

Plato and Saussure Deconstructed: Language and Philosophy through Derrida's Lens

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Abstract

Jacques Derrida's philosophy greatly disrupted traditional Western metaphysics by questioning our understanding of the relationship between language and reality. This paper examines how Derrida deconstructs logocentric and phonocentric perspectives that have influenced Western thought, focusing on his analyses of Plato's *Cratylus* and *Phaedrus*, as well as Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*. For Derrida, the meaning in language is always shifting, suggesting that absolute truths, as traditionally conceived in Platonic metaphysics, are inherently unstable. His concept of *différance* illustrates the fluid nature of meaning and the limitations of language. In his critique of "Plato's Pharmacy," he explores the inclusive potential of writing, which contrasts with Plato's preference for speech and dialectics. While Plato is concerned with texts reaching readers he deems "inappropriate" for not fully grasping their meaning, Derrida views access to texts as positive and equitable. He argues that writing removes hierarchical barriers of interpretation, empowering readers and promoting inclusivity and diverse voices. Through this approach, he not only reshapes Western philosophical thinking but also encourages continuous questioning of the truths we often take for granted, expanding philosophy's relevance to social and political aspects of everyday life. Derrida believes that philosophy should be accessible to all and not limited to privileged academic circles. He critiques elitism and advocates for philosophy to adapt to new social demands, challenging outdated rhetorical models and institutional authority. Derrida's deconstruction encourages us to consider perspectives beyond our own backgrounds and experiences. By breaking down barriers that limit which voices are acknowledged and valued, we support more open and equitable intellectual and social systems.

Keywords

Deconstruction, Derrida, Plato's Pharmacy, Platonic Metaphysics, Saussure,

1. Introduction

Jacques Derrida's revolutionary ideas on language profoundly disrupted Western philosophy, particularly through his critique of traditional metaphysics. His work raises questions about how language shapes our understanding of reality and whether speech can ever fully capture meaning and truth (Glendinning, 2011: pp 30-31). These age-old philosophical questions take on new depth with Derrida's deconstruction. Is ambiguity rooted in language itself? Is speech superior to writing? What are the implications of privileging certain concepts of knowledge over others? And who is included or excluded in this process? These are some of the key questions that he grappled with.

At the heart of the May 1968 protests at the Sorbonne, while students rallied against authoritarianism and oppressive power structures on the streets of the *Quartier Latin*, Derrida was immersed in ancient texts, quietly leading his own movement to reshape postmodern philosophy through a critique of classical works (Leonard, 2011: pp. 1-2). Derrida belonged to "The Incorruptible," a group of French philosophers so named for their commitment to an uncompromising "ethos of writing and thinking" (Birnbbaum, 2004). His work questioned "universal truths" and reexamined fundamental ideas in Western thought, challenging established norms (Marts, 2023).

In the essay "We Other Greeks" ("*Nous autres Grecs*"), Derrida (2010) explains his connection to Western philosophy and his concerns about the broad influence of Greek thought. In *Of Grammatology* (1967) and *Dissemination* (1972), he explores how this philosophical thought has shaped the theory of language, particularly focusing on sign theory and the impact of speech and writing on meaning. For Derrida, Platonic metaphysics, rooted in logocentrism and prioritization of presence, relies on the idea of absolute truths and favors speech over writing, a view he consistently challenges throughout his work (Leonard, 2011: p. 4).

Derrida, a reader at heart, approaches philosophy through a close examination of both ancient and modern texts, including those of Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Husserl, and Heidegger, among others. Given the vast scope of his work, it is not possible to analyze all his references. Instead, this paper focuses on Derrida's critique of Plato's *Cratylus*, Plato's *Phaedrus*, and Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course of General Linguistics*, as discussed in *Of Grammatology* and *Dissemination*.¹ Although these works differ in approach and objective, Derrida (2016) identifies common themes in the writings of Plato and Saussure, noting that Saussure draws several elements of his linguistic theory from ancient texts (pp. 32-33, 36-37). In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida begins with a discussion on

¹The *Cours de linguistique générale* was published posthumously in 1916 by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, two of Saussure's students who compiled the book based on notes. Therefore, it is generally regarded as accurately capturing his thoughts (Engler, 2004: pp. 47-58).

language and meaning to question the existence of absolute truths. Through his concept of *différance*, he shows that meaning is not fixed but always deferred, challenging the idea that language can ever fully and directly represent reality (pp. 24-25, 68).

“Plato’s Pharmacy,” one of Derrida’s most insightful writings on ancient texts, shows how Western philosophy privileges certain concepts like presence, unity, and identity over absence, difference, and multiplicity, with broad implications for power structures within systems of thought (Leonard, 2011: pp. 46-47). For Plato, truth is seen and experienced by the philosopher or dialectician whose soul seeks “goodness,” while writing, viewed as a mere imitation of a spoken dialogue, cannot offer the same vision of truth (Powell, 2006: p. 86). This idea creates a hierarchy that goes beyond language theory, influencing what is considered legitimate knowledge and whose voices are valued. Derrida (1981) challenges this hierarchy, considering writing fundamentally inclusive. Unlike speech, which remains limited by time, place, or the authority of the speaker, writing can open access to ideas and knowledge (p. 144).

Ultimately, Derrida’s deconstruction leads to the idea that reality, as we understand it through language, is never entirely stable or fully accessible. This notion has significant implications for how we approach knowledge, truth, and meaning. He suggests that these concepts are fluid and contingent, rather than fixed and universal. However, rather than dismissing the pursuit of truth, Derrida encourages a deeper, more critical approach to how we interpret the world, recognizing the importance of continuously seeking truth while acknowledging limitations in our systems of understanding (Leonard, 2011: pp. 4-10; Derrida & Caputo, 1997: pp. 36, 50-55). In addition, he opens the door to more inclusive and equitable ways of thinking, adding a powerful political dimension to his philosophy.

2. “We Other Greeks”

Influenced by Classical Western philosophy, Derrida reinterprets key texts, particularly those of Plato and Aristotle, to articulate his own philosophical ideas (Leonard, 2011: pp. 2, 9). Having a deep understanding of Greek texts, he recognizes that we owe much to “the Greeks” for their impact on the ongoing search for truth, which continues to be relevant to philosophical thought today (Derrida, 2010: pp. 30-31). His interest in these works lies in the fact that they are the foundation on which Western philosophical heritage is built, representing the historical roots and core structures that have shaped his own philosophical tradition.

Derrida draws on his Jewish background to position himself as a philosopher “at the margins” of Greek and Western thought. The outsider’s perspective allows him to question Greek foundational assumptions and who is excluded from what he calls “the Greek thing” (Leonard, 2011: pp. 5-6; Derrida, 2010: p. 18).² The title

²In his 2004 interview, Derrida explained that “circumstances” have made him a French Jew from Algeria, part of the generation born before the “war of independence,” close to the Arabs, through language and customs. These personal circumstances influenced his perspective of philosophy (Birnbau, 2004).

of his essay “*Nous autres Grecs*” can be translated in different ways, reflecting his characteristic play in words, as either “We Are Also Greeks” or “We Are Greeks of Another Kind.” Derrida (2010) is interested in “the other of the Greek (the Egyptian, the Barbarian, or whoever is defined by the Greek as his other)” (p. 25). The Greek conception of truth and identity relies on a clear division between Greek and non-Greek, between “us” and “them.” He approaches Greek texts from the perspective of “the other,” the figure the Greeks sought to exclude (Leonard, 2011: p. 6). This tension comes through in the Egyptian myth of the origin of writing in the *Phaedrus*, which is further explored in this paper (Plato, 1995).

Derrida argues that Western philosophical history, often presented as a unified and continuous narrative under “its Greek name and its European memory,” is “hybrid, grafted, multilinear,” and self-contradictory since its origin (Benjamin, 2010: p. 208). For Derrida, the Greek influence on philosophy through vocabulary and ethics becomes an issue for those thinking at its margins. By exposing its inconsistencies and limitations, his writing “short-circuits” the system of Platonic philosophy (Leonard, 2011: p. 6). Critical of a viewpoint centered only on European values, he acknowledges that, while deconstruction has deep European roots, it seeks to rethink old philosophical ideas (Birnbbaum, 2004). In “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Derrida states that “we are today on the eve of Platonism,” implying that history continues to unfold, and we are on the verge of moving beyond Platonic ideals (Derrida, 1981: p. 107, Derrida, 2010: p. 36).

3. Derrida on Plato and Ferdinand de Saussure

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida (2016) explores the relationship between thought and language, questioning Western philosophical tradition’s focus on logocentrism and phonocentrism (pp. 3-4). For Derrida, Platonic metaphysics is logocentric since it links the original truth to the ideal *logos* (Glendinning, 2011, p. 38).³ He challenges the distinction between the perfect realm of ideas and the imperfect reality around us as neither idea nor reality are pure: one inevitably “infects” and influences the other (Lawlor, 2023: p. 10). His critique of phonocentrism (privileging of speech over writing) ties directly to metaphysics of language, speech, and writing. Derrida outlines a “theoretical matrix” of “references” and “critical concepts” to address what he calls the “secondariness” of writing (pp. cxiii, 3, 4, 15, 58).⁴ According to Derrida, the “problem of language” necessarily includes writing (pp. 6-7).

He often presents his ideas by first inhabiting authors’ positions before critiquing them. This paper examines central themes of three works—Plato’s *Cratylus* and *Phaedrus* and Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics*

³An example of logocentrism is the theory of forms, which asserts that truth lies in perfect abstract forms (*logos*), with language and the material world serving as mere imitations of this ultimate truth.

⁴Derrida discusses how, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates contrasts a metaphoric representation of writing of “truth in the soul” to bad writing or literal, sensible writing in space (278a, Derrida 15). In this Platonic metaphor, good writing represents the ideal spiritual *logos*, rather than writing in the physical world (Glendinning, 2011: p. 49).

(*CGL*)—and makes connections while exploring Derrida’s critique of these texts.

3.1. Plato’s *Cratylus*: Language and Meaning

Do words capture the true “nature” of what they designate and does a pattern of sounds correspond with the things they define across language (383ab; 423d)? *Cratylus*, Plato’s (1998) only dialogue dedicated exclusively to language, offers deep insights into these questions. Although Derrida does not engage with *Cratylus* as extensively as he does with *Phaedrus* in *Dissemination*, *Cratylus* plays a critical role in connecting Platonic metaphysics with language and establishing the key concepts of logocentrism and phonocentrism. In addition, the conventional nature of language signs and the privilege of speech over writing significantly influenced Ferdinand de Saussure’s *CGL*, which Derrida deconstructs in *Of Grammatology*.

In *Cratylus*, Socrates, Hermogenes and Cratylus discuss the “correctness of names” (*onomata*) and if they are naturally or conventionally linked to the referent—the being signified by the name/sign (Robinson, 1955: p. 224).⁵ Correctness relates to how a name/sign successfully names the referent (Ademollo, 2011: pp. 4-5). Socrates challenges both Hermogenes’ and Cratylus’ points of viewpoints. While Hermogenes argues that names are determined by “convention and agreement” (384d), Cratylus argues that names are either correct or incorrect, depending on whether they reflect the true nature of the referent (428de). By contemplating the two sides of the problem, Plato draws the reader’s attention to several significant aspects of theory of language and metaphysics (Plato, 1998: pp. 1, 77-78; Ademollo, 2011: p. 145).

Socrates argues for the need to look beyond names and conventions and focus first on reality itself, since “things have a fixed being or essence of their own” (386de), independently of one’s perception, establishing that reality and therefore nature remain objective (Sedley, 2009: p. 54). Despite its apparent simplicity, Socrates’s initial position on language as a coherent whole made of parts that follow rules of correctness has deeper and more complex metaphysical implications throughout the dialogue.

Through the analogy with a carpenter, a shuttle, and a weaver, Socrates establishes that a name is a “tool” (388a). When a carpenter makes a shuttle, he will look for “the nature that naturally best suits it to perform its own work.” Socrates explains that the “form of a shuttle” is “what the shuttle itself is” (389b). As this analogy introduces Plato’s theory of forms, a parallel can be drawn with the *Republic*’s craftsman metaphor. Starting from a simplified hypothesis of the existence of a “single form in connection with each of the many things,” Socrates explains how a carpenter making a bed looks towards the form of a bed (596a)—the very “being of a bed” (597b)—in order to make a piece of furniture (Plato, 1992: pp. 267-268). In *Cratylus*, the carpenter will look to the specific form of a shuttle

⁵While *onomata* does not translate precisely from Greek into English, the closest translation is *names*. However, *word* or *term* better captures *onoma*’s real meaning in the dialogue, encompassing both proper and common nouns, adjectives and verbs (Ademollo, 2011: p. 1; Robinson, 1955: p. 221).

(389ab), recognizing that each type of shuttle is naturally suited to a type of weaving (389d). While each shuttle's nature corresponds to a form, all shuttles share a generic shuttle form or genus-form (389b) which supervenes over all specific forms (Plato, 1998: pp. 11-12; Ademollo, 2011: p. 130).

In the case of language, since a name/word is only a tool, like a shuttle, no matter how correct a sign may be, it remains imperfect as it cannot capture the true essence of the referent in the way a form does in Platonic metaphysics. When we express a fact by using our “voice, tongue, and mouth,” we simply imitate it, following that a name serves as a “vocal imitation of what it imitates” and not its essence or form (423b, Reeve, 1998: p. 23). Derrida (1981) notes that Socrates, much like Saussure later, must stop “the insistence on voice as sonority imitative of sounds,” since the voice names things through “the differences and relations” of letters (*grammata*). Therefore, both Plato and Saussure have the same “pedagogical necessity” to represent phonemes—vowels and consonants—with written letters (p. 141).

But who actually makes names? Who does Socrates refer to in the carpenter/weaver analogy? To answer this question, Socrates uses myths rather than history (414c; Robinson, 1955: pp. 225-226). As names have the crucial role of “instructing” (388b), only the skilled lawgivers (*nomothêtes*) can craft names and only the wise name-user (*dialectician*), like a skilled weaver (390d), knows how to properly use names or tools (Plato, 1998: pp. 14-15; Reeve, 1998: p. 18). The use of myths and the role of the dialectician are crucial elements in the Platonic metaphysical construct. Derrida (1981) notes that Plato makes a distinction between grammar (the conventional system that governs language) and dialectics (dialogue-based reasoning to uncover truth through structured questions and answers) in the *Cratylus*. This distinction lies in the idea that, for Socrates, language is limited by signs which are imitative, whereas dialectics searches for truths, which cannot be satisfied through language signs alone (p. 166). For Socrates, language carries an intrinsic ambiguity, in contrast with the absolute truths of the forms, a system of opposites that Derrida rejects.

Socrates shifts his focus to Cratylus, who believes that “all names have been correctly given” by the rule-setters according to “the nature of the thing it names.” Socrates shows that “usage,” like convention, creates acceptable naming (428d; 434e) and that name-makers must understand things through investigation and discovery (436a). For Socrates, “ambiguous” names are commonly used (437a), proving that natural correctness does not condition naming and custom and convention play an important role in language (Plato, 1998: pp. 76, 86; Anagnostopoulos, 1973: p. 331).

Although scholars do not have a unified view on the correctness of names or the relationship of language and reality in the *Cratylus*, the idea that skilled name-makers can assign natural names to things, aiming for correctness and proper etymology, offers a possible middle ground (Meißner, 2023: pp. 5-6). For Plato, language functions primarily as an imitative tool and cannot reveal metaphysical

truths or ultimate reality. These insights encourage a deeper exploration of reality, prompting us to go beyond language to understand the essence of knowledge. While neither Socrates nor Plato see language as the ideal tool for pursuing knowledge, they both still rely on it, making it an appropriate tool in practice since it is used after all. Derrida (2002) underscores this idea when he states that “recourse to language is indispensable for the minimal practice of philosophy” (p. 28).

3.2. *Phaedrus* and Dissemination: “Plato’s Pharmacy” and Writing

In “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Derrida (1981) critiques Platonic metaphysics, meticulously drawing connections across several of Plato’s dialogues. Through the concept of *pharmakon*, an “ambivalent” term that represents at the same time god (medicine, cure) and evil (poison) depending on the context, he offers a new perspective on Platonic theory of language and metaphysics (p. 70). This paper focuses on the *Phaedrus* which contains a fundamental discussion of speech versus writing and its linguistics, philosophical and political implications.

In Plato’s (1995) *Phaedrus*, Socrates and Phaedrus take a walk outside the city walls of Athens (229a) and discuss themes such as love, the soul, rhetoric, and the nature of speech and writing. Phaedrus shares Lysias’ speech, in which he argues that relationships without love are better since they avoid madness and irrationality (231a-234c). Socrates responds with two speeches which discuss both sides of the issue. Through the metaphor of the “charioteer” and a pair of “winged horses” (246b); he illustrates the contrast between virtue, which elevates the chariot/soul toward the heavens (noble horse), and the impulses and desires for physical pleasure that drag the chariot/soul down to earth (ignoble horse) (pp. 31-33). In the end, Socrates sides with sincerity and praises love as a “divine madness” (256b) that can lead the soul to truth and beauty for those who exercise self-control (p. 47). Socrates critiques rhetoric, arguing that true rhetoric should be based on the pursuit of truth, without which it becomes an “artless” practice (260e) of persuasion (p. 55).

The discussion on rhetoric prompts a deeper conversation on “logography”—speech writing or ghostwriting (257c). Phaedrus mentions that many respected citizens feel embarrassed about writing speeches, worried that future generations will see them as sophists (257d). For Socrates, a ghostwriter is a sophist — a man of absence and non-truth—who composes speeches for others to use but does not speak or even necessarily believe in what he writes (260a), associating writing with negative qualities (Plato, 1995: pp. 49, 55; Derrida, 1981: p. 68).

Plato uses Egyptian mythology to convey logocentric and phonocentric views, showing a constant tension between the Greek and the non-Greek. The story also highlights Platonic dualities, such as speech and writing, father and son, life and death, good and evil, and inside and outside (Plato, 1995: pp. 79-81; Derrida, 1981: p. 85). Theuth, an Egyptian god who invented many arts, including writing (*grammata*), presents his inventions to King Thamus (Ammon, the god-king). Theuth

claims that writing “will make the Egyptians wiser and improve their memory,” offering it as a *pharmakon* for both wisdom and memory (274c-e). King Thamus criticizes writing, as it will not enhance memory but instead create “forgetfulness,” making people rely on external symbols rather than their internal faculties (274a). By reading things without being properly taught, men will appear “wise instead of really being so” (275b) (Derrida, 1981: p. 75).

For Derrida (1981), Theuth, the god of writing, appears as a secondary character, without decision-making power, much like writing itself is for Socrates. Theuth explains the value of writing (*pharmakon*) to the god-king Thamus, who has the final say on its worth. Thamus depreciates it, considering it not only useless but also a threat. Without Thamus’ approval, writing, which is external to him, has no inherent worth. Therefore, Socrates “assigns the origin and power” of speech (*logos* or the Word of God) to the paternal position (pp. 76-77). Derrida expands on the father’s thesis, where the father and son are connected through *logos* when both are present. In the father’s absence, the son can only rely on writing, leaving him lost or destroyed (pp. 77-78, 81). Socrates emphasizes that *logos*, once written down, “always needs its father to attend to it, being quite unable to defend itself or attend to its own needs” (275e). In Derrida’s view, “the father of speech asserts his authority over the father of writing,” subordinating writing to speech (p. 102).⁶ For Socrates, memory (*mnēmē*) and truth cannot be separated, while writing serves merely as a repetition, unable to capture the essence of living memory (p. 107). This analysis demonstrates a hierarchical power structure within Platonic philosophy, where the philosopher/dialectician controls knowledge while others do not. In “We Other Greeks,” beyond the “problematic of writing,” Derrida connects “Plato’s Pharmacy” with power, democracy, and democratization (p. 29).

Derrida follows Plato’s anagrammatic writing of *pharmakon* (remedy, recipe, poison, drug, philter) and its variants, such as *pharmakeus* (sorcerer), and *Pharmacia* (medicating or poisoning) across dialogues (Derrida, 1981: p. 71; Johnson: 1981: p.25).⁷ Derrida (1981) concludes that although *pharmakon* may seem like a substance, in the *Phaedrus* it becomes an “ant substance”, with “nonidentity” and “nonessence” which Socrates equates to writing (p. 70). The *pharmakon* is a non-identity since it embodies multiple, contradictory meanings at once—sometimes beneficent, sometimes maleficent, and sometimes both simultaneously—thus resisting any philosopheme (a foundational concept that carries a stable meaning). Writing, as a *pharmakon*, operates outside of memory and does not produce truth but only the appearance of truth (pp. 98, 103). Linked to broader philosophical discussions, *pharmakon* illustrates Derrida’s (2010) view that meaning is

⁶Derrida (1981) draws a parallel between Theuth’s myth and Socrates’ life. Much like Theuth, the god of writing and death in Egyptian mythology, whose *pharmakon* can be either a remedy or poison, Socrates serves as a surrogate father to the Athenians, appointed by God, but executed by them with a *pharmakon* (poison). Socrates’ uses dialectics, which he considers to be the only way to pursue meaning and truths, as an antidote to the *pharmakon*, making death acceptable to him (pp. 121-123).

⁷Anagram refers to a Saussurean term indicating how certain words are dispersed and repeated throughout a text in a hidden or fragmented manner.

fundamentally unstable and requires careful interpretation and translating choices (p. 33).

In *Dissemination*, Derrida (1981) replaces traditional *polysemy*, which acknowledges the possibility of multiple meanings to a word, with the concept of *dissemination*, the possibility of meaning being opened since any word in a language carries the trace of all meanings and associations (pp. 69, 71). *Pharmakon* exemplifies dissemination or the occurrence of an “undecidable” term whose “impossible meaning” can “unsettle a text” (Howells, 1999: p. 79). He also points out the flaw in the reasoning of Plato and Saussure after him, who believe that, even though writing exists outside the *logos*, it can still “infect” the *logos* (p. 110).

3.3. Course in General Linguistics (CGL): Signs and Linguistic Value

In the early 20th century, Ferdinand de Saussure, known as the founder of modern linguistics and semiology, made significant contributions to the study of language while disproving the Platonic views of absolute meaning. As a classicist, Saussure taught history of linguistics, starting from Ancient Greek logic, theory of sign, and the *Cratylus*, which he saw as precursors to modern linguistics and influences on his own approach (Joseph: 2012: pp. 71-77). Although Saussure focused on linguistics, a brief comparison between Saussure’s *CGL* and *Cratylus* reveals several thematic similarities.

The *CGL* emphasizes that language is a social institution based on “necessary conventions adopted by society” to allow communication (Saussure, 1986: p. 25). Signs are arbitrary and are a product of the relation between signified (*signifié*) and signifier (*signifiant*). In *Cratylus*, while the role of a “private individual” or “community” appears less important (385a), convention and usage play a significant role in language as a system of classification that “divide[s] things” (388b). Saussure echoes this idea when he describes a language system (*langue*) as a “self-contained” and “structured...system of classification” (Saussure, 1986: p. 25; Gordon, 2004: pp. 78-79).

Saussure, like Plato, focuses on speech and verbal communication. A “sign” connects a preexisting knowledge concept in the brain and an acoustic image, a mechanics of meaning used by Aristotle and ancient semiotics (Saussure, 1986: p. 28; Joseph: 2012: pp. 61-62). Communication involves a “psychological process” that sends impulses (sound patterns) from the brain to “the organs of phonation” triggered by a concept (*signifié*) (Saussure, 1986: pp. 28, 99). Language (*langue*) is “passively registered” and resides solely within the brain, while speech (*parole*) is an “individual act of the will and the intelligence,” consisting mainly of sounds (pp. 30-31). Following a Platonic point of view, Saussure considers writing as secondary and an artificial representation of speech, favoring phonic/alphabetic writing over ideographic writing due to its proximity to spoken language (Bennington, 2004: pp. 189-192).

In the *CGL*, signs gain value through their relationship to other signs within language, indicating a conceptual realm of meaning beyond the signs themselves

(Saussure, 1986: pp. 155-158). For a sign to be defined, it needs to be delimited through relative values, which separates Saussure's linguistic perspective from any direct link to the "real world" (Normand, 2004: p. 104). Since all elements in a language "fit together" and "coexist simultaneously," a sign's meaning is determined by its difference from other signs—definition by absence (Saussure, 1986: p. 159). The notion that in language there are only differences without positive terms means that each sign is identified by *what it is not*, rather than by *what it is* (Joseph, 2004: p. 64). Saussure's principle of definition by absence contrasts with the Platonic metaphysical concept that a name signifies a specific form, which is the essence of the being or referent (Derrida, 2016: pp. 36-37, 50-51).

3.4. *Of Grammatology: Trace and Différance*

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida revisits Saussure's linguistic theory and offers his own new perspective on Saussure's identity by difference, addressing questions about theory of language unanswered by Plato and Saussure (Porter, 1986: pp. 889-890). He structures his critique in two parts: Saussure's *declared purpose* (*propos déclaré*) and *other implications* (*un autre geste*) (Derrida, 2016: p. 32; Bennington, 2004: p. 188).

Derrida's critique of Saussure's *declared purpose* centers on his logocentrism and phonocentrism, which are tied to the concept of sign (signifier/signified) as a phonic unit. Saussure views writing as an external representation of sounds and a "purely artificial" image of speech, placing it "outside" of proper linguistics (Saussure, 1986: pp. 44-47; Derrida, 2016: p. 32). For Derrida (2016), Saussure's linguistic sign cannot be separated from its classical metaphysical roots in the duality of signified (a pure *logos* of origin) and signifier, a real representation of the ideal signified (pp. 11-12). While Saussure's theory goes beyond the duality between signifier and signified or spoken word and actual reality, it still maintains a clear separation between the material and the intellectual realms. Derrida's view of language challenges these divisions.

In addition, Saussure's (1986) view of the sign, which bridges *logos* and speech, privileges presence. He views speech as an "internal element of language" and writing as an external one. However, writing represents a threat that could contaminate the purity of the vocal sign and "usurp" the place of speech (pp. 44-47). Derrida questions the reasoning behind Saussure and Plato's fear of writing displacing speech, since usurping would only be possible if writing was not external, as they suggested (Derrida, 2016: pp. 39-40; Bennington, 2004: p. 189). Under the provocative title "The Outside is the Inside," Derrida challenges the notion of prioritizing vocal signs as more "natural" over the written signs: if all signs are equally "arbitrary" and "unmotivated," there should be no reason for privileging speech (pp. 47-49).

Derrida (2016) also challenges Saussure's idea of speech and writing as "two distinct systems of signs," arguing that speech cannot be physically resembled by a written trace and a trace cannot simply be the "figuration" of speech (p. 33, 46, 49). For Derrida, "writing signifies inscription" and the "durable institution of

sign,” making it a better representation of language than speech, as the “very idea of institution” is “unthinkable before the possibility of writing” (p. 48).

Derrida’s critique of Saussure’s *other implication* (*un autre geste*) addresses unintended metaphysical consequences of the linguistic theory that Saussure did not explicitly address. Using Saussure’s idea of “arbitrariness” and “differential relationality,” Derrida explores the concept of metaphysical presence (Derrida, 2016: pp. 38-37; Bennington, 2004: p. 193). For Derrida, a sign’s identity, defined by difference without positive terms, allows for its recognizability and repeatability (Saussure, 1986: p. 166; Bennington, 2004: p. 193). However, each sign also bears the trace of all the signs it is not. Saussure’s definition by absence creates the possibility of any identity through the trace of all other signs in language (Derrida, 2016: pp. 76-77). As this trace-relation must be always at work for the identity of all signs of a language to exist at all times, Derrida coins the term “*différance*” to capture the two concepts of difference (from the French *différence*) and deferment (from the French *différer*) in an endless chain of signifiers (p. 25). This concept shows that no signifier has an absolute meaning on its own, but only gains meaning through its relation to other signifiers (Glendinning, 2011, 2011: pp. 66-67). This idea also suggests that meaning shifts across contexts, emphasizing the fluidity and indefinite nature of text interpretation (Bennington, 2004: pp. 194-198).

Advocating for a science of writing he calls “grammatology,” Derrida defines “trace” and “institutional trace,” as the general possibility of a recognizable trace without a positive or fixed meaning, challenging the “logic of presence” through *différance* (Derrida, 2016: pp. 4, 49-51, 76-77; Bennington, 2004: pp. 192-193). Writing draws its power not from the “permanence” of the writing but from the “absence” of the writer: since writing can be transmitted without the presence of the writer or the reader in the “here and now,” this absence creates the “possibility of the message itself” to exist independently (Glendinning, 2011: pp. 70-71). As a result, the meaning of the text no longer depends on the writer’s presence to explain her intent, making the text open to the reader’s interpretation.

While Plato sees language as instrumental but limited due to its inability to reveal metaphysical truths, Derrida takes language as a starting point to create a theory which goes beyond language itself by showing that *différance* challenges any claim of absolute truth about reality. The philosophical implication is that if language is a system of relative values, the search for truth through language becomes relative rather than absolute. Without the writer present to enforce meaning, the reader gains more freedom to interpret the text, shifting the authority over meaning from the author to the audience.

4. Conclusion: Rethinking Language through Deconstruction

Derrida’s critique of Plato and Saussure encourages us to rethink the initial questions about ambiguity of language and its role in shaping our understanding of reality. Plato sees language as a useful but imperfect tool, unable to fully reveal metaphysical truths. Saussure’s theory of language as a system of signs reinforces

the idea of its conventional and arbitrary nature since the meaning of a sign depends on all the other signs in the language system. Both thinkers favor speech over writing, even though they paradoxically use language and writing to acquire and spread knowledge. Derrida challenges these logocentric and phonocentric traditions, highlighting their broader political and philosophical implications, especially in how knowledge is acquired and communicated.

Identifying limitations and contradictions in these theories, Derrida (2016) builds on Saussure's concept of definition by absence to introduce the concept of *différance*, which highlights the shifting nature of meaning not only in language but in reality as well. He challenges the Greek idea of *logos* as the only path to truth and argues that the opposition between speech and writing is itself an illusion. Since all signs are arbitrary, speech already carries the same differences as writing, and writing cannot corrupt meaning (pp. 44-50). Ultimately, if language functions as a system defined by relational values, the search for absolute truths through language may be unachievable. More importantly, by defining reality through the same relational lens, Derrida extends the discussion far beyond the original subject of theory of language: through deconstruction, we learn to question anything that presents itself as a fixed or absolute truth. Derrida offers us the tools to apply critical thinking and to be open to multiple interpretations rather than accepting rigid conclusions.

According to Plato (1995), the issue with a written text lies in the possibility of it falling into the hands of "inappropriate people" who do not fully understand it (275e). However, what Plato sees as writing's weakness, Derrida sees as its true strength. The absence of the dialectician/philosopher allows writing itself to gain value and give interpretative power to the reader. In *Dissemination*, Derrida (1981) states that writing is "essentially democratic," since it is "available on the sidewalks," regardless of hierarchy (p. 144). In questioning the notion of exclusive control over meaning, Derrida creates a philosophical space with an unlimited potential for new ideas, regardless of background or tradition, and the inclusion of diverse voices.

5. Deconstruction's Influences Beyond Language Theory

At the time of his death in 2004, Derrida was one of the most widely read and discussed French philosophers worldwide due to the significant impact of his ideas. Staying faithful to his principles, he refused to give up "a fold, a paradox, an additional contradiction" in his work, even if it might not be understood by readers or journalists (Birnbaum, 2004). This approach has often led to criticism, not just from journalists, but also from scholars, who accused him of being overly obscure. However, he saw each book as a pedagogical tool designed to shape its readers. Just as he believed language and meaning are never stable, intellectual inquiry must remain open-ended and not be oversimplified, allowing space for continuous questioning.

Recognizing the need for philosophy to cross boundaries and become

interdisciplinary, Derrida extended deconstruction beyond philosophy and language theory by challenging rigid political structures and absolute values in areas like art, architecture, justice, and political theory. Even though these areas fall outside the scope of this paper, it is important to note that Derrida's concepts of *dissemination* and *polysemy* of language had a profound impact on literary criticism. While traditional criticism often seeks to uncover the author's intended meaning, deconstruction embraces ambiguity and gives readers freedom in their interpretation (Butler, 1987: pp. 60-65). For Derrida, once published, a text takes on a life of its own, moving beyond the author's control and allowing for diverse interpretations. As in philosophy, deconstruction in literature "pushes against the limits of language and knowledge." Literature is "the right to say everything" with "non-censure" and a space of "democratic freedom." If philosophy is the right to think, literature is the "right to write" (Derrida & Caputo, 1997: p. 58).

Despite being criticized for his complex writing style and various references, Derrida views philosophy as a powerful educational tool to make academia more accessible to all. He questions conventional structures of authority, advocating that all texts, traditions, and interpretations deserve critical examination. In *Who's Afraid of Philosophy? The Right to Philosophy*, Derrida challenges the elitist practice of philosophy by specific social groups that, through distinct dialects, codes, academic structures, restrict it to privileged spaces of "so-called general culture." He criticizes academia for failing to recognize the effects of "discrimination that [these practices] engender" and the need to adapt to a new "social demand" instead of seeking to preserve outdated rhetorical models and social norms (p. 30). He emphasizes the importance of philosophical inquiry and debate in society and of academic freedom to encourage critical, experimental, and diverse philosophical inquiry. As Caputo notes, Derrida believes that philosophy is not "private property... of a self-validating academic establishment... housed in prestigious academic institutions," but rather the right to question what we hold "sacred"—reason, knowledge, truth, ethics, and philosophy itself (Derrida & Caputo, 1997: pp. 55-56).

In recent years, the expansion of online open access has made academic resources in philosophy and other subjects more available to students, faculty, and anyone without access to large libraries. However, Derrida argued that access alone is not enough. We must also have freedom to question and challenge existing systems and ideas that define legitimate research (Willinsky, 2008: pp. 279-296). Deconstruction seeks to keep "thinking and writing alive" by pushing for a continual evolution of thought within academic and philosophical discourse (Derrida & Caputo, 1997: p. 62). These ideas are particularly relevant for students today as they navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected world, where Derrida's challenge to traditional views feels more urgent than ever. Deconstruction pushes us to question accepted mainstream ideas, and work to dismantle the barriers that limit whose voices are heard and valued. In doing so, it offers a meaningful way to work toward more open and fairer intellectual and social systems.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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