A critique of the 'post-structuralist' conception of language

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Post-structuralism is a way of thinking which originated in French intellectual circles, but which has become something of a fashion in English-speaking countries as well. The post-structuralist point of view applies to nearly all areas of human activity. Among other things, it generates quite definite views about the nature of art, history, and the human individual, views which — it is said — agree perfectly with the so-called 'post-modern' sensibility: the past is dead; the future is closed; the present is fragmented into an indefinite number of monadic language-games; science, politics, and religion *qua* collective norms have lost their meaning; people deal with things as external appearances to which they are free to attach any meanings they please.

At bottom, however, the post-structuralist ideology derives its justification from a certain conception of *language*. It is this conception which is first taken to be valid and is then generalized — *telle quelle* — to art, history, etcetera. In what follows I shall show that this conception is thoroughly incorrect, which means that the post-structuralist edifice has no foundations. One may still wish to cling to post-structuralist views, but one should at least be aware that there is no rational justification for doing so. Rather, it is simply a matter of emotional attachment.

Derrida is commonly regarded as the main figure of post-structuralism. Yet his conception of language was anticipated by other French thinkers — notably Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, and Foucault. Therefore I must consider these three before tackling Derrida. First of all, however, I wish to explain why I think the emphasis on *language* is misplaced in the present context.

Language = thought?

The nearly obsessive concern with language which has for so long been evident in French theorizing is incomprehensible unless it is seen as motivated by the assumption that *language determines thought*. On this view, which can with some justification be traced back to Saussure, a

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change in the way of speaking entails a change in the way of thinking. (It is true that Anglo-American 'analytic philosophy' also deals centrally with language, but its aims are less comprehensive.)

Two comments are in order here. First, the view that language determines thought (and is thus the main factor in shaping one's personality) is of course identical with the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis. This hypothesis has been disproved by some thirty years of psycholinguistic research. To quote Clark and Clark:

> The main thrust of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis is that differences in languages affect thought. ... So far, however, no convincing examples of these differences have turned up. ... What this suggests is that language differences reflect the culture, and not the reverse (1977: 577)

Curiously enough, post-structuralists continue to assume that language determines thought, despite the fate of the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis. This brings out some troubling aspects of the French intellectual scene, detailed by Bouveresse (1983): on the one hand, complete indifference toward research carried out outside one's own familiar circles; on the other, a tendency to value opinions which are *interesting*, rather than opinions which are, or might be, *true*.

Second, it is not only the case that language does not determine thought. Even a weaker version of the same thesis, to the effect that there can be no thinking without language, cannot be upheld. When it is maintained that language is either identical with or at least a necessary condition of thinking, what is meant by 'language' is generally an *oral* language like English or Chinese. After the psychology of the deaf has become the object of a systematic investigation, however, it has become evident that the thinking 'supported' by sign languages does not essentially differ from normal thinking. Consequently, thought exists also in the absence of an oral language. Moreover, there is good reason to speak of thought independent of (or anterior to) *any* form of language (see Furth 1966). To be sure, all mentally normal children who grow up in a normal social environment develop some kind of language, and their thinking develops in an intimate connection with it. This is shown most dramatically by the 'home-sign systems' spontaneously created by isolated deaf children of hearing parents (see Feldman et al. 1978). It seems wrong, however, to emphasize here the role of *language*. What is necessary for thinking to develop is not language as such, but rather human *interaction*, and particularly the feedback that the child gets from others. It just so happens that human interaction cannot take place except by the intermediary of signs, or of 'languages'. But, as the case of home-sign systems demonstrates, these 'languages' may be quite *ad hoc*. Again, the existence of these facts is ignored in the post-structuralist tradition.

Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, and Foucault on language

There are several issues on which Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida disagree, but they all agree on a quite specific view of language — or, more precisely, of the linguistic sign. What is common to all of them is a general mistrust of linguistic meaning (*signifié*) and a tendency to regard linguistic form, or expression (*signifiant*), as that aspect of language which is amenable to systematic study. From this general attitude it follows that hermeneutics, as the general philosophy concerned with the understanding or interpretation of meaning, is treated with strong suspicion. As might be expected, different thinkers have reached this 'formalist' standpoint by somewhat different routes.

For Lévi-Strauss, it is phonology, with the Jakobsonian emphasis on binary features, which constitutes the scientific model to be imitated.

> For centuries the humanities and the social sciences have resigned themselves to contemplating the world of the natural and exact sciences as a kind of paradise which they will never enter. And all of a sudden there is a small door which is being opened between the two fields, and it is linguistics which has done it. (Lévi-Strauss 1972: 70)

By 'linguistics', however, he means only phonology. Thus he emphasizes that structural analysis does not apply at the level of words, let alone of sentences, but *only at the level of phonemes* (1972: 36). Phonemes are inherently meaningless, and therefore from the primacy of phonological analysis it follows that meaning is relegated to a secondary status. This is in perfect agreement with Lévi-Strauss's aspirations to do research comparable to natural science. Yet, apart from the absurdity of reducing languages to mere sounds, his methodological pronouncements are patently inconsistent with his actual descriptive practice. When he purports to detect 'transformational relationships' between different myths — relationships such as 'symmetry' and 'equivalence' — he frankly admits his inability to define these terms in any precise way: 'I have used them to refer to large bundles of relations which we *vaguely perceive* to have something in common' (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 31, emphasis added). Myths are stories, concerned for example with the origin of fire. It makes no sense at all to assume that relations of equivalence can be 'vaguely perceived' between such stories, without recourse to precisely those

processes of meaning-understanding that have always been the traditional subject matter of hermeneutics. (Besides, it is rather pathetic that the results of such 'vague perceptions' should be compared to the results of the 'natural and exact sciences'.)

Saussure held form (or expression) and meaning to be as inseparable as the two sides of a sheet of paper. When he drew a line between the two, it was meant to express that they are both distinct and inseparable. Lacan, however, reinterprets this line as a *barrier* which *separates*, or removes, meaning from form. He can do this because he extends the scope of the term 'language' by reinterpreting form as (conscious) action and meaning as (unconscious) motive. And it is well known that in neurotic behavior (which is Lacan's primary concern) there may be no transparent or consistent connection between actions and their unconscious motives (or 'meanings'). The end result is the same as in Lévi-Strauss's case: what we have are tangible forms with intangible, shifting, and perhaps nonexistent meanings. This result may be acceptable as far as neurotic behavior is concerned (provided we accept Lacan's metaphorical extension of the term 'language'), but it makes no sense at all to project this view of the linguistic sign back to natural language. Yet there can be no doubt that this is precisely Lacan's purpose (see Lemaire 1979: 101–103).

In my discussion of Foucault I shall concentrate on his notion of 'discourse' (or 'discursive formation'). I intend to show that this notion does not possess that specific content which Foucault wishes to attribute to it. After presenting Foucault's conception of intellectual history, which is meant to justify his notion of 'discourse', I shall argue that this conception is factually false, and that Foucault's manner of using it is self-contradictory. It may be true that, as Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982: 26–43) have pointed out, Foucault wishes ultimately to address such difficult Kantian antinomies as 'empirical vs. transcendental' and 'conscious philosophical knowledge vs. its unconscious background'. But constructing false and self-contradictory analyses is hardly the right way to solve these or any other problems.

Foucault (1966) considers the post-medieval history of biology, economics, and linguistics in Europe. He sees this history as falling into three separate periods, namely the Renaissance, the Classical Age, and Modernity. Each period is characterized by its own way of thinking, as expressed in its conception of the linguistic sign. In the Renaissance the sign-relation is taken to be based on the *similarity* between the expression and its referent. In the Classical Age it is taken to be based on the fact that the expression *represents*, or stands for, its referent in an arbitrary and transparent way. Modernity seizes upon the *historical* character of language: since both expressions and meanings are seen to be in a

continuous flux, the sign-relation appears as problematic or nontransparent. The important thing is that since each period is characterized by its own way of thinking, it cannot understand the others. More precisely, the texts written in the Renaissance or in the Classical Age are incomprehensible to us, living in the Modern Age. All we can do is consider these texts as formal objects or 'discourses'. We can note certain 'regularities' and 'transformations' in the way the discourses have been put together, but their meaning remains impenetrable to us. As a consequence, there is no need for text interpretation, and hermeneutics (as a philosophy concerned with text interpretation) is superfluous. Actually, Foucault is willing to admit that we may sometimes understand the meanings of texts dating from alien periods. But whether we do or not is irrelevant. Meaning *has to be* bracketed, so — to repeat — there is no need for hermeneutics.

There is not a shred of truth in Foucault's account of history, at least as far as the history of linguistics and of the linguistic sign is concerned. Here Foucault's central concern is the Port-Royal grammar as an exponent of the Classical Age. However, contrary to what Foucault says, the Port-Royal grammar represents no sudden break in the history of linguistics. Rather, it is an integral part of a tradition which goes back to Aristotle and Apollonios Dyskolos via Sanctius, Scaliger, the scholastic grammarians, and Priscianus. This is simple to prove. According to Foucault, the most revolutionary aspect of the Port-Royal grammar is its 'new' analysis of the verb. Thus, for example, the Latin sentence *Petrus vivit* is analyzed as *Petrus est vivens* — the finite verb is seen as consisting of the copula plus a present participle. In such a construction the copula performs the function of *assertion*: it represents the activity of the mind which combines the subject and the attribute into a single whole, into a sentence. Curiously enough, this 'revolutionary' analysis was presented already in Aristotle's booklet *Peri hermeneias*, and it was part and parcel of practically every grammatical treatise that was written in the Middle Ages. (The technical term for the function of the implicit copula was '*compositio*'.) So there is continuity, and even identity, where Foucault sees only differences. Moreover, the same grammatical tradition that was represented by the Port-Royal grammar continues in the Modern Age, especially in the school of transformational grammar. This view has been forcefully argued by Chomsky (1966).

In the present context I cannot expatiate upon how Foucault views the history of linguistics. Suffice it to say that whether he deals with a Renaissance linguist like Ramus or with a 'modern' linguist like Bopp, he unerringly manages to say the opposite of the truth.

So Foucault's conception of intellectual history is factually false. In addition, the use which he makes of this conception is self-contradictory.

According to Foucault, it is no use to try to interpret texts of alien periods. Not interpreting them, or bracketing their meanings, makes them appear as discourses, as formal objects. But let us focus on what Foucault *himself* is doing. He never states any formal 'regularities' or 'transformations'. All he ever does is interpret texts. Sometimes he takes the interpretations from others, as for example in connection with Paracelsus' cosmological texts, where he (without acknowledgment) relies wholly on Koyré (1971). Sometimes he invents his own interpretations, as in connection with the Port-Royal grammar. The truth or falsity of his interpretations does not matter in the present context; the important point is that he consistently contradicts his own advice not to practice the hermeneutic method.

Let us therefore forget the talk about 'discourses', and ask instead: What is Foucault *really* doing? What is his *real* concern? The answer is that he wishes to record the beliefs that were at different times entertained in the fields of biology, economics, and linguistics. It is utterly trivial to note that past beliefs are investigated by means of written documents. But, in the light of Foucault's own practice, it would be nonsensical to claim that one investigates *merely* those documents, and not the beliefs they express.

Foucault avoids taking a stand on the truth, or the relative superiority, of beliefs entertained at different times. This makes him a relativist. In this respect his position is no different from that of, for example, the so-called Edinburgh school (see Barnes 1974), except that the latter presents its case in a much more perspicuous and informative fashion.

It may be added that the shift from 'archeology' to 'genealogy' in Foucault's later writings does not affect his attitude toward the nature of the linguistic sign in general and that of written documents in particular.

Derrida on language

In what follows I shall single out three aspects from Derrida's work — namely 'grammatology', '*différance*', and 'deconstruction'. My primary sources are Derrida (1967) and (1972). Derrida's style is so idiosyncratic that there is not much point in trying to approach his work without the aid of secondary literature. I have found Culler (1983), Habermas (1985), Leitch (1983), and Seung (1982) very useful.

Grammatology

Under the title of 'grammatology' I shall deal with three partly overlapping topics — 'logocentrism', 'writing', and 'metaphysics of presence'. I shall first put forward what I take to be Derrida's view on each of these topics, and then I shall present my critique.

1. *Logocentrism.* In the Western tradition, Derrida claims, language has been identified with speech. He thinks this 'logocentric' attitude is a mistake, because concentrating on speech tends to give a misleading picture of what language is about. When we speak or listen, we are likely to overlook the medium of expression (since it, being involved in breathing, is 'too near' to us) and to proceed 'directly' to the meanings of the sentences spoken. These meanings are in turn experienced as something 'here and now'; that is, as contents of our own consciousness (*Bewußtseinsinhalte*). In reality, however, *repeatability* is an essential characteristic of language: the same sentence can occur in different contexts, and can even exist independent of any contexts, as a pure potentiality. It is the *written* sentence (rather than the spoken one) which brings out these characteristics of repeatability and context-independence. In addition, when the emphasis is put on the written language, the myth is dispelled that meanings could be experienced without any intermediaries, and attention is directed to all kinds of problems and breakdowns that may bedevil acts of communication.
2. *Writing.* As a consequence of (1), writing is primary with respect to speaking; language is essentially writing; therefore speaking, as an exemplification of language, is also a kind of writing.
3. *Metaphysics of presence.* Western philosophy, represented in an outstanding fashion by Husserl's phenomenology, consists in analyzing one's own self-consciousness, or the 'presence of the self to itself'. This general attitude is exemplified by the above-mentioned psychologistic conception of (sentence-)meaning. However, this 'metaphysics of presence' is untenable, at least for two reasons. As we saw already in connection with point (1), meanings or concepts necessarily extend beyond any momentary, context-dependent experiences or 'contents of consciousness'. Second, even assuming that a meaning or concept can in some sense be experienced 'here and now', it nevertheless exists only as part of a larger system, or by virtue of meanings/concepts that are 'absent', not experienced 'here and now'.

Now I shall comment upon the three preceding points.

Ad 1. There is little justification for the view that the tradition of Western thought is based on speech, rather than writing. Thinkers as dissimilar as McLuhan and Cavell have represented the opposite view. They have deplored the fact that in our philosophical tradition teaching and debate do not take place in a face-to-face interaction but rather by means of written treatises, which tends to create and sustain situations where the antagonists are talking (more precisely, writing) past each

other. Derrida makes much of Plato's hostility toward the written medium. But it seems to me that Plato was speaking of a specific problem. He feared that an excessive reliance on (solitary) writing would bring about a decline in the philosophical dialogue, which is — as McLuhan and Cavell see it — precisely what happened.

Ad 2. In identifying language with writing, Derrida tries to express a correct idea by means of a disastrous metaphor. Of course sentences are to a large extent context-independent, but this just follows from the *social* character of language (Saussure's *langue*): it is the *rules* or norms of language, determining both the syntactic and the semantic correctness of sentences, that are independent of any particular occasion of language use. However, trying to express this idea by referring to particular concrete specimens of written sentences is unhelpful, to put it mildly, because writing, of course, has its own (context-independent) rules.

The reason Derrida prefers written to spoken sentences must be that in his opinion one written sentence can be used repeatedly in different contexts and may even be left behind as a context-independent, undecipherable relic, whereas this is not true of spoken sentences. In so doing, however, he overlooks the fact of *recorded speech*. With the aid of this 'modern' invention (apparently too modern for Derrida to have noticed it), the spoken language has acquired all those characteristics of the written language which Derrida regards as relevant.

Finally, it may be pointed out that, if employed more widely, the *Denkfigur* of which Derrida makes use would have decidedly unwelcome results. The same logic that shows speaking to be (a kind of) writing shows, for example, that men are women (or vice versa). It happens in three steps: (A) The category 'human being' has the two subcategories 'man' and 'woman'. (B) The defining property of human beings is their will to power, which means that men, being more power-hungry, exemplify the category 'human being' more adequately than do women. (Alternatively, the defining property of human beings is their capacity for compassion, which means that women, being more compassionate, exemplify the category 'human being' more adequately than do men.) (C) It follows that women, *qua* human beings, are in reality men (or vice versa). It is this kind of juggling with words that has given 'dialectics' a bad name.

Ad 3. It is correct to say that philosophers like Descartes, Hume, and Husserl represent something like the 'metaphysics of presence'. (To be sure, exceptions must be made here of Hume's social philosophy and Husserl's later philosophy.) It is also true that the psychologistic conception of meaning is still widely accepted within both the philosophy of language and the theory of (psycho-)linguistics. But it is quite wrong to

say that this line of thinking is representative of the Western philosophy in its entirety. For Plato and Aristotle, the objects of genuine knowledge are immutable and eternal — that is, emphatically *not* 'here and now'. Even more pertinently, Hegel (1970) employs the same argument as Derrida — albeit much more systematically — to show that genuine knowledge is not '*sinnliche Gewissheit*'; that is, not something restricted to what is being experienced 'here and now' (see Itkonen 1984). This argument has been brought up to date in Wittgenstein's refutation of 'private languages' (see Itkonen 1978: 4.2.5). Finally, it cannot be denied that Marxism is an important part of the Western intellectual tradition; and it would be grotesque to accuse Marx of having limited his socio-economic investigations to the 'presence of the self to itself'.

Différance

By the term '*différance*' Derrida wishes to capture the essence of natural language. This term has both a synchronic and a diachronic content. Synchronically, it intends that the identity of a (meaning) unit is determined by how it *differs* from other units. Diachronically, it intends that (meaning) units change in an abrupt and arbitrary way. Because meanings are forever in a state of flux, they can never be experienced 'wholly' or 'definitively'; rather, such an experience is *deferred* forever, and language itself is an eternal movement toward this unattainable goal.

The term '*différance*' is used by Derrida-disciples as a magic formula, to raise a barrier between themselves and nonbelievers. However, if one wishes to find some sense in it, the following might be proposed as the common denominator of the synchrony and the diachrony of language: The identity of X at the moment m_2 is determined by how it differs from Y, Z, etc. at m_2, and how it differs from what X was at an earlier moment m_1 and will be at a later moment m_3. But this, of course, is too prosaic to suit the post-structuralist frame of mind.

Next I shall make some more specific comments on *différance*. First of all, it is generally thought that, as the originator of structuralism, Saussure was the first to notice that X is what Y, Z, etc. are *not*. However, this insight is much older. As Seung (1982: 27–34) points out, it has governed conceptual analysis at least since Plato. It was explicitly formulated by Spinoza in his dictum '*Omnis determinatio est negatio*', and was the central methodological tool in Hegel's dialectical analysis (see Itkonen 1984).

Second, it is in connection with *différance* that the influence of structuralism on Derrida is most evident. Like the majority of French

thinkers, he suffers from the fact that beyond Saussure, he knows next to nothing about modern linguistics. It cannot be emphasized too much, however, that in many respects Saussure is outdated. Thus both when Derrida criticizes Saussure and when he seeks support in Saussure, what he says is beside the point, though in differing ways. More specifically, Derrida castigates the Saussurean concept of 'linguistic system' for being too rigid to do justice to the essentially 'fuzzy' character of natural language. But this criticism has been voiced much earlier and much better. At least since Sapir (1921), linguists have known that 'all grammars leak'. This insight later found expression in sociolinguistics' concern with 'variable rules' (see Itkonen 1983: 265–278). As for diachrony, Derrida follows Saussure in viewing linguistic change as nothing but a succession of random, nonsystematic events. This aspect of Saussure's work has been rejected almost unanimously by today's linguists. At least since Jakobson (1931) and Havers (1936), it has been known that linguistic change is systematic in the sense of being governed by some principle of *teleology*. The apparent random character of (some) linguistic changes is due to the fact that they result from a *clash* between conflicting principles of teleology, typically between the ('material') tendency to facilitate the articulation and the ('spiritual') tendency to maintain formal distinctions necessary for exchanging a rich amount of information. The results of such 'clashes' cannot be predicted, but they can be (teleologically) explained *post factum* (see Itkonen 1982).

Third, it has already become evident that the term '*différance*' combines two meaning elements — 'to differ' and 'to defer'. As far as the justification of the latter element is concerned, it is very odd to view the history of a language as a never-to-be-fulfilled longing for a 'total experience' of word or sentence meanings. (I must admit that to me at least such a longing is totally unknown.) Yet Derrida's view can be explained (though not justified) in a rather surprising way. Habermas (1985: 214–216) points out that Derrida labors here under the influence of the cabalistic tradition: when he speaks of 'word', he means in fact *God's* word, although he is either unwilling or unable to admit it openly. In a religious context it may be understandable that a believer both wishes to experience God's word in its totality and despairs of ever being able to do so. But there is no justification, and no excuse, for trying to smuggle such elements of Jewish mysticism into the theory of natural language.

Finally, it is good to note that Derrida's view of linguistic change is identical to Foucault's view of intellectual change. In both cases, history is seen as a succession of random events, without any (teleological) principle that could explain the movement from one state to the next. However, contrary to what Foucault claims, the history of linguistics exhibits

continuity without any breaks. Similarly, diachronic linguistics fails to give any support to Derrida's view of linguistic change.

Deconstruction

'Never-ending semiosis' is one of the central notions of semiotics. It is meant to capture the fact that when a sentence or a text has been understood (or 'interpreted'), the result of this process is itself a sentence-like or text-like entity (either at a mental level or, when expressed, again at the linguistic level), which may in turn be understood (or 'interpreted'); and so on indefinitely. It is mainly in connection with *literary* texts that the never-ending semiosis has a meaningful application, because such texts customarily admit of more than one interpretation. But in connection with the everyday use of language, never-ending semiosis 'runs idle'. Take a sentence like 'John slept on the narrow back seat of the car with his feet out the side window'. All interpretations of interpretations (and so on) of this sentence produce the same result. Therefore there is no need to start the 'semiosis machine' at all, beyond the first ordinary act of understanding.

This is the conventional view, and I think it is perfectly correct. Derrida and his followers wish to reject it, however. They base their rejection on the notion of *différance*. If meaning is really as elusive and unreliable as this notion suggests, then every use of language is similar to most exotic poetry. The descriptive practice which aims at showing that this is indeed the case is called 'deconstruction'. More precisely, it consists in showing that any text admits of, or contains, not just different but even conflicting interpretations which cancel one another out. Depending on the point of view, either the literary critic deconstructs a text or a text deconstructs itself.

It would seem that the truth of deconstruction follows from the truth of *différance*. I have argued that *différance* is false, which means that deconstruction is left without justification. But let us assume, *per impossibile*, that *différance* is true. Surprisingly enough, this would not help Derrida at all, because he could not argue for deconstruction without contradicting himself. This can be proven as follows.

It is the point of *différance* to show that meaning is unreliable and secondary *vis-à-vis* form. (Remember that it is this attitude which unites Derrida with Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, and Foucault.) However, if we give up meaning, we also give up reference and truth. To give a simple example, the sentence 'The grass is green' is true if the words in it have their customary meanings. It is false if *grass* means 'snow', and it is meaningless

if *grass* means 'negation'. If we do not know what the words mean, we have no way of knowing whether the sentence is true or false (or meaningless), which means that opacity (or nonexistence) of meaning entails opacity (or nonexistence) of truth-value.

Both Derrida and Foucault accept this conclusion. In fact, they passionately argue for it because, as they see it, 'truth is an instrument of power'. *Truth* has always been used to oppress and terrorize powerless people. It is something evil, and must therefore be abolished. More precisely, it has to be replaced by *pleasure*.

At this point it is almost too easy to ask the question 'Is it *true* what Foucault and Derrida say?', and then to point out that there is no way to answer it. Since Foucault and Derrida explicitly reject the concept of truth, there is no reason why anyone should *believe* them — that is, believe that what they say is *true*. Therefore it is almost comical that they nevertheless go through all the motions of trying to *convince* their audience that what they say is *true*. (It has been suggested to me more than once that Foucault and Derrida have been joking all along. This may be so. Nevertheless, it is quite certain that they have often been taken seriously. My critique is directed against those who take Foucault and Derrida seriously, whether or not Foucault and Derrida themselves are included in this group of persons.)

Derrida uses a host of arguments to establish the unreliability of meaning *vis-à-vis* form (or expression). Most of them have the following tripartite structure:

a. Normal thinking: 'There is a distinction between rule_a and exception_a such that rule_a is primary and exception_a is secondary'.

b. But a rule — in order to be a rule — requires the exception; therefore the exception is necessary.

c. Therefore, in Derrida's thinking: 'Exception_a is rule_c, and rule_a is exception_c and even ceases to exist; we are left with rule_c ($=\text{exception}_a$)'.

Next I shall enumerate some arguments to this effect that I have found scattered throughout Derrida's work. There is no need to comment on these arguments. Once they have been spelled out, their spuriousness is obvious.

1. The form remains, the meaning is forgotten; and even if the latter is rediscovered, it will differ from what it was before. Therefore meaning is secondary.
2. There is no hard-and-fast line between meaning and referent; but referent may be lacking; therefore meaning may be lacking.
3. Historically speaking, there was first a referent and then a sign that denoted the referent; the sign took the place of the referent and was in a sense its 'trace'. So the referent was the first, and the sign/trace was the second. But there is no 'first' without a 'second'; for X to be the first, there has to be some Y which is the second. Therefore, 'in reality' the trace is the first, i.e. it precedes the referent of which it is a trace, and the referent is the trace of a trace: it is the second, or perhaps the third. So the sign(-form) is primary, and the referent (or meaning) is secondary. (Again, this is a gruesome piece of 'dialectics'.)
4. Some words (e.g. the Greek *pharmakon* and *hymen*) have opposite meanings; therefore all words have opposite meanings; and therefore all texts contain opposite meanings/interpretations and deconstruct themselves.
5. Words or sentences do not have absolutely rigid contexts of use; therefore they have no standard contexts of use; therefore any one can use words or sentences as he pleases.
6. Meaningless sentences too may be used in some contexts; therefore there is no difference between meaningful and meaningless sentences.
7. All sentences may be used in a non-literal meaning; therefore there is no difference between literal and non-literal meanings.
8. A sentence *can* be misused, which means that rules can be broken; but what is such a rule worth whose very existence is based on the possibility of its being broken? (Answer: Quite a lot. In fact, it is the only type of rule which is worth anything.)

To sum up, the deconstructionist (or more generally, post-structuralist) conception of language aims at severing the tie between meanings and forms, and letting meanings 'float freely'. Up to now, I have argued that this conception is untenable. However, it is time for me to admit that there *is*, after all, a group of people whose language agrees with the post-structuralist view. These are the *schizophrenics*. Studies on aphasia have shown that in schizophrenic subjects sentence-formation is not determined by *meaning*, but rather by word-associations based on sound-structure; that is, by *form*. If we recall that schizophrenics like Hölderlin and Artaud have always been the heroes of the post-structuralist movement, we begin to see that there is a certain logic in post-structuralists' apparently outrageous pronouncements, culminating in Deleuze and Guattari's remarkable dictum 'The schizophrenic is the only free person'. However, there is one final observation to be made. The aphasia symptoms I just described are characteristic not only of schizophrenics, but also of those suffering from *senile dementia*, mainly caused by Alzheimer's disease. Thus we come to the conclusion that post-structuralism is — to use a fashionable word — a 'celebration' of senile dementia. *Pourquoi pas*?

Conclusion

I have shown that there is no *rational* justification for the post-structuralist conception of language, which means, given the centrality of language

in this context, that there is no rational justification for post-structuralism itself. This does not mean, however, that there could not be other kinds of justification. What indeed might justify the attitude of looking for contradictions and not for systematicity, or of creating chaos rather than order? Perhaps it is boredom with Western science, or hatred of repressive authority, or fear of nuclear war. I am not saying that such feelings are *irrational*. In fact, I understand quite well why and how people come to have such feelings. I do claim, however, that in the present context they are *nonrational*, in the sense of being irrelevant to the issue at hand. It is just a muddle to let our feelings of boredom, hatred, or fear dictate the way we see the facts of natural language (or the history of linguistics).

Moreover, although it is understandable that there should arise an emphasis on (unresolved) contradictions and chaos, there is some reason to think that such an attitude cannot be permanent. It is a fact, demonstrated by the 'theory of cognitive dissonance', that the human mind cannot endure contradictions indefinitely. Rather, it has to resolve them in one way or another, and thus either to restore the lost unity or to create a new one. This is the basis for the 'rational explanation', which, I think, is the sort of explanation required by all empirical human sciences (see Itkonen 1983, especially pp. 205–206).

I must admit that I find the behavior of the leading post-structuralists rather hypocritical. On the one hand, they proclaim that *no* text has one single 'correct' interpretation; the search for such an interpretation has to be abandoned, together with the very notion of *mis*understanding, and it has to be replaced by a deliberate production of ever new interpretations and by the 'celebration', 'ecstasy', 'joy' (see Leitch 1983) that supposedly accompany such text-deconstructions. On the other hand, the very same people complain in shrill tones if they feel that *their* texts have been misunderstood (that is, have not been given the one 'correct' interpretation), and also in every other respect they carry out among themselves a normal academic debate the principal object of which is to get a better job and to increase one's own influence. In all this, I detect very little 'ecstasy' or 'joy'.

The view that the concept of truth should be abandoned is really not at all new. It is well known that according to Heraclitus, everything changes. Plato refuted this view convincingly in *Cratylus* (1963: 440.A-B), by arguing that if literally *everything* is changing at every moment — not just the objects of knowledge, but also the very concept of knowledge — then nothing can ever be known or asserted truly. (And, we may add, if meanings are continuously changing, nothing meaningful can ever be said.) In spite of this *de facto* refutation, Heraclitus' disciples continued to cling to his doctrine. Heraclitus had said that it is impossible to step twice

into the same river. Cratylus was consistent enough to claim that one cannot do it even once (since the river is changing while one is stepping into it). Again, it was Cratylus who drew the logical consequences from Heraclitus' doctrine and, what is admirable and quite rare, also practiced what he preached. To quote Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (1941: 1010a.5–10): 'And again, because they saw that all this world of nature is in movement, and that about that which changes no true statement can be made, they said that of course, regarding that which everything in every respect is changing, nothing could be truly affirmed. It was this belief that blossomed into the most extreme of the views above mentioned, that of the professed Heracliteans, such as was held by Cratylus, who finally did not think it right to say anything but only moved his finger ...'.

I just wish that deconstructionists/post-structuralists were consequent and honest enough to follow Cratylus' example.

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