

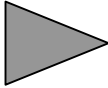
**DERRIDA VS. SAUSSURE: TWO WAYS OF LOOKING
AT THE LINGUISTIC SIGN**

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Abstract

This paper examines one particular aspect of deconstruction - namely, its anti-metaphysical, anti-logocentric understanding of the linguistic sign, which sets it apart from the traditional Saussurean view of language - and explains why language is indeed a major issue addressed by deconstructionist discourses. It discusses Derrida's "theory" of language based on the notion of "writing" in the extended sense of the word: an "arche-writing", or proto-writing, considered to be at the "origin" of the linguistic sign (as both phonic/graphic signifier and signified), despite its own lack of presence.

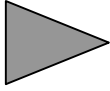
Keywords: "différance", "(archi-) écriture", "trace"



*The anti-logocentric understanding
of the linguistic sign*

The main targets of deconstruction are “logocentrism” (the obsessive search of Western philosophy for meaning or truth understood as an autonomous “foundation”) and its variant, “phonocentrism” (the assumption that speech has an unmediated and natural relationship with meaning, unlike writing, considered as a mere representation of speech) – in other words, the traditional “determination of the being of the entity as presence” (Derrida, 1998: 12), specific to the “metaphysics of presence”. Therefore, it is natural that questions of language should hold a privileged place in its overall “theoretical” debate.

To Jacques Derrida, presence is a delusive effect of differences that can themselves be traced back to a “*différance*” no longer conceivable in terms of the classic hierarchical opposition presence / absence. In *Of Grammatology*, the French deconstructionist denounces “the illusion of full and present speech”, or “the illusion of presence within a speech believed to be transparent and innocent” (Derrida, 1998: 140) through his notion of writing (*écriture*) in the extended sense of the word (“writing in general”), thus challenging the traditional Western linguistic theories (e.g. Saussure’s, mostly concerned with speech as the true object of linguistics). He sets out to identify the reasons why “logocentrism, this *epoch* of full speech, has always placed in parentheses, suspended, and suppressed [...] all free reflection on the origin and status of writing, all science of writing which was not *technology*” (Derrida, 1998: 43). According to Derrida, the logocentric outlook on language is nothing but a mystification whose function is purely defensive. More precisely, logocentrism is a way of concealing a linguistic reality that, if acknowledged, would have the catastrophic consequence of invalidating the entire system of Western metaphysics: underlying every signifier (be it phonic or graphic), he argues, there is “writing in general”, which he calls either “*archi-écriture*” (“*arche-writing*”), or simply by its traditional name, “*écriture*” (“writing”), understood as “inscription” in the broadest sense of the word, rather than in the sense of “material inscription” that we are familiar with (“the vulgar concept of writing” [Derrida, 1998: 60]). Derrida’s revelation is based on the critical re-examination of the metaphysical view of language expressed by Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*.



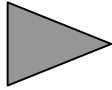
Saussure's inconsistencies

In his attempt to deconstruct the logocentric illusion, Derrida takes advantage of the contradictions in Saussure's text – such as the one between the thesis of the arbitrary character of the linguistic sign on the one hand, and the traditional understanding of writing as “image”, or as a “natural symbol” (Derrida, 1998: 45) of speech, subordinated to it on the other hand. As Derrida points out, writing, or “the sensible inscription”, has always been depreciated by Western tradition – of which Saussure himself is a notable representative - as “the body and matter external to the spirit, to breath, to speech, and to the logos” (Derrida, 1998: 35). If we admit, however, that there is only a conventional relationship between the phonic signifier and what it signifies, speech can no longer be considered superior to writing, since both turn out to be external, arbitrary signs.

Another incompatibility would be the one between the so-called secondary status of writing in relation to speech, and Saussure's statement about speech and writing representing “two distinct [i.e. autonomous] systems of signs”(Derrida, 1998: 30).

Finally, there is one more inconsistency in Saussure's text between the “theory of difference as a source of linguistic value” (Derrida, 1998: 52) and the allegation of the “phonic nature of language” (Derrida, 1998: 53) - in other words, the belief that language is first and foremost speech, which is why Saussure repeatedly uses the generic word “language” to refer to the phonic signifier.

Besides the above-mentioned inadvertencies, the most powerful argument used by Derrida to deconstruct the metaphysical, phonocentric hierarchy speech/writing is Saussure's own use of writing as an illustration of the “immaterial” nature of the phonic signifier. By using the graphic signifier as an example, the linguist unwittingly reverses the previously stated “violent” opposition between speech and writing to the point of even suggesting the possibility of a new concept of writing that would be radically different from the traditional one and would include two categories: phonic and graphic. Saussure thus contradicts his own logocentric view by implying that, far from being superior to writing (due to an allegedly higher concentration of presence), speech is just a “species of writing” (Derrida, 1998: 52) in the broad sense of the word.



“Archi-écriture” as “Différance” and “Trace”

The “deconstruction” almost already at work in Saussure’s text is taken up by Derrida and developed into a purely deconstructionist perspective on language based on the idea of “arche-writing” as the “origin” of both phonic and graphic signifiers:

If writing signifies inscription and especially the durable institution of a sign [...], writing in general covers the entire field of linguistic signs. In that field, a certain sort of instituted signifiers may then appear, ‘graphic’ in the narrow and derivative sense of the word, ordered by a certain relationship with other instituted – hence ‘written’, even if they are ‘phonic’ – signifiers (Derrida, 1998: 44).

Moreover, if “arche-writing” is a “durable inscription of the linguistic sign”, it is also responsible for the existence of the signified. The system of differences “precedes” not only the material signifier but also the signified, since the former does not signify by affirming an already constituted stable meaning but by differing from other signifiers. Consequently, there is no such thing as an autonomous, stable, “transcendental signified”, unmarked by difference and deferral. The signified is itself an effect of *différance*, like any other manifestation of presence (meaning included). At this point, Derrida equates “arche-writing” with two other undecidables, *différance* and *trace*, all of which being described as paradoxical “origins” that have no presence and no stable identity:

*The (pure) trace is différance. It does not depend on any sensible plenitude, audible or visible, phonic or graphic. It is, on the contrary, the condition of such a plenitude. Although it **does not exist**, although it is never a **being-present** outside of all plenitude, its possibility is by rights anterior to all that one calls sign (signified/signifier, content/expression, etc.) ... (Derrida, 1998: 62).*

That is exactly why “arche-writing”, as “movement of *différance*” (Derrida, 1998: 60), with its double meaning of “difference” and “deferral”, escapes definition and therefore cannot be regarded as one more “scientific” concept among others. After all, replacing the metaphysical conceptual system by another is hardly the intention of deconstruction.

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