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# SELF-CORRECTION IN THE CONTEMPORARY FRENCH NOVEL: RHETORICAL EFFECTS OF A PARADOXICAL ETHOS STRATEGY

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## Abstract

*Self-correction may be seen as undermining ethos, particularly in writing, as it suggests an inability to articulate the right word initially. However, it is pervasive in everyday conversation and has been studied for its persuasive effects in pragmatics (Younis et al. 2023) and rhetoric, where it signals sincerity (Plantin 2009). In literature, particularly contemporary French novels, self-correction is very frequent and represents everyday discursive movements and thought processes (Rouayrenc 2015), offering a lens to study its rhetorical effects.*

*Self-correction can emphasize the “ethos of the communicating subject” (Herman 2005), as a counterpoint to the speaker’s person. While it may damage the communicator’s ethos by highlighting linguistic inadequacy, it can enhance the person’s ethos by signaling authenticity. However, excessive self-correction or radical reformulations, frequently seen in French contemporary literature, risk undermining positive rhetorical effects.*

*This study analyzes French novels to explore the variations of self-correction based on factors like their number, semantic contradictions, reformulation types (Steuckardt 2009) and meta-enunciative evaluation to investigate their rhetorical effects (positive and negative). We aim to explore these rhetorical effects in various argumentative scenarios to deepen the understanding of the rhetoric-argumentation interface.*

**Keywords:** *ethos, self-correction, contemporary novel, communicating subject, enunciative loops*



## 1. Self-Correction and Its Impact on Ethos

Self-correction is a frequent feature of everyday speech: we constantly rephrase our words to reaffirm, correct or emphasize them. However, its frequent use does not make it trivial. For instance, let us consider these two examples:

- 1) I am angry – **no, I am furious** about the delay.
- 2) “Her voice I was going to say above all that, **but no, not above, no.**” (Mauvignier 1999, 116)

Although each of these two utterances contains one self-correction, it serves two different purposes. In the first example, the second segment is a self-correction that functions as an amplification of the initial statement, reinforcing its orientation and extending its meaning in a consistent direction. In contrast, in the second example extracted from our corpus of French contemporary novels, the self-correction takes the form of a contradiction, or at least a questioning of the preceding segment (“but no”), without giving the final adequate word for the speaker. This excerpt reveals a paradox concerning the use of self-correction in contemporary novels: it highlights the rhetorical and narratological effects of the process of correcting an initial mistake in a published work. As Authier-Revuz notes, it is impossible to “retroactively cancel an error” in oral discourse; however, in writing, “even when it does not mimic oral speech, there is a deliberate choice” (1995, II, 563, our translation). This means that the decision to display self-corrections is an “unconstrained enunciative choice” (1995, II, 564), which calls into question the construction of the speaker as a communicating subject. Rather than interpreting this as mere incoherence, it is worth examining what such a move reveals about the speaker’s strategy. When viewed through the lens of rhetoric and discourse analysis, self-correction reveals itself to be a way of strategically constructing identity and an important aspect of the creation of ethos, that is, the image we create of ourselves through discourse (Amossy 1999). Indeed, this apparent weakness may paradoxically serve to reinforce the speaker’s ethos, as visible traces of hesitation can indicate rhetorical sincerity or transparency in the search for the right words. This raises a broader question: how does self-correction contribute to shaping the speaker’s ethos in this literary context – by weakening or strengthening it?

We will question the impact of such corrections on the representation given by the speaker of themselves, through their discursive choices as a communicating subject. Ultimately, we question how this contributes to the construction of a specific ethos – one in which the speaker openly displays uncertainty in finding the most adequate formulation. This paper examines self-correction as a meaningful rhetorical act that operates in a more complex way than simply showing hesitations in discourse. Self-correction has significant implications for our corpus of contemporary French novels, as this process represents the “work in progress” of the speaker’s thoughts or speech, highlighting their relationships with their own discourse in a meta-enunciative<sup>1</sup> dimension that exposes the process rather than the final product. It thus has strong implications for the construction of the subject’s ethos in managing communication.

## 2. Background

To understand these effects, we adopt an expanded interpretation of ethos, based on French discourse analysis and argumentation theory. Since the work of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1958) and the symposium led by Amossy (1999), the concept has been broadened in the

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we adopt a broad definition of meta-enunciation, understood as the “enunciation that takes itself as its object” (Pennec 2020, 64; our translation).



French-speaking world. It is no longer confined to the qualities that a speaker invokes in their speech to demonstrate credibility, such as sincerity, competence, and benevolence (Doury and Lefébure 2006, 53). Setting aside extra-discursive aspects, our work builds on the research of Herman (2005; 2018; 2022) and Maingueneau (2009; 2013; 2022). We consider the framework in which ethos influences ways of seeing, thinking or feeling without the intention of persuading. It operates in every speech:

As soon as enunciation occurs, something of the order of ethos is released. Through speech, a speaker activates in the interpreter the construction of a certain representation of themselves, thus jeopardizing their control over their own speech. They must therefore try to control the interpretative processing of the signs they send. (Maingueneau 2013, 2)

Following Maingueneau, we argue that ethos is not merely a persuasive device, but rather a discursive phenomenon that is inseparable from enunciation. Furthermore, we build upon Herman's (2005) distinction between two "targets" of ethos: the ethos of the communicating subject (the image of the speaker as a communicator, as someone who manages discourse in terms of their discursive skills) and the image of the speaker as an individual with historical, social and cultural depth (in our case, this refers primarily to the characters in the novel and/or the narrator). These dimensions may coexist in any utterance, though one often dominates. For instance, "Sorry, I am not fluent in English" primarily targets the ethos of the communicating subject; however, this sentence may also impact the personal ethos, as in the case of someone publicly admitting a weakness. The ethos of the communicating subject can be expressed verbally, as in the above example, or demonstrated through non-verbal cues such as hesitations like "Ah, um, mm"; "I'd like to say... I mean...". In the case of self-correction, the ethos of the communicating subject is more salient because it highlights a problem with what was initially said in a meta-discursive way. Thus, we will rely on this aspect of the ethos throughout our paper, but we'll address the link created through discourse between the speaker as communicating and the speaker as personhood.

As for the literature on self-correction, it is a discursive phenomenon belonging to the broader category of reformulation. This process has been extensively studied in both spoken and written discourse: a significant body of scientific literature on it exists in oral (e.g., Fox Tree 2010) and written form (Roulet 1987; Rossari 1990; Steuckardt, 2009). These linguistic studies have identified various reformulation typologies<sup>2</sup>. According to Younis et al., who followed the definition given by Cuenca, reformulation "is thus characterized by an intention to present two segments as being equivalent on a pragmatic or semantic level" (2023, 14), "an equivalence operation" that presents "alternative formulations of a single idea" (Cuenca 2003, 1071).

Moreover, Normand defines reformulation as part of the communication process. It "involves revisiting what has been said by oneself or others with the aim of clarifying it" (1987, 6, cited in Bikialo 2005, 148). However, reformulation is not always synonymous with clarification or semantic enrichment. According to Steuckardt, it may serve to abandon or overwrite an initial formulation, thereby highlighting a failure of the initial utterance, "when the reformulation cancels out an initial, imperfect formulation, rendering the initial word as if crossed out or abandoned" (2003, 10).

Reformulation is a complex phenomenon that has also been investigated in enunciative theory, particularly by Jacqueline Authier-Revuz in the context of reflexive loops (1995). She analyzed a

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<sup>2</sup> For example, they distinguish between paraphrastic and non-paraphrastic reformulations, as well as reformulations with or without glosses. These glosses can also be transparent or opaque (Bikialo 2005, 148–49).



wide range of situations in which the speaker comments on their own words while they are being uttered. We use her third form of non-coincidence – between words and reality – as it is particularly pertinent to our area of study. Through this lens, Authier-Revuz's notion of "nomination in progress" provides a valuable analytical framework through which to examine the self-corrections that emerge in our corpus. Bikialo's contributions to enunciation and discourse analysis complement this approach, particularly regarding his analysis of reformulation markers such as "or rather", which are significant in our corpus.

In the field of rhetoric and argumentation, recent research such as the AMoRe project (Oswald and Koszowy) extends this perspective by exploring the impact of rephrasing on speaker's ethos in strategic contexts.<sup>3</sup> According to Koszowy et al. (2022, 52), reformulation enables speakers to "clarify or emphasize the content of the message, help the audience memorize or comprehend it [...]" and helps the speaker to "establish their own ethos in terms of knowledge or eloquence". For his part, Plantin (2009) includes self-correction, alongside signs of doubt and hesitation, as part of the "sincerity component of ethos", which contributes to the image of a persuasive and credible speaker. This enables us to consider self-correction as a rhetorical and strategic gesture with significant implications for the construction of ethos, rather than merely as a corrective act: self-correction as part of the reformulation process can also strengthen ethos.

Literary studies introduce a different dimension to the analysis. Here, self-correction is often interpreted as a stylistic indication of cognitive effort or as an imitation of spontaneous speech. Reggiani interprets such moments as symptomatic of an "approximation of the corrected utterance", explicitly demonstrating "the difficulty of holding a discourse on things" (2012, 320) and Prak-Derrington views self-correction as an "effect of reality" (2005, 3), replicating the features of spontaneous, oral or even internal speech. This imitation of disfluency, including reformulations, abandoned clauses and unfinished syntagms, creates a sense of a text being a work in progress, with the hesitations and corrections shown (Pallaud, Rauzy and Blache 2013).

### 3. Hypotheses

Self-correction suggests that the initial segment was not adequate for conveying the speaker's intended meaning. In this sense, it may appear to undermine the credibility of the speaker. But if that is the case, why engage in self-correction in a published text at all? Two hypotheses arise from the analysis of our corpus.

The first posits that the ethos of the communicating subject is temporarily undermined, but "repaired" or reinforced through self-correction, which functions as a rhetorical strategy of discursive sincerity (Plantin), or at least a discursive success in showing himself as a "good" communicating subject, *in fine*, because they found the adequate word after a correction, and because they show discursive signs of credibility in being the most adequate in the nomination progress. From this perspective, ethos is "repaired" through the speaker's willingness to revise and improve their utterance. We then need to address how this reinforcement operates, and on what basis we can conclude that ethos is being strengthened, and by which observable discursive or semantic criteria.

The second hypothesis suggests that the communicating subject's ethos is undermined; the speaker struggles to find the right words and fails to repair the damage, yet chooses to leave the failed attempt visible. How is this undermining sustained? Why expose one's own discursive

<sup>3</sup> We use reformulation and rephrase as equal in this paper, as we do not restrain reformulation specifically to a single term nor in single semantic or pragmatic context.



fragility? Why publish a “self-inflicted wound”? Though paradoxical, this gesture may generate a form of rhetorical credibility as well, by exposing the non-coincidence between words and reality. Therefore, the publication of such moments raises a deeper paradox: the act of attempting to communicate that which resists or exceeds communicability.

#### 4. Parameters of Analysis of the Self-Correction Process

To analyze the process of self-correction and its rhetorical impact on ethos, this paper puts forward a three-part analytical framework comprising three interconnected parameters: assertion, reformulation and metalinguistic or meta-enunciative evaluation. Firstly, an assertion refers to the initial discursive position from which a speaker articulates a proposition. This can take the form of an assertive mode, in which the speaker expresses a statement with confidence, or a hypothetical mode, which is often indicated by expressions such as “let’s say”, suggesting a tentative or provisional stance. Secondly, reformulation involves modifying the initial assertion. This can result in various discursive outcomes: an adjustment, where the reformulation maintains semantic continuity and refines the original statement; a transformation, where the reformulated content shifts the semantic or rhetorical direction of the discourse; or a contradiction, where the new statement negates or destabilizes the original assertion. Finally, metalinguistic evaluation may accompany or follow reformulation, providing explicit commentary on the speaker’s discursive struggle. Such evaluations may reveal the speaker’s awareness of incommunicability – or the difficulty of conveying an experience through language, or they may reflect an assumed approximation, where the speaker embraces imprecision as a necessary or strategic aspect of expression. Together, these parameters clarify the internal mechanics of self-correction and its implications for constructing and repairing the communicating subject’s ethos.

#### 5. Corpus and Methodology

This study is based on a corpus of three contemporary French novels: *Loin d’eux* (1999) and *Des hommes* (2009) by Laurent Mauvignier and *La figure* (2025) by Bertrand Belin.<sup>4</sup> These texts are unified by their recurrent exploration of themes such as doubt, the fragility of speech, and the unreliability of memory. All three novels examine discursive hesitation and reformulation as literary strategies that mirror the characters’ difficulties in expressing past trauma or emotional complexity.

Initially, the study focused on the prototypical marker of self-correction “or rather” (“*ou plutôt*”, Bikialo 2005; Magri 2018) which appears frequently in *Des hommes* and serves as a revealing entry point into the mechanism of self-correction and its impact on ethos. However, as ethos is multidimensional by nature, the analysis has broadened to include the surrounding syntactic and narrative context to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how ethos is formed or undermined across a series of utterances.

In *Loin d’eux*, Laurent Mauvignier tells the story entirely through a series of interior monologues. Through these, multiple characters struggle with grief and solitude following Luc’s death. The novel is characterized by repeated self-corrections and reformulations that complicate the narrative voice and contribute to the portrayal of an emotionally burdened, hesitant ethos.

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<sup>4</sup> Our analysis is based on our translation of the original French texts. Indeed, the self-correction phenomenon is also salient in English and can thus be highlighted and investigated.



The novel *Des hommes* revisits the lingering impact of the Algerian War on a group of men forty years after their conscription. Here, self-correction acts as a discursive rupture that enables the repressed past to resurface, particularly when denial or silence is replaced by involuntary memory. The frequent use of self-corrective structures signals a breakdown in narrative control, emphasizing the instability of identity and voice.

Finally, Bertrand Belin's *La figure* centers on a protagonist revisiting his childhood, which was marked by paternal violence. The novel highlights the limitations of recollection, with the narrator distancing himself explicitly from direct access to memory, and instead highlights the interpretive and reconstructed nature of remembrance. The fantastical entity "La figure" blurs the line between memory and fiction, thereby reinforcing the novel's meta-enunciative reflection on speech, narrative and ethos.

Through a comparative analysis of these texts, the study examines the strategic use of self-correction – including lexical reformulation, syntactic hesitation and enunciative loops – and its rhetorical function in shaping the ethos of the communicative subject.

## 6. Self-Correction: From Reinforcement to Dissociation in Ethos

### 6.1. Self-Correction as Reinforcement: A Repaired Ethos

The first example is taken from *La figure* by Bertrand Belin. It uses the prototypical marker "or rather". This is the only instance in our corpus where a self-correction results in the correct term being used.

- a) Retaining the sensation [...] in childhood, which is metaphysics incarnate, confusion began, **or rather** the continuum was revealed, between my body, [...] its substance, and the substance of the elements that made up, and still make up, my immediate environment. (29)

It can be categorized as a "progression in the designation" between words and reality, as defined by Authier-Revuz. It consists of a "nomination with a hierarchical alternative" (1995, I, 566): the second term ("the continuum was revealed") rectifies a slight inadequacy in the first term ("the confusion began"), which remains acceptable. This differs from an utterance such as "I am angry – no, I am furious about the delay", where the second term does not rectify but rather "pursues greater adequacy in the direction already taken by the first segment" (Authier-Revuz, 1995, I, 566), which is positive. Nevertheless, even if it does rectify, we assume that it serves to strengthen the ethos of the communicating subject by showing the modification, and, moreover, because the adequate formulation is found by the speaker. At least, that is what can be inferred in the absence of other reformulations or meta-enunciative evaluations. In such a case, the impact on the speaker's ethos can be said to be efficient: ethos is here self-repaired through the quick process of a single reformulation, showing a discursive willingness to adjust words to experiment, as well as a discursive ability to articulate words to reality.

The other examples from our corpus show a complex way to find the right expression, by cumulation of reformulations. For instance:

- b) His voice suddenly fell silent and crashed into a look of contempt for me. So, the bachelor. With his bachelorette. **A laugh. Or rather a kind of laugh, a hiccup, a quickly stifled giggle.** Then the silence. (*Des hommes*, 41)

This passage also provides an example of self-correction in the form of a prototypical marker of "corrective reformulation", that is "or rather" (Magri 2018, 36), but it is followed by a cascade of



multiple reformulations. The segment begins with a nominal phrase in assertive mode – “a laugh” – notably lacking a verb, which immediately signals a form of discursive assertion. The subsequent clause, introduced by “or rather” initiates a movement of specification: “a kind of laugh,” followed by three further reformulations – “a hiccup,” “a quickly stifled giggle” and finally, “then the silence.” The “corrective reformulation” process is defined as

substituting one word for another [which] can be seen in the linear construction of the text: the second occurrence is presented as a better translation than the previous one. [...] The textual progression is presented as an improvement in formulation, with the reformulation being credited with added expressive value. (Magri 2018, 36)

However, because the reformulation is not simple, but multiple in our example, it is not directly a “better translation”, but rather a better translation that arises from the integration of each new term. The right formulation is found through a series of refinements. The multiple reformulations progressively refine the initial utterance, at least the text works towards adjustment by successive reformulations. Semantically, the reformulations are coherent; they do not cancel each other out but rather take place in a movement of densification (there is more to say than just a laugh). Each iteration contributes to a progressive refinement rather than mere hesitation. It is a discursive adjustment that relies on a constellation of approximations, which contributes to a more precise naming, offering a slightly different perspective on the same phenomenon. This process is linear and cumulative rather than self-negating. Because of this multiplicity, at first sight, this accumulation of reformulations might seem to weaken the ethos of the speaker, exposing a struggle to find adequacy, thus suggesting discursive fragility. Yet, when read through Magri’s perspective, the sequence appears instead as a productive rhetorical movement. In this sense, reformulation does not signal rhetorical failure but rather exemplifies a successful discursive strategy that enhances the speaker’s ethos by demonstrating an effort towards expressive precision.

Moreover, the sequence lacks any explicit metalinguistic evaluation (e.g., expressions of doubt such as “I don’t know” or “perhaps”), which contributes to the perceived confidence and deliberateness of the process. The absence of such mitigation reinforces the speaker’s authority over the discourse and lends credibility to the adjustment, suggesting that the ethos of the speaker is, in fact, strengthened by the careful modulation of meaning.

The next examples are much more complex, involving multiple self-corrections, reformulations, and metalinguistic evaluations.

## 6.2. Self-Correction as Stating the Inadequacy: Paradoxical Ethos

- c) [...] that’s when they attack, **the noises stored up** like in an electric sheath, a **whistling sound rises slowly and soon crosses my head from side to side, from one ear to the other like an iron rod, a metallic thing that twists** but doesn’t wind, **no**, files rather, nibbles, **I don’t know what to say. It’s a whistle, but the word whistle doesn’t pierce the head.** (*Loin d’eux*, 18)

In this passage, a series of reformulations emerges again, but these function differently from those in the previous example. The excerpt demonstrates the complex layering of discursive efforts to describe a sensory experience, characterized by hesitation, semantic approximation and the eventual meta-enunciative acceptance of failure.

The text begins with an initial assertion framed through comparison (“like an iron rod”), which already signals the slight inadequacy of the chosen term. This is followed by a further comparison,



“a metallic thing that twists but doesn’t wind,” which itself immediately gives rise to a correction. Within this correction, the movement of adjustment intensifies, producing a chain of micro-reformulations which signals an ongoing attempt to refine the utterance (“no, files rather, nibbles.”). While the successive terms – “twists”, “files”, “nibbles” – are loosely connected semantically and attempt to capture aspects of the sensation, they ultimately underscore a breakdown of representation. The progression culminates in a meta-enunciative acknowledgment of insufficiency (“I don’t know what to say. It’s a whistle, but the word whistle doesn’t pierce the head.”).

Unlike case b), where reformulations led to semantic densification, the accumulation of approximations here foregrounds the speaker’s difficulty in articulating the experience. Following Bikialo’s argument with Authier-Revuz regarding the “or rather” structure:

What is staged is the fundamental heterogeneity between words and things as experienced by the subject. This staging of a search for adequacy to reality ranges from the dissociation of two referents [...] to the explicitly discursive search [...], via a majority of forms that stage the gap between words and things. (Bikialo 2005, 155-156)

This is made explicit in the meta-enunciative comment: “I don’t know what to say”. This open admission of expressive inadequacy marks a key shift. Here, the communicative subject is struggling not only to find the right term, but also to express the inadequacy of language itself in conveying internal sensory disturbance. After the rectification term “no”, there is a meta-enunciative way of saying that this is not the right word, setting aside the possibility of finding the right word. This aligns with the typology of the “work in progress of nomination”, which shows cases where the correction “cancels out” the first term by “replacing it” with the second term: this is the form of “X, no, Y” (Authier-Revuz 1995, II, 563). As a result, the ethos of the communicating subject is significantly weakened. Furthermore, this discursive fragility may spill over into the ethos of the character as a person in the fictional world, who is shown to be overwhelmed by their inability to control language and meaning. Following the distinction established by Authier-Revuz, it is not a complaint about the lack of words available in the language, the “inadequacy of language to name reality”, but rather a testimony of “the speaker’s failure to use language resources”, as in the comment “I don’t know how to say” (Authier-Revuz 1995, II, 584).

However, this discursive failure does not wholly discredit the speaker but rather places the highlight on the inadequacy of language: “Whether tentative or unsuccessful, the important thing is that naming is not reduced to the given outcome but rather unfolds as a progression or visible deletion”. In following the reflexive loops developed by Authier-Revuz, we can say that this example highlights the struggle – the barriers – to coincide words and things, let us remind that in written discourse – novel, for our case – there is a deliberate choice to represent the process of nomination, as much as showing the subject grappling with language in the process of writing. (Bikialo 2005, 156)

The refusal to conceal linguistic inadequacy, and the willingness to expose it, generates what might be called a paradoxical ethos. Rather than demonstrating fluency in communication, the speaker reveals his inadequacy or failure<sup>5</sup>, showing the non-coincidence between words and reality, using meta-enunciative loops that questioned the “self-evident” of the words. It can be said to be a discursive posture that foregrounds the struggle rather than its resolution.

<sup>5</sup> or, at least, he draws attention to the text’s hesitations. This aligns with Plantin’s (2009) observation that features such as doubt, hesitation, and self-correction can serve as markers of sincerity.



- d) Thing or non-thing, it doesn't matter. I'm stuck with them all the same. That's what it's all about. **Let's say I have the memory of my face-to-face encounter with what I was immersed in.** And that this face-to-face encounter must be seen as a weld. Let's say that there was and still is contact. **A bridge. Or contamination or assimilation, healing. Welding. More or less. I'll see. Cutting, welding, yes.** (*La figure*, 30)

Here, the excerpt from Belin exemplifies a different reflective and iterative process of self-correction, characterized by successive reformulations and metalinguistic evaluations concerning the precision of the terms employed. The reformulations are semantically linked through the central notion of "connection", although some alternatives, such as "contamination", function as substitutions rather than cumulative additions, signaling a strategic lexical choice. The presence of meta-enunciative commentary reflects the communicating subject's conscious engagement with the challenge of linguistic precision, yet simultaneously reveals a postponement of definitive resolution, culminating in an eventual, though provisional, acceptance of "welding".

This dynamic embodies a paradoxical ethos: while the speaker admits to imprecision and ongoing negotiation of meaning, there is no indication of communicative failure. Instead, this openness to approximation and indeterminacy can be interpreted as a deliberate rhetorical strategy, embracing the fluidity of language and the complexities of representing experience. Such an ethos reveals a subject who neither conceals uncertainty nor presents a fully polished discourse but rather invites interlocutors to engage with the provisional and evolving nature of expression.

### 6.3. Self-Correction as Contradiction: Dissociated Ethos

- e) Coming up the social ladder all by my own, like a twat. How serious I am. **I'm gonna stop. I mean I'm gonna go on.** (*La figure*, 40)

This example shows a contradiction manifested through self-correction. The self-correction involves a single reformulation – "I'm gonna stop" followed immediately by "I mean I'm gonna go on" – without any accompanying meta-enunciative evaluation. This absence of explicit commentary suggests a superficially successful self-correction. However, this apparent success is undermined by the intrinsic contradiction within the utterance, which disrupts the coherence of the text.

From an ethos perspective, the communicating subject's image is destabilized by this contradiction, as it reveals internal ambivalence and indecision. Or a "rhetorical slip of the tongue that takes us from approximation to something more deliberate" (Authier-Revuz 1995, II, 571), in an attempt to mimic the orality of speech. While on the surface the self-correction might seem effective, its contradictory nature generates pragmatic effects that extend beyond mere textual coherence. The failure to resolve this contradiction linguistically invites readers to infer underlying psychological or rhetorical motivations. Specifically, the allowance of such a blatant contradiction may signal a deliberate rhetorical strategy, exposing vulnerability or ambivalence that paradoxically contributes to the speaker's ethos. Although the self-correction is presented as successful, it fails so clearly on a communicative level that it triggers inferences about why such a contradiction was allowed.

- f) It began with words that were **flayed, or rather** planed, retracted, **a stream without asperity, without consonants or vowels** to form identifiable sounds, but [...] I knew, having heard him once, **always – no, not always** – his mumbled litany between his lips. (*Des hommes*, 40–41)

The passage opens with the assertion that the words are "flayed," invoking a violent, tactile image akin to skin being stripped away. This initial metaphor is immediately qualified through a



series of self-corrections introduced by the prototypical marker “or rather” which replace “flayed” with “planed” and then “retracted”. These successive reformulations function to mitigate the harshness of the original image, shifting from the graphic notion of “skinning” (which evokes a living being) towards a less corporeal, more abstract conception of the words. The subsequent juxtaposition with “a stream without asperity, without consonants or vowels to form identifiable sounds” represents a semantic transformation towards indistinctness and formlessness, departing substantially from the initial metaphor. This gradation serves rhetorically to highlight the semantic distance and incompatibility between “flayed” and “a stream”, emphasizing the instability of the speaker’s representation of the verbal phenomenon. The self-correction here is not simply a clarification but a process of requalification and semantic modulation that reveals the speaker’s struggle to depict an elusive or ineffable experience. The movement from a violent, concrete image to a fluid, indistinct one reflects a tension within the discourse between vividness and ineffability.

Immediately following this sequence, the assertion “I knew, having heard him once, always” is subjected to a bare and striking self-correction: “– no, not always –”, with no mitigating discourse markers or further explanation. The initial use of “always” asserts a sweeping generalization, signaling narrative certainty and control. Yet, the immediate negation “not always” withdraws this claim, leaving a logical gap that destabilizes the speaker’s authority. This contradiction explicitly violates the logical principle of non-contradiction developed by Charolles:

For a text to be micro- or macrostructurally coherent, it must not introduce any semantic elements that contradict content established or presupposed by a previous occurrence, or that can be inferred from it (1987, 22).

Authier-Revuz discusses the non-coincidence between words and the realities they are meant to designate. She argues that specific reformulations should be viewed under the “modality of cancelling the statement”. More specifically, naming here “consists of this statement of X, which is paradoxically carried out in the mode represented by its non-execution”, meaning that “the statement is coupled with its own cancellation” (1995, II, 582). The segment “no, not always” plays this role throughout the chain of discourse as a corrective that, rather than representing dynamic progress towards the adequate word, appears as “an unresolved contradiction in the naming and the speaker” (Authier-Revuz 1995, II, 567). Something is said and then immediately cancelled. This represents the orality of discourse, but not only, as in written discourse, it is a choice that requires interpretation, such as representing the work in progress of naming a memory. By exposing this self-inflicted contradiction within the written text without meta-enunciative commentary, the text foregrounds the non-coincidence experienced by the speaker and leaves an unresolved tension in the repair of the communicative subject’s ethos.

## **6. Conclusion: Gradual Repair of the Ethos of the Communicating Subject**

Our analysis suggests that the process of self-repair in discourse initially undermines the ethos of the communicating subject to the benefit of the ethos of the person (as a sign of sincerity or honesty). However, the examples studied also indicate a gradual and dynamic process through which this damage may be mitigated or even repaired over the course of successive reformulations.

We propose that different degrees of self-correction can be distinguished according to specific criteria observed in the corpus. The simplest form involves a quick, single reformulation, which tends to produce a minimal disruption. When multiple reformulations occur, paired with marks of



correction rather than mere refinement, the struggle to find adequate expression becomes more salient, as does the concurrent process of repairing the damaged ethos.

In more complex instances, where embedded self-corrections appear within multiple reformulations, the communicative struggle is even more pronounced. Yet paradoxically, such cases may ultimately be interpreted as successful acts of self-correction, demonstrating a nuanced management of the speaker's ethos.

Conversely, there are cases in which self-correction is clearly unsuccessful from the speaker's perspective but remains temporarily acceptable within the narrative context (as in Belin's work). Additionally, some speakers explicitly acknowledge their communicative failure, choosing nonetheless to leave such failure visible in the text. This transparency can itself generate a paradoxical ethos: by openly exposing the limits of expression, the speaker may paradoxically reinforce their sincerity and credibility. The visible fragility of the writing or speaking process thus becomes a rhetorical resource that partially repairs the damaged ethos. The meta-enunciative evaluation, analyzed through the prism of the non-coincidence between words and reality, gives another layer of paradoxical ethos, where showing the failure shows, in the same way, the very experiment of the non "self-evident" use of language.

When no explicit evaluation of failure is present, semantic transformations or contradictions between formulations may violate the principle of relevance. In such contexts, the restoration of ethos depends on the emergence of a paradoxical ethos, wherein apparent flaws or inconsistencies become rhetorically significant, to signify a play with discourse or to show a self-inflicted wound, as part of a sincerity strategy aiming to highlight the inadequacy of the speaker or an inadequacy of the language to refer to reality.

This leads us to propose the notion of a paradoxical ethos, opening a new path for defining this concept and its multiple layers in discourse analysis.

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