

# What it is like to be “ex”? Psycho-discursive analysis of a dangling identity

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**Elena Faccio**

Department of Applied Psychology, University of Padua, Italy

**Giuseppe Mininni**

Department of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Bari, Italy

**Michele Rocelli**

Clinical Psychology, University of Padua, Italy

## Abstract

The goal of this article is to observe how communicative processes intervene in constructing and maintaining given self-narratives. Proceeding from the idea that the Self is, first of all, narration, we shall scrutinise the topic of identity permanence and change in our linguistic system by exploring the configurations of reality produced by the use of a specific morpheme: the “ex”. After considering some differences about the intricate relationship between language, mind and reality, we tried to enter the etym and the meanings linked to the use of this linguistic particle. Making use of Wittgenstein’s proposed method called “perspicuous representation” we examined the implicit meanings it assumes in different usage contexts such as daily language and self-narratives provided by prisoners asked about their image of the “ex-prisoner”. The analysis revealed a substantial ambiguity between the identity change and its negation since the use of the prefix “ex” seemed to confirm and at the same time deny the meaning of the noun accompanying it. The use of the prefix can also prevent the re-positioning of the persons with respect to their past. These findings may contribute to the understanding of the need for a change in linguistic direction. Our conceptualisations of identity cannot be divorced from the linguistic devices used to express them. Major implications for daily language and for the study of clinical and deviant phenomena have been considered.

## Keywords

Language game, ex, identity, change, permanence, psycho-discursive analysis

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## Corresponding author:

Elena Faccio, Department of Applied Psychology, University of Padua, Via Venezia 8, 35131 Padua, Italy.

Email: [elena.faccio@unipd.it](mailto:elena.faccio@unipd.it)

## Introduction

Many authors have explored the relevance of linguistic aspects in the construction and deconstruction of identity and mental phenomena (Bang, 2009; Branco & Valsiner, 2010; Graham & Stephens, 1994). Whether one's stance with respect to a "narratological view" is radical (Gergen, 1991) or moderate (e.g. Spence, 1982), undeniably, meanings are recreated through "re-storying exercises" (Chandler, 2000 p. 215). As Chandler stresses (2000, p. 215), the idea that the human being is engaged in narrating stories from which he/she draws notification and awareness of the Self (aptly, Latin defines identity by using the expression *cognitio hominis*) is not simply one normative ideal among others, but it has to be seen as "our only or 'primary' way of organizing our experience in time" (Carr, 1986): as the "'essential genre' of self-represented identity" (Flanagan, 1996, p. 67, in Chandler, 2000). Such a process concerns the identity both of individuals and communities (Faccio, 2013)).

Since the Self is, first of all, narration, in this study we shall investigate the theme of identity permanence and change in our linguistic system by exploring the configurations of reality produced by the use of a specific morpheme: "ex".

Can a prefix completely modify the meaning of what we are about to say? And can it deceive us to the point of making us say the opposite of what we intend? (Faccio, Nardin, & Cipolletta, 2016). In order to look into the possible implications, we shall enter the terrain of etymology and the meanings which the morpheme assumes in differing contexts of usage.

Common discourse studied by exercising "perspicuous representation" requires us to trust in the possibility to expand word usage, considering even rare or impossible uses; we shall try to invent and introduce new linguistic games in an attempt to bring out facets and viewpoints which differ from the established rules of usage for the prefix "ex", unhinging them from their fixed positions. Wittgenstein's proposed method of mental experiments aims to demonstrate that human beings are imprisoned by their very way of speaking through certain images incarnated in language. This is also the purpose of "psyche therapy" as it emerges in the post-modern vision: It fosters change in those linguistico-representational rules by which we have constructed a particular discursive configuration whose opposite, or even difference, we are incapable of configuring (Wittgenstein, 1921). This leads us to stage it and "read" it always in the same way ((Faccio, Centomo, & Mininni, 2011)(Iudici, Salvini, Faccio, & Castelnuovo, 2015) (Faccio, 2011)

## Language, mind and reality: An intercultural overview

The Western philosophical tradition draws from the seminal reflections of Plato and Aristotle the fundamental premise for any reflection concerning the intricate relationship between language, mind and reality. It consists in holding that to speak meaningfully is "to say something". Indeed, "for a person who does not mean something, there could be no talk, either with himself or with another" (Aristotele, 1997, pp. 20–25). Human words

have value because (and as long as) they mean “a thing” which, thanks to them, “forms an ‘en-tity’, possesses an ‘id-entify’” (Jullien, 2006, p. 4). This assumption underlies the entire imposing structure of Western philosophical and scientific thought, nourished as it is by the preliminary need to define, and by respect for the principle of non-contradiction (Mininni & Manuti, 2017).

Some Asian languages, instead, tends to attribute value to all the resources of “speaking without saying”, which allow the speaker to evade the urgency of the “something” in order to respect the “that way”. Words are animated by the intention not to “say something”, but to “say how”. These cultures seem interested in the meaning system traceable in the resources of non-determination and errance, of continuous, diffused processuality, even when the retrieval of such reserves of non-distinction and vagueness impose pathways of de-signification and de-subjectification (Jullien, 2006).

The choice favouring the principle of non-contradiction made by Western cultures implies a number of costs. Some of them emerge from the enunciating/expressive ambiguities that may be sparked off in the use of a particular morpheme recognised by numerous Indo-European languages: “ex”.

## Words and possible worlds

The flow of experiences constituting the world is organised and signified in various ways, starting with a specific linguistic system: that is, on the basis of an agreement codified in the grammatical schemes proper to a given language. Some analytical and comparative research studies on different languages led Whorf (1956) to hypothesise a “principle of linguistic relativity” according to which the differences among various forms of life and culture spring from differences among the linguistic categories and structures of various idioms. The most pertinent example concerns the experience of time, which is conceptualised differently by way of its discursive formulation. Some languages (mostly in Western cultures) tend to “objectify” time: one speaks of “ten days” as of “ten men”; one refers “to a summer” using the same grammatical structure with which one refers “to a corner”; one represents time as a spatialised quantity that can be subdivided into measurable units, each containing a specific temporal portion. The three-tense verbal system (past, present, future) further favours one’s thinking of time as a series of aligned objects. At this point it becomes possible to refer back, to calculate, quantify, plan, register chronologies, pay monthly salaries, lose time and gain it. The Hopi language, on the contrary, has no room for any linguistic objectification of non-material concepts: it has no word, grammatical forms, constructions or expressions that refer directly to what we call “time”. Hopi employs different words to refer to “a duration of time” (*pàasa* “for that long”), to a point in time (*pàasat* “at that time”), and time as measured by a clock (*pahàntawa*), as an occasion to do something (*hisat*), and to have time for something (*aw nánaptsiwta* (verb)). In absence of an abstract concept of time, we find a subjective relationship between events, a cyclical flow in which there is no past, present, future. The same perceptive situation can be “affected” in different ways, according to the terms used. This means that terms do not isolate clear-cut empirical contents, but can cut out

and describe different “things”, without there being “facts” deciding which is the right one. As Wittgenstein illustrated with his argument against private language, the same holds within the confines of a given language: all the more for non-observable “internal” entities such as identity, sentiments and moods.

## Discursive modes for objectifying

Several Indo-European languages, more than others, tend to isolate and register distinct things and events, corresponding to the words delineating their perception. These languages make prevalent use of nouns and adjectives which give information on positionings and characteristics without requiring specification as to situation or the action per se. Some Asian languages, instead, make prevalent use of verbs which introduce greater amounts of contextual information, and which bond the subject and the object of the action. For example, compare the sentence “he is an altruist” to the sentence “he always helps his friends”: the first specifies the abstract trait or characteristic that someone “possesses”, de-contextualising it, while the second appears more concrete and immersed in a specific situation, to the point that it could not exist without a direct object (Carnaghi, Maass, Gresta, Bianchi, Cadinu, & Arcuri, 2008). Nevertheless, the variety of languages and cultures may be not well represented by the simplification about East and Western linguistic contexts; it represents a tendency rather than a categorical difference.

Kashima, Kashima, Kim, and Gelfand (2006) hypothesise that the Western individualistic conception (focusing on the actor and interpreting behaviour in terms of personality traits), might actually stem from specific linguistic practices: in using adjectives and nouns without including background information, we objectify and de-contextualise characteristics, making them appear more durable, stable and generalisable. For example, “a dishonest person” or “a liar” is more dishonest than “someone who tells a lie”. Verbs tend to offer a description focusing on the process; they shift the emphasis on the context more than nouns and adjectives. Conversely, a prevalent use of adjectives and nouns brings to the fore a world of discrete, consistent objects, determined by their properties instead, a more massive use of verbs depicts the field of experience as a unified whole which shifts dynamically.

In some of the principle Western languages the very word used in referring to “reality” derives from the Latin *res*, meaning “thing, object”; and in fact, it is commonly used to indicate the objectivity of what exists. “Real” phenomena appear to be independent of the human being and are manifest in activities and objects accessible to everyone, above and beyond their direct perception. First of all, however, things and events take shape linguistically, and then assume meaning and duration thanks to linguistic signification shared with other members of the social group: in its naming, words give concrete existence to experience. All aspects of reality regarding the world or oneself and one’s identity descend from acceptance of the language used to describe reality.

The prospects of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934) and constructionism (Harrè & Gillett, 1994; Vygotskij, 1934) adopt the idea that, in order to take shape and last, this “state of things” depends on social processes. Reality is continually

protected, reaffirmed or modified within daily conversations focusing on arguments which seem the most nonchalant; in them, reality is not formally defined, but taken for granted (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Any meaning relation is thus reified and asserts itself as concretely (“objectively”) existent, separate from those who speak about it, but not pre-existent to the conversations in which it emerges. In these conversations, social actors reciprocally show each other how to define objects and phenomena through a process of negotiation (Iudici & Fabbri, 2017)(Iudici & Verdecchia, 2015)

## Discursive practices as “rule-following”

Truly, it is absurd to keep reifying meanings: even those which seem to be necessary facts receive that configuration by way of linguistic rules. Persons’ experience with reality can be understood only by recognising their self-placement and the meanings they propose according to a dense web of rules and practices in public and private contexts, as they attempt to carry out their projects and achieve their goals.

As Wittgenstein points out in his discussion on “rule-following”, a person is trained to follow prescriptive, interpretative rules most of which are culturally or locally inherited. Based on them, the person is prepared to respond in certain ways to certain situations, in a manner appropriate to and shared by a pre-defined reality. Freed from the bonds of nature, of one’s own autobiography or environmental condition (Harrè & Secord, 1972), persons may be reconsidered as “poietic” and “auto-poietic” systems (Maturana & Varela, 1980), at the same time consumers and generators of linguistic practices and therefore speakers of and spoken by the same language.

Just as what occurs with the highway code, if someone should break the rules, they would promptly be reprimanded or punished according to the “seriousness” of the case, for have committed an error; for having misunderstood or having gone mad. However, states Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein, 1953), there is not only one way to “follow the rule”. For example, an arrow might just as well tell us to go in the direction of the arrowhead or to head in the opposite direction, if a “deviant” use, a local convention, the conviction that we are being deceived, induce a person to believe that this is the real meaning. “Rule-following” is not a mechanistic-activity, but implies the capacity to master the rule, and the intention to use it: a tennis champion can deliberately decide to make a wrong stroke because the movements of his body—no matter how assiduously he has practised—result from the choice to conform to a norm of correctness which may vary according to circumstance (“play badly to raise a friend’s morale”, “lose the game to win a bet”). But once we have been initiated in the “right” way to follow a rule, we do not choose between one interpretation and another, we obey that way blindly ((Wittgenstein, 1953)§219), since we are dealing with a *praxis* ((Wittgenstein, 1953)§202) acquired through training within a collective practice (Harrè & Tissaw, 2005). The rules do not “stand” *within one* mind, but *among* minds, and take shape as social (and socialised) activities, more than mental (or mentalised) ones, which guide and emerge within collective, public practice (Mininni, Manuti, & Curigliano, 2013).

Modern psychology springs from the primordial need to point out the “rules” of identity construction, according to expectations of “compactness”, “coherence” and “sameness” of the Self. However, Self-construction is not describable merely according to the rules of “identity”, but also to those of “otherness”, evoking traits of “difference”, “plurality” and “variability”. Precisely because such practices are not “something that could be done by only *one* man, *once* in his life” privately, (Wittgenstein, 1953, 203, §199), but result instead from rules of usage .

In our study, we shall attempt to enter the etym and the meanings linked to the use of the particle “ex” —as an important contribution toward understanding identity-building generated by speakers’ interaction. Later, we shall examine the different usage contexts of this prefix, such as daily language and sentences related to deviance, with the purpose of exploring the possible implications.

### Words with a special statute

The meaning of the morpheme “ex” responds to the rule implicit in the use of the verb “to stop [being or doing]”. An “ex-husband” is one who has “stopped” being (or acting as) a husband. As is well known, some words are semantically opaque since they have a “double-layered” meaning: What they appear to mean implies, in turn, a further piece of information. For example, the word “stop [being or doing]” means “to not do a certain thing anymore”; but it also means that “before, a certain thing was done”. Thanks to the presuppositional valence of the word “stop”, the statement “Carlo has stopped smoking” gives us a double piece of information about Carlo: that he no longer smokes, and that he used to smoke. However, this meaning of “to stop” has worth against the “background” of another of its meanings: that is, “Carlo used to smoke”. Words construct the human world by placing it in time, which (at least from Augustine on) is the most significant matrix of the mind.

### To be or not to be “Ex”

Although it is widely used and has many different facets, the preposition “ex” does not take root in all soil. We may find nouns which will never become “ex”: if a woman loses her husband, she does not become “the ex-wife of her dead husband”, but the “husband’s widow”. In this case, even in the presence of the meaning “is no more”, we do not use “ex”, but instead, totally change the noun: so that the wife becomes widow. The same goes for a son: we never speak of an “ex-son”; even should he lose his parents or be abandoned by them, he can keep the noun “son” unchanged, or modify it completely (using “orphan”). Analogously, when a person loses his/her job or leaves the world of employment, he/she does not become an “ex-worker”, but, respectively, “unemployed” or “retired”.

Whenever we use different nouns (as in the examples given), we modify reality, since we can call on a different linguistic configuration than the former one, and we put the

accent on what is new: the present. The former role no longer exists, since it is not evoked. When the former noun persists and is supplemented by “ex”, the given remains. Whether we remain on the same plane or create a completely different plane, we keep the same denotation or sign. The particle implies the possibility that the given—the qualification—is still there, regardless of time and space (Iudici, Castelnuovo, & Faccio, 2015).

## Words that de-construct id-entities

Alongside the subtractive or deprivative meaning, “ex”, in its Latin derivation, may also assume an extractive valence (“from” or “out of”: e.g. *deus ex machine*) or a conclusive one, indicating a person who has held a certain position and no longer holds it; an ex-president is “no longer” president since he has come out of that role. In this case, we indicate the anteriority of a condition by attaching the prefix to the condition which the person has left. After leaving his teaching post, the teacher becomes an ex-teacher, just as a mayor or a wife becomes “ex”.

However, in current usage, this morpheme can also assume completely opposite meanings; it can also have an emphatic, accentuating valence: i.e. it can forcibly stress what it precedes; it is born as negation, but sometimes becomes reinforcing. “Ex”’s meaning can be subtractive, by indicating that there is no longer a tie to a given condition; or it can be emphatic in using a noun to say what it no longer intends to say. We can say we are an *ex-husband* either in order to allude to the nearness of the person to whom we have been married or to emphasise our condition of distance from the person; the two illocutions are equally plausible.

In Greek, “ex” is not used as a prefix to a noun from which it can be separated; rather, it merges with the noun itself, and its meaning is manifested only if the word is split up into its elements (e.g. “exotic” is formed by *exo*, meaning “outside of, foreigner, stranger”). Passing to Latin and then on to current usage, we find a progressive extraction of the prefix from the term to which it refers: Greek encompasses “ex” in the noun, Latin presents it both as a prefix in composing vocabulary entries and as a single term referring to specific words, but detached from them. Current usage may even transform it into a noun.

In analysing various uses of the morpheme “ex”, we are surprised by the fact that although it refers to a past condition or to a past role, it accompanies a present verb form. We say “I *am* an ex-manager”, not “I *was* an ex-manager”; we introduce ourselves using a prefix specifying the fact that we are “no longer tied to”, but we do so using the same narrative style we would use for a self-presentation regarding the “here and now”.

The prefix’s two different, opposing possible meanings thus prearrange two completely different configurations of reality. The effects show that in the use of “ex”, one can attest the contrary of what one declaims. This makes “ex” one of the most intriguing vortices of language; it exposes the mind to the possibility of entering interpretative loops that may become dangerous, especially in psychology. In fact, this particle “says” that “it does not say [that it no longer is...]”; at the same time, however, it attests to the fact of “still being”.

The morpheme “ex” interests us in its particular function of threatening the words to which it attaches itself and, therefore, the id-entities which create being. In fact, the principle meaning of “ex” consists in removing validity from the meaning of the word that follows. Essentially, “ex” says that “what follows is no longer valid”. At first glance, an analogous function appears to be performed by the prefix “post”, which projects the time flow onto a scenario which is neutral as far as values are concerned, in that it highlights only the diversity of conditions. “Post-modern” era, “post-capitalist” society, and “post-human” life form evoke modes of being in time which are not necessarily branded by value judgments, but are seized in their differentiation from other modes of being. “Ex-millionaire”, “ex-virgin”, “ex-prisoner” and “ex-drug addict”, instead, evoke modes of being in time which highlight some reference to a value system; with varying degrees of explicitness they allude to a sense of loss.

### **Identities blocked by words**

The noun remains, even when it is preceded by a prefix: this fact represents the bedrock underlying construction of the socially available identity and image (Mininni, 2009).

When we speak of an “ex-pusher”, an “ex-life partner” or an “ex-prisoner”, on one hand we try to emancipate the person from what he/she has been; on the other, we tie and solidly anchor his/her former identity to the present one. For psychology, this “error” is disastrous in light of the fundamental concept based on which the past explains the present and foresees the future. The linguistic game of “ex” turns out to be an exercise in denotation, delineation and confirmation of an identity which has already been strictly codified, renegotiated and then reintroduced in masked form, but inextricably anchored to a label. Indo-European languages are scattered with linguistic games leading to the amplification of language’s generative potential (Brockmeier, 2002). The ambiguity of “ex” is the pragmatic outcome of its use as a prefix which takes up residence in places where a formerly narrated, already foreseen identity is available.

Thus, for example, “prisoner” and “ex-prisoner” become the same expression, and their coinciding penetrates into interpersonal perception, making available the same identity configuration for each. Any “ex” bears a portion of reality: the portion that we wish to present or else to conceal.

A drug addict clearly represents a stigmatised social role (Goffman, 1963), and as such, consumes his own possibility to think about himself/herself, or tell his/her own story, or act. The use of “ex” together with the noun “drug addict” is not capable of representing a reality different from the prelude (drug addiction); it therefore defines an identity space which is completely saturated by the expressive currency of the label applied to it. This also conditions the person’s self-perception, for as is well-known, self-representations cannot exist without the narrations of others (Ribeiro, Bento, Gonçalves, & Salgado, 2010).



## Rhetorical forms of ex-identity

By questioning 11 “guests” of an Italian penitentiary (the Due Palazzi in Padua) concerning their image of the “ex-prisoner”, we were able to collect descriptions and narrations allowing us to deduce their specific perceptions of this.

More specifically, we asked the prisoners, all men with at least one year imprisonment and irrespective of the crime committed or of the number of former detentions, to complete an open question questionnaire.

In line with the aim of our linguistic exploration, we are not interested in presenting the entire research project about the typing of detainees and the stigma related to prison conditions. Rather, we propose to offer a selection of the answers given to questions regarding the issue of the meanings implied in the use of the prefix “ex”.

In particular, we refer to some extracts from the responses provided to the following four questions:

1. After completing a period of detention in prison, all individuals can be said to be ex-detainees. Are there any exceptions?
2. When does someone stop being an ex-offender?
3. Being able to differentiate ex-offenders according to the type of offence for which they were imprisoned, are there crimes that do not fall into the category of a fully atoned offence, and remain so even after release?
4. Try to imagine and to propose a word that represents an alternative to “ex-detainee”.

We paid great attention to preserving the original formulation of the responses in order to apply, once again, the methodology of perspicuous representation.

We were thus able to see that their use of “ex-prisoner” responds to the activation of various specific rhetorical strategies, which combine to form a coherent vision of moral and social exclusion.

These extracts illustrates the rhetoric of temporal dramatization which lurks in the use of “ex”:

If you’ve been a prisoner you’ll become an ex-prisoner

If I’m a prisoner today I’ll be an ex-prisoner tomorrow

like an equation: ex-thief, now a thief

Another rhetorical device made available by the semantic unit created by “ex” is generalisation:

Everybody who’s finished doing time in a penitentiary is an ex-prisoner. Without exception.

However, the most frequent use made by “prisoners” of the word which later on may/will have to designate them is marked by the rhetoric of the stigma. Once we have been “prisoners” it is impossible to become “post-prisoners”; instead, we are condemned to being—all of us, perennially—“ex-prisoners”; that is, branded by moral and social exclusion.

‘Ex’, an indelible mark that so-called civil society will bring up, remark on, any time it decides is right. Let’s take an example: we’re in a factory locker room, there are 30 workers, one of them is an ex-prisoner, a guy can’t find his wallet... where is everyone looking?

As mentioned earlier, at a certain point, self-representations themselves coincide with the external gaze, producing a tautology of allusions tending to confirm itself perpetually. How can we blame anyone who distrusts an ex-prisoner, then?

The stigma marking the ex-prisoner will remain eternally, partly because it’s the truth.

An ex-prisoner is and remains one.

In my case it can never be removed because I committed murder, even though it was for revenge, it can’t be justified.

The more serious the reason for which we have become “prisoners”—homicide, paedophilia—the more justifiable, in the eyes of “prisoners” themselves, is their renunciation to draw from the prefix “ex” any hope for rehabilitation and re-integration into the moral and social community.

Paedophilia is a terrible crime in the eyes of prisoners and everyone, and in my opinion ex-prisoners deserve no consideration, even when they’ve left prison.

After all, it is impossible to look forward and backward at the same time. The particle “ex” gives us the illusion that we can look ahead, while it makes the image of what we thought we had left behind, even more clear. As one prisoner brilliantly stresses: “*The only real way to not be seen as an ex-prisoner is to go back to prison, and become a prisoner again*”.

The discursive process is based on an intrinsic property: narrative coherence (Gore & Cross, 2010), which represents the weft of narrations, making everything coherent and real according to common-sense thinking. Through narrative coherence, one’s entire existence is read and experienced “in function of” a given event, thus tending to consume it and shut it up into stereotyped definitions which are predictable and foreseeable. “*A person may behave well as long as they want, but there are objective factors like their*

*name being in criminal files, that keep them from removing the mark*". And: "Anyone who has made a mistake will continue to make mistakes".

The prisoners themselves reveal that any possible emancipation from the shadows of "ex" may have linguistic bonds. One who carries in the story of his identity, any trace of having been "prisoner", may glimpse a possibility for coming out of the "ex" trap in the capacity of the other person to proceed beyond the objectifying instructions of words:

I would have to be able to make an effort in a constant, marble-hard way to avoid anything happening: mourning, disappointment in love, marginalising feelings or events... like the fact of not finding a job (so going to eat at the friars' or at the municipal canteens for the poor) or even worse, losing one... I'd still have to keep going. If only others could see us as persons who've made a mistake but who've served their time in prison, once you've left there's no other way (at least on paper): but anyway you'll have to deal with the so-called additional social verdict.

The events that can lead you to no longer being considered an ex-prisoner lie in other people's direct knowledge of you, based on respect, on relations of reciprocal esteem, in a relationship based on sincerity, accepting the fact, too, that you're an ex-prisoner.

In other words, the only way to not be an "ex", and simply to have once been, consists in modifying the linguistic configurations used in speaking of oneself, eliminating the morpheme, as this extract suggests:

My belief is that there is no ex if he's paid by undergoing his punishment. Instead of "ex" I'd use 'a good debt-payer with no additional penalties'.

All linguistic labels referring to clinical or deviant conditions that may be expressed through the prefix "ex" (ex-drug addict, ex-prostitute, ex-mentally ill) may therefore greatly benefit from this linguistic renewal, demonstrating that the way we speak affects the way we think about what we are talking about.

## **Not conclusive conclusions**

Our intention to explore the morpheme "ex" has led us to the bedrock of language: to those discursive configurations which become, through use, denotations as well. "Ex" is an excellent example of a linguistic game imprisoning the perception of identity in a fixity which admits of no change: which transforms our predictions regarding others into conclusions. "Ex" declaims the fact that the person is not, by reiterating his/her still being; he/she is since he/she has been, even though context and conditions have changed. The use of "ex" is a game by which we crystallise the day-to-day process of becoming in illegitimate labels. Once again, we might say that our world manifests itself in our use of language, and is shut up inside its limits (Harré & Gillett, 1994).

The construction of reality by “ex” enters a web of narratively coherent bonds and contributes to confirming the prospect of a “deviant *career*”. Despite any other available information about the person, the use of “ex” favours the selection of elements confirming the progressive acquisition of the deviant identity.

Nevertheless, the semiotic dynamism of possible meanings we have found in the use of the prefix “ex” does not validate an “essentialist” position, since (in accordance with Valsiner, 2014) it is intended to recognize that the generating identity processes demand also resources of the “semiotic (self)mediation” [Valsiner, 2014, p. 47]. The meaning of “ex-wife” also arises in the new set of rights and duties that usually make the woman feel no longer engaged in ironing the shirts of the man who is no more her husband!

Among the expressions of prisoners we can also find phrases which do not refer to their deviant condition, which are capable of opening up a different “*Biographic*” perspective.

The words of this biography evoke contexts and situation free from the heredity of the past; we find biographical shocks (“*far from the city where I grew up*”), or indications of change seen by the prisoners in their life experience (“*to demonstrate my capacities apart from what led me to prison*”), of fundamental importance since they represent the real possibility for change as it is perceived. Such language does not remain tied to the past but, in starting out from the present condition, is projected toward the future. Let us consider one more example. What suitor will have better chances of winning the heart of the woman he desires: the one who introduces himself as an ex-fiancé or one who tells his story as an unattached man? The answer is so clear that no one truly interested in his beloved would commit such a gross error. Words change the configuration of reality and induce us to think of ourselves differently. Such words remind us we are *free citizens, husbands, fathers, free, toll-payers*.

Even within a culture like ours, then it seems quite clear that a mutation in language can change the way we look at the world. Inventing new language games means comparing images and concepts that no one has never compared before.

If the use of the prefix “ex” contributes in re-positioning persons with respect to their past, it also points to the need for a change in linguistic direction. We should follow the indications of Wittgenstein: “[we must] replace one form of expression with another” (ibidem, §90):

you have to look at the many uses of words that are causing the problem, extending the exercise beyond the present uses, including possible and impossible ones. A change in perspective can amplify the possibilities of choice and action, even if most of us *want* to see things in the wrong way. (Wittgenstein, 1929–1934, p. 5)

To see new connections is an aim (Harrè & Tissaw, 2005). To discover new uses of words is fundamental, then, because “Usage has made everything blossom, and therefore it can change everything” (Gargani, 1973, p. 40).

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### **Author biographies**

**Elena Faccio** is an Associate Professor in Clinical Psychology at the Department of Applied Psychology, University of Padua (Italy). She is also a psychotherapist and starting out from an Interactionist and Constructionist theoretical frame, she is interested in investigating the theme of change in psychotherapy envisaging the “self” in dialogical terms as a narrative form functional to the identity processes. She is interested in linguistic nature of meaning making in a dialogical perspective.

**Giuseppe Mininni** is a Full Professor of Psychology of Communication and Cultural Psychology at the University of Bari (Italy), where he studied philosophy and semiotics. His main interests are semiotics and social psychology of language and his publications include 220 articles and 14 books. These works are marked by an interdisciplinary strain, aiming at outlining both a pragmatic and a dialogic perspective in Critical Discourse Analysis, which has been labelled “Diatextual Approach”.

**Michele Rocelli** has a Master Degree in Clinical Psychology at the Padua University (Italy). He is working as a manager of the Therapeutic Community l’Arcobaleno of Capodarco (Fermo) for the long-term residential treatment for substance use disorders. He is interested in linguistic construction of deviance phenomena.