrained and overly free – we must view them as being potentially reshaped by each interaction, yet primarily reenacting their standardized nature. Social structures, once internalized, impose significant constraints on change.

4. Conclusions

Partial speech acts and unfinished speech acts illustrate, in complementary ways, the complexity of intentions and subjectivities in communication. While Bianchi (2024) highlights the presence of strategic intentions in speakers, Terkourafi (2025) emphasizes the richness of meanings that speakers may not fully grasp and control. The interdependence of social structures and subjects, as discussed here, can help refine these perspectives.

On the one hand, we should not overestimate the intentional component, imagining subjects fully in control of meanings. Even the values that most characterize us as individuals are the result of internalized social practices: and these practices do not form a perfectly coherent whole, nor do subjects form a fully transparent conception of them. We are, to some extent, divided subjects.

On the other hand, we should not underestimate the intentional component, imagining subjects as empty vessels. Individuals act based on motivations and intentions that, although shaped by social practices, become constitutive of their identity. We are, to that extent, genuinely intentional subjects.

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