
UNIT 4 DECONSTRUCTIVE METHOD

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

It is very hard to restrict deconstruction as a method. In fact, the key thinker of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida has always resisted pinning it down as a method. However, in this unit, we shall briefly discuss the various aspects of deconstruction starting from its seminal idea found in Heidegger. In order to have a better grasp of deconstruction as a strategy, we also deal with related concepts in Derrida's Philosophy such as difference, trace, supplement and arche-writing.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Deconstruction is a method or a school of philosophy today. This practice of textual analysis is used to dissect numerous writings (philosophy and literature), to reveal their shifts and confusions of meaning by means of a *reading* focusing on the assumptions implied and omissions unveiled by the text itself. This concept, participating in both philosophy and literature, won a great reputation in the United States of America, where it is equated with the postmodern philosophy, and more generally to the different approach of continental philosophy in Europe. If the term "deconstruction" was first used by Heidegger, it is the work of Derrida which has systematized its use and theorized its practice.

4.2 THE SEMINAL IDEA OF DECONSTRUCTION IN HEIDEGGER

The term *deconstruction* in Derrida appears for the first time in *Of Grammatology* translated without explicit Heideggerian terms. Derrida explained that he wished “among other things,” to provide a translation for the German terms of *Destruktion* and *Abbau*, that Heidegger employs in *Being and Time*, Derrida believes that his translation is more relevant than the classical translation of *Destruktion* and *Abbau* as *destruction*, insofar as it does not refer so much to the destruction of metaphysics, to reduce it to nothingness, than to show how it was built.

But *Destruktion* and *Abbau* in this context meant an operation on the *structure* or traditional *architecture* of the founding concepts of ontology or of Western metaphysics. But in French the term “destruction” too obviously implied annihilation, a negative reduction closer to the “demolition” found in Nietzsche, which Derrida rejected. In fact, the word *deconstruction* appeared from 1955 in French philosophy in the context of the translation of the text of Heidegger “Contributions to the question of Being” (*Zur Seinsfrage*). Granel Gerard chose this term “deconstruction” to translate *Abbau* the German word that he wanted to distinguish from “destruction” (translation of *Zerstörung*). In Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*), *Destruktion* addresses the concept of time, it must be shown by successive steps the experience of time was covered by metaphysics, making us forget the original meaning of being as a temporal being. The three steps of this deconstruction will go down the history of Western Philosophy:

1. Kant’s doctrine of schematic and time as the preliminary step of a problematic of temporality.
2. The ontological foundation of the *cogito ergo sum* of Descartes and the resumption of the medieval ontology in the problematic of *res cogitans*.
3. The treatise of Aristotle on time as *discrimen* of the phenomenal base and limits of the ancient ontology.

however, if Heidegger announces this deconstruction at the end of the Introduction to *Sein und Zeit*, this part of the book, which was to be, according to the plan of 1927, was never written as such. At most, we can consider his other works and conferences that partially touch upon it, starting with the book *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, published in 1929.

4.3 DECONSTRUCTION IN DERRIDA

In reflecting on his own and recovering the notion of deconstruction, Derrida intended the meaning of a given text (essay, novel, newspaper article) is the result of the difference between the words used, rather than referring to things they represent; it is an active difference, working in the hollow sense of each word, in a manner analogous to the differential meaning of Saussurean linguistics. To mark the active nature of this difference (instead of the passive nature of the difference relative to judgments about contingent), Derrida suggests the term *différance*, a sort of portmanteau word combining the present participle of the

verb “to differ” and “to defer”. In other words, different meanings of a text can be found by decomposing the structure of language in which it is written.

Deconstruction is not intended as a method, nor a philosophical system, but rather a practice. His detractors often accuse him of its convoluted meaning. On the day of the demise of Derrida, the *New York Times*, written by Jonathan Kandell, headlined thus: “abstruse theorist is dead.” Unloved and paradoxically little known in France, where deconstruction remains attached to the figure of Derrida, it has been subjected to violent attacks both in the continental Europe and in the United States of America as well. Derrida has replied to a particularly aggressive criticism of the American philosopher John Searle in his book, *Limited Inc.* (the book’s title is a pun on the name of the philosopher: “Inc”. is a rough translation of the French SARL).

4.4 STRUCTURALISM AND POST STRUCTURALISM

The term “post-structuralism” refers to a critical perspective that emerged in the seventies and dethroned structuralism as the dominant figure of thought of language and text. To understand post-structuralism, it must be considered in relation to structuralism. Deconstructionist critics agreed with the poststructuralist view of language, according to which a signifier (form of a sign) does not refer to a defined signified (the content of a sign), but only to other signifiers.

Derrida opposes the centre inherent in the structuralism of the structure. With Claude Levi-Strauss as a representative of structuralist thought, Derrida shows that with the prohibition of incest, the nature/culture opposition and the universal/normative structure can no longer hold: “The incest prohibition is universal [natural], but it is also a prohibition, a system of norms and prohibitions [culture].” Derrida rejects the metaphysical history and the hierarchical dichotomies that have survived so far and on which all *logical* reasoning (*logos*, meaning speech) of the world was founded. Derrida rejects structuralism and the Saussurean schema (the relation between signifier and signified) is therefore revised. The structure that Derrida rejects is the binary opposition signifier/signified. This structure is in fact the structure of the history of thought, which conceives the world in terms of a system of oppositions leading to infinity: logos/pathos, soul/body, same/other, good/evil, culture/nature, man/woman, intelligible/sensible, inside/outside, memory/forgetfulness, speech/writing, day/night, etc.

4.5 SIGN, SIGNIFIER AND SIGNIFIED

In order to properly explain the theory of Derrida, which falls both on philosophical and semiotic framework, it is important to define the concepts that shape his thought. Given the close weaving of several of these concepts with one another and the impossibility of defining one without considering the other, each of these brings together several concepts. The relation between the signifier and the signified is no longer one of structuralism. Hence, there are two ways of erasing the difference between the signifier and the signified; the classical one consists in submitting sign to thought, the other precisely is to challenge the system in which the preceding reduction functioned starting from the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible. Note that, according to structuralism, the signifier is the sensible part of the sign, for it is grasped

by the senses thus allowing us to have access to the signified. As far as the signified is concerned, it corresponds to the idea, to the immaterial and intelligible concept. It is this opposition that Derrida criticizes. The Derridean concept of the sign is thus always linked to the structure of the Western philosophy. The direct relationship between the signifier and the signified is revisited. Let us take the example of water: While reading the word “water,” we can think of drops of water, a lake, the chemical symbol H₂O, etc. We do not necessarily think of a still image of water, a universal mental representation. Thus each concept (meaning) to which the “water” may refer, sends back to another signifier. This infinite chain of signifier to signifier results in an endless game and opens the text, shifts it and makes it moving.

4.6 WRITING AND TRACE

Words refer to other words. The grammatology of Derrida proposes that writing is originary in the same way as voice, a constant tension without power struggle. Therefore *writing* cannot be a reproduction of the spoken language since neither came first; similarly, *writing* is not a simple written form of a word, but the articulation and inscription of the *trace*. The *trace* conveys the impossibility of the origin and of a centre. It is the non-origin of the origin. It is the absolute origin of sense in general. In the words of Derrida, “*the trace is the differance* which opens appearance [*l'apparaître*] and signification.” He further asserts that if it belongs to the movement of signification, then “signification is *a priori* written, whether inscribed or not, in one form or another, in a ‘sensible’ and ‘spatial’ element that is called ‘exterior’.” It is also significant to note that Derrida considers the trace as an arche-writing not only because it is the first possibility of spoken word but also because it is the first possibility of written word (*graphie*).

The concept of “*graphie*” depends on trace in so far as the latter is the common possibility to all communication systems. When we associate the *trace* with the *graph* (gestural, visual, pictorial, musical, verbal), the *trace* becomes *gram* (letter). Only at this point appears outside (opposite of inside), as a spatial and objective exteriority. The arche-writing of which Derrida speaks is in fact a generalized form of writing to be understood in terms of *differance*. This difference (the *a* here is the *trace* and the *gram*), as temporalization, is itself the trace of the written in the spoken word. For example, the punctuation marks are supplement to speech, and not its reproduction.

According to Derrida, the *text* cannot be explained by its origin source (author, society, history or context), since repetition is at the origin. The *text* is writing and writing is unintentional language. It is language in relation to speech that implements it. However, only reading makes the text and writing possible. What characterizes writing is *textuality*, which is both closure and non-closure of the text. As Derrida states in his monumental work *Writing and Difference*, “One can conceive of the closure of that which is without end. Closure is the circular limit within which the repetition of difference infinitely repeats itself. That is to say, closure is its *playing* space. This movement is the movement of the world as play.”

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What is Post-Structuralism?

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2) Explain the Derridean concept of sign.

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3) How Derrida's grammatology is related to Writing?

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4.7 DECONSTRUCTION AS A STRATEGIC READING

The method of deconstruction is not negative. Deconstruction is primarily to reverse the principles of Western philosophy by emphasizing the role of margin and non-privileged, with the basic concepts under erasure in order to demonstrate how these principles were designed and their opposites, neglected. In an attempt to explain his project, Derrida remarked that an opposition of metaphysical binary concepts such as speech/writing and presence/absence is not merely an opposition but it establishes a hierarchy and an order of subordination. Derrida was interested in a particular opposition, the opposition between speech and writing. Deconstruction cannot proceed immediately to neutralization: it must – by a double gesture, a double science, a double writing – practice an overturning of the classical opposition in the system. Thus deconstruction takes place in two stages. First is the phase of reversal, since the binary pair is hierarchical, we must first destroy the exercise of power by one term of the pair over the other. Writing must take precedence over speech, the other over the same and the absence over the presence. Next comes the phase of neutralization. The binary logic and its dual thinking have to be totally uprooted. Thus the new terms become undecidable, thus making them unclassifiable and they amalgamate the two poles previously opposed.

In his essay titled “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Derrida has adopted a deconstructive reading of Plato’s famous work *Phaedrus*, in which opposites poles meet and merge. Phaedrus recounts the myth that Theuth, the inventor of writing proposed to King Thamus writing as a remedy against forgetfulness, but the king considered writing as a poison as it kills the live memory. Thus the term *pharmakon* can mean both cure and poison; the same word has two opposite contexts. While Teuth uses this word in the sense of cure, the king chose the meaning of poison. Derrida in his reading of *Phaedrus* shows that *pharmakon*, both as remedy and poison, already enters into the body of speech with all its ambivalence. This charm, this virtue of fascination, can be alternately or simultaneously beneficial and harmful. It is significant that Socrates himself compares writing, the written text, to a *pharmakon*. “You seem to have discovered a drug for getting me out,” he says, “A hungry animal can be driven by dangling a carrot or a bit of greenstuff in front of it; similarly if you proffer me speeches bound in books I don’t doubt you can cart me all around Attica, and anywhere else you please” (*Phaedrus* 230d-e).

But Derrida is more concerned with this practice within a given language. What is important to him is that even in the original text Plato himself was bending the term to fit his needs, namely, stressing the caustic side of the ‘drug’ in association with writing (and myth) to belittle it in the face of speech. Derrida further adds that “if the *pharmakon* is ambivalent, it is because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (soul/body, good/evil, inside/outside, memory/forgetfulness, speech/writing, etc.).” We can say that deconstruction shakes the distinctions provided by the ontology, between presence and absence, between the fullness of life and death; it focuses its attention on to leaving traces or inheritance beyond the living present of life. Derrida himself summarizes the operation of deconstruction as a rejection of the possibility of aggregation. “If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infinity of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field—that is, language and a finite language-excludes totalization.” It is finite language which excludes totalization as language is made up of infinite signifier and signified functioning inter-changeably and arbitrarily, thereby opening up possibilities for infinite play and substitution. Derrida explains this free play through the concept of supplementarity.

4.8 THE LOGIC OF SUPPLEMENT

Derrida deconstructs the hierarchy between speech and writing through the “logic of supplement.” The term “supplement” is borrowed from Rousseau, who describes writing as a supplement of speech, the latter representing the former. The natural condition of language is the speech and writing presents itself as a dangerous supplement insofar as it does violence to the natural character of language. The term “supplement” has two meanings. It can first mean an addition to something which is already sufficient in itself. But it can also mean something more to accomplish a thing incapable of self-accomplishment. If writing is a supplement to speech in the second sense, it can become dangerous. It can affect the naturalness of speech and can even supplant it.

Admittedly, Rousseau, according to Derrida, repeats the inaugural movement of Phaedrus. If the history of metaphysics is the history of the determination

of being as presence, if it is intertwined with that of logocentrism and if it is understood entirely as a reduction of the trace, the Rousseau's work seems to occupy a singular situation between the *Phaedrus* of Plato and the Encyclopedia of Hegel. Thought is analyzed by speech while speech is analyzed through writing. The art of writing is only a mediated representation of thought and representation is the loss of presence.

For Derrida, writing can be a supplement to speech insofar as the latter can be "supplemented," that is to say it suffers from a lack which can be completed. Derrida explains this lack as follows: speech is not a thought fully present to the listener, but an acoustic symbol representing thought. Like in the case of writing, speech is only a mediation of thought and this is why writing can complement it. The alleged derivation of writing has been possible on one condition: that the language called "original" has ever existed, it was never touched by the writing, it was always and already writing.

Writing is indeed a "dangerous supplement," not because it could affect the purity of speech, as Rousseau feared, but because its ability to complement speech and even supplant it shows that speech has flaws that are usually attributed to writing. Writing is a supplement to the extent that it fills a lack in speech. This is a new meaning of "dangerous supplement." Speech itself is mediation of something and like writing, it is also a supplement. Note the important thesis of Derrida: a signifier both completes what it signifies, and adds something new to it. If speech is a supplement, what it complements must be insufficient in itself, otherwise speech cannot represent it. What is represented by speech must also be a supplement and it must signify or represent something else. The result is a chain of supplements leading to a full and self-sufficient presence. The consequence of this thesis is that in the language, there is only a chain of signifiers, each signifier pointing to another signifier.

4.9 NO OUTSIDE-TEXT

The paradox is that a sign can never represent the presence itself, as presence is self-sufficient, nor can the sign function as a signifier or supplement. What exists is a world of representations and representations of representations, ad infinitum. Each signified is also a signifier for another signified. Derrida describes the final reconstruction of presence: "there is no outside-text" [*"il n'y a pas de hors-texte"*]. To better understand this famous aphorism of Derrida, let us recall that, according to him, deconstructive reading is installed in the space between what the author means and what the text says of which the author himself is "taken-up" by surprise. The deconstructive reading must identify the chasm between what is said and intended meaning; this is not possible by so-called conventional and reproductive reading, which is, however, important, according to Derrida, to avoid any kind of interpretation: "[Without] all the instruments of traditional criticism..., critical production would risk developing in any direction and authorize itself to say almost anything." And immediately, Derrida recognizes the inadequacy of this traditional reading despite its importance: "but this indispensable guard-rail has always only *protected*, never *opened*, a reading."

In all Metaphysics, especially in that of Husserl and Heidegger, we may find what "exceeds" Metaphysics: the traces of before, after and outside. But such a reading requires a simultaneous passing through and transgressing Metaphysics.

In this context, Derrida remarks that the only way to be faithful to a tradition and to keep it alive is to transgress it. In other words, to keep a tradition alive, we should not be faithful to it to the point of reproducing it mechanically. We must keep alive the possibility of reading otherwise, to explore through conventional requirements without abandoning them, whatever they exclude, marginalize and forget. Deconstructive reading transgresses this guardrail. This transgression is a passage to limits and to frontiers, but it evades a transcendental signified which would be outside text and beyond history; it remains always and already embedded in social, political and historical networks, which Derrida calls “*arche-text*” and sometimes simply “text.”

In this context, the adage “there is no outside text” means that there is no reference without difference, that is, without the use of a differential system. “There is no outside-text” does not mean that there is nothing outside of words, or that everything can be reduced to linguistic concepts. In the words of Derrida: “I never ceased to be surprised by critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is, in fact, saying the exact opposite. The critique of logocentrism is above else the search for the ‘other’ and the other of language.” In his epilogue to *Limited Inc.*, Derrida once again resumes his definition of text: “I wanted to recall that the concept of text I propose is limited neither to the graphic, nor to the book, nor even to discourse, and even less to the semantic, representational, symbolic, ideal, or ideological sphere. What I call ‘text’ implies all the structures called ‘real,’ ‘economic,’ ‘historical,’ ‘socio-institutional,’ in short: all possible referents. Another way of recalling once again that ‘there is nothing outside the text’ ... It does mean that every referent, all reality has the structure of a differential trace, and that one cannot refer to this ‘real’ except in an interpretive experience. The latter neither yields meaning nor assumes it except in a movement of differential referring.”

4.10 DIFFERENCE

The term *differance* was coined by Derrida when he gave a lecture in 1968 to the French Society of Philosophy. In itself, it represents a synthesis of philosophical and semiotic thought of Derrida. All concepts defined earlier are involved in this theory. The grapheme *a* points to several aspects of the practice of this theory:

1. *Differance* is the difference that pulls down the cult of identity and dominance of the same over the other; it means there is no origin or more precisely originary unity). To differ is not to be identical.
2. *Differance* mark a difference in spelling, written by *a* instead of *e*; we see this difference, but we cannot hear it.
3. *Differance* evokes the meaning of displacing, eluding and shifting.
4. *Differance* is a future in progress (struggle against the fixed meanings); it is the displacement of signifiers which signify the margins because there is no original and organized transcendental signified.

The writing of *differance* refers to itself as it breaks away from the concepts of signified and referent. The emphasis of the theme of writing works as an antidote against idealism, metaphysics and ontology.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) Spell out the two stages of deconstruction according to Derrida.

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- 2) Why is writing a dangerous supplement according to Derrida?

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- 3) What does Derrida mean by “there is no outside-text”?

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- 4) Enumerate the four-fold aspects of *Differance*.

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4.11 LET US SUM UP

A deconstructionist approach allows us to create a constant tension between dualisms in any binary opposition, bringing the two poles of the pair to an equal footing. Thus meanings of words become undecidable so as to go beyond binary thinking. This theory is adopted by literary writers, including feminists, who, by the deconstructionist approach and through the strategy of *differance*, give rise to new terms that go beyond the dualisms in general but more specifically beyond the opposition such as man/woman, self/other and pathos/logos.

To deconstruct, is to go beyond all rigid conceptual oppositions (masculine/feminine, nature/culture, subject/object, sensible/intelligible, past/present, etc.) and not to deal with these concepts as if they were opposed to each other. Each pole in the binary carries within it, the trace of the opposite pole. Thus for example, the androgynous person bears traces both of masculine and feminine, the inclusion of the observer in a scientific experiment in pursuit of its objective

purpose, and the law of might, which governs the nature reverberate in organizations and social structures.

4.12 KEY WORDS

- Differance** : *Differance* is a play on the French ‘*differer*,’ which means both “to defer” and “to differ.” Derrida uses both of these meanings to describe his concept. With words, Derrida suggests, the meaning is always “deferred” as a single word cannot give a complete description. A word needs other words to give it context; therefore its meaning is deferred until more information is given.
- Trace** : According to Derrida, there is no true meaning of all human words (and even human thoughts). The meaning of any word can only be expressed compared to other words. What every word contains within itself is only shadows of other related words, which Derrida calls trace.
- Graphie** : written form of a word.
- Pharmakon** : It meant both the disease and its cure to the ancient Greeks. It also means both medicine and poison and from which we get “pharmacy” and “pharmaceutical.”
- ogocentrism** : It is a term used by Derrida and other exponents of deconstruction to designate the desire for a centre or original guarantee of all meanings, which in Derrida’s view has characterized Western philosophy since Plato. The Greek word *logos* can just mean “word,” but in philosophy it often denotes an ultimate principle of truth or reason, while in Christian theology it refers to the Word of God as the origin and foundation of all things. Derrida’s critique of logocentric thinking shows how it attempts to repress difference in favour of identity and presence: the philosophical “metaphysics of presence” craves a “transcendental signified” ultimately self-sufficient meaning (e.g. God, Man, Truth). The most significant case of logocentrism is the enduring phonocentrism that privileges speech over writing because speech is held to guarantee the full ‘presence’ and integrity of meaning.

4.13 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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