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The passion of Saussure

Russell Daylight*

Charles Sturt University, Panorama Avenue, Bathurst, NSW 2795, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Perhaps the best known and most influential of Jacques Derrida's early, linguistically-oriented critiques concerns the relationship between writing and speech. This inquiry is directed towards a certain thread in the history of philosophy in which priority is given to spoken language over the written. It is Saussurean linguistics in particular that allows Derrida to posit the interdependence of *phonocentrism*, or the privilege of speech over writing, with *logocentrism*, or the desire for a true and universal experience of the world in the mind prior to the introduction of language. However, a close reading of this engagement suggests that Saussure might be phonocentric but not logocentric, and indeed, that it is *possible* to be phonocentric but not logocentric.

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1. Introduction

Perhaps the best known and most influential of Jacques Derrida's early, linguistically-oriented critiques concerns the relationship between writing and speech. This inquiry – which features most centrally in *Of Grammatology* – is directed towards a certain thread in the history of philosophy in which priority is given to spoken language over the written. An essential *proximity* between the voice and the mind is always contrasted with the inessential and external quality of writing. For Derrida, the interiorisation of the voice and the exteriorisation of inscription is not an accident of history, but rather a necessary condition for metaphysics if it is to allow the mental, internal voice an immediate and pre-linguistic relationship with experience, nature, and the truth. This relationship between writing and speech would be established simultaneously with the birth of philosophy:

The idea of science and the idea of writing – therefore also of the science of writing – is meaningful for us only in terms of an origin and within a world to which a certain concept of the sign (later I shall call it *the* concept of the sign) and a certain concept of the relationships between speech and writing, have *already* been assigned. (Derrida, 1974, p. 4)

In readings of Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Husserl, Saussure, and others, Derrida observes this universal privilege given to spoken language over the written. In this way, Derrida reveals, in contemporary philosophies claiming to break from classical approaches, the ongoing desire to preserve the priority of the voice as that which is closest to sense, to consciousness, and to truth.

Derrida's critique of the relationship between writing and speech appears in *Speech and Phenomena*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Margins of Philosophy*, among others. In *Of Grammatology*, the argument is made most clearly in regard to Saussure's well-known privileging of speech over writing as the proper basis of linguistics. Saussure's entire engagement with language and signs is, according to Derrida, dependent upon a presumed and uncritical primacy of speech:

* Tel.: +612 6338 4028; fax: +612 6338 4401.

E-mail addresses: rdaylight@csu.edu.au, russelldaylight@netspace.net.au

Saussure, for essential, and essentially metaphysical, reasons had to privilege speech, everything that links the sign to *phonē*. He also speaks of the ‘natural link’ between thought and voice, meaning and sound (46). He even speaks of ‘thought-sound’ (156). (Derrida, 1981, p. 21)

Saussure’s insistence on the priority of spoken language is useful to Derrida, for it allows him to demonstrate the interdependence of *phonocentrism*, or the privilege of speech over writing, with *logocentrism*, or the desire for a true and universal experience of the world in the mind prior to the introduction of language. Derrida’s situation of Saussure within this epoch of classical metaphysics in which the voice is joined to truth and the word of God radically changed the way in which Saussure is read to this day. Robert Young’s gloss is typical: ‘Saussure’s theories remain clearly within the logocentric tradition. . . . For Saussure, as for Aristotle and Plato, speech is privileged because it seems closest to the self-presence of consciousness’ (p. 16). But does such a view follow from the text of the *Course in General Linguistics*? If it is clear that Saussure privileges speech over writing, can we say that this results from a desire to keep the *voice* closest to the sense experience of the world? This essay will review Derrida’s analysis of the relationship between writing, speech and the logocentric voice, and attempt to bring this assessment to bear against Saussure’s belief in the priority of spoken language. If something of Saussure’s position escapes this framework, then what does it tell us about the relationship *in general* between phonocentrism and logocentrism?

2. Writing, speech, and the voice

Following the close textual analyses of Derrida’s earlier work, the broad historical sweep of *Of Grammatology* is as unexpected as it is penetrating. Derrida’s object of analysis here is not simply Saussure or Rousseau, but an entire history of philosophy in which the voice is joined to truth. Before bringing Saussure to the discussion it is important, therefore, to understand how Derrida understands, or establishes, this epoch. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida’s interrogation of the phonocentric tradition in Western philosophy begins with a quotation from the opening few lines of Aristotle’s *On Interpretation*:

Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words. Just as all men have not the same writing, so all men have not the same speech sounds, but the mental experiences, which these directly symbolize, are the same for all, as also are those things of which our experiences are the images. (Aristotle, n.d., lines 2–4)

On the scene of language, in the Aristotelian view, and in a certain order, are: ‘things’; ‘mental experiences’ (which are the *images* of things); ‘speech sounds’ (which are the *symbols* of mental experiences); and lastly, ‘written words’ (which are the *symbols* of spoken words). A ‘thing,’ for example, a tree, is the same for all people, and hence the mental impression (experience, image) of a tree is the same for all people. Speech is the first symbolisation of mental experience, and writing a symbolisation of speech. Derrida formulates this as follows:

Between being and mind, things and feelings, there would be a relationship of translation or natural signification; between mind and logos, a relationship of conventional symbolization. And the *first* convention, which would relate immediately to the order of natural and universal signification, would be produced as spoken language. (1974, p. 11)

The relationship between things and the mind is a natural one. The relationship between the mind and the word, however, is by convention, as not all men have the same speech sounds. But the most intimate, most interior expression of the feelings of the mind is spoken language.

Derrida observes that, in Aristotle’s formulation, the spoken or written signifier is ‘derivative’ in regard to sense. In other words, the relationship between the thing and its mental image is established *prior* to the introduction of language. In this way, the signifier can be regarded as secondary or derivative in that it *follows* an original coupling, and hence also that it has no bearing or influence on that original coupling. The signifier is useful only for transporting the signified – which is understood as the mental image of the thing – from one person or place to another, that is, for communication. Such a transportation by signifiers would leave the signified unaffected in its relationship with the thing itself. And this division between the external, derivative ‘signifier’ (Aristotle’s *σύμβολον*, or ‘symbol’) and the internal, essential ‘signified’ (Aristotle’s *παθεματα*, or ‘mental experience’), would form the classical concept of the ‘sign’:

All signifiers, and first and foremost the written signifier, are derivative with regard to what would wed the voice indissolubly to the mind or to the thought of the signified sense, indeed to the thing itself . . . This notion remains therefore within the heritage of that logocentrism which is also a phonocentrism: absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning. (1974, pp. 11–12)

The philosophical epoch of logocentrism, or the natural expression of the world in the mind prior to the introduction of signs, is also that of phonocentrism, of the relative intimacy of truth and the voice, and of the relative externality and distance of writing.

The ambition of *Of Grammatology* is to critique an epoch of the sign in which the relationship between speech and writing had already been assigned. Written at the same time as this critique, *Speech and Phenomena* connects phonocentrism with the metaphysical drive to expel signification in general from what is essential in the human experience of the world. This reading, this first and most substantial argumentation against the internalisation of the voice, is made in relation to Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*. In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida will say of Husserl that he ‘believes in the existence of a pre-express-

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