

THE CRITIQUE OF MEANING IN POSTSTRUCTURALISM

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Post-structuralism has given a new dimension to the relationship of language vis-à-vis reality. Unlike the Realist concept or for that matter even of the layman's common sense view that language is a tool or symbol to indicate towards the reality which objectively exists in the outside world. The post-structuralists insist that it is not all that simple. Language, they hold, has a more significant function to perform: it constructs reality.

Earlier structuralism had given a relationship of one to one correspondence between the signifier and the signified; saying that this relationship between the two is the linguistic sign and that the language is constructed out of such signs. In post-structuralism, however, there is no such one to one correspondence and the result is "the incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier".¹ With there being no inherent relation between language and the outside reality (signifier and signified), the result is a critique of meaning peculiar to post-structuralism.

The celebrated post-structuralist Jacques Derrida puts forth the concept of floating signifiers pure and simple having no exact correspondence to any outside existence at all.²

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Any attempt to understand this highly cerebral argument of Derrida requires and presupposes clarity of the corresponding concepts and terms employed by him.

A fundamental term to understand in this regard is 'sous rature' which literally means 'under erasure'.

A term is 'sous rature' when it is inadequate and insufficient to express the full meaning intended to be expressed by it but still it is being employed as there is no better term available for the given meaning. It is, therefore, the best of the available terms yet not the exact or ideal one. A term is under erasure when it is written down and crossed, simultaneously showing its need and inadequacy. Let us take an example to illustrate it. If you use the term 'spirit' to refer to the force or energy in the universe without intending to bring into view the religious or metaphysical sense associated with the word, then the word can be employed under erasure.

Derrida borrowed this concept from Martin Heidegger who used ~~to~~ write 'Being' under erasure, because he felt that the word was inadequate, yet the only option available.

As we have seen earlier, in Derrida's view there is no harmonious and direct relation between the signifier and the signified. Instead, they are continuously despairing from one another and forming new pairs with other partners. This is in direct conflict with the Saussurean model of sign which views an inherent relationship between a signifier and its corresponding signified and they are viewed as two sides of a single coin which must always remain together. One can understand Derrida's concept of floating signifiers by considering the following example. The meaning of a signifier can be seen in a dictionary. But the dictionary explains a signifier in terms of still more signifiers. And the meaning of these other signifiers can be found out in terms of yet other signifiers and so on *ad infinitum*. In this circular process, each signifier keeps transforming into signified and each signified into signifier but one can never reach a final signified which is not a signifier in its own turn. This is the

concept of floating signifiers as distinct from Saussure's concept of sign, *viz.* a fixed relationship between a signifier and a signified.

By employing the concept of floating signifiers, the message being conveyed by Derrida is that the meaning is not immediately present in a sign. This is so as meaning of a sign is in reference to what a sign is not, rather than what a sign is. For instance, to say 'ice cream' means more negatively, *i.e.* it is not a pudding or a chair or an orange or a monkey than what it is positively. Hence meaning is in a way absent from the sign.

Meaning, therefore, is not contained in just a sign. It is spread over a whole set of signifiers and cannot be easily pinpointed where it is, as this set of signifiers is a set of floating signifiers.

As meaning is not contained in a single sign, so it can never lead to meaning. The search for meaning would continue with one signified substituting the other and so on without ever reaching the desired end of final meaning as contained in a signifier's corresponding signified. Thus, a sign is always under erasure as it contains the traces of another sign in it.

Furthermore, as one sign in different contexts has different implications, similarly the meaning also keeps changing from context to context and is never identical with itself.

It all adds up to the thesis that language is not something stable and static. Nothing is truly definable in itself but can only be understood with its relation to other things. It is not just that meaning or language is not stable but even the man employing it is not so. It is so since language is something that man is made out of.³

Derrida's theory of language stands in sharp contrast to Husserl's phenomenological theory of language which has human overtones. For Husserl, meaning implies some human being that means the language. Expression is intentional⁴ and words are alive.⁵ But all this presupposes that even before words

are uttered, meaning is there in the mind. Hence language becomes just a mode of conveying the already existing meaning. But this secondary status of language is not acceptable to Derrida who considers language to be the most significant reality. He, therefore, tilts the direction of language's emphasis from intention to writing. Because in writing the human or intentional element is minimum for the author of the writing may even be dead. As writing exists "even if what is called the author of the writing no longer answers to what he has written."⁶ And unlike speech, writing becomes fatherless as soon as it is born.⁷ It is an aid to the memory⁸ and so not directly related to man like speech. This brings to us Derrida's concept of phonocentrism. Before coming to that concept, he developed the technique of deconstruction. It is a technique in which you read a given text so thoroughly and in all its fine details so as to expose the inherent conceptual dichotomies and conflicts present in the writer's thought and apparent in his text. The standards and principles propounded by the text are themselves used to deconstruct the text and to show that it itself does not live up to the standards set by it.

Deconstruction is related to the metaphysics of presence which is a common assumption that what is immediately present is absolutely certain. This presence which is "now" as compared to past (which is no more) and future (which is uncertain) is certain. Speech has an element of here and now. Derrida, however, denies this presence. Criticizing it, he points out that it is due to this misconception of certainty to presence that the spoken word is wrongly but generally supposed to be superior to the written word. This preference he calls phonocentrism. Tracing the roots of this preference he concludes that it has been so because speech implies presence in immediacy, *i.e.* the speaker and the listener are immediately present not only that even the meaning is present. While speaking, one seems to be completely in control of meaning. That is why phonocentrism, for Derrida, is a direct consequence of the metaphysics of presence.

The act of speech is also different from writing as in the former spoken words are immediately present to the consciousness, and voice in which they are presented is a very intimate medium. All this is different in case of writing. Speech reassures us of our being while writing is more distant and mediated, not close to consciousness.

Barbara Johnson's following comment will add to our understanding. Derrida's critique of western metaphysics focuses on its preference of the spoken word over the written one. The spoken word is given a higher value because the speaker and the listener are both present to the utterance simultaneously. There is no temporal or spatial distance between the speaker, the speech and the listener, since the speaker hears himself speak at the same moment that the listener does. This immediacy seems to guarantee the notion that in the spoken word we know what we mean, mean what we say, say what we mean, and know what we have said. Whether or not perfect understanding always occurs in fact, this image of perfectly self-present meaning is, according to Derrida, the underlying ideal of the Western culture. Derrida has termed this belief in the self-presentation of meaning "logocentrism", from the Greek and Logos (meaning speech, logic, reason, or the word of God). Writing, on the other hand, is considered by the logocentric system to be only when speaking is impossible. Writing is thus a second-rate activity that tries to overcome distance by making use of it: the writer puts his thought on paper, distancing it from himself, transforming it into something that can be read by someone far away, even after the writer's death. This inclusion of death, distance and difference is thought to be a corruption of the self-presence of meaning, to open meaning up to all forms of adulteration which immediacy would have prevented.⁹

Derrida argues that our thinking is such that we are caught in the web of binary oppositions such as signifier/signified, sensible/ intelligible, matter/mind, parole/langue and in the same way speech/ writing. Such pairs represent a particular mental state, i.e. of water tight ideologies in which certain things are

absolutely right others thoroughly wrong. One must endeavour to get out of this.

But even if we accept all this, one still wonders how Derrida gives priority to writing over speech as opposed to the age-old custom of phonocentrism. Derrida opposes the commonsense view that since speech comes before writing in the history of human race's development or in the growth of a child so it must also be primary. He makes a distinction between the historic/chronological and conceptual/ logical priority. Writing, he says, is logically prior to speech though not chronologically prior. A few examples would clarify the point.

Take the example of mathematics. It is a highly developed and complex science today but in its earliest day it started with the crude form of counting with the help of real objects like pebbles. So, if the original form is prior then all advanced methods employed in contemporary mathematics, which is chronologically later, should be traceable to the oldest teachings. But, obviously, it is not possible. The concept of the infinity or that of the square root of minus one cannot be traced back to the actual method of counting, etc. with the help of pebbles. It is so because the methods, which were historically primary, have given way to other techniques, which have become conceptually prior to the older one.

Similarly take the example of nature-culture. It is commonly believed by philosophers as well as by the laymen that nature is prior to culture in the history of human evolution, man started with nature and slowly and gradually added something to it which came to be known as culture. Culture, thus, used to supplement nature. In later days, culture became so dominant that it assumed the primary significance. Now what distinguishes man from animal is not what he has as a relic of nature but what he is due to culture. So what was chronologically later has become logically prior.

Derrida replaces the conventional logic of origin with the radical logic of supplement, *i.e.* what is added later on always

comes to dominate the earlier one. This strange structure of the supplement,¹⁰ is a key feature of post-structuralism.

It is such a logic of supplement which gives priority to writing over speech. Another argument that Derrida employs is that Freud explained the mechanism of the unconscious by analogy to writing and not to speech.*

In 'The Interpretation of Dreams' (1900), Freud employed a variety of linguistic analogies like hieroglyphics, pictographs, rebuses, Chinese script and the like to explain dream symbols. 'Note on the Mystic Pad' (1925) employs the analogy of a magical writing pad (a child's toy slate) to explain the physiology of the unconscious. Just as the words on the celluloid sheet get erased yet leave their indelible print on the lower wax slab, so do the perceptions which are no longer present in the consciousness leave their permanent mark on the unconscious and may be recalled by special ways.

This radical concept of reversing the hierarchy of speech and writing is a sort of reaction against the metaphysics of presence so vogue in the western philosophy.

In addition to the things discussed earlier, it would be apt to quote from Derrida in this regard:

"all the names related to the fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have designated the constant of a presence – eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject), aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness, or conscience, God, man and so forth."¹¹

And again:

"It was necessary to begin to think that there was no center, that the center would not be thought in the form of a being-present, that the center has no natural locus

*Derrida employs Freud's three texts to prove his point, viz. Project for a Scientific Psychology, The Interpretations of Dreams and Note on the Mystic Writing Pad.

but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign substitutions come into play. This moment was that in which language invaded the universal problematic; that in which, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse That is to say, when everything became a system where the central signified, the origin or the transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification and infinitum."¹²

This sums up the logocentric bias of the western thought – its compulsions to have a central place for everything and to reduce everything to this central place.

In its opposition to the center, the concept of post-structuralism is a challenge to structuralism from yet another perspective. The very idea of structure presumes a center, a fixed principle, a hierarchy of meaning and a solid foundation; and it is just these concepts which Derrida's treatment of writing critically evaluates and rejects.

Post-structuralism is not just critical of structuralism but of structural linguistics as well. Since structuralism aims at isolation of general structures of human activity, it becomes parallel to linguistics in this way. Structural linguistics is concerned with four fundamental functions:

- Instead of emphasizing on the study of conscious linguistic phenomena, it focuses on their unconscious infrastructure.
- For it the basic entities are not terms but the relation between the terms.
- It is based on the concept of system.
- One of its aims is to unearth the general laws operating in this field.

Derrida's post-structuralism holds these presumptions into question on the following grounds:

- He doubts the possibility of the existence of operation of general laws.
- He questions the structure of binary opposition because he holds that what is a term's opposition is in fact, its complement.

Let us now once again revert back to our original thesis of the metaphysics of presence. Following examples would help to illustrate what Derrida means when he says that this concept is deep rooted in the western thought. In the Cartesian 'cogito ergo sum' (I think, therefore, I am), 'I' becomes beyond doubt because it is immediately present in the whole exercise of thinking.

Another case can be the familiar view that whatever is in the present moment, it exists beyond doubt, as opposed to what was in the past (about which we are not sure) or what will be in the future (which we don't know).

Another example is with reference to meaning. When one is speaking and the other is listening, he is commonly thought to be conveying the meaning already present in his mind to the listener present there.

In short, metaphysics of presence conveys the impression that reality is made up of a series of present states, which are obvious, and beyond doubt. This commonsense view appears to be all right at first sight but as we begin to challenge it, we discover that the present state is not that fundamental as it appears to be and is itself made up of something else.

Let us take an old example of Zeno's paradox of the moving arrow. Now looking at the moving arrow it appears beyond doubt that the arrow is in motion and the fact is true as all this is happening before our presence, here and now. Yet at any given time, it is at a particular spot and hence at rest. What is to be done to resolve this conflict? Motion is to be understood only if

we consider not present but also past and future, *i.e.* the arrow is at one spot now, it was not there in the past and will be elsewhere else in the future. So, non-present also inhabits the present and is part of it. It is only after making non-present part of the present that we can understand the obvious fact of arrow's motion. Thus what appears to be simple and present is in fact complex and differential, *i.e.* having traces of both presence and non-presence.

Nothing is therefore simply present. What appears to be present depends for its identity on differences and relations which cannot be present simultaneously with it. But the fact that differences are not present does not mean that they are absent. It is a wrong logic to say that if something is not present, it must be absent. It smacks of the already mentioned binary oppositions (such as presence, absence). Differences resist discussion in terms of the opposition of presence and absence.

It will become clearer as we take an example from the realm of language in the following discussion.

It is held that meaning of a word depends on the fact that it has been commonly used in a particular sense to convey a certain meaning, *i.e.* on the rules and regulations of the structure of language. But on a serious thought, it will dawn upon us that such a structure (which gives a word its particular meaning) is itself dependant on prior structures. The word "apple" has the meaning of apple because it is different from all other things and words which are not apple. Signification, hence, depends upon difference, and this difference is, in turn, the result of some prior signification.

If we focus on events, we see that they give rise to difference but when we pay attention to difference we see that it leads to such instances. This paradox was called 'differance' by Derrida, which in French means both a passive difference already existing as well as an act of differing which produces difference. It "is a structure and movement which cannot be conceived on the bases of opposition of presence/absence.

Differance is the systematic play of differences, of traces of differences, of the spacing (espacement) by which elements refer to one another. This spacing is the production, both active and passive (the *a* of differance indicates this indecision in relation to activity and passivity, indicates that which cannot be governed and organized by that opposition), of intervals without which the full term could not signify, could not function".¹³

Derrida's concept of difference is in opposition to Plato's concept of identity in showing that identity is preceded by difference. Difference refers, on the one hand, to differing (each sign differs from the other) and, on the other hand, to deferring (the endless chain of signs postpones any termination of the chain in some original signified).

Plato used to employ the term *pharmakon* to writing. Derrida points out that this term has double meaning: cure and poison. It is poison as it corrupts meaning by removing it from the speaker's presence and placing it outside the author but paradoxically it is a cure, too, as with its aid meaning can be remembered, repeated and recollected from oblivion and can remain the same, *i.e.* identical with itself. So, it is both the disease and the remedy. As *pharmakon*, writing is a play of irreconcilable binary opposites. At one point, it places meaning beyond the speaker while at the other point it helps him to recall that meaning.

As Derrida himself points out, "On the one hand, [differer] indicates difference as distinction, inequality, or discernibility, on the other, it expresses the interposition of delay, the interval of a spacing and temporizing that puts off until 'later' what is presently denied."

In the last mentioned sense, 'differer' refers to 'to defer' and hence brings into focus the idea of time. So by associating differer to *pharmakon*, its meaning 'poison' exists not just due to being 'different' from 'remedy' but also by 'deferring' the meaning of remedy for the time being. As the meaning is deferred, so it is put off only for the present, and afterwards the

meaning which has been deferred (*viz.* remedy) will come back to it.

In this and other ways, the post-structuralist tendencies came to their logical end in Derrida. His theory of language is not like the other ones where movement is from signifier to the signified (like in structuralism) but here movement is from one signifier to another signifier. It is in such a unique concept of signification that Derrida conceives of meaning.

Writing is to be understood in terms of signifiers and signifiers are to be understood in terms of more signifiers.

What is more, such a movement of signifiers goes on for ever unlike the conventional view where one signifier points to the signified and the meaning is contained in that signified. In this radical Derridan system meaning does not come to a halt in the idea or image in the reader's mind (signified) but each signifier points to another signifier, which in turn points to yet another and so it goes on and on for ever. As Derrida points out:

"The meaning of meaning is infinite implication, the indefinite referral of signifier to signifier, its force is a certain pure and infinite equivocality which gives signified meaning to respite, no rest, but engages it in its own economy so that it always signifies again and differs."¹⁴

This movement of signifiers never lets the meaning escape it and come to a point outside this line. It goes further and further. For Derrida this state of language is expressed by the term 'dissemination'. Meaning can never be fully gathered as there is always an endless loss and spillage of meaning like 'seed scattered wastefully outside'.¹⁵

Dissemination is different from both univocity and polysemy. Univocity is the state of one meaning while polysemy is that of multiple meanings. But in both these cases meaning comes to a halt in reader's mind. In dissemination, however, the meaning never comes to an end in reader's mind but hops from

one signifier to the next perpetually, and has no reference to any signified.

It is interesting to note that by removing the signified (the idea in the reader's mind) from the scene altogether, the human control over language is removed for good. And as there is no human control, language acquires energy and creativity peculiar to itself which is distinct from that of any writer or reader. The language, thus, instead of being under the control of the reader or writer, takes control of him. Hence, "responsibility and individually are values that no longer predominate here: that is the first effect of dissemination."¹⁶

In the end, I will recapitulate various arguments employed by Derrida to show how Western thought has been dominated by the metaphysics of presence which expresses itself in its preference for one over many, identity over difference, spirit over matter, eternity over time, immediacy over deferment, and last but not least, speech over writing.

Derrida's grammatology – the deconstructive science of writing – aims at doing away with these metaphysical oppositions, not by reversing them, but by projecting the concept of difference-difference and deferment-inherent in the metaphysical language. Discovery of this difference helps to falsify their claim of self-identity of presence.

While deconstructing traditional logocentrism, he does not want to replace it with his own preference for such terms as difference, supplement, dissemination, erasure, deconstruction and the like. For this he says that his own terms should also be placed under erasure to avoid their becoming dogmas.

Derrida claims that his technique of deconstruction is not merely a nihilistic reduction of meaning to non-meaning. Rather it is a passage of meaning into otherness. As meaning always remains other than what we take it to mean, it aims at checking meaning being converted into a system of absolute knowledge, a meaning which is so once for all.

In doing so, he does not do away with the subject but opens it to its own desire for other-than-itself. He says:

“the subject is not some meta-linguistic substance or identity, some pure cogito of self-presence, it is always inscribed in language and this very inscription constitutes a form of liberty for it shows the subject that it is not tied to a single identity, but lives in language, as difference, and is therefore perpetually haunted by the ‘other’ Deconstruction gives pleasure in that it gives desire. To deconstruct a text is to disclose how it functions as desire, as a search for presence and fulfillment which is interminably deferred. One cannot read without opening oneself to the desire of language, to the search for that which remains absent and other than oneself. Without a certain love of the text no reading would be possible. In every reading there is corps-a-corps between the reader and the text, an incorporation of the reader’s desire into the desire of the text. Here is pleasure, the very opposite of that arid intellectualism of which deconstruction has so often been accused.”¹⁷

ENDNOTES

- 1 Jacques Lacan (1977), *Ecrits: A Selection*. London: Tavistok, p. 154.
- 2 J. Culler (1975), *Structuralist Politics*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 247.
- 3 T. Eagleton (1983), *Literacy Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, pp. 127-134.
- 4 J. Derrida (1973), *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Tr.). Evanston: Northwestern University Press, p. 33.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- 6 J. Derrida (1982), *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 316.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 J. Derrida (1976), *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, p. 37.
- 9 Babra Johnson's Introduction to the English translation of *Dissemination*.
- 10 J. Derrida (1973), *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Tr.). Evanston: Northwestern University Press, p. 89.
- 11 J. Derrida (1978), *Writing and Difference*. University of Chicago Press.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 J. Derrida (1972), *Positions, Pairs*. An English translation of the title interview in this volume appeared in *Diacritics*, Volume II, No. 4 and Volume III, No. 7.
- 14 *Writing and Difference*, p. 25.
- 15 J. Derrida (1981), *Dissemination*. London: Athlone Press, p. 149.

16 *Ibid*, p. 6.

17 Richard Kearney (1984), *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*. Manchester University Press.