The Context of Logocentrism in Derrida's Thought

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By

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This book is dedicated to my son, Stefan Leone,
the master of delaying things.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

INTRODUCTION

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) holds a peculiar position in the history of philosophy as a reader and critic of philosophical discourse who deploys various lenses of ideology from the humanities. Very few philosophers would read philosophy as a literary trope or literature as a philosophical trope. Derrida's reading of philosophy invokes many possibilities that expose philosophers' inherent contradictions and arbitrary intentions. Derrida's writings were incisive with the fundamental assumptions in philosophy, from the valorisation of speech over writing to the distinction between the ideas of presence and absence in language. Notwithstanding the criticisms from other thinkers such as Foucault, Searle, and Habermas, Derrida's fame or infamy became seminal in adapting philosophical ideas in disciplines such as literature, architecture, history, colonial studies, and even legal theory.

Derrida's contribution to philosophy is often understated because of his penchant to conflate the disciplinal affiliations of certain texts and his tendency to stretch out the context of these texts to its margins. Take, for example, his reading of Rousseau's works, the conflict between the purity of nature and the artifice of society, or the contradictions between Levinas' proposal to valorise ethics over metaphysics. These tensions allow Derrida to provide insight into philosophical ideas that ought to be taken seriously and which ideas are worth exploring despite the limitations of the philosopher's *no-longer* present context. Reading philosophical texts through Derrida's perspective opens new possibilities for interpreting the text and exposes the fundamental ideas that buttress a philosophical text. While it would be difficult to recommend Derrida to novices and students new to philosophy, the difficulty of going through his gestures, neologisms, and playful re-purposing of concepts opens new possibilities for reading philosophy.

This work contains four essays that I have written on various topics regarding Derrida's works. The central theme of these essays revolves around the pervasive necessity of logocentrism in Derrida's writings. While it might be easy to characterise Derrida's philosophical position as a critic of logocentrism, I argue that Derrida works within the fundamental premise

that logocentrism is a necessary element of any discourse. The caveat to this is that despite accepting the necessity of logocentrism, Derrida is likewise manoeuvring the discourse as a form of demonstrating the arbitrariness of logocentrism. The reason behind the arbitrary nature of logocentrism and its necessity in any discourse is that it offers a relative sense of stability in maintaining the normative functionality of meaning.

Chapter One, "Logocentrism and Deconstruction", explores the idea of logocentrism through different areas covered by Derrida's reading of Saussure's linguistic structuralism, Heidegger's *de-structurization* of the history of Western ontology, and Husserl's phenomenology. This essay attempts to reconstruct the intellectual history of logocentrism as a problem inherent in systems of representation found in language. Derrida proposes an acceptance of the arbitrary distinctions between these relations by following the issues surrounding the relationships of signifier-signified, speech-writing, inside-outside, and nature-artifice. These arbitrary distinctions demonstrate that using language means that any attempt to convey an idea is subject to the whims of a fleeting singular moment of the author/speaker's consciousness. This phenomena of presence/non-presence in a text are what occurs in deconstruction or simply the act of reading/writing.

The struggle to recreate, reconstruct, or even simulate a *non-present presence* must acknowledge the effect of deconstruction. Any attempt to read or write a text will be subject to the mediation of the interlocutor's consciousness. The conflation between the text and the interlocutor creates the possibility of interpreting meaning from a text that has been severed from its originator. The separation of the text from its author implies that the singular instance of the text's inscription implies the impossibility of recovering such intentions from its author. The essay in Chapter 2, entitled "Iterability and Différance," covers the dispute of interpretation of the meaning of *parasitism* in Austin's speech act theory. The argument begins with Derrida's essay entitled "Signature, Event, Context", claiming that *parasitism* pervades the possibility of conveying meaning in language. Parasitism is a condition where speech or writing lacks the necessary explicitness to convey its intended meaning. In instances when speech acts that cannot fulfil the requirements of conveying meaning, such as sarcasm, irony, poetry, and jokes, the function of explicitness no longer satisfies the conventional operation of the speech act theory. Derrida asserts that Austin's insistence on explicitness indicates Austin's affirmation of the constancy of parasitical forms of language.

Searle's position on the debate is that despite the presence of parasitical forms of speech acts, the context resolves the parasitical instances of a speech act through either brute or institutional facts. Searle asserts that parasitical forms of discourse should be excluded in the actual operation of a speech act and should be delegated as *etiolation* or degradation of language. Contrary to this, Derrida argues that explicitness is not always a constant factor in language or any form of speech acts. Following Austin's gesture of invoking signatures as a makeshift attempt to contextualise the presence of the speaker or author, Derrida argues that the necessity of this practice demonstrates that parasitism is an integral feature of the speech act theory and language in general. Communication always involves a radical absence between the speaker/author and its interlocutor. Hence, there is a tendency to invoke a certain parasitical or even *creative* appropriation of a text or an utterance. This spells a variety of possibilities in a discourse. In the attempt to reconstruct the intention of the author/speaker or their *logocentrism(s)*, the outcome is a repetition of the author's intent that is similar and different to the origin of the text or utterance. What I find interesting in this essay is the demonstration of the logocentric tendencies that we see in Derrida and Searle. Both present a reading of Austin's idea of parasitism that resembles Austin's speech act theory and yet, at the same time, both thinkers propose a radically different interpretative outcome.

Derrida's essay "Signature, Event, Context" introduces his neologism, *différance,* to illustrate the relative permanence and impermanence of meaning. *Différance* indicates the close similarity to the French word *différence* with the imperceptible phonological difference of an 'a.' This neologism presents an idea of how meaning defers the possibility of eliciting a similarity of meaning and difference within the singular instance of reading/writing. The stable and unstable mechanics of meaning in language account for the flexibility and creativity of expression; with *différance*, we can breach the limits of expression by treating the *logos* as an eccentric centre. While there are normative rules and principles observed in the ordinary use of language, these normative rules are likewise bound to the possibility of revision to accommodate new possibilities of meaning. In Chapter 4, the essay entitled "Eliciting a Sense of Normativity in Derrida through Honneth's Theory of Recognition," explores the economy of normativity and the affinity of these two thinkers in their position towards normativity. In this essay, I explore Derrida's position on the *economy of violence* and Honneth's affirmation of the necessity of dialectical relations in social theory. Both Derrida and Honneth affirm the necessity of relative stability/instability of norms precisely because they allow the possibility of ethically addressing new and forthcoming identities. Despite this

affirmation, I follow the cautionary warning of both Derrida and Honneth in the idea of the economy of violence. This form of violence is not necessarily a *physical* form of violence but rather dialectical violence where singularities must be reduced as an identity to provide a space for dialogue. For example, in as much as we want to come to the aid of the poor or needy, we must reduce the subject's identity to the moniker "poor" or "needy." Derrida's essay "Violence and Metaphysics" is not a rejection of Levinas' ethics of alterity.

On the contrary, Derrida recognises that certain ideas from Levinas' such as the infinity of the *Other* and the valorisation of ethics over metaphysics are hyperbolic. Both Derrida and Honneth agree on the impossibility of depicting the *Other* as an infinity. On Derrida's side, addressing the *Other* as infinity is akin to not addressing the *Other* at all for all its irreducibility and infinity. On Honneth's side, the infinity of an *Other* does not fulfil a mutual economic exchange between subjects and is likewise unproductive in maintaining a cooperative dialectical social relation.

The last chapter of this collection is entitled "The Paradox of Ipseity and Difference," which is my take on the necessity of logocentrism in deconstruction's active and passive operation. Despite Derrida's hesitation to define its meaning, deconstruction is a product of the activity of reading/writing. In this essay, I argue that despite the aporetic possibility of fully recovering the meaning behind a text, there is a relatively stable production of inherently logocentric meaning. I also argue in this essay that in so far as there is a necessity for reading and writing as an activity of meaning, logocentrism is an inevitable condition of this activity.

CHAPTER ONE

LOGOCENTRISM AND DECONSTRUCTION

The assumption that there is a fixed centre, permanence, origin, and nature in Derrida's discourse shakes amidst his neological invention called *deconstruction*. Though he never claims any referential point or origin from where he derived this invention, his works tell us otherwise. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida revisits the anthropological claims of purity and naturality from Levi-Strauss and Rousseau to criticise philosophical anthropology's phonocentric tendencies. Derrida's objective was to prove that if writing is a representation and representations (in the form of writing) are unnatural, then speech, in its sense, is unnatural. Rousseau and Levi-Strauss claim that speech is natural insofar as it is spontaneous and primal, as opposed to writing, which is several steps removed from the physical presence of speech. Levi-Strauss points out that the Nambikwara Indians live in a total sense of purity devoid of writing. They merely write incoherent lines and patterns of 'geometric' quality in their calabashes for decorations. Only the mimetic exercise of the village chief led Levi-Strauss to uncover the political significance of writing. When the village chief saw the social superiority that writing can confer, only then did the chief decide to imitate the activity of the anthropologist (Derrida 1997, 124).

Derrida's analysis of Levi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques* shows the answer to the dispute about the primacy of speech over writing. Speech is often considered to have the priority of representation over writing since it comes unmediated and manifested spontaneously by man. Speech is also *more* natural as opposed to writing[1] because writing is already a form of mediation of speech. Derrida disagrees with this by arguing that speech is also a kind of writing,[2] it is writing that tries to fabricate an arbitrary *meaning* of an object into memory.[3] Writing has already been mediated by our consciousness and biases even before other artifices of communication externally manifest it. Another problem that the primacy of speech over writing has to face is the problem of legitimisation. Derrida dedicates a significant amount of thought to how writing is considered a bastard offspring of speech in the absence of a *father*[4] as the author of *presence*.

Although it is hard to isolate the origin of deconstruction in Derrida's work, the opposition between the spoken word and the written text has been often used by Derrida to showcase the weakness of both structuralism and Western ontology.

Deconstruction in itself is not a tool that re-inscribes a new system of narrative legitimisation. It unveils the system that inscribes what is legitimate from what is not. Deconstruction is not an activity that creates; instead, it makes the very structure in a certain narrative stand out, be it a contradiction or an affirmation of its discourse. The discourse on deconstruction begins or is often associated with *Of Grammatology*. Derrida alludes to this work as a science of writing and a science of representation and signification wherein phenomena are mediated and communicated through language (Derrida 1997, 4).

In Derrida's case, the discussion of deconstruction and logocentrism is long and tends to veer off from its initial discussion for the sake of demonstration and to provide layers upon layers of context. To streamline the discussion, I will divide this essay into four parts. The first part (1) will focus on Derrida's challenge to structuralism, specifically, Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic structuralism. The second part (2) is allocated to Heidegger's critique of the history of Western ontology and Derrida's modification of writing under erasure. The third part (3) shall cover the role of deconstruction as an intervention or mediation text. The last part of this essay will discuss the two ontologies employed by Derrida's discourse, namely, the ontology of immanence and transcendence.

Challenging the Assumptions of Saussure's Linguistic Structuralism

Derrida's fame (or infamy) as one of the seminal thinkers that led to the intellectual movement of post-structuralism can be traced back to his reading of the critical arguments of linguistic structuralism's assertions. What is interesting in Derrida's articulation of these inherent contradictions is that his reading of structuralism does not attempt to move out of the discourse. Instead, what Derrida adopts in this reading is to implode the claims of structuralism from within. Post-structuralism does not herald the supposed *death* of a structure; rather, it speaks of the inherent self-effacement of the structure or its modus that makes it possible to support its *weight*. The first section of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* immediately speaks of structuralism and its inherent problems in linguistics: the signifier and

the signified problem. Derrida begins his critique of structuralism by investigating de Saussure's distinctions between the *signifier* and the *signified*, specifically on the claims that its coverage has gone 'beyond the extension of language' (Derrida 1997, 7).

Initially, one might think that language might be the issue in Derrida's polemic since the structure of language creates a contrast that establishes a centre or a point of reference that makes meaning possible. Structuralism assumes that these relationships of opposing pairs or *binary pairs* are natural structures that make meaning possible. Derrida questions this relationship's claim as anything but natural. Language is merely referential. The terms used in statements refer to an idea, reality, or phenomena that are communicated. For example, the word *condom* in this paper (or in the case of an electronic file, a screen) cannot be word nor used for intercourse; rather, this term refers to an actual concrete object in reality that is worn before sexual intercourse, or used as a water storage device in emergency and survival situations. The term *condom* represents a set of squiggles, lines, and curves arranged in a specific manner to denote a particular phonetic pattern that produces the sound *Kahn-demn*. Despite this, the question of the nature of the sign still stands: are signifiers naturally related to signifieds?

> The advent of writing is the advent of this play; today such a play is coming into its own, effacing the limit starting from which one had thought to regulate the circulation of signs, drawing along with it all the reassuring signifieds, reducing all the strongholds, all the out-of-bounds shelters that watched over the field of language. This, strictly speaking, amounts to destroying the concept of "sign" and its entire logic. (Derrida 1997, 7)

The object of Derrida's criticism is to point out the arbitrariness of language as a medium of communication. Letters, words, and statements refer to reality as they are arbitrarily constructed to point out non-present subjects or objects.

Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* aims to provide an extensive critique of the European tradition of linguistics concerned with the historical and comparative approach of linguistic analysis. Saussure saw through the folly of these methods of linguistics on two points. On the one hand, the historical method was fallible in terms of its inability to take into consideration that language shifts within the context of time and space; language shifts in its very own context when the people who speak the language are moving to and fro from one place to another as time progresses. For example, Saussure demonstrates that the word *Wasser*

(water) in German has not always been as it was. The old High German equivalent of *Wasser* is *Wazer* (Saussure 1983, 35). The variation of which has evolved through time. Through the constant use (and *mis*use) of the word *Wazer*, the modern form has evolved to *Wasser*. Saussure sees this as the case for language is:

> Language at any given time involves an established system and an evolution. At any given time, it is an institution in the present and a product of the past. At first sight, it looks very easy to distinguish between a system and its history, between what it is and what it was. In reality, the connexion between the two is so close that it is hard to separate them. Would matters be simplified if one considered the ontogenesis of linguistic phenomena, beginning with a study of children's language, for example? No. It is quite illusory to believe that where language is concerned the problem of origins is any different from the problem of permanent conditions. There is no way out of the circle. (Saussure 1983, 9)

The problem that linguistics faces in this situation is that by studying one, one is not representing its actuality. The system or institution of language is not permanent. In other words, there is a degree of impossibility in representing language as if it were suspended in time. On the other hand, if language is taken up comparatively, the problem of its historicity also places itself at the fore of this dilemma. A comparison of linguistic systems leads to a fixed representation of language itself. To compare, linguists would have to assume that the language they are trying to investigate is what it is. In other words, they would have to consider, for example, that Old High German, as the researcher would understand it is similar to how the researcher would understand another language like ancient Sanskrit. Saussure considers this problem by stating that in the study of linguistics, one should be aware of the *diachronic* and *synchronic* characteristics of language:

> … to mark this contrast more effectively, and the intersection of two orders of phenomena relating to the same object of study, we shall speak for preference of *synchronic* linguistics and *diachronic* linguistics. Everything is synchronic which relates to the static aspect of our science, and diachronic everything which concerns evolution. Likewise, *synchrony* will designate respectively a linguistic state and a phase of evolution. (Saussure 1983, 81)

Since language in general, not *a* language in *particular* is shifting according to space and time, the study of linguistics needs to be revised and must focus on its essential and primordial properties. Thus, Saussure's study of linguistics delves into the issue of representation and referentiality with this in mind.

The Primacy of Speech Over Writing

Saussure's point of departure immediately begins with language mediums and how they are conveyed through speech and writing. Writing, for Saussure, is not an internal part of a language; it is merely a representation of the phonetic qualities of speech and is, in turn, arbitrary through its relationship with sound (Saussure 1983, 25). Saussure argues that the nature of writing is much more detached from the idea in contrast to speech. Speech is more natural for Saussure precisely because it becomes the object of representation by writing.[5] The distinction between the phonetic and ideographic language systems in Saussure's course seems to be distinguished:

> There are only two systems of writing:
>
> 1. The ideographic system, in which a word is represented by some uniquely distinctive sign which has nothing to do with the sounds involved. This sign represents the entire word as a whole and hence represents indirectly the idea expressed. The classic example of this system is Chinese.
> 2. The system often called 'phonetic,' intended to represent the sequence of sounds as they occur in the word. Some phonetic writing systems are syllabic. Others are alphabetic, that is to say, based upon the irreducible elements of speech. (Saussure 1983, 26)

Though it may seem that the distinction between the two is clear-cut, one might still wonder about the issue of language's arbitrary nature. If language is arbitrary, how can speech be primordial over writing? Why does Saussure insist on the primordiality of speech over writing? Are they not equally arbitrary in the same sense that our ideas and concepts take prevalence over the reality or phenomena that it tries to represent? Can these questions be realised and raised when we question the ambiguity of Saussure's distinction between ideographic and phonetic writing?

> There is also the question of reading. We read in two ways. A new unknown word is scanned letter by letter. But a common, familiar word is taken in at a glance without bothering about the individual letters: its visual shape functions like an ideogram. (Saussure 1983, 34)

The significance of this ambiguity is something that should not be taken lightly. Despite Saussure's qualification of exceptions where a phonetic system might be ideographic in some instances, the orthography of phonetics in words does not have the foundation for language to convey its meaning. This qualification is true in languages representing the idea or the

concept through writing to communicate its ideas. Languages that utilise an ideographic system of writing, such as the Hieroglyphics and Chinese logographs, directly represent an abstract concept or idea rather than referring to a pattern of sounds representing the idea. Moreover, in phonetic languages such as French, the phonetic pattern and its written form are not congruent. Thus, insofar as the representation of concepts and ideas is concerned, there is no natural method or technique of representation in language, be it speech, writing, phonetic, or ideographic.

The ambiguity in the distinction between ideographic and phonographic systems of writing is apparent in Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*. The significance of this distinction is at the very root of language itself. Since language is referential, the connection between the word (be it written or spoken) and the idea is arbitrary. The signifier and the signified are understood only if the signified is assumed to have preceded the creation of the intention of the signifier. The problem becomes complicated when Saussure, on the one hand, tells us that the relationship between the idea and the word is arbitrary.[6] On the other hand, he claims that speech is closer to ideas (Saussure 1983, 19) than writing because writing signifies speech.

> A language and its written form constitute two separate systems of signs. The sole reason for the existence of the latter is to represent the former. The object of the study in linguistics is not a combination of the written word and the spoken word. The spoken word alone constitutes that object. (Saussure 1983, 24)

Both systems (speech and writing) are essentially representational. In this line of thought, Saussure's linguistic structuralism is ambiguous, leading Derrida to suspect the fundamental assumption of a fixed linguistic structure based on phonology. (Derrida 1997, 32). Saussure believes that the phonological property of language (that is if it was a property of language) is the primary mode of representing language or even using language. If it is the case with language, then such an assumption would posit that arbitrary representations such as speech are natural within language structure. This assumption needs further investigation to clarify the nature of signification in language.

The Insistence of the Signifier to the Signified and Vice-Versa

Before proceeding to a further analysis of Saussure's assumption that language is phonological, I would like to delve first into the problem of

language as a system of the signification of the signified. The latter is assumed to correspond to the former, and the latter is assumed to precede the former. In this case, the relative opposition between the two points out the tension between the arbitrariness of the structure that is derived from the *structure* and the reality that flees this representation. The importance of this problem is that it demonstrates the inherent difficulty of what deconstruction is intending to deconstruct and what deconstruction deconstructs within its structure.

The primacy of speech over writing is not the only issue that deconstruction tries to confront in Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, I think that his critique of linguistics is part of the critique of Western ontology. It is necessary to go back to Derrida's polemic on the binary pairing of the signifier and the signified. The signifier and the signified are not the exact words that came from Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, and the signifier is considered a sound pattern. In contrast, the signified concept is the *concept* that the signifier represents (Saussure 1983, 66-67). The need to establish this is to link phonocentrism's significance as a point of departure for Derrida's distinction between the inside and the outside. There are two important points in Derrida's critique of Saussure's structure of signification: (1) First, is that the system of writing is considered an external manifestation of signification, whereas, speech is considered an immediate and *natural*[7] form of representation of concepts and ideas inherent within language. (2) What follows, after which, is that the arbitrariness of language does not have exemptions. Even if speech seems to have spontaneously followed language, it does not necessitate its position as a natural representation of language because language is an arbitrary representation of ideas. Hence it is an artifice for representation. Derrida further argues:

> If writing is nothing but the "figuration" of the language, one has the right to exclude it from the interiority of the system (for it must be believed that there is an inside of the language), as the image may be excluded without damage from the system of reality. Proposing as his theme "the representation of language by writing" Saussure thus begins by positing that writing is "unrelated to [the] …inner system" of language (p.44) [p.23]. External/internal, image/reality, representation/presence, such is the old grid to which is given the task of outlining the domain of science. And of what science? Of science that can no longer answer to the classical concept of the *episteme* because the originality of its field – an originality that it inaugurates – is that the opening of the "image" within it appears as the condition of "reality," of "outside" and "inside," of "appearance" and "essence," with the entire system of oppositions which necessarily follows from it. (Derrida 1997, 33)

Derrida's strategy was to extend Saussure's arguments by pointing out the exclusion and the marginalisation of writing in linguistics. This strategy implies that the internal structure or *model* exists within the context of language. If language was entirely arbitrary in the sense that it tries to signify reality, then Saussure's attempt to delegate speech as originary over writing becomes dubious:

> For Saussure it [writing] is even a garment of perversion and debauchery, a dress of corruption and disguise, a festival mask that must be exorcised, that is to say warded off, by the good word: "Writing veils the appearance of language, it is not a guise but a disguise" (p.51) [p.30]. Strange "image." One already suspects that if writing is "image" and exterior "figuration," this representation that is, as usual, anything but simple exteriority. The meaning of the outside was always present within the inside, imprisoned outside the outside, and vice versa. (Derrida 1997, 35)

It is interesting to note that this discrepancy plays with the problem of presence in language. According to Saussure, writing represents speech, while on the other hand, speech represents language with spontaneity. The dilemma, however, is that language itself represents presence. Moreover, according to Derrida, the courses outline the limits of linguistics by excluding writing as a part of linguistics when in fact, it is universally attached to language (Derrida 1997, 39).

Derrida's critique of Saussure in *Of Grammatology* invokes this linguistic scope in which a "general" course is supposed to occur. Derrida points out that in proving that language is a mere arbitrary imposition of a structure or a model representing phenomena as if it was present at the moment. Saussure's argument is problematic because his exclusion implies that writing cannot mediate or even participate in language. Derrida lauds Rousseau, in contrast to Saussure, since Rousseau anticipates the space for an ideographic system of representation as a model for linguistics. Moreover, Rousseau was even more receptive to the idea of the impossibility of tracing the origins of language.

Tracing back an entire origin or a history of language generates an interesting series of questions: What was the first word uttered by humans? Is such a word meaningful to the people around the first speaker? If yes, what made the *first* word meaningful to everyone? To claim that speech is immediate and more *natural* than writing agrees with Saussure's assumption that writing is external to speech. Though Saussure assumed speech as the originary manifestation of language without even tracing its origin, the trend of linguistics most likely influenced Saussure's position in his time. The

trend of comparative linguistics (Saussure 1983, 3 and 14) seems to have made Saussure aware of the inherent limitation of this method, making him consider the diachronic and synchronic factors in linguistics has led him to the hypothesis that speech precedes writing as a representation of ideas.

Derrida's treatise on logocentrism's central focus was to criticise the imposition of an artificial form of *centrism* towards texts, much like the assertion of the relationship between the signifier and the signified. The problem of centrism, or in the case of Derrida's critiques, *logocentrism*, is an issue of *feigned certainty*. The problem with logocentrism is that any reading of a text is subject to the reader's epistemic conditions. While Derrida does not assert that Saussure's structuralist linguistics is inimical to reading (or writing) a *text*, relegating the meaning of a text into a rote mechanical convention of interpretation can lead to displacing the *other* possibilities of interpretation. It would be hasty to interpret, for example, a statement such as "My nuts are on fire!" as a declaration of the immolation of the male genitalia either by accident or by some malicious intent. The signifiers do point at something; in fact, it points to many things that make the problem of tracing the *signified* a priority for hermeneutics. Immediacy is a phantasm in this example. Though the author or the speaker of the words "my nuts are on fire!" is certain about which nuts are actually on fire, the interlocutors could be at a loss with the lack of contextual details that goes with the statement or text. Has the man accidentally set himself on fire? Has he left his chestnuts roasting on the fire for too long? Or has he consumed a bag of hot and spicy peanuts? This problem's banality might be amusing or trivial, but it does point out that the correspondence between the signifier and the signified is not necessarily connected. The substantial gaping cleft in the language (or any method of representation) involves a degree of externality that is no longer under the control of the speaker or author. In other words, a statement uttered (or written) will not always carry the intentions of the speaker (or author) with the utterance (or text). While we can say that context is the *king* of any discourse since it provides the necessary clues for intention, its presence is not always reliable or consistent. In most instances, context is imaginary and arbitrary:

> The science of linguistics determines language – its field of objectivity – in the last instance and in the irreducible simplicity of its essence, as the unity of the *phoné*, the *glossa*, and the *logos*. This determination is by rights anterior to all the eventual differentiations that could arise within the systems of terminology of the different schools (language/speech [*langue/parole*]; code/message, scheme/usage; linguistic/logic; phonology/phonetics/ glossematics). And even if one wished to keep sonority on the side of the sensible contingent signifier (which would be strictly speaking impossible, since formal identities isolated

within a sensible mass are already idealities that are not purely sensible), it would have to be admitted that the immediate and privileged unity which founds significance and the acts of language is the articulated unity of sound and sense within the phonie. With regard to this unity, writing would always be derivative, accidental, particular, and exterior, doubling the signifier: phonetic "sign of a sign," said Aristotle, Rousseau, and Hegel. (Derrida 1997, 29)

Derrida's reference to the impossibility of the sonorant contingency or the signifier's isolation as a representative of the signified is already a subtle question towards the assumption of structuralism. It becomes further emphasised with Derrida's quotation from Aristotle, Rousseau, and Hegel that the sign becomes a sign for another sign. So what is it then does the sign signify? If the sign points to another sign, what does the pointed sign signify? The question would continue to beg itself to no avail. If the process of signification were taken to its extremes, there would only be an endless series of significations of signifiers, thus arriving at an inevitable *aporia*.

With the absence of the author the problem of the signifier/signified becomes exacerbated. Although the extremes in which the tracing of the signification of the signified is not often apparent in mundane instances, neglecting its possible interpretative benefits is not only reckless but also unethical. To immediately assume an interpretation of a text to some conventional meaning could lead to a hasty conclusion of an author's intent, whereas the immediacy of the intention is already found to be illusory or even an impossibility, the extracted meaning thus becomes doubtful.

Derrida would, in the latter parts of the *Of Grammatology*, make it apparent that the act of naturalising a particular relationship existing between a pair of binary opposites is not at all natural. If inspected closely, the pairing could be arbitrary or self-contradictory. To go back to the problem of the primacy of speech over writing, Derrida would expose the arguments that Rousseau would present against writing.

> *The Essay on the Origin of Languages* opposes speech to writing as a presence to absence and liberty to servitude. These are almost the final words of the *Essay*: "But I say that any tongue with which one cannot make oneself understood to the people assembled is a slavish tongue" (Chap.XX). With this sentence, through the detour of the Lévi-Straussian ideology of the "neighbourhood," of a "small community where everybody knew everybody else" and where nobody went beyond earshot, we have set foot again upon a Rousseauist ground that we had hardly left: a classical ideology according to which writing takes the status of a tragic fatality comes to prey upon

natural innocence, interrupting the golden age of the present and full speech. (Derrida 1997, 168)

What leaves Rousseau open to Derrida's criticism is that Rousseau has equated simplicity to nature, perhaps not as an explanation of how societies operate, but rather as a reductive convenience for his ideal society. This reduction of reality towards simplicity becomes a weakness for Rousseau in as much as he considers with this simplicity the fixation of the structure of language and the evil that writing gives to language. Derrida would allude to Rousseau's notion of simplicity in language, particularly with a child, who for Rousseau seems to know only one natural language, "I hurt" (Derrida 1997, 46, 59).

It is interesting to note that in some of Rousseau's texts, the criticisms towards the idea of presence are felt in some instances wherein representations would corrupt or "de-naturalise" nature.[8] Though Derrida would agree with Rousseau's criticism of *un-naturality* in some instances, Derrida would find that some of Rousseau's arguments would lean on the side of nature as a way to advance his thoughts. One such claim made by Rousseau is that writing is unnecessary because it plays on imaginary presence, which pretends to give immediacy. Derrida cautions us about the dangers of supplementation through Rousseau's sexual practices:

> I had returned from Italy not quite the same as I had entered it, but as, perhaps, no one of my age had ever returned from it. I had bought back, not my virginity but my *pucelage*. I had felt the progress of years; my restless temperament had at last made itself felt, and its first outbreak, quite involuntary, had caused me alarm about my health in a manner which shows better than anything else the innocence in which I had lived up to that time. Soon reassured, I learned that dangerous means of assisting it [*ce dangereux supplement*], which cheats nature and saves up for young men of my temperament many forms of excess at the expense of their health, strength, and sometimes their life (Pléiade, I, pp.108-09 [p.111]). (Derrida 1997, 150)

This act of cheating against nature may perhaps be considered dangerous by Rousseau, yet with some contextual considerations he considers such activity to have its utilitarian value for the 'young men' of his 'temperament.' Like language, masturbation is the supplementation of presence. In as much as real presence could not be expressed nor can real sexual activity be achieved through phallic strangulation. Like language or any form of experiential representation Derrida agrees that:

> The dangerous supplement, which Rousseau also calls a "fatal advantage," is properly *seductive*; it leads desire away from the good path, makes it err

> far from natural ways, guides it towards its loss or fall and therefore it is a sort of lapse or scandal (*scandalon*). It thus destroys Nature. (Derrida 1997, 151)

Writing, speech, or any mode of representation is seductive because it enables man to conveniently re-experience a real or an unreal object. Writing for Rousseau, in this regard, falls under the category of *dangereux supplement* because it *cheats* the actuality of a real sexual partner only because it cannot be made present to experience. Thus, in the loneliest Rousseauean context, we are left only with language and representations in our hands to compensate for the absence of real presence.

Derrida would have agreed to this if only Rousseau had made the point to include the entirety of language as a non-immediate source of presence. In one of the essays that Derrida investigates, Rousseau would refer to the *neume* (Derrida 1997, 249). This musical term is where the *jouissance* or immediacy of God's presence is articulated in a song that does not use words since it is primordial, natural, and spontaneous in its expression of pleasure and presence. Words are absent because the feeling of presence lacks any intervals (Derrida 1997, 250), which can be corrupted with mediations of an internal feeling that flows from the music.

It might seem spontaneous, unmediated, and natural if taken on its own terms, but the notion of *neume* effaces what representation of context. Why? Because the *neume* is still a representation of presence. Presence is fleeting, immediate, and could only be experienced on its unveiling. To speak or even play music in honour or remembrance of a pleasure (*jouissance*) that was once felt is already a representation of what has already transpired. The *neume* perhaps does this intended function of representing a presence through an undecidable context, yet in its very intent to represent, it cloaks or subterfuges the reality behind the absence of actual presence.

Heidegger's *Destruktion* of the History of Western Ontology and the Metaphysics of Presence in the Text

The culmination of the critique of the metaphysics of presence can be traced to Heidegger's question of the conventionality of meaning. The moniker *deconstruction* is an immediate deference to the sixth section of *Being and Time*. Though Heidegger's agenda may differ from Derrida, the convergence of their ideas is apparent. In 1989, one of Heidegger's unpublished manuscripts was made public for the first time. The book entitled *Beiträge zur Philosophie*[9] was heralded as the continuation of *Being*

and Time's failure to fully answer the question of being. While waiting for the prophetic time to come in which the book was to be published at Heidegger's behest, Derrida was already at work in a similar trajectory. The publication of various essays from Derrida during the 60s sustained the continuation of the critique of the metaphysics of presence.

The inaccessibility of the *Beiträge* from Derrida did not stifle Derrida's development of deconstruction. Even before the release of the *Beiträge*, deconstruction was already being picked up in both philosophical and literary circles. If Heidegger was able to come up with reflections concerning the eternal recurrence of the leap towards the eternal swaying of being (Heidegger 1999, 271-273), Derrida has already expanded his critique of presence through *differánce*.[10] There is, however, no coincidence in this similarity. Both philosophers are concerned with meaning and are also aware of the crisis that surrounds meaning.

The Critique of Presence in Language

Both Heidegger's and Derrida's critique comes from a similar perspective in the history of philosophy where the overturning of a dominant system collapses under the pressure of its structure. Heidegger, influenced by Husserl's phenomenology, approaches the problem of ontology or the question of being to break away from the impoverished understanding of metaphysics of his own time. Heidegger's early works focused on reviving the attitude of questioning established philosophical notions. In as much as Plato would criticise the problem of rote and mechanical understanding of being, Heidegger attacks the tradition of Western Ontology's assumptions with being. Heidegger's first attempts were directed towards the de-structuralisation of the history of Western Ontology. Heidegger is critical of Kant's thoughts for paying heed to the discrepancies of understanding in place of the *a priori* or self-evident understanding as a "dubious procedure" (Heidegger 1996, 3-4). Note, the dubiousness or the scepticism that Heidegger feels towards this mode of thinking is founded on the awareness that there is a gap where being appears or makes itself present. This is perhaps the more obvious influence of phenomenology in Heidegger's critique, the awareness of the gap in thoughts and representation. Going back to Husserl's phenomenology, we could understand the gap as a problem where the connection between meaning and its object of reference:

> Every expression intimates something, means something and names or otherwise designates something. In each case, talk of 'expression' is equivocal. As said above, relation to an given objective correlate, which

fulfils the meaning-intention, is *not* essential to an expression. If this last important case is also taken into consideration, we note that there are two things that can be said to be expressed in the realized relation to the object. We have, on the one hand, the *object itself*, and the object as meant in this or that manner. On the other hand, and more properly, we have the object's ideal correlate in the acts of meaning-fulfillment which constitute it, *the fulfilling sense*. Wherever the meaning-intention is fulfilled in a corresponding intuition, i.e. wherever the expression actually serves to name a given object, there the object constituted as one 'given' in certain acts, and, to the extent that our expression really measures up to the intuitive data, as given *in the same manner* in which the expression *means* it. In this unity of coincidence between meaning and meaning-fulfillment, the essence of the meaning fulfilment corresponds with, and is correlative, to the essence of meaning: the essence of the meaning-fulfillment is the fulfilling sense of the expression, or, as one may also call it, the sense expressed by the expression (Husserl 2001, 116-117).

What is emphasised here is that the meaning or the understanding that is acquired from the expression of an author is only achieved when the intention or the objective of the author correlates with that of its recipient. The problem with this is that this occurs as a mere possibility, or what is to be considered as a coincidental occurrence since the manner or the mode of expression is not or at least partially indicated. The intention is the gap that creates the suspension of meaning when certitude is sought. Realising this limitation, Heidegger goes back to the foundation of being that was intimated through the experience of subjectivity or *Dasein*. The rote and mechanical understanding that was employed in ontology occurs in the problem of philosophy's dissociation from being or the singularity of the experience. Philosophy, or at least for Heidegger, the history of Western Philosophy is guilty of talking about what was talked about being. In other words, the fixation towards the structure has made metaphysics, if not lazy, detached from what being is trying to unveil.

This problem is not only tantamount to gossiping about being or mere *idle-talk* (Heidegger 1996, 158/168) but is also marginal and centric for Heidegger and Derrida. The failure to recognise the limitations that an expression or thought about being leads to an inimical conception of meaning. Moreover, this has detrimental effects on the intention of language to communicate. Universals are often treated as if it was a thing that exists, when in reality, it does not, at least outside the boundaries of human consciousness. Though it can never be isolated in language, universals would remain as a foundation of language's function.

In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida provides a critical reading of Husserl and Heidegger's critique of the metaphysics of presence. Derrida begins his reading by questioning the ideality of presence where things become represented by language. To find a foundation where *pure grammar* could exist, Husserl tries to elicit the possibility of an *a priori* system existing within grammar. Looking back to Kant, Husserl thinks that

> … Since it cannot, however, be said that pure formal semantic theory comprehends the entire *a priori* of general grammar there is, e.g., a peculiar *a priori* governing relations of mutual understanding among minded persons, relations very important for grammar – talk of pure logical grammar is to be preferred. (Husserl 2001, 75).

Derrida criticises Husserl's view based on Husserl's assumption that there is a guiding or natural designation where language is utilised (Derrida 1973, 9). It might be difficult to conceive of a system of communication without any structure but to conceive it as if it was a fixed and unwavering structure that does not change raised some suspicion in Derrida's reading. Similarly, in de-Saussure's linguistics, there is an issue with the delineation of the structure and free play of grammar. Poetry, irony, and satire, for example, would use an unconventional free-play of language; while at the same time, can communicate its intention.[11]

The goal of the language is to express meaning, though it may seem simple, the complication behind this is evident in Derrida's critique. The expression of meaning must first use a medium where it can be transmitted or communicated. The use of signs be it through speech, gestures, or writing makes it possible for the recipient to understand the intended meaning of the author of this communication. The expression refers to a presence that has occurred in the consciousness of the author, and through language, it is simulated by its interlocutors to approximate the experience of the author. Derrida makes the following distinction in the use of signs:

> Two functions may be interwoven or entangled in the same concatenation of signs, the same signification. Husserl speaks first of an addition or juxtaposition of function: "signs in the sense of indications, (*Anzeichen*) (notes, marks, etc.) *do not express anything*, unless they happen to fulfil a meaning *as well as* [neben, alongside; the italics are Husserl's] an indicative function." But several lines further, he speaks of an intimate involvement, an entanglement (*Verflechtung*). This word will often reappear at decisive moments, and this is not fortuitous. In the very first paragraph he says: "Meaning (*bedeuten*) – in a communicative speech (*in mitteilender Rede*) – is always interwoven (*verflochten*) with such an indicative relation." (Derrida 1973, 20)

The nature of language becomes accessible as much as it is *retrievable* by its interlocutors. Husserl might allude to Kant's *a priori* system in as much as it comes close to what Husserl is trying to elucidate, but this qualification sets his system of phenomenology apart from the idealistic or disembodied approach of the metaphysics of presence. The entanglement (*Verflechtung*) of language towards a world where experience is communicated, retrieved, or accessible, is what makes language function. The sign would always allude to something that has always already been there.

In an ideal setting, the simulation of presence is usually achieved through a simple transfer of signs indicating an accessible and conventional means. For example, a statement such as "My cat is black." Is easily understood in as much as the two terms used in this statement are easily accessible and simulated through experience. However, the case would not be simple if the experience itself is irretrievable or at least in some way inaccessible to the interlocutor. Take for example, the statement "I love you" or "I am in pain!" may provide a general idea of what is expressed but may present some difficulties on specific details regarding the experience of the speaker. In Derrida's critique of Husserl's phenomenology, Derrida agrees with the necessity of viewing communication as a mental form of commerce where transactions would only work when there is a correlation between mental and physical experiences (Husserl 2001, 106). For Derrida, this transaction that simulates presence does not have the immediacy of presence:

> When I listen to another, his lived experience is not present to me "in person," in the original. Husserl thinks I may give a primordial intuition, that is, an immediate perception of what is exposed of the other in the world: the visibility of his body, his gestures, what may be understood of the sound he utters. But the subjective side of his experience, his consciousness, in particular the acts by which he gives sense to his signs, are not immediately and primordially present to me as they are for him and mine are for me. Hence there is an irreducible and definitive limit. The lived experience of another is made known to me only insofar as it is mediately indicated by signs involving a physical side. The very idea of the "physical side," is conceivable in its specific difference only on the basis of this movement of indication. (Derrida 1973, 39)

This point is central and important to Derrida's critique since it implies the gap where the text and the consciousness impart to the recipient of a communication. Love, for example, can never be grasped in the same manner as another consciousness would; and yet, the correspondence between a couple giving the same statement to each other is an agreement between the similitude, not verisimilitude, of their emotions. To go on