

R.K. Nar*y*n on Derrida and Bourdieu

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Abstract. The controversial French philosopher Jacques Derrida is associated with the claim that, in the West, speech has historically been prioritized over writing. In this paper, I present some obvious counterexamples, though I am an admirer. I also raise a challenge to the social theories of Pierre Bourdieu, though I fear they are not wrong. The paper is written as a pastiche of a notable fiction writer from the Indian subcontinent, but set in the West.

Note: the content may not be very realistic and the style is slightly off target. If one cannot make this style or its descendants absorb French philosophy, probably the entire family will be targeted to extinction.¹

It was a cloudy day in Manchester and Uncle and his son were studying Western philosophy again, in the small apartment they rented. “Uncle, shall we study French philosophy today?” Everyone called him Uncle, even his own son sometimes, but in a joking spirit. Uncle felt mild irritation at this but passed over the kin term aberration.

“Oh yes, let’s study French philosophy. I love Foucault, Derrida, and even Lacan,” he replied with his heavy accent,² and beneath his moustache let out a smile. Then he picked up a copy of a journal he had found. It had been discarded by a minor philosopher who lived in a nearby apartment and was called *European Journal of Philosophy*. “You know if the title is *European Journal of Philosophy*, it has to be good. Those titles go first: *Mind* and *Analysis*,

¹ Well, the opposition seems to have trouble with a homely family-friendly style.

² I actually heard words like these from someone in economics, by the way.

and then if you are late with founding a journal, you need a cool title and no capital letters.” His son put on a pair of sunglasses to symbolize coolness.

The red cover gave Uncle a feeling of prestige. He glanced at the first page of the third article. Nothing much interesting there. He turned to the second page. The page number, 39, had been circled by his neighbour and some words had been underlined. Uncle did not like this minor philosopher, with his blunt arrogant manner, but faced with a stream of words, he decided to trust the fellow. “Okay, this is what Sarah Richmond says. ‘According to Derrida, Western thought, from at least Plato onwards, has repeatedly pro-pa-gated a false hierarchy, placing speech above writing. Philosophers have regarded writing with suspicion, as a dangerous re-posit-ory of thought, in which the speaker’s intentions are likely to be betrayed.’ ” Uncle wondered whether repository was something to do with digestive problems. He worked as a nurse in a nearby university hospital and it sounded medical. Propogated also sounded a bit medical.

His son spoke, disturbing Uncle’s line of thought. “What about other people in Western thought? Did they also favour speech over writing?”

“Other people?”

“Yes, she’s just talking about philosophers,”

“I think he means everyone. Mathematicians, botanists, everyone. Everyone has to do a bit of philosophy. We had to do some in nursing ethics. If a doctor can save one life—”

“Uncle, do we also favour speech over writing?”

“Of course, because we are in the West now. But we have a god of writing. East is different from West.” Uncle smiled.

“What about Chinese? Do they prefer writing?”

“Of course, they love their writing. Also some footballers.”

“But how can it be that in the West they prefer writing, because the maths teacher always wants us to show our working. And then you have to write it down.”

“Good question.” Uncle contemplated the matter. “That must be a recent thing. In the old days,” Uncle looked tense as he made up some history, “you just gave the right answer – teacher is happy.”

It began to rain. It often rained here. Uncle remembered how children write things in misty windows. His son said, “If I go to Aunty’s flat, she will ask me to go shopping and get some small chilies from this small shop, some large chilies from that small shop, some garlic from next door, and I need to make a list. Otherwise she will say, ‘What sort of person are you? I can’t make a good meal now. Let’s go and eat some fast good. Fried chicken.’” She wasn’t the boy’s mother, by the way.

“I think shopping lists don’t count as part of the history of Western thought.” Uncle contemplated the matter. “In economics supermarkets, but not shopping lists.”

“What if someone comes to this country and rents a room? They want a written contract.”

Uncle thought about this problem too. Surely the great philosopher Derrida has not made such an elementary oversight. “I think the proper Westerner is very optimistic. He doesn’t care about contract or anything. He just takes a risk.” Uncle smiled. This was a clever response.

“But—”

Uncle interrupted his son, because he wanted to give his own counterexample. “Back home there was a magician.”

“Where back home?” asked his son, skeptically.

“Oh, er, in... Malgudaraj. I didn't know him. I only heard about him. He was a Chinaman and he had opened a restaurant. But in his heart he wanted to be a magician. And when the customer asked for the total bill, he wouldn't say it. He would slowly write numbers on the tablecloth. Then when the customer went home, he would see the same numbers, on a sign or chalked on the road. It was a marvellous trick.”

Uncle felt an itch. What was that itch? Had something bitten him? He scratched it. His son had taken the journal from him. “This article is very hard to understand. That must be why he discarded it.”

“Shall we try Bourdieu?”

“Who is Bourdieu?”

“I don't know. We had to read him in the nursing ethics and sociology course as well. He's in this book.” It was another book discarded by their neighbour. It had a greenish colour, which felt a little blue as well, and was called *The Anthropology of Time*, by Alfred Gell. There were two chapters devoted to Bourdieu, quite a lot of material. Uncle opened the book until he found a page with a passage underlined. Page 272. “Okay, imagine you are having some tea with some people and you want a job with them. You need to know how to talk. You can't just blah, blah, blah!” Uncle said these last words slowly, opening his mouth wide. “And the rules are not clear. It's not like don't talk with your mouth full. It's like jazz when they interact.”

“Jazz?”

“Music, music. And then they give you information and only then you can have a career there.”

“But if they don't ask stupid questions, how can they understand what's going on?”

“I think they have to hire someone to ask stupid questions. That’s why there are some black and Asian people who have jobs in the arts faculty and even some white people.” Uncle laughed.³

His son switched on the television. “French philosophy is strange.”

“No, no, no, French philosophy is not so strange. English philosophy is stranger. Like words mixed with mathematics mixed with... co-lon-ial-ism.” Uncle pronounced the word as if it were something medical as well.

References

Gell, A. 1992. *The Anthropology of Time*. Oxford: Berg.

Richmond, S. 1996. Derrida and Analytical Philosophy: Speech Acts and their Force. *European Journal of Philosophy* 4: 38-62.

³ This is a concern I have about Bourdieu. If you are interacting in this sophisticated uncodifiable way, sooner or later you may well hire someone without much social skills to help you understand what is going on – to ask the questions you have.