

# Loosening the Metaphysical Anchor of any Center by Derrida's Concept of Textuality

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## Abstract

*To read a text from a deconstructive point of view, one should have a clear understanding of the tenets deconstruction sets forth. Since any knowledge has to be acquired and conveyed through language, it will be subject to all linguistic distortions, contradictions and unreliability that deconstructionists have discovered, imprinted in language and impossible to get rid of. This article tries to investigate the contribution of deconstruction father, Derrida, in loosening any center and his disruptive criticism of desire for center, drowning everything in textuality loosens the metaphysical anchor of any center. In fact what he does is to unravel the woven texture of arguments by first discovering and reversing the binary oppositions and then refusing to form any new centers, to reach an aporia where the text is unreadable and undecidable.*

**Keywords:** Derrida, textuality, deconstruction, diffe'rance, boundary, unreadability.

## Introduction

Derrida in his "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" that marks the moment at which post-structuralism as a movement begins, turns away not only from traditional structuralism but also humanism and empiricism<sup>1</sup>. Saussure according to Derrida was trying to discover the vast structural relations that underlie language and make it possible for the speaker to produce an infinite number of linguistic expressions by mastering a finite number of rules and component parts<sup>2</sup>. L'evi-Strauss made series of attempts to do the same to myth by finding out a small number of rudimentary mythemes that combine in numerous ways to form numberless versions of myths that are, on the face of it, diverse while they are composed of the same basic elements<sup>2</sup>. Derrida attacks their presupposition of a center which is out of the play of structurality and serves as a metaphysical point immune to its vicissitudes surges and fluctuations. He believes that Strauss reaches a point of undecidability while making an effort to distinguish nature from culture, but he (Strauss) refuses to see its implications fully<sup>1</sup>.

In his *Of Grammatology*, Derrida propounds one of his deepest contemplations, namely, the concept of textuality. There is nothing outside the text. Among the different signification of this is the inclusiveness of textuality, that there is no point, no idea, no concept that is not preys to the play of structurality<sup>3</sup>. Then he discusses logocentrism, phonocentrism and diffe'rance. In *Writing and Difference* he deals primarily with absence, presence, difference and deference. Perhaps the most remarkable point he sets forth there, is his consideration of the absence of center: "The absence of a transcendental signified extends the domain and play of signification infinitely<sup>4</sup>."

## Discussion

The French philosopher, Jacques Derrida is the founding father of deconstruction<sup>5</sup>. He coined the word by adding "de" to construction to represent the paradoxical nature of the formation of any center. The word is a combination of destruction and construction and in contrast to the unilateral process which is meant in each of these two words, that of either putting together and making or taking a part and disintegrating, the word deconstruction signifies a paradoxical sense simultaneous doing and undoing, making and destroying, combining and dispersing. A text viewed from this angle will be one which is trying to form a center of signification, but at the same time weaves into its own texture opposite elements that ruin it. The text is at the same time making and ruining itself, the making being exactly the ruining.

A major point of departure in Derrida is his disruptive criticism of desire for center. 'Structure' even in structuralist theory, according to Derrida, presupposes a center. The center governs the structure, since it is impossible to think of a structure without a center, a focal point that controls the component parts, puts them in order and governs them. Therefore, the centre must be part of the structure, within it, but it is itself by no means subject to structural analysis, because if it is analyzed as a structure within the larger one, it loses its centrality since like any other structure it will need another center. The center must be outside the structure. Thus, it is both within the structure and outside it. The structure has its center not at its center, but somewhere else, a paradox. However, a center seems to be necessary. People crave it. They desire it since it unifies and brings order to things and makes them understandable. It guarantees being as presence. A center is held under repression and violation at the cost of what is outside the domain of the

center, the dissenting voices that cannot be neatly cut down to the procrustean bed of the center. People, for instance, center all their physical and mental activities on an "I" which is unifying principle. It helps them arrange and rearrange the chaos of their everyday experience. Other people, objects, ideas, actions and concepts take on meaning only when a person relates them to and puts in order according to his/her own "I", the unifying center of signification<sup>3</sup>.

Freud's dismantling of the "I" which was supposed to be the indisputable center of presence and analyzing it into its component parts, the id, the ego and the superego was a forerunner of Derridian thinking. The "I" was no longer a center. It had submitted to the structuralist analysis and was now a structure made of its own component parts and holding its center. However, Freud substituted other centers for it, the division between conscious and unconscious decentered consciousness to replace it with a new center: the unconscious, what Derrida never allows to happen. Western philosophy and in general Western civilization according to Derrida has formed an infinite number of centers: God, truth, man, essence, being, form, end, beginning, origin, reason, humanity and self to name a few. Each operates as a self – sufficient concept and serves as a transcendental, metaphysical signified. In his *Of Grammatology*, Derrida calls the desire for a center logocentrism and defines it as the belief that there is an ultimate truth or reality that can function as the basis to support all our thoughts and actions. Derrida readily admits the impossibility of freeing oneself from one's logocentric habit of thinking<sup>3</sup>.

Since language and textuality dominate everything and define everything even our identity and because there is no way out of this textuality, no terms, no point outside language to hold firmly to, one has just to make do with that habit. Derrida introduces the concept of bricolage here, the impossibility of making anything completely original, new and suitable, the inevitability of having to use what there is to form what should not use them, to use what does not suit your plan but is the only option you have. The only option language and textuality allow us to choose is the terms that are deeply rooted in logocentrism. Decentering one concept means automatically, immediately and inevitably to fall prey to forming another center. All one can do is to keep the centers under erasure<sup>2</sup>.

It is impossible, then, to avoid centers. Centers are always formed and stuck to. And since the establishing of one center automatically leads to decentralization of another, Derrida argues that all Western civilization and by implication all human thought is based on a system of binary operations or conceptual oppositions. Accepting good leads automatically to a rejection of bad. Taking reality as center is followed inevitably by a decentering of what is imaginary. God/Satan, up/down, day/night, right/left, man/woman, speech/writing, light/darkness are some examples of the innumerable binary oppositions which are at work in the whole fabric of human thought. The binary Opposition works only when we think of

the two concepts as radically and sharply contrasting, assuming one of them a privileged status as superior to and better than the other which is inferior, unprivileged. It is the working of binary opposition that Derrida wishes to nullify. He usually proceeds by finding binary oppositions and arguing against considering them as opposite, rather he tries to prove that one is a supplement to the other, that is, it adds to, completes and continues the other rather than opposing it. It makes the other possible. Derrida then avoids giving any privilege to the one which has always been privileged since Plato. He turns the binary upside down, but does not let a new center to be formed. He rather, holds them in suspense, under erasure, undecidable. An example is speech/writing. Western thought, Derrida argues, has long privileged speech over writing, for speech supposes presence, while writing is associated with absence. He calls this privileging of speech over writing *Phonocentrism*. Western phonocentrism has metaphorically substituted voice for presence and for truth. While writing lacking that presence is taken for unreliable itself. Derrida is at great pains to deconstruct the binary opposition. He shows the assumption of presence to be a myth since language works only through difference and deference. Speech uses the differential system of language as much as writing does. And in speech meaning is as deferred as it is in writing. Voice is one kind of mark, of signifier among many others, written signs being one. Thinking of writing as any system that works through difference and deference, Derrida reduces speeches status to a kind of writing, but soon, he prevents the formation of another binary opposition, writing/ speech with writing granted a privilege<sup>6</sup>.

Derrida builds the whole edifice of his deconstructive theory on Saussurian Linguistics<sup>2</sup>. He agrees with Saussure that language is a system signifying through a differential network. Signifiers are distinguished from one another through their differences and relationships within that system. He takes Saussurian linguistics still a step further by applying the latter's findings about the signifiers to the signified. The objects or the concepts to which the signifiers refer take their significance from the relationships and differences among them. thus Derrida blurs the boundary between language and the world and drowning everything in textuality loosens the metaphysical anchor of any center. The world is a text, given to as much indeterminacy and as many warring interpretations as any other text. A key word of great importance to understand deconstruction that Derrida coins is *diffe'rance*. It is a French word which means at the same time to differ and to defer meaning to postpone, to delay. Language signifies through absence in contrast to what is held in phonocentrism as presence. Difference always supposes absence. The word 'beauty' does not signify because some significance is present in it, found positively, but because it differs from cat, wall, urns etc. because it does not have the qualities found in them and it is not what they are. Deference also presupposes absence. If a given word's meaning depends upon its relations to and differences from any other word within the system of language its meaning is actually postponed forever. *Diffe'rance* is, according to Bressler, Derrida's "what if?"

question<sup>7</sup>. What if no transcendental signified exists<sup>7</sup>? What if there is no presence in which we can find ultimate truth<sup>7</sup>? What if all our knowledge does not arise from self – identity<sup>7</sup>? What if there is no essence, being or inherently unifying element in the universe<sup>7</sup>? What then<sup>7</sup>? " Bressler then examines the implications of difference. First, all human knowledge becomes referential; we know something not because it has some truth in it, but only because it is different from other bits of knowledge. Second, since language does not have any connection with reality or truth, and since there is no transcendental signified all interpretations of life, experience, text, etc. are legitimate and probable. Difference has also some implications for text reading. If there is no center; no anchor or no metaphysical signified to pin down meaning, there will be no presence in a text. A text can signify only through absence. It is what it is because it is not what other texts are. Therefore a text can mean only in relation to other texts. This sets to work the concept of *intertextuality*. In other words the meaning of a text is deferred forever and forever. No interpretation will have the right to assume itself any privilege over the others. Not even that of the writer because it is not the writer who controls language, rather it is language that controls the writer. Any stretch of language always produces a surplus of meaning which undermines the intention of the writer.

## Conclusion

Derrida the founding father of deconstruction questioned the prejudices and presuppositions of Western civilization held wrongly from Plato as true. They have always been produced and reproduced so that they have woven themselves tightly into the texture of language and have left no way out. Even if you want to reject them you have to use the means they put at your disposal because there is no other means. The tragedy lies in that using those means is equal to affirm them, to confess their truth. So, Derrida is well aware of the fact that his deconstructive readings of L'evi- Strauss, Rousseau, Plato, etc.

are subject to further deconstructive readings. He started from Saussurian linguistics, used his concept of language as a system of differences, his division of sign into signifier and signified as well as his emphasis in the arbitrariness of the relationship between signifier and signified. However, Derrida headed toward a different direction. He applied Saussure's differential system to signifieds as well and problematized the binary oppositions Saussure had taken for granted. He shook the foundation of not only philosophic thought, but also Western civilization by blurring the boundaries between good and bad, beginning and ending, God and Satan, peace and war, etc. He looked at life, the whole life as a text and as a text, unreadable, undecidable and unintelligible<sup>8</sup>.

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