On Privileging Speech over Writing: Derrida's Unmasking of Saussure and Rousseau's Logocentric Biases

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This reflection paper focuses in an evident pattern that I observe in the past lectures that there seems to be a leaning towards the supremacy of speech over writing. It is an alarming phenomenon because this parasitic tendency to go back to binary opposition would put into question the intention of structuralism to move away from the spell of logocentrism. Derrida's manner of unmasking this issue is really intriguing, for it will possibly shake the ground where structuralism laid its foundation as free from this logocentric bias. Thus, one of the most important concerns this paper wanted to establish is for structuralism to remain steadfast despite a deconstructive attempt from Derrida.

Derrida looked at the entire history of Western Metaphysics as a continuous search for a *logos* or an *originary presence*. We keep trying to find the logos and behind this search is a desire for a higher reality, a full presence that is beyond and is not implicated in the play of structure- *metaphysics of presence.* This *logos* promises to get meaning and purpose to all things, to act as the universal center. Structuralism on the other hand made a deliberate step to move away from the tradition of Western metaphysics by claiming that there is no such thing as an encompassing reality. As defined by Peter Caws (1988), "structuralism is a philosophical view according to which the reality of the objects of human or social sciences is relational rather than substantial."[2] This definition is not holistic; it applies to one kind of reality but says nothing about the other.[3] In effect, it is a step away from the centering impulse for there is a realization that the relations between the intelligible world and the material world may vary, there is no presence of one metaphysical structure that can explain everything that there is.

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[2] Newton Garver and Seung-Chong Lee, "Derrida and Wittgenstein", Temple University Press Philadelphia,p.15.
[3] Ibid.

Derrida posited a very alarming observation that despite the structuralist' claim that it is not logocentric; it still has the tendency to make its assertions move towards the center. For instance, structuralism cannot totally get rid of formulating concepts as characterized by binary oppositions- of *privileging one over the other.* This is where the thrust of this reflection paper will concentrate, it will focus on Derrida's contention of a logocentric bias that he found in the selected works of Ferdinand de Saussure and Jean Jacques Rousseau. My personal assumption however, is that Derrida's deconstruction can be used as an advantage for structuralism to further makes a firm stand on what it intends to do. It can be a helpful approach to move away from the very biases Derrida claimed that he found from the works of the two mentioned thinkers here. His means of unmasking is not only posited as a challenge, but a way to interpret the philosophy of Saussure and Rousseau as credible enough in its very core, a true representative of a structuralist manner of interpreting reality.

Saussure's Binary Opposition: On Privileging Speech over Writing

The main achievement of the 20th century has been in linguistics where Ferdinand de Saussure "established the viability of his brilliant new way of describing the phenomena of language, without which none of the rest of history would have been possible."[4] It was in his *Course in General Linguisitcs* laid down his concept of semiotics defining "language as made up of system of signs."[5] This can be exemplified by his example using the relationship between the signifier and signified. For instance, a linguistic sign "cow" is made up of the *sound "cow" (signifier)* and the concept or *meaning of "cow" (signified).*[6] For Saussure, the tangible sound gives us access to the intangible meaning- sound is outer and meaning is inner. Derrida however noticed, that Saussure regards the *signified (the meaning*) as more important than the *signifier (sound).*[7] In this, Saussure seems to be cherishing the idea of an inner origin as a presence within which has a shadow of logocentrism.[8]

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[4] Ibid. p.21.
[5] Jim Powell, "Derrida for Beginners", Writers and Readers Publishing, Inc., p. 39.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

One of the most important contributions of the history of linguistics is the discovery of phoneme defined as a unit of sound- so it becomes clear that linguists must think of languages primarily as spoken rather than written.[9] This is because speech, according to Saussure, is natural and direct, immediately intimate and present to thought and meaning. He further argued that just as speech is a way of representing speech. In this case, Derrida would analyze the matter as really giving supremacy to speech and marginalizing writing. For instance, "if speech is a sign of inner meaning, then writing as a sign of speech is twice removed from inner meaning because it becomes a *sign of a sign*."[10]

Derrida's response is a way of reversal in order to show that writing can also be seen as central to Saussure's text. Common to these two thinkers is the belief that meaning can be found in difference rather than sameness. It is in this context where Saussure said that the link between the *signifier (sound)* and the *signified (meaning)* is just due to chance especially on the level of *sound "cow".* A sign gains its identity because it is slightly different from other signs i.e. "cow", "now", or "chow". So, there is nothing essential in the sound that relates it to meaning, its identity is dependent upon its difference from these other *sounds (signifiers)* in order to distinguish itself from them. Everything works in a system of contrast or difference, and it is here where phonemes as units of sound are identified as well.[11]

This is one promising step to solve the dilemma of Saussure as he was being observed by Derrida to be yearning for a logocentric bias. In this context, Derrida's position can be seen not as a contradiction but a way to strengthen the structuralist view. For instance, the seemingly vertical intimate correspondence between *sound (signifier)* and *meaning (signified)* is no longer the central issue here because in a system of contrast, what shapes the sound of language (meaning) is the horizontal difference between sound and sound. There exists an interwoven system of differences- both meaning and sound.[12] In connection, writing is no longer seen as marginal for if Saussure described language "as a vast tissue of differences, it

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid. p40.

[11] Newton Garver and Seung-Chong Lee, "Derrida and Wittgenstein", Temple University Press Philadelphia,p.24.

[12] Ibid.

must employ graphic system- writing- as an example. The entire scenario would make Saussure escaped a logocentric tendency. After all, Derrida said that "if the play of difference makes the sound and meaning, this play of difference in speaking is just like the play of difference in writing. Writing is purely just a play of differences at the same time.

Rousseau's Binary Opposition between Nature and Culture

As shown in the previous section, this particular part of my reflection on Rousseau also mimics the very contradiction that Derrida weaved upon the philosophy of Saussure on language. On *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, Rousseau reacted against the view that progress in the arts and sciences will make human beings happy. Instead he argued that civilization and learning corrupt human nature. [13] He celebrated the "original", "natural", "uncivilized" man who was innocent of writing, for he feels that even writing is perverse- a product of civilization, a dangerous supplement to natural speech.[14] As he puts it:

> A language of gestures, although allowing for only rather impoverished expressions of feelings, would suffice to establish societies little different from those we have; that the first spoken expressions consisted only of vowels, consonants being a later and degenerate development; that the expressions of passion requires only vowels, it being ideas that necessitate the addition of consonants.[15]

He further argued that the first speech was entirely metaphorical, literal speech coming only later, again as a form of degeneration. Writing in this context has enervated speech, for grammar and articulation reduce the expressiveness of language.[16]

Rousseau's picture of language arises from the role he assigns to writing and from the first *originary* (Derrida) language. For him, we do not essentially need a vocal communication because gestural communicating would suffice for all our physical and practical affairs such as hunting and commerce.[17] It is not needs but passions that drew the first words, which thereby determined vocal language as distinctively human form of communication. Since it is passions

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[13] Ibid. 49.
[14] Ibid. p. 50.
[15] Newton Garver and Seung-Chong Lee, "Derrida and Wittgenstein", Temple University Press Philadelphia, p. 102.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid. p. 103.

and moral needs that bring people closer together, language then is essentially social in its original form that must have served to express passions. In effect, linguistic articulation, complex activities, and organization were set to separate men.[18] It is writing that has intruded upon the idyllic communal peace and grace of the one-to-one intimacy of natural speaking societies.[19]

This yearning of Rousseau to go back to an idyllic, intimate, primitive speaking community is a manifest of logocentrism or *metaphysics of presence-* a longing for a full presence of speech and distrust in writing. Rousseau felt his predicament as a writer in his *Confessions.* As he is writing in candid, confessional mode, he came to a realization that even though writing is artificial and decadent, he is a writer.[20] He then realizes that "he must rely upon writing to make his own intimate thoughts and feelings known, even to himself. He also confesses that when writing down the history of his life and emotions, that he feels tempted to embellish, to fictionalize, to dress up the original, natural truth."[21] Thus, it is in this problematic case that writing becomes a dangerous *supplement* to speech.

Derrida's manner of unmasking Rousseau's philosophy is done in a very delicate way. Like Socrates, he just worked on what is given in the text. For instance, he said that the word **supplement** is paradoxical-it can mean "*adding something on to something already complete in itself, or adding on something to complete a thing.*"[22] In relation to Rousseau, writing as a *supplement* is both something that is added on to speech, which is supposedly already complete and full presence- and it is also something which makes speech complete. In this case, speech is obviously not yet complete if it needs writing to *supplement* it. It is not full of presence; it must contain absence in order to assimilate the *supplement*.[23] Thus, a cunning way to move away from logocentrism.

"There is Nothing outside the Text" - Derrida's Ambiguous Challenge

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[18] Ibid.
[19] Jim Powell, "Derrida for Beginners", Writers and Readers Publishing, Inc.,p. 50.
[20] Ibid. p.51.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.

Derrida has made it unclear for his readers what a text means, and the range of its use in his work is very broad. More conventionally and more narrowly, "a text is a set of written or spoken sentences that are composed of words and can be read, written, spoken, thought, and so on. It is in this sense as they occur in history of philosophy that Derrida wanted to focus on.[24] Stanley Cavell (1979) understands philosophy as a set of texts rather than as a set of problems, in a sense puts an ironic supremacy on writing (although he did not totally discard oral tradition). He opposes Rousseau's disdain for writing as a kind of corruption, substituting instead a call to focus on writing itself, on the texts, rather than on what the writing is supposed to be for.[25] Derrida is also pushing the same line of argumentation in his work *Of Grammatology* when he argued that "writing is prior to speech, and that there is nothing outside of the texts." He said:

> Philosophy is inseparable from texts. Derrida sees that when we think and talk about philosophy, what we are actually doing is weaving and unfolding a certain text. Philosophy is at best, a certain sort of textuality. That is to say, it is by identifying a text that one identifies what one is talking about; one must turn to texts to resolve questions of what was said and was meant.[26]

Even Derrida's manner of presenting textuality enters a playful mode of understanding the term. "Textuality is realizing how a text means rather than what it means. It is the realization that a text is made up of words, and that words can mean different things."[27] In essence, we recognize textuality by being open to a realization that words can have different meanings, and the meaning of the text is never settled but always open to the play of textuality- a way of moving away from a central definition which is logocentric.

Textuality as the play of meanings must set a certain distance from the logos, the fixed, orthodox, rational, authoritative spoken word. In context however, textuality as "the play of differences in writing, in and between books, poems, phrases, and verses, becomes an irresistible force."[28] And when Derrida says "there is nothing outside the text!" all of life is like

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[24] Newton Garver and Seung-Chong Lee, "Derrida and Wittgenstein", Temple University Press Philadelphia, p. 112.
[25] Ibid. p.111.
[26] Ibid. p.112.
[27] Jim Powell, "Derrida for Beginners", Writers and Readers Publishing, Inc.,p. 63.
[28] Ibid. p.64.

a text. And this text is nothing but a play of differences- a play of presence and absence.[29] On the other hand, Derrida's claim that there is nothing outside the text can also be seen as a structural slogan, since there is no way to understand texts except as units of language, defined structurally. This entails that there is no pure meaning to serve as a metaphysical foundation which can be taken as independent from structures.[30]

Wittgenstein reechoed the same line of argumentation by stating that there is no ideal language (or logic) to determine the meaning of the text. It is a myth to think of a crystalline purity of logic that could examine actual language. He said that if we look for one, we might end up to slippery ice where there is no friction and make us unable to walk.[31] If we want to walk, Wittgenstein believed that we need to go back to the rough ground. This is where it is obvious that there is a denial of one unifying logos that can give meaning to everything- a transcendental signified. As Wittgenstein said, "what we call sentence and language was not the formed unity that he imagined, but is the family of structures more or less related to one another."[32]   In relation, "even our clear and simple language games (he said) are not preparatory studies for future regularization of language- as it were first approximations, ignoring friction and air resistance. The language games are rather set up as objects of comparison which are meant to show light on the facts of our language not only of similarities, but also of dissimilarities."[33]

As a conclusion, I would like to borrow T.S. Eliot's analysis when he said that "to understand a word, we have to understand a sentence in which it is used, to understand a sentence, we have to understand a context in which it occurs. In this way, our focus expands from word to sentence, to text, to content, to language-game, and finally as Wittgenstein puts

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[29] Ibid. p. 56.
[30] Newton Garver and Seung-Chong Lee, "Derrida and Wittgenstein", Temple University Press Philadelphia, p. 32.
[31] Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Philosophical Investigations", The English Text of the Third Edition Translated by G.E. M. Anscombe, Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. p. 40.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid. p.500.

it (at the beginning of part two of the *Philosophical Investigations*), to this complicated form of life."[34]

Sources:

Jim Powell, "Derrida for Beginners", Writers and Readers Publishing, Inc.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Philosophical Investigations", The English Text of the Third Edition Translated by G.E. M. Anscombe, Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc.

Newton Garver and Seung-Chong Lee, "Derrida and Wittgenstein", Temple University Press Philadelphia.

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[34] Newton Garver and Seung-Chong Lee, "Derrida and Wittgenstein", Temple University Press Philadelphia, p. 32.