

After the Play

A study on deconstruction with reference to Jacques Derrida's theory of *écriture*

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1

Contemporary literary theory or criticism is flourishing and holds many schools which include structuralism, reader-response criticism, deconstruction, Marxist criticism, feminist criticism, semiotics, psychoanalytic criticism, hermeneutics and *Rezeptionsästhetik*. Among the most noteworthy and attractive may be deconstruction which was founded on Jacques Derrida's philosophy and developed as literary theory by a group of American critics including Paul de Man and Geoffrey Hartman, most of whom choose Yale or Johns Hopkins University as their spheres of critical activity. This thesis aims to explore some aspects of Derrida's philosophy which has exerted much influence upon contemporary criticism.

According to Derrida's discourses, the history of metaphysics, or the tradition of Western thoughts, beyond all apparent differences, from Socrates and Plato to Hegel and Heidegger, has "always assigned the origin of truth in general to the logos,"⁽¹⁾ that is to say, has been affected by "logocentrism." What "the logos" implies here are God's infinite understanding, reason, logic, thought, truth, words and so on, conceived as existing in itself; as the source of all meanings. Within the realm of the logos the original and essential link to the *phoné* which has never been broken means that logocentrism also has a close connection with phonocentrism: absolute kinship of voice and truth. Derrida writes:

Producer of the first signifier, it [the voice] is not just a simple signifier among others. It signifies "mental experiences" which themselves reflect or mirror things by natural resemblance. Between being and mind, things and feelings, there would be a relationship of translation or natural signification; between mind and logos, a relationship of conventional symbolization. And the *first* convention, which would relate immediately to the order of natural and universal signification, would be produced as spoken language. Written language would establish the conventions, interlinking other conventions with them (Gr. p. 11).

In *of Grammatology* he often points out that Western philosophy has conventionally debased writing (*écriture*), and conferred privileged status on speech (*parole*) instead. The reason the phoneme has been looked upon as the most ideal of signs he explains:

“by virtue of hearing(understanding)-oneself-speak—an indissociable system—the subject affects itself and is related to itself in the element of ideality” (Gr. p. 12). Further he observes: “This auto-affection is no doubt the possibility for what is called subjectivity.”⁽²⁾

All these discussions of necessity lead him to another recognition that the phonocentrism-logocentrism is deep associated with a “metaphysics of presence,” which is the only metaphysics we have known:

The notion of the sign . . . remains within the heritage of that logocentrism which is also a phonocentrism: absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning . . . We already have a foreboding that phonocentrism merges with the historical determination of the meaning of being in general as *presence*, with all the subdeterminations which depend on this general form . . . (presence of the thing to the sight as *eidōs*, presence as substance / essence / existence (*ousia*), temporal presence as point (*stigmè*) of the now or of the moment (*nun*), the selfpresence of the cogito, consciousness, subjectivity, the co-presence of the other and of the self, intersubjectivity as the intentional phenomenon of the ego, and so forth). Logocentrism would thus support the determination of the being of the entity as presence (Gr. pp. 11-12).

Thus Derrida arrives at the conclusion that logocentrism, phonocentrism and metaphysics of presence form the relationship of the Trinity. This logocentrism united with phonetic-alphabetical script emerges, as the most original and powerful ethnocentrism, in the process of imposing itself upon the world, and the scientific civilization derived from the ideology is dislocating the world culture, making an epoch of which we can glimpse the *closure* (Gr. p. 4). After such consideration, Derrida aims his deconstructive strategy at logocentrism and metaphysics of presence. We can see how he tackles this task when we examine his attempt to deconstruct Saussure’s linguistics, though it has given one of the most indispensable footings to his philosophy.

As is well known, a crucial premise of Saussure’s argument is that there are two objects for linguistics, *langue* and *parole*. *Langue* is the system of a language, the social product of which the existence permits the individual to exercise his or her linguistic faculty. *Parole*, on the other hand, is actual speech by the individual made possible by the language. Saussure claimed that the study of linguistics should focus its attention not on *parole* but on *langue* in order to place linguistics on a scientific basis. He was convinced that linguistics would get into a hopeless mess if it were concerned with actual speech, *parole*. But Saussure, whose theory is heavily committed to the prior consequence of *langue*, language as system, chose as material for his study not writing (*écriture*) but speech (*parole*), granting the latter privileged position. What should we make of this puzzling paradox?

In this paradox Derrida sees Saussure deeply involved in the tradition of metaphysics, logocentrism, though his theory of the primacy of a “synchronic” approach against a “diachronic” one had great impact upon the tradition. Unlike Roland Barthes,⁽³⁾ Derrida refuses simply to accept this paradox. His strategy makes the very paradox in his predecessor’s theory the target of its deconstructive enterprise. For Derrida, the debasement of writing as

an appendage, a mere technique, implies a symptom of a much broader tendency.

2

Saussure defines language as a system of signs, in which, he emphasizes, the sign is the central fact of language. His primary principle suggests that the true nature of the sign is arbitrary. It is to the effect that "a particular combination of signifier and signified is an arbitrary entity."⁽⁴⁾ Another main principle of his theory is this: in the linguistic system, there are only differences; meaning is not latent in a sign but functional, defined by the relation of difference which sets it off from the other signs. Namely, language is a system of differential signs. From these linguistic definitions by Saussure does Derrida elicit his position, and steps in his distinctive direction further.

Provided that in the linguistic system there are only differences, and that signs are products of differences, Derrida produces a general demonstration:

the play of differences involves syntheses and referrals that prevent there from being at any moment or in any way a simple element that is present in and of itself and refers only to itself. Whether in written or in spoken discourse, no element can function as a sign without relating to another element which itself is not simply present. This linkage means that each "element" — phoneme or grapheme — is constituted with reference to the trace in it of the other elements of the sequence or system. This linkage, this weaving, is the *text*, which is produced only through the transformation of another text. Nothing, either in the elements or in the system, is anywhere simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.⁽⁵⁾

Let us pursue his unique idea further: "The trace, where the relationship with the other is marked, articulates its possibility in the entire field of the entity [*étant*], which metaphysics has defined as the being-present starting from the occulted movement of the trace. The trace must be thought before entity. But the movement of the trace is necessarily occulted, it produces itself as self-occultation" (Gr. p. 47).

The "trace," one of the elemental conceptions in Derrida's philosophy, is composed of *différance*, the faculty of which is to differentiate both space and time.⁽⁶⁾ For the functions of articulating and inscribing differences in the domain of *différance*, Derrida chooses a term, *archi-écriture* (archi-writing). The reason he continues to call the concept writing is that in the light of inscription "it essentially communicates with the vulgar concept of writing" (Gr. p. 56). The archi-writing is writing in general, and the condition of both speech and writing in the narrow sense. We could regard as almost the same concept in Derrida's theory, *différance*, trace and archi-writing, which nicknames are given to the movement of "difference-itself" (Gr. p. 93).

Saussure's theory tells us that meaning is a product of the difference between signs.

Derrida advances the thesis to the point that “without a trace retaining the other as other in the same,” no meaning would appear (Gr. p. 62). He argues, therefore, that “*the trace is in fact the absolute origins of sense in general.*” This amounts to saying “*there is no absolute origin of sense in general,*” because the trace is not the entity but the process of differing in space and deferring in time, though it opens appearance and signification (Gr. p. 65, Italics in the original).

This represents a sharp and destructive challenge to Western metaphysics which he thinks has been grounded upon presence of meaning as a signifying intention present to consciousness at the moment of utterance. Through this critique Derrida questions the truth of all the notions based upon logocentrism or metaphysics of presence, which includes God’s infinite understanding, reason, words, the relation of cause and effect. After all, in spite of the eloquent critique of theology, the essence of his idea, “*archi-writing*” to trace the exclusion and degradation of writing and expose the privileged status of speech, must lie in the transgression of rationalism of modern thoughts. In this respect Derrida is going the same way that Friedrich Nietzsche paved, in other words, irrationalism. Christopher Norris draws up a summary of Nietzsche’s philosophy:

Reason had crushed out the imaginative life of philosophy, just as—in Nietzsche’s view—it had destroyed the joyous or ‘Dionysian’ element in classical Greek tragedy. Socrates stands—with Christ in Nietzsche’s inverted pantheon—as the pale destroyer of all that gives life, variety and zest to the enterprise of human understanding. To restore that buried tradition is to show how ‘reason’ usurped its place by systematically opposing and disguising the rhetorical gambits of language.⁽⁷⁾

Derrida who refutes reason as involved in logocentrism comes to take Nietzsche to be his predecessor in a deconstructive way: “the Nietzschean *affirmation* . . . of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming . . . of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to active interpretation.”⁽⁸⁾ Indeed Derrida’s philosophical strategy depending upon modern linguistics seems to have achieved a marked success, but what validity and verity can it have? I would like to investigate his deconstructive hypothesis somewhat in detail.

Saussure’s linguistics is founded on the premise that the sign is the union of a signifying form, which is called the *signifiant* or signifier, and an idea signified, called the *signifié* or signified. In short, the signifier and the signified exist only as the components of the sign. He describes the nature of the sign as arbitrary in that there is no natural or inevitable link between the signifier and the signified. It is only social convention that determines the relation between them. The signified, one of the two elements of the sign, falls into the hands of Derrida’s deconstructive attempts, because it is the agent of reflection of objects to subjects as sense or meaning. Derrida believes that even Saussure’s theories, despite their incisive criticism of logocentrism in terms of a purely differential system of language, cannot escape this ideology. On a typical obsession of Saussure’s with logocentrism, Derrida comments:

This linearist concept of time is therefore one of the deepest adherences of the modern concept of the sign to its own history. For at the limit, it is indeed the concept of the sign itself, and the distinction, however tenuous, between the signifying and signified faces, that remain committed to the history of classical ontology The *signatum* always referred, as to its referent, to a *res*, to an entity created or at any rate first thought and spoken, thinkable and speakable, in the eternal present of the divine logos and specifically in its breath. If it came to relate to the speech of a finite being (created or not: in any case of an intracosmic entity) through the *intermediary* of a *signans*, the *signatum* had an *immediate* relationship with the divine logos which thought it within presence and for which it was not a trace. And for modern linguistics, if the signifier is a trace, the signified is a meaning thinkable in principle within the full presence of an intuitive consciousness (Gr. pp. 72-73).

In Saussure's linguistics, Derrida assumes, the signified face, originally distinguished from the signifying one, has rights to be what it is without the latter. The meaning of the signified is thinkable and possible outside of all the signifiers. Derrida makes an assertion: "It is thus the idea of the sign that must be deconstructed through a meditation upon writing" (Gr.p.73). Here we can see his ingenious contrivance to deconstruct the idea of the sign in modern linguistics. This pursuance by Derrida never fails to sway the root of ontology itself:

One is necessarily led to this from the moment that the trace affects the totality of the sign in both its faces. That the signified is originarily and essentially (and not only for a finite and created spirit) trace, that it is *always already in the position of the signifier*, is the apparently innocent proposition within which the metaphysics of the logos, of presence and consciousness, must reflect upon writing as its death and its resource (Gr. p. 73).

Let us illustrate his ostensibly difficult arguments. A sign does not have its original meaning or identity. Meaning is rather the result of division of signs than identical with itself. For instance, the meaning of the sign *dog* cannot be defined until it excludes *cat* or *pig*, traced through by them. In this way, the other possible signs are constitutive of its identity. Thus language is less a stable affair than considered, but looks "much more like a sprawling limitless web where there is a constant interchange and circulation of elements, where none of the elements is absolutely definable and where everything is caught up and traced through by everything else."⁽⁹⁾ In the true nature of language, meaning is not immediately present in a sign but scattered and dispersed along the whole tissue of traces. Therefore it is "a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence together."⁽¹⁰⁾ As a result, all the signifieds are reduced to signifiers, and in a structure of infinite referral there are only differences of signifiers and traces of traces.

At this point, Derrida meets with Roland Barthes, a French critic, who confidently proclaimed the "death of the author." His enquiry of Balzac's story *Sarrasine*, *S/Z* (1970)

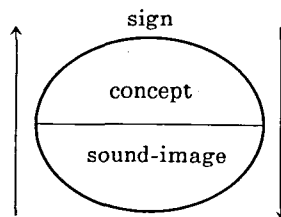
insisted that all literary texts are woven out of other literary texts, so that there is no literary originality; in this sense all literature is “intertextual.”¹⁰¹ Literary writings are now considered not as works of which the import is already given by the author, but as texts which encourage the critic to produce his semi-arbitrary play of meaning, transposing them into different discourses. Literature is not an object any longer, to which criticism must confirm, but becomes a free space in which it can sport. As Terry Eagleton puts it, the moment from structuralism to post-structuralism coincides, in a way, with a movement from “work” to “text”:

It is a shift from seeing the poem or novel as a closed entity, equipped with definite meanings which it is the critic's task to decipher, to seeing it as irreducibly plural, an endless play of signifiers which can never be finally nailed down to a single centre, essence or meaning.¹⁰²

Derrida's assumption suggests that there is no meaning but is embroiled in the endless play of signifiers. Accordingly all meanings turn out undecidable. However, a serious question arises whether his audacious hypothesis can have real efficacy in the field of literature. Saussure's linguistics, which Derrida draws on, maintains that language is a system of signs in which there are only differences without positive terms, and that the nature of the sign is arbitrary. It also explains that meaning is only the result of difference of a sign from others. These theses by Saussure must have given strong footings to structuralism and post-structuralism including Derrida's philosophy. I would like to explore the real sense of the theses back in *Course in General Linguistics*³³ by Saussure in the following parts. The focus upon the concepts of “value” and “signification” in the writing will be helpful to my purpose.

3

The main points of Saussure's formulations about language are that “it is a system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of meanings and sound-images, and in which both parts of the sign are psychological” (p. 15). He also advances the suggestion that “the linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image” (p. 66). To dispel ambiguity, the former is termed signified, the latter signifier, and the whole constituted by the both, sign (*signe*), as in the diagram (p. 67). Another proposition, though rather paradoxical, is this: “in the last analysis, what is commonly referred to as a ‘grammatical fact’ fits the definition of the unit” (p. 121). The unity or sign, therefore, proves to be a central fact of language from which we should start our investigation. So it comes to my first task to weigh the significance of his theory that a linguistic sign is the combination of a concept and a sound-image.



Linguistics in general before Saussure had thought of language as, in a way, a set of labels for entities which exist independently outside in the world. He levels penetrating criticisms at this point of view: "Some people regard language, when reduced to its elements, as a naming-process only—a list of words, each corresponding to the thing that it names . . . This conception is open to criticism at several points. It assumes that ready-made ideas exist before words" (p. 65). What his critique aims at is the view of language as a nomenclature, conventional from Plato and Aristotle, which presumes that language is "a series of names arbitrarily selected and attached to a set of objects or concepts."¹⁴ If language were a nomenclature, a way of naming things outside, Saussure believes, it would be easy to translate from one language to another. And yet our numerous linguistic experiences tell us that this is not true. Saussure paid vigilant attention to the very fact that the concepts of one language inevitably differ from those of another. Contrary to the language-as-nomenclature theory which allows the existence of ideas before words, Saussure's proposition stresses that concepts or meanings are not outside but inside of signs. It is not until words are created that we are able to have meanings of entities and objects. These suggestions by Saussure paved the way to modern semantics, though he did not extend particular discussions about it.¹⁵

One of the primary principles in Saussure's linguistics concerns itself with the arbitrary nature of the sign. It urges that the bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary; there is no natural connection between them. But this does not simply mean that the individual has free choice of a signifier for a given signified. Once a bond is, even if arbitrarily, established in a linguistic community, the individual has no power to change the sign. Although Saussure writes:

Language can also be compared with a sheet of paper: thought is the front and the sound the back: one cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time: likewise in language, one can neither divide sound from thought nor thought from sound (p. 113),

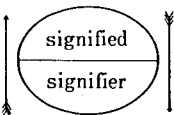
there has been a deep-seated tendency, especially in post-Saussurian thought, to elicit from his theory of arbitrariness the conclusion that there is no essential relevancy between the sign and the "referent" or what it refers to. This cannot but deny reflexivity to the sign. The following is intended to demonstrate that this argument is a deviation from Saussure's linguistic theories.

What position will Saussure enunciate who attaches great importance to the fact that language is not a nomenclature? Despite his conception of the unit as the kernel of language, he does not think that a unit exists isolated from others, but that it does only in relation with others in a linguistic system. From this standpoint, he also repudiates the empirical one whose assumption is that the linguistic system is composed of the accumulation of independent units. He argues that "language is characterized as a system based entirely on the opposition of its concrete units" (p. 107), and that "a linguistic system is a series of differences of sound combined with a series of differences of idea" (p. 120). What arises from the opposition among linguistic "terms," which Saussure substitutes for units in a

system, are defined not as concepts but as “values.” In his linguistics, the value of a term amounts to its dimension and position with respect to other terms (pp. 110-11).

To examine the real implication of Saussure’s claim that meaning is only the result of differences, which post-Saussurians have made the most of, a happy way may be to investigate into the relation of “value” in a system of signs to “signification” or sense of a unit. The fourth chapter of part two of the *Course in General Linguistics* especially deals with this matter:

- (1) When we speak of the value of a word, we generally think first of its property of standing for an idea, and this is in fact one side of linguistic value. But if this is true, how does *value* differ from *signification*? Might the two words be synonyms? I think not, although it is easy to confuse them, since the confusion results not so much from their similarity as from the subtlety of the distinction that they mark.
- (2) From a conceptual viewpoint, value is doubtless one element in signification, and it is difficult to see how signification can be dependent upon value and still be distinct from it.
- (3) As the arrows in the drawing show, it [signification] is only the counterpart of the sound-image. Everything that occurs concerns only the sound-image and the concept when we look upon the word as independent and self-contained.



But here is the paradox: on the one hand the concept seems to be the counterpart of the sound-image, and on the other hand the sign itself is in turn the counterpart of the other signs of language.

Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others, as in the diagram:



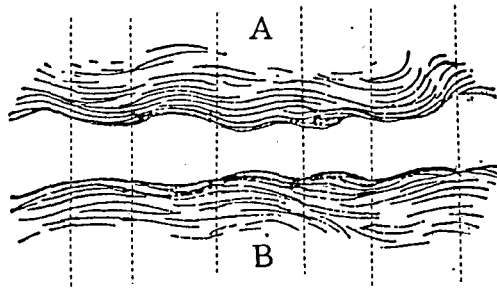
(pp. 114-15)

These discussions certainly seem complicated and contradictory. To recapitulate, value differs from signification, “although it is easy to confuse them” (1); value is one element in signification, namely, the source of signification (2); not just is the concept the counterpart of the sound-image in a sign but also “the sign itself is in turn the counterpart of the other signs” in a system. It logically follows that signification is identical with value (3). That is, says Saussure himself, paradoxical. I will attempt to pursue this entangled argument below.

The view is to be interpreted as Saussure's starting point that there is a substantial difference in the way of cognition between natural sciences and cultural fields. For the former, natural phenomena can be measured by mass, but this is not true of the latter. He was entirely certain that language is deeply related to the way of cultural cognition. From the viewpoint of criticizing the language-as-nomenclature principle, he asserts: "Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language" (p. 112). Not given language, our thoughts or conceptions would remain a shapeless continuum, and the world would be experienced without articulation.

The hypothesis on how to cognize the world suggested by Saussure is an original and revolutionary idea, *decoupage linguistique* or severing by language. He describes:

The linguistic fact can therefore be pictured in its totality – i.e. language – as a series of contiguous subdivisions marked off on both the indefinite plane of jumbled ideas (A) and the equally vague plane of sounds (B). The following diagram gives a rough idea of it:



(p. 112)

Language is not a tool for providing a set of labels for pre-existing ideas and entities but, preceding them, makes the world intelligible by articulating between concepts. This linguistic theory by Saussure can be, therefore, a kind of epistemology as well.

The division of a conceptual continuum or spectrum is absolutely arbitrary: "Not only are the domains that are linked by the linguistic fact shapeless and confused, but the choice of a given slice of sound to name a given idea is completely arbitrary" (p. 113). Each language produces not simply a different set of signifiers, dividing a phonetic continuum in its own way, but a different set of signified, using divided signifiers to mark off a conceptual continuum in its distinctive way. Accordingly each language has its particular way to articulate the world into concepts. Let us consider a couple of the many examples that Saussure offers. English has two words *sheep*, which roams the hills, and *mutton*, which we eat, whereas French has the single word *mouton* for both of them (pp.115-16). French uses *louer* (*une maison*) indifferently to mean both "pay for" and "receive payment for," while German does two words, *mieten* and *vermieten* (p. 116).

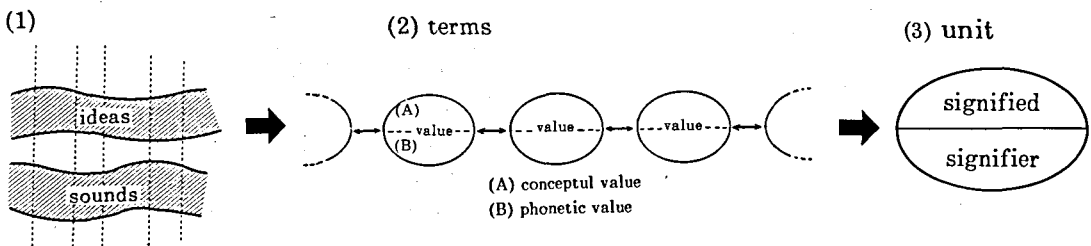
Moreover color terms would be a neat example of the arbitrary nature of the sign. Some languages divide the rainbow into seven colors, others into five colors, while others constrain

it to two colors. Physics would grasp the rainbow as a spectrum of changing light. On the contrary, each language divides the continuum in its distinctive way and distinguishes categories which it calls colors. This case tells us that “the signifieds of colour terms are nothing but the product or result of a system of distinctions.”⁶⁷ This is exactly true of language itself.

Saussure’s linguistics puts explicit emphasis on the fact that the division of a continuum is completely arbitrary; different languages articulate the world in different ways. In this linguistic nature is enshrined the true reason for the difficulty to translate from one language to another. His theory of arbitrariness of the sign which we have seen above refers to the relation between the signifier and the signified. Now we come to another important point, the fact that this arbitrariness results from a similar arbitrary nature of dividing a continuum into concepts. Saussure notes: “. . . values remain entirely relative, and that is why the bond between the sound and the idea is radically arbitrary” (p. 113).

Furthermore, as for the division of the chain of meanings, its nature is also defined as negative: “a segment of language can never . . . be based on anything except its noncoincidence with the rest (p. 118). For instance, the sign *dog* is defined by the exclusion of the other signs, *pig* or *cat*. Thus the value of each term (sign) is a product of its negative relations to the others. These notions of language makes it possible for us to understand his thesis: “*Arbitrary and differential* are two correlative qualities” (p.118). Another important proposition put forward by Saussure: “*language is a form and not a substance*” (p.122, Italics in the original), bears reference to the principle of opposition mentioned above. It is to the effect that language is not made up of autonomous entities determined by some kind of essence, but is a relative and differential system called *structure de configuration* produced by dividing the spectra of sounds and concepts in an arbitrary way.

To sum up these arguments of Saussure’s, language is not a nomenclature, a way of naming pre-existing concepts. The value of a term emanates from a system of differences, defined by their opposing relations to the other terms of the system, not by their positive contents. In this regard, we are led to his cardinal view that by dividing the continuums of both sounds and concepts, language “sets up an arbitrary relation between signifiers of its own choosing on the one hand, and signifieds of its own choosing on the other.”⁶⁸ Let me illustrate Saussure’s conceptions of language.



The value of a term is completely negative in a opposing system (2). And yet the sign which is only a result of the negative relations of terms, removed from negativity, becomes positive by its own attribute (3). Saussure writes:

But the statement that everything in language is negative is true only if the signified and the signifier are considered separately; when we consider the sign in its totality, we have something that is positive in its own class . . . Although both the signified and the signifier are purely differential and negative when considered separately, their combination is a positive fact (p. 120).

Both the signified and the signifier are purely differential and negative when considered separately. Nevertheless, once they are combined, a positive unit is realized. That is why a unit is again treated as a "concrete entity," a "reality" or an "identity" (pp. 107-11).

The investigation above now brings us to the point to gain a clearer comprehension of the contradictory relationship between "value" and "signification."

1) "value differs from signification": This proposition is concerned with the positive unit, in which signification is the counterpart of the sound-image. Each unit has its own property distinct from the other units (3).

2) "value is identical with signification": This alludes to a negative system of differences. The conceptual value of a term is defined by its opposing relations to the other terms, which in consequence produces the signification of a sign. In this sense, it can be said that value is an element or a source of signification (2). To this effect Saussure states that "meaning is a product of differences." To reiterate, the signification (concept) of a unit is determined only in a system of differential values.

However, not only does Saussure stress the linguistic nature of differential relations, but also maintains that a unit, which is a result of the negative relations, turns out positive as an identity. We should not dismiss this standpoint of Saussure's.⁹⁸ Finally, it would be worthwhile to reconsider his remark: "The linguistic mechanism is geared to differences and identities, *the former being only the counterpart of the latter*" (p. 108, Italics added).

5

We have seen in part 1 that Derrida inaugurates his unique ideas of "archi-writing," "trace," or "differance," constructed upon Saussure's theories of difference and arbitrariness. In his own light, Derrida hazards a smart critique of Western philosophical tradition based upon the principle of presence for logocentrism. His revolutionary-looking theory severs not merely the bond between the sign and the referent, but also the bond between the signifier and the signified, so that all the signifieds are reduced to signifiers. As a result, no meaning can escape from being involved in the infinite play of signifiers, nor have rights of presence any more. The denial of the signified, the conceptual face of the sign, inevitably causes the sign to lose its faculty to reflex objects including social reality and subjects' experiences, that is, the wide world. Thus the "trace" theory of Derrida's embroils mankind and the world in the infinite play of signifiers and, giving up all the meanings as the logos, lets his philosophy fall into irrationalism and nihilistic anarchism.

On the contrary, Saussure's theory, though based on the same premise of difference and arbitrariness, makes a radical distinction from Derrida's. What is implied by the arbitrary nature of language in Saussure's refers to the way to divide a continuum into concepts by linguistic subjects, or the way of cognition. Language is a negative system of differences, from which, however, emerge positive units as "realities that have their seat in the brain" (p. 15). It is true that there is no natural connection between the signifier and the signified, but once they are combined into a sign, the individual has no power to break it at will, as if language were a sheet of paper. Further, as for the relation between the two elements in a sign, the priority is given to the signified: "Language is a system of signs that express ideas" (p. 16), or "[phonic substance] is a plastic substance divided . . . into distinct parts to furnish *the signifiers needed by thought*" (p. 112, Italics added). All these propositions by Saussure convince us that his theories never deny reflexivity to the sign.

What makes the difference between Derrida and Saussure both of whom appear to stand on the same position? Derrida's deconstructive strategy is aimed at the union of the signifier and the signified in Saussure's linguistics. To look back, his enterprise is to advocate the hypothesis: because "the trace affects the totality of the sign in both its faces," the signified is "*always already in the position of the signifier*," within which, he proclaims, "the metaphysics of the logos, of presence . . . must reflect upon writing as its death" (Gr. p. 73, Italics in the original).

But this argument by Derrida would not be possible without his arbitrary, even deliberate interpretation of Saussure's theory. The latter insists that language is a system of differences, in which signifieds as well as signifiers oppose to each other. The concept of a sign is defined by the others and at the same time the sign acts in turn to define the concepts of other signs. Derrida takes this interaction of signs for the relationship between the signifier and the signified. They are, however, the two elements in a sign, in other words, a concept and a sound-image initially found in Saussure's linguistics. Here we cannot escape the conclusion that Derrida confuses, intentionally or not, Saussure's theses: "a sign is the combination of a concept and a sound-image," and "language is a system of differences." It follows, for example, that the concept of the sign *dog* is the sound-image of the sign *cat* as well. What verity and validity can this perplexing hypothesis possibly have in linguistics in general? Consequently, however, Derrida achieves a measure of success in freeing his philosophy from reality into a fictional world; an endless play of signifiers.

Where does this dubious theory come from? Derrida inherits the theory of arbitrariness from Saussure with abandonment of the idea of *decoupage linguistique*, which is the core of the theory. Saussure's view of language as a differential system was originally the result of the linguistic subject's arbitrary activity to divide a continuum of his or her own will, so that it can also be a kind of epistemology. But now it is subjected to Derrida's peculiar interpretation:

Henceforth, it is not to the thesis of the arbitrariness of the sign that I shall appeal directly, but to what Saussure associates with it as an indispensable correlative and which would seem to me rather to lay the foundations for it: the thesis of *difference*

as the source of linguistic value (Gr. p. 52).

This assumption of necessity establishes the kingdom of differences, in which there occurs alienation between subject and object, and subjectivity gets lost and entangled in the "web-like complexity."²⁰ To be brief, in Saussure's theory, "Man produces signs," whereas in Derrida's, "Signs govern man."

Derrida erected a grand edifice of his unique philosophical system called deconstruction: "archi-writing," "différance," "trace," and so on. But its foundation, as we have ascertained, is not so stable, because it depends upon his distortion of several key theses in Saussure's linguistics. Derrida's revolutionary-looking philosophy which is intended to deconstruct, strictly speaking, to destruct the tradition of Western thoughts on the ground that it is a logocentrism has been introduced to the domain of literature. And yet, now that it has been proven to have some serious flaws which cannot be overlooked, critics should be more cautious about his philosophy. Literary theory and criticism, so long as they concern themselves with literature as a linguistic art, should rest upon linguistics which will not dismiss the signified in order to contribute to literary creation of the wide world.

Notes

- 1) Jacques Derrida, *of Grammatology*, trans., Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), p. 3. Hereafter page references will be cited in the text as Gr..
- 2) Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans., David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 77-79
- 3) Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 26-27. Norris writes: "Derrida finds a dislocating tension here, a problem other structuralists (Barthes included) had been content to regard as a puzzling but unavoidable paradox."
- 4) Jonathan Culler, *Saussure* (London: Fontana Press, 1976), p. 19.
- 5) Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans., Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp. 37-38.
- 6) Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 97. Culler explains:

The term *différance*, which Derrida introduces here, alludes to this undecidable, nonsynthetic alternation between the perspectives of structure and event. The verb *differer* -means to differ and to defer. *Différance* sounds exactly the same as *différence*, but the ending *ance*, which is used to produce verbal nouns, makes it a new form meaning "difference-differing-deferring." *Différance* thus designates both a "passive" difference already in place as the condition of signification and an act of differing which produces differences.
- 7) Norris, pp. 57-58.
- 8) Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans., Alan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 292.
- 9) Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 129.

- 10) Ibid., p. 128.
- 11) Ibid., p. 138.
- 12) Ibid., p. 138.
- 13) Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans., Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959). All subsequent page references to the edition will be cited in the text.
- 14) Culler, *Saussure*, p. 21.
- 15) Keizaburo Maruyama, *Saussure no Shiso* (Tokyo: Iwanami-shoten, 1981), p.116.
- 16) Ibid., pp. 319-20.
- 17) Culler, *Saussure*, p. 25.
- 18) Ibid., p. 18.
- 19) There is a marked tendency in the study of Saussure's theory to excessively estimate its aspect of linguistic relativity but dismiss that of linguistic identity. See Culler, *Saussure*, pp. 19-29, and *On Deconstruction*, pp. 98-99.
- 20) Eagleton, p. 132.

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