

Preface

 <https://doi.org/10.1075/cvs.12.preface>

Pages xv–xviii of

**How to Do Philosophy with Words: Reflections on the
Searle-Derrida debate**

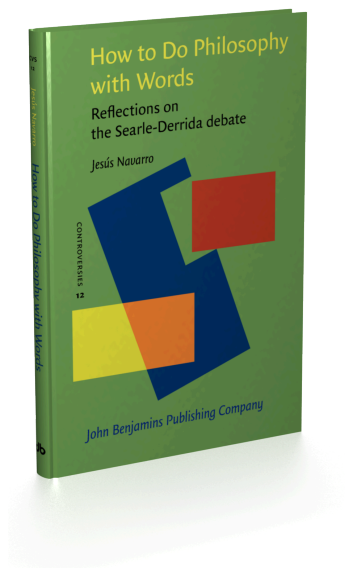
Jesús Navarro

[Controversies, 12] 2017. xviii, 225 pp.

© John Benjamins Publishing Company

This electronic file may not be altered in any way. For any reuse of this material written permission should be obtained from the publishers or through the Copyright Clearance Center (for USA: www.copyright.com).

For further information, please contact rights@benjamins.nl or consult our website at benjamins.com/rights



Preface

Venus huic erat utraque nota.
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, III, 323

In 1998, while I was writing my doctoral thesis, I had the opportunity to attend some of the classes taught by Jacques Derrida in the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales of Paris. That course, whose topic was “Pardon,” began with an analysis of the political discourse that followed upon *Apartheid*. There was an extraordinarily large audience attending, with students and professors, French people and foreigners, finding a place for themselves on the hard floor, disseminated densely throughout the passages and jamming the fire exits. On the lecturer’s table a whole mess of recording devices had been left to record the master’s words and make his *voice* last as though it were a *text*. Almost ashamed of the recorders, the discourse readied itself to hurriedly cross the terrain of orality, midway between the written text and the transcribed text, in a lecture that would have to be strictly read from beginning to end. When Derrida finally appeared in the classroom, the aura of his white mane spread throughout the entire auditorium in the form of a tomblike silence. To be honest, I now recall few of his enigmatic words, but I will be a long time in forgetting my first impression of those classes and the peaceful rhythm of our instructor’s penetrating rhetoric.

In those days I wanted to get to know Derrida’s thought, because his influence on literary criticism over the preceding decades would be difficult to exaggerate. The *Essays* of Montaigne, which were the topic of my thesis, had been subjected to a new reading by certain authors who, in a more or less direct manner, said that they were influenced by Derrida’s deconstruction, an influence that gave rise to so-called *textualism* (“there is nothing outside the text,” meaning that an interpretation should not go beyond the text itself). I had thought that this posture was wrong ever since I first learned of it, long before my encounter with Derrida, and therefore I was somewhat prejudiced against that mysterious master. Nevertheless, as I matured as a reader of Derrida, I noted that what I didn’t like about textualism – at least in its cruder manifestations – was precisely that it didn’t correctly follow the posture taken by Derrida, confusing his concept of *text* with the limited realm of literary works. In contrast, Derrida himself became ever more stimulating, since I thought I had encountered in his works a lively and penetrating development of the

Levinasian problem of alterity (specifically, in the way Derrida defends the *dissemination* of meaning). Nevertheless, I have to admit that that development continues to be, for me, at least sometimes, irritatingly cryptic and obscure.

Six years later I was at the University of California-Berkeley as a visiting post-doctoral scholar, invited by Prof. Janet Broughton, with the intention of developing certain lines of my doctoral thesis. During that time I attended the excellent course on *Philosophy of Mind* taught by Paul Skokowski, having become interested in that discipline through the problem of personal identity. Within its diverse panorama, the position of John R. Searle regarding the intentionality of the mind was especially attractive to me, since he appeared to me as one of the few authors that have truly escaped the long shadow of behaviorism. Taking advantage of the fact that, in the following quarter, Searle himself was giving a class on social philosophy, I infiltrated once again into the classroom as an auditing student, with the same innocent curiosity that I had shown in Paris years prior. The classroom, of course, was also completely filled (although, thanks to efficient American organization, every student had her own desk). A video camera systematically recorded the *speech acts* of the professor, embalming them in their context. The result was no less dazzling, since Searle's reputation as a charismatic teacher was totally justified: without even a notepad in sight, at more than 70 years old, his mental agility was marvelous. The ease with which the best examples came to his mind, the clarity with which he presented his arguments, the firm definition of his intellectual goals and the dynamism with which he transmitted them were truly enviable (moreover, his fame as a stubborn man was also merited, since, as is well known, he has a formidable ability to instantly dismiss those objections he considers obsolete).

When I undertook those research stays I had no plans at all for writing this book, but I probably wouldn't have ever written it had it not been for my time at Paris and Berkeley. And not just because of the incidental encounters that I was able to have with these two titans of present-day thought, but above all because those research stays allowed me to live for a few months in the social and human contexts where they carried out their respective academic activities, the places where they were admired and respected. I was able to immerse myself in the way of doing philosophy followed by each thinker. The comparative analysis of both philosophies and the effort to establish some degree of understanding between them is an imprudent, risky project that I later decided to undertake when I discovered that both of the fervent crowds of supporters – amongst whom these authors appeared like grand intellectual paradigms – were perfectly willing to despise the other from lofty heights. Searle, among the deconstructivists, is nothing more than a stale, outdated theoretician; Derrida, among the majority of analytic philosophers, is a dishonest trickster of an intellectual. How is it possible for this kind of admiration and this

kind of scorn and contempt to be present simultaneously? Is it a situation that can never be remedied? Shouldn't philosophy be the domain of open communication, dialog and respect? Aren't there problems common to the works of both on which each can cast a bit of light from their own perspective?

Upon approaching the texts of the explicit confrontation that the two authors had been enmeshed in, I found myself in a relatively favorable position for understanding the motives of their missed encounter, since I had learned something from both worlds. I saw the clash between their outlooks as both something inevitable and as a challenge, since at base I had the sense that the possibility of a certain understanding between the two was not to be entirely discarded. With the caveat that this understanding would imply taking into consideration philosophical activity from a perspective that is broader than what is strictly theoretical. As I will attempt to demonstrate with great care, the problematic confluence of the philosophies of Searle and Derrida – concerning questions like “iterability,” “intentionality” and the “parasitism” of language – cannot be resolved by paying attention only to what each author *says* but rather, as Austin stated regarding speech acts, the issue must be resolved in the terrain of what each one of them *does* with what he says. But this is a question that will have to be dealt with in the book.

I would like to thank Owen Flanagan for his hospitality at Duke University in summer of 2005, because during that research stay I was able to collect the majority of the bibliography I was in need of, and had some conversations, both with him as well as with his colleagues at the Department of Philosophy, conversations that have both helped me greatly. My thanks also go to the professors and colleagues that have read parts (or the entirety) of the manuscript, for their valuable commentaries: among others, Manuel Barrios Casares, César Moreno Márquez, Enrique Bocardo Crespo, Manuel Padilla Cruz, Luis Sáez-Rueda, Juan José Acero and Marcelo Dascal. I have had the occasion to discuss the argument of my book at length with Teresa Bejarano, Pedro J. Chamizo-Domínguez, Antonio Pineda Cachero, Federico Rodríguez Gómez, Margarita Planelles Almeida, Miguel Vidal Pérez and Gabriel Arnáiz; the result owes much to their attentive and painstaking observations. To Cristina San Juan, with whom I attended the classes given by Derrida: I want to thank her for her infinite hospitality during my time in Paris. Beyond the strictly academic, the support of my family has been as unconditional as ever; I want to especially thank Carla for her inexhaustible patience and understanding, and Nora for all of the time I have failed to dedicate to her.

I presented sketches of this book in various doctoral courses at the University of Sevilla between 2006 and 2008, and I must also recognize my debt to the students of those courses for their insightful opinions and critiques. But above all I wish to especially thank my students in the course on *Contemporary currents in philosophy*

at the University of Sevilla. It was when I faced them in lectures that I found myself complying with the obligation to offer a broad panorama of present-day thought, feeling the necessity and the difficulty of integrating the authors I discussed into a common history. That is the purpose of the present book, within the narrow limits that I have marked out for it, and I owe much to the debates that we held in class.

Sanlúcar de Barrameda, summer of 2009

Note to the English edition

This book was first published in Spanish by the Fondo de Cultura Económica (Madrid) in 2010. This translation has been made possible thanks to the University of Seville (VPPI) and the Consejería de Innovación, Ciencia y Empresa of the Junta de Andalucía, whose financial support I gratefully acknowledge.

I would also like to recognize Erik Norvelle's patience and professionalism during the long process of translation. My involvement in the supervision of his work has been intense, perhaps wearisome for him at times, but it has allowed me to qualify some of my positions in the book and to detect and avoid some of its errors, and I am very thankful to him for that.

Edinburgh, autumn of 2015