

REA EMILIA ALEXANDRA WALLDÉN

**IN BETWEEN AND OUTSIDE:
DECONSTRUCTION AND STRUCTURALISM
ON SEMIOTICS AND ITS LIMITS**

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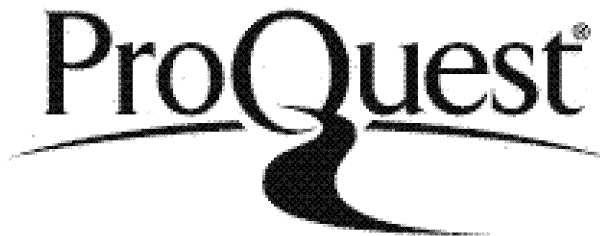
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CARDIFF UNIVERSITY

CARDIFF SCHOOL OF ENGLISH, COMMUNICATION AND PHILOSOPHY

PH.D. THESIS IN PHILOSOPHY

IN BETWEEN AND OUTSIDE:

DECONSTRUCTION AND STRUCTURALISM

ON SEMIOTICS AND ITS LIMITS

REA EMILIA ALEXANDRA WALLDÉN

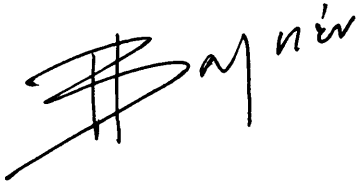
SUPERVISOR: Professor CHRISTOPHER NORRIS

CARDIFF, 2008

**REA WALLDÉN – IN BETWEEN AND OUTSIDE
DECONSTRUCTION AND STRUCTURALISM ON SEMIOTICS AND ITS LIMITS**

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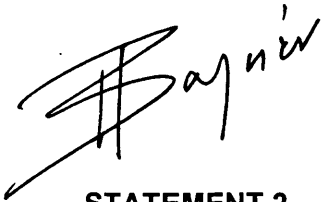
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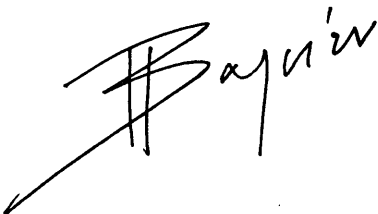
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REA WALLDÉN – IN BETWEEN AND OUTSIDE DECONSTRUCTION AND STRUCTURALISM ON SEMIOTICS AND ITS LIMITS

SUMMARY

The topic of my thesis is the complicated interconnection between deconstruction and structuralist semiotics, developed around the problematic of the sign and its limits. I argue that Jacques Derrida's project of deconstruction can be seen as an extension of the project of structuralist semiotics in two ways: on the one hand, it extends the applicability of its principles beyond the semiotic realm; on the other, it investigates its conditions of possibility. Thus, to a significant extent, deconstruction develops on the basis of structuralist semiotics; it needs structuralism both as its own foundation and as its exemplary object. I investigate the way deconstruction affects the structuralist definition of signification and its epistemological implications. Louis Hjelmslev and the linguistic Circle of Copenhagen occupy an exceptional position in this context. Derrida's quasi-meta-theory of signification looks in some ways very much like Hjelmslev's stratification, put into motion and thrown out of balance, flattened or multiplied *ad infinitum*. Moreover, glossematics is probably the closest semiotics can get to posing the question of its limits without exceeding a strictly immanent point of view. Throughout the history of Western metaphysics, signification was defined in terms of mediation and exteriority. Structuralism retains the structure of this definition, while completely emptying it of any metaphysical import. Derrida proceeds to question that same structure; nevertheless, he also retains a residue of dualism so as not to fall back into metaphysics. In a dualistic structure, the question of bridging is of utmost importance. Having defined the object of knowledge as constituted by the semiotic articulation, both structuralist semiotics and deconstruction are faced with the structural impossibility of bridging the epistemological gap. Therefore my thesis, which begins as a study of the limits of semiotics, epistemological and other, turns out also to concern the semiological limits of epistemology.

Acknowledgements

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In loving memory of my grandmother Emilia Angelidi (penname: Milia Rozidi), poetess and engineer, who set high academic standards for the women in our family; and of Di Corker, Kostas Georgizas and Nikos Papadopoulos, who didn’t live to see me finish this project.

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List of Abbreviations

DERRIDA

- Diss* __ *La dissémination*, 1972
Diss Eng __ *Dissemination*, trans. of *Diss* by Barbara Johnson, (1981) 2004
ED __ *L'écriture et la différence*, 1967
Gram __ *De la grammatologie*, 1967
Gram Eng __ *Of Grammatology*, trans. of *Gram* by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (1976) 1997
Khor __ *Khôra*, 1993
Let – 'Letter to a Japanese Friend', (1983) 1985
Lim – *limited inc*, trans. by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, 1988
Mar __ *Marges de la philosophie*, 1972
Mar Eng __ *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. of *Mar*, by Alan Bass, 1981
Nom __ *Sauf le nom*, 1993
Or __ *Edmund Husserl, L'origine de la géométrie: traduction et introduction*, 1962
Or Eng __ *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, trans. of *Or*, by John P. Leavey, Jr, 1989
Ponc __ 'Ponctuations' (1980), in *Du droit à la philosophie*, 1990
Pos __ *Positions: entretiens avec Henri Ronse, Julia Kristeva, Jean-Louis Houdedine, Guy Scarpetta*, 1972
Pos Eng __ *Positions*, trans. of *Pos*, by Alan Bass, 1981
SPh __ *Speech and Phenomena: and other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Language* [from *Mar*], trans. of *VPh*, by David B. Allison, 1973
VPh __ *La voix et le phénomène: Introduction au problème du signe dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*, 1967
WD __ *Writing and Difference*, trans. of *ED* by Alan Bass, (1978) 2001

HJELMSLEV

- Prol* __ *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language* (1943), trans. by Francis J. Whitfield, 1953
Lang __ *Language: an Introduction* (1943, 1963), trans. by F. J. Whitfield, 1970
Essais __ *Essais linguistiques* (1937-1957), 1971

SAUSSURE

- CLG* __ *Cours de linguistique générale*, ed. by Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye and Albert Riedlinger (1916), critical ed. and intro. by Tullio de Mauro, 1972

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. On the title

The topic of this thesis is the complicated interconnection between deconstruction and structuralist semiotics, developed around the problematic of the sign and its limits. What begins as a study of the limits of semiotics, epistemological and other, turns out also to concern the semiological limits of epistemology; at least for the kind of theory of knowledge that both deconstruction and structuralism endorse, despite the fact that they diverge considerably on many issues.

The word ‘sign’ remains latent in my title. This silence is intentional. Both the theories that we are studying here are concerned with redefining the classical concept. The structuralist linguist Louis Hjelmslev proposes instead the term ‘sign-function’, while the deconstructivist philosopher Jacques Derrida systematically replaces the term with neologisms such as ‘*archi-écriture*’ and ‘*différance*’. Therefore, we will not start in a traditional way by defining what the sign is. This definition will be integrated with the progress of the entire thesis.

We will see, however, that the functions of ‘in between’ and ‘outside’ underlie all definitions of what we will refer to from now on as ‘the semiotic’. Derrida argues that these same functions describe the oppositional structure constitutive of the system of Western metaphysics. He addresses his critique to this system by means of questioning the definitional functions of the semiotic. The relation of deconstruction to structuralist semiotics exemplifies in many ways this relativised oppositional structure. My own approach to structuralist semiotics and deconstruction can also be described as ‘in between and outside’ them; that is, deeply indebted to them.

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One observes here a complicated, almost impossibly complex, geometry of limits and borderlines, of inclusions and exclusions. There is more than one sense of the term ‘limit’: it can mean a reachable borderline or an unreachably destination, in the mathematical sense; then, according to viewpoint, it can mean the demarcational line between two areas or the limit beyond which one cannot go. In my thesis, there appear all these senses of limit, in their divergences and their intimate communication. We investigate the limits of the semiotic, internal and external, and the semiotic in its function as limit; the limits between theory of signification, epistemology and metaphysics; and the limits, between and of, structuralism and deconstruction.

1.2. Choices and methodological problems

This research began with my interest in structural semiotics, the method which initiated the cultural movement of structuralism. Structuralism belongs to the 20th century’s ‘linguistic turn’, to which one can also relate the dominant trend in the English speaking world of ‘Analytic philosophy’. I am much interested in structural(ist) semiotics for many reasons, which can be grouped in two areas: on the one hand, it is very effective as a descriptive and predictive method of approaching texts and cultural phenomena; on the other, despite their crucial philosophical and stylistic differences, structuralism is the undeniable precursor of both post-structuralism and postmodernism, which constitute important components of the contemporary ideological battlefield. Thus, understanding the limits and implications of structuralist semiotics offers an important insight into the underlying structures of our contemporary culture and thought.

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I have chosen to approach structuralist semiotics through a deconstructive critique. This may appear a paradoxical choice, because deconstruction is opposed to the main ideological declarations of structuralist semiotics. Additionally, it is considered by professional philosophers as much more controversial than structuralism itself. However, there are three reasons for my choice. Firstly, deconstruction is the most fruitful and insightful critique of the epistemological limits of structuralism that I have come across and it has caused me for the first time to question what I had known as – and still believe to be – a very effective method. Simultaneously, the investigation of the epistemological limits of structural semiotics is a very important component of the deconstructive project. Secondly, deconstruction has a strong claim to be a philosophical theory, unlike structuralism which is ‘just’ a method. Of course, as was noted before me and significantly by Derrida, structuralist theories have preconditions, propositions and implications of philosophical interest, which are radical and influential enough to be treated as a philosophical theory. Moreover, Derrida would have his objections to the branding of his own work as philosophy, some of which we will investigate in this thesis. However, it remains a fact that the deconstructive project is directed toward issues of metaphysics and epistemology, while structuralist works usually include much more technical elements, with which we won’t deal here. Thirdly, I argue that structuralism is not just one of the precursors of deconstruction but its overall frame, that – in a way – deconstruction is structuralism’s own self-critique.

My project is structurally infested with methodological problems. To start with, I am mainly using structuralist concepts and methodology, informed by the Derridian critique. My use of concepts such as ‘system’, ‘method’, ‘isotopy’ etc has a structuralist background. I try to give their definitions in the course of the text, when I

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think that it is necessary. Then, my very approach is structuralist, as I am looking for structural similarities and relations – but this is not only part of the problem, it is part of the solution too, as we shall see. All this would normally demand, first of all, a definition of ‘structure’. However, this definition is too intertwined with the thesis itself to be offered in advance. Furthermore, I am fully aware that my terminology and method are questioned by Derrida’s endeavour, and this questioning plays a great part in my thesis. However, I deem them absolutely necessary for my project; not only because, as Derrida says, they are unavoidable for philosophical thought but because they are particularly fruitful in analyzing Derrida’s texts. Derrida’s work, I claim, is not just a good object for a structural(ist) analysis, it is structural(ist) *per se*.

My structural approach means that I am studying only the underlying infra-structures of theories and not their particular details. Apart from reducing considerably the length of my thesis, this choice agrees perfectly with my subject. In this aspect, Derrida’s description of his method fits my own:

We are not concerned with comparing the content of doctrines, the wealth of positive knowledge; we are concerned, rather, with discerning the repetition or permanence, at a profound level of discourse, of certain fundamental schemes and of certain directive concepts. And then, on this basis, of formulating questions. Questions [...] about the metaphysics in linguistics, or, as you will, about the linguistics in metaphysics¹

1.3. On structure, references and conventions

My thesis consists of five chapters, including this introduction and the conclusion. In the second chapter, in an effort to define and clarify my subject, I address issues of naming and classification, which are proved to be anything but superficial in relation to the complicated interconnection between deconstruction, structuralism, their paradigmatic concepts and the question of the semiotic. In chapter three, I deal with

¹ *Mar Eng*, p.153 / *Mar*, p.184

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structuralist semiotics. This is actually a double chapter, both in length and function in the overall design of my thesis, as structuralist semiotics constitutes both the theoretical frame and the paradigmatic object of deconstruction. I needed to analyse in detail several of its aspects in order to situate this double interconnection. In the fourth chapter, I describe the deconstructive project as a meta-theory of signification and then compare it to structuralist semiotics. It is shown to bear an intimate relation to the theory of signification common to Western metaphysics, as well as having a potentially critical role. The final chapter summarises the conclusions of my thesis in two areas, regarding the theory of signification, on the one hand, and its epistemological implications, on the other.

It is customary in most theses to dedicate a chapter to a literature review. It would not be appropriate in this case. This is because of the subject of the thesis and the methodological choice of a structural approach. The search for meaningful structures demands a great breath of bibliographical research, concentrating on structural issues and not necessarily on details of content. This means, on the one hand, an emphasis on primary literature, where we search to identify structures, instead of an extensive research in the secondary resources. On the other, in combination with Derrida's close reading and the structuralist tradition as analytic tool, the resources are closely intertwined with each part of our argument and are therefore dealt with in the relevant chapters. I will, therefore, limit myself here to a few clarificatory comments.

My approach to deconstruction refers solely to the work of Jacques Derrida and not that of other authors who subsequently used the term. In his work one can recognise some differentiation in style and preferred subjects over the long and varied course of his writing life. Whether to recognise a continuum or breaks, a progress or

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regress, is a subject of its own and it is not included in the scope of the present thesis. I accept the existence of three periods in Derrida's writing, which I don't think constitute radical breaks in his thought. Very provisionally, I would distinguish a first period, between '62 and '72, where he is mostly interested in epistemology and semiotics, and where he still follows a rather traditional philosophical mode of exposition. Then, there is a second period until the beginning of the 90's, where he turns to metaphysical and aesthetic issues and their applications, and where he essays a performative enactment of his positions in his writing. In the third and last period, he seems to turn toward social and political issues, and to choose a more 'popular' style. Obviously, all these are relative, as Derrida's style is always rather indiosyncratic and obscure, while his position, as I argue, is more or less the same. The period that interests me most is the first one. I am thus concentrating on his texts between 1962 and 1972, although I inform my reading with his later texts. It seems clear to me that whatever sample one chose from Derrida's texts, one would come to very similar conclusions. I have checked this hypothesis in many of his texts. The same method and the same principles underlie all of them. What differentiates the early ones, and makes them particularly precious to my study, is the rigorous and rather more traditional exposition of these positions. Moreover, I was obliged to make a choice, considering the vast expanse of Derrida's texts. I think I do not do any disservice to Derrida's position by this choice.

The following books, which are the entirety of Derrida's published works between 1962 and 1972, constitute my main Derridean references:

Edmund Husserl, L' origine de la géométrie: traduction et introduction, 1962
De la grammatologie, 1967
L' écriture et la différence, 1967
La voix et le phénomène: Introduction au problème du signe dans la
phénoménologie de Husserl, 1967
La dissémination, 1972

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Marges de la philosophie, 1972

Positions: entretiens avec Henri Ronse, Julia Kristeva, Jean-Louis Houdedine,

Guy Scarpetta, 1972

Of these, most central to my thesis are: ‘L’écriture avant la lettre’, which is the first part of *De la grammatologie*; ‘Force et signification’, ‘«Genèse et structure» et la phénoménologie’ and ‘La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines’ in *Ecriture et Différence*; *Positions*; and ‘La différance’ and ‘Signature Evénement Contexte’ in *Marges*.

I have read Derrida’s texts mostly both in the original French and in English translation. The original is, I think, much more intelligible, as Derrida’s style relies greatly on word-games, semantic ambiguities and neologisms. However, the English translations are, interestingly enough, much clearer. The translators, even the most conscientious and faithful ones, are obliged to make choices. Therefore, good translations provide very interesting commentaries on the works. Here, I must pay homage to the very illuminating translators’ introductions, which I have found useful in spite of not usually agreeing with them.

The secondary texts on Derrida which I found closest to my interests and most useful are those by Rodolphe Gasché and Marian Hobson, for their structural observations, and by Christopher Norris, particularly for the Kantian epistemological connection. In his popularising introduction to deconstruction, James Smith proposes a very interesting classification of ‘responses to deconstruction’²: (a) the Yale School, de Man, Hartman, Miller, Bloom, ‘through the gates of literary theory’; (b) the Germans, Habermas and Gadamer, who ‘took up Derrida as an extension of Heideggerian hermeneutics’; (c) the Analytic Philosophers, Gasché, Norris, who ‘describe deconstruction as analytic philosophy’; and (d) those After Postmodernism,

² *Jacques Derrida: Live Theory*, pp.99-103

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Eagleton, Žižek, Badiou, who reproach deconstruction as postmodernist and politically regressive. I have two observations. First, apparently, all the three writers that I have found most relevant to my research belong to the Analytic school. This is not incidental, considering the intellectual context in which I write, the philosophy section of the University of Cardiff, and my intention, in Norris' steps, to bridge the gulf between the Analytic and the so-called 'Continental' schools of thought. Secondly, there appears to be a gap in interpreting deconstruction, regarding its structuralist affinity. My intention is to fill this gap.

About structuralist semiotics and structuralism in general, which is a field that I have studied in depth, I consulted the work of its most prominent representatives, such as Saussure, Jakobson, Hjelmslev, Benveniste, Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Greimas and Eco. I also consulted several works of reference, such as the semiotic dictionaries by Ducrot and Todorov (1972), by Greimas and Courtès (1979), by Sebeok (1994) and by Ducrot and Schaeffer (1995). I found most useful Lagopoulos' excellent works on the epistemology of semiotics. However, I have particularly concentrated on the mile-stone text *Cours de linguistique générale* by Ferdinand de Saussure and the theoretical work of Louis Hjelmslev and the linguistic School of Copenhagen. Most central to my thesis are the following:

By Louis Hjelmslev,
Prolegomena to a Theory of Language (1943)
Language: an Introduction (1943, 1963)
Essais linguistiques (1937-1957), and particularly 'La Stratification du Langage'
By Hans Jørgen Uldall,
'Outline of Glossematics: A study in the methodology of the Humanities with special reference to linguistics' (1952)

I have given serious thought to the language of my references and I have chosen to present them in English. I made exceptions to that rule when the exact original wording was indispensable to my argument; in these cases, I include the

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English translation, usually in a footnote. The English translations of texts originally in another language are those listed at the end of the thesis. When an English translation is not cited, the translation is mine. So is the translation of passages from *Cours de linguistique générale*, despite the English translation listed in the bibliography, for reasons that I explain at length in chapter three. In the case of Derrida's texts, I occasionally modify the listed translations; consequently, any responsibility for errors lies with me. Moreover, with regard to my main Derridean references, his texts published between 1962 and 1972, I always refer in a footnote to the pagination of both the original and the translation. Finally, for reasons of convenience I use abbreviations for the most frequently cited works; a list of them precedes the text of my thesis.

I have presented publicly material from this thesis in the following occasions:

- 8th Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies, Lyon, France, July 2004
- Postgraduate Conference: *Questioning the Disciplinary Frontiers*, Cardiff, June 2005
- International Conference: *Following Derrida: Legacies*, organized by the journal *Mosaic*, Winnipeg, Canada, October 2006
- 8th National Congress of the Hellenic Semiotic Society, Florina, October 2007
- Invited speech, University of Athens, Department of Methodology, History and Theory of the Sciences, Athens, March 2008

2. THE SIGN OF DECONSTRUCTION

2.1. Introduction

An analysis of the phrase ‘the sign of deconstruction’ could almost occupy my entire thesis. The expression /the sign of deconstruction/ is polysemous, or rather – as Derrida would have it – produces an effect of ‘dissemination’. Derrida introduces the notion of ‘dissemination’ which exceeds ‘polysemy’, in the sense that it cannot be analysed by and reduced to a semantic tree. The notion of ‘polysemy’¹ is shown to be inadequate to name the phenomenon of signification because the multiple alternative contents of one expression inform each other and can not be rigorously delimited; among other reasons, because the distinctions between content and expression, connotation and denotation are structurally impossible to establish with any rigour or precision. ‘The sign of deconstruction’ produces an effect of dissemination as any text would do according to Derrida, but also exemplifies this textual function, the reason being that it includes /sign/ and /deconstruction/. Derrida’s critique of the notion of the sign, which is addressed to any sign whatsoever, affects *par excellence* the expression /sign/ and the terms that he introduced to substitute for it, which are the key-concepts of deconstruction, among them the very name /deconstruction/. In a sense, deconstruction is an effect of the semiotic, in the same way as dissemination. A practical consequence of the deconstruction of the sign is that one cannot use the term with full philosophical commitment in this context; it must be a provisional use, a use

¹ The French term ‘polysémie’ is translated in English as ‘polysemy’ by Weber and Mehlman and as ‘polysemia’ by Alan Bass. I chose Weber and Mehlman’s term ‘polysemy’ which I use even when the term ‘polysemia’ appears in texts translated by Bass for reasons of uniformity. For a comparison between polysemy and dissemination, see Jacques Derrida, ‘Signature Événement Contexte’, in *Marges de la philosophie*, 1972, (pp.368, 376) / trans. in English by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman in *limited inc*, 1988, (pp.2, 9); and *Positions*, 1972 (pp.61-62) / trans. in English by Alan Bass as *Positions*, 1982, (pp.44-45)

‘under erasure’. Assuming this and many other Derridean precautions, which will be clarified in the course of my thesis, let us attempt to expound some of the meanings of /the sign of deconstruction/.

Firstly, it could mean “the sign ‘deconstruction’”. This could either refer to what deconstruction is – the movement, the process, the technique – or to the history and use of the *term* ‘deconstruction’. The fact that these two senses are not easily distinguishable, exemplifies Derrida’s position concerning the ‘disseminating’ character of semiosis. Then, /the sign of deconstruction/ could also mean “the ‘sign’ of (in) deconstruction”. Now the stress is on the /sign/ and not on /deconstruction/. This is produced partly by a different explanation of the syncategoreme ‘of’. So /the sign of deconstruction/ could mean either “the critique of the notion of the sign in the movement of deconstruction” or “the model of semiosis according to the movement of deconstruction”. There are further possible and co-existing meanings of /the sign of deconstruction/, arising from what traditionally would be perceived as metonymic slippage or wordplay, which however is of significant philosophic import in Derrida’s case. /Sign/, as he reminds us, can also mean “symptom”, like the symptoms of a virus. In this case, the topic would be “how to recognise deconstruction”. Finally, Derrida has devoted close attention to the function of sign as monument and tomb, like a pyramid². So ‘the sign of deconstruction’ could be homage to this philosophical system and, by the same token, its epitaph. Dealing with deconstruction in an academic way, the very kind of analysis to which I have just exposed ‘the sign of deconstruction’, is in a way an entombment of deconstruction.

² See ‘Le puits et la pyramide, Introduction à la sémiologie de Hegel’, in *Mar/* trans. in English by Alan Bass as ‘The Pit and the Pyramid: Introduction to Hegel’s Semiology’, in *Mar Eng*

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Derrida often begins his texts with over-determined or under-determined expressions, which are then addressed and expounded by the entire text. The choice of these inaugurative expressions is presented as almost accidental, in the context of a discourse that questions the ‘essential vs. accidental’ distinction. He also often imitates structurally and stylistically the texts he reads. There is a certain temptation to follow his example regarding both these stratagems in a text reading deconstruction, particularly as he has so radically questioned the conventions and protocols of academic writing, while opening the gates to the dazzling joy of poetic language. In a qualified way, I have already done so, by starting this chapter with the semantic possibilities opened up by its very title. However, I have done so in an unfaithful manner, subjecting this analysis to rather traditional academic norms. I believe that it is important to stress that linguistic games are far from exhausting what deconstruction is about³, and this point is in danger of being obscured by the inclination of some sympathetic commentators to imitate Derrida’s style. The purpose of deconstruction is the destabilisation of categorical distinctions, among them the distinction between philosophical and poetic language, not their annulment. I intend to show that deconstruction does not resist a provisional conceptualisation; if this was the case, it would imply a mystification of the process of deconstruction, which is totally at odds with Derrida’s enterprise. I will therefore proceed mostly in a traditionally systematic way.

This chapter is mostly historical, placing terms in the context of their complicated genealogies. Thorough definitions and further explication will be offered in the following chapters. This chapter functions as a clarifying delimitation of the

³ On the significant philosophical import of Derrida’s texts very informative are Christopher Norris’s works, such as *Derrida*, 1987 and others; as well as: Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 1983; and Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*, 1986

terms that appear in the title of the thesis: ‘deconstruction’, ‘structuralism’, ‘semiotics’. It also serves as a pretext for me to locate the two main philosophical affiliations of deconstruction, namely phenomenology and structuralism, and briefly explain my reasons for choosing to focus mainly on the second. I begin with an investigation of the issues and difficulties linked to the act of naming, and the strategies involved in overcoming them. Then I trace ‘deconstruction’ back to the notions of ‘Destruction’ and ‘structure’. Finally, I provide an overview of the history of the theory of signs. I point out how the names of the movements, ‘structuralism’ and ‘deconstruction’, in their complicated history of naming acts and inaugurations, relate to the movements’ conception of the ‘semiotic’ and their various ways of addressing the issue of definition, including the issue of whether such definition is possible or desirable.

2.2. About naming and deconstruction

To start with, definitions are incompatible with the deconstructive project. What makes every definition impossible in the Derridean context is the fact that Derrida’s work consists largely in a critique of the ‘metaphysics of ontology’, and particularly of the structure ‘A is B’. Therefore, Derrida does not give definitions; or he gives so many as to destabilise the very notion of definition. He defines through a process. ‘*What is deconstruction?*’ is a question that cannot be asked in so direct form⁴.

If we attempt a traditional categorisation, we could say that in deconstruction there co-exist a *theory of language* and a *critique of metaphysics*. Its peculiarity is that these two projects are indistinguishable. Deconstruction appears *both* as a theory of

⁴ This difficulty of definition is very clearly expounded by Derrida himself in the ‘Letter to a Japanese Friend’ (1983). The letter was originally published in Japanese. Subsequently, it was published in different languages, among which French (1985) and English (1985).

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language *and* as a critique of metaphysics. It also appears both as a *method of approach* to language and metaphysics, and as a *descriptive model* of them. This amalgamation of different functions is a direct result of deconstructive positions⁵. In an ordering and over-simplifying mode, against the grain of deconstruction, one could distinguish between two different ‘somethings’ that deconstruction approaches: our culture and the world. Its primary object of critique is ‘Western metaphysics’ in its complicity with ‘Western semiotics’, where in both cases the denomination ‘Western’ proves to be redundant. But by and through this critique, an epistemological position is implied. Adjectives such as ‘true’ and ‘false’ would be vehemently rejected by at least the early Derrida as playing any role to his project. However, in a qualified way, one could speak of ‘something’ proved ‘untrue’ in the process of deconstruction – a necessary untruth, yet an untruth – and, therefore, we are given indications about ‘something else’, even if in its case the notions of ‘truth’, ‘thing’ etc cannot be accorded their full ontological weight. Such epistemological questions in deconstruction always arise and are organised by the parallel questions regarding the notion of the sign.

Novel terms and notions have a name-like quality; among other reasons, because they are given by a stipulative act of nomination. Therefore, one has to start with the issue of naming before trying to give a narrative of the stories and tensions related to the principal name-like concepts of this thesis: that is ‘deconstruction’, as well as ‘structuralism’ and ‘semiotics’. In the Derridean context, naming is entangled in a structural paradox. We must start with the impossibility of the name; and yet we do name⁶. The name is an extreme case of language, sometimes taken as the

⁵ See e.g. in *Pos*, 126 / *Pos Eng*, 90-91 against ‘regional delimitation’

⁶ *Sauf le Nom*, 1993

paradigmatic case, so paradigmatic indeed as to fall out of it. As a particular type of word, it takes part in the general problematic of language; yet it adds a few questions of its own. The ever open oscillation between particularity and generality, for example, is but one of the questions haunting language and is closely linked with logical, epistemological and ultimately ontological issues. Since Derrida is most attentive to these interconnections – one can even say that this is the crux of his method – most of the linguistic functions and complexities are addressed at some point in his work. I think that the most relevant questions regarding the use of flag-like terms are linked to the act of naming as related to (a) the epistemological status of reference and (b) the connotational burden.

Derrida claims in ‘Force et signification’⁷ that the two extreme poles of language are reference and poetry, i.e. articulation to the world and self-reference. The sign-reference is opposed to the text-poetry⁸. Both extremes are considered paradigmatic and in some way exceeding the limits of language and the Derridean notion of ‘writing’ plays between the two. Most theories of language in the tradition of Western metaphysics, as Derrida observes⁹, consider its referential function as its central, indeed its only legitimate one. It would take Roman Jakobson¹⁰ and J.L.Austin¹¹, independently of each other, to recognise the complexity of the different

⁷ In *L'écriture et la différence*, 1967 / trans. in English by Alan Bass as ‘Force and Signification’ in *Writing and Difference*, (1978) 2001

⁸ ‘C’ est quand l’écrit est défunt comme signe-signal qu’il naît comme langage’... ‘l’inscription [...] a seule puissance de poésie’, *ED*, 23-24 / ‘It is when that which is written is deceased as sign-signal that it is born as language’ ... ‘inscription alone [...] has the power of poetry’, *WD*, 13

⁹ In *Lim* and elsewhere

¹⁰ Roman Jakobson originally presented his theory of the six communicative functions at a conference held at Indiana University in 1958. It was first published in 1960 in ‘Closing Statements: Linguistics and Poetics’, in *Style in Language*, Thomas A. Sebeok ed. Published again in 1987 as ‘Linguistics and Poetics’, in *Language in Literature*, Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy ed.

¹¹ J.L. Austin elaborated his theory of speech acts in the series of William James Lectures he gave in Harvard University in 1955. They were subsequently published in the volume *How to Do Things with Words*

linguistic functions. This privileging of denotation¹², in the logical positivist sense, is the source of the philosophical centrality of the copula, since Aristotle, and of ‘a priori synthetic judgements’ in Kant. A further quite recent step has been the distinction between the act of semiosis and the act of reference, appearing both in Saussure¹³ and Frege¹⁴. Structural semiotics in the Saussurean tradition makes a very clear distinction between signification and reference, between the question of meaning and the question of truth (as correspondence). In structural-semiotic jargon, unlike Frege’s, ‘denotation’ is intra-semiotic, while ‘reference’ is a relation between the semiotic and the extra-semiotic. The act of reference is the anchorage of language to the world, the epistemological component of language, or rather its articulation with the extra-linguistic¹⁵. One could say, more generally¹⁶, that the act of reference is the articulation of culture as culture, i.e. as meaningful system, with everything that is extra-semiotic, including culture as materialisation. This means, for example, the connection between the system of fashion and the clothes that we are wearing, as material objects. For both structuralism and deconstruction, language in a generalised

¹² There is a certain terminological discrepancy between ‘analytical philosophy of language’, particularly of the logical positivist persuasion, and ‘structuralist semiotics’. The crux of their difference is that the analytical linguistic investigations are much more interested in the truth value of sentences, while the structuralist semiotic investigations concentrate on cultural signification. ‘Denotation’, for analytics, is more or less synonymous with ‘reference’; it is the actual object (if any) designated by the word or sentence. ‘Connotation’, on the other hand, is its definition (see Gottlob Frege, ‘On Sense and Reference’, 1892 and Bertrand Russell, ‘On Denoting’, 1905). Conversely, for structuralists, ‘denotation’ and ‘reference’ are very clearly distinguished. ‘Reference’ is the relation to the ‘referent’, the actual object, and it is considered outside the scope of semiotic investigation. ‘Signification’ is the relation between signifier and signified, which produces meaning. The first degree of signification is ‘denotation’; higher degrees are ‘connotations’, i.e. metaphorical meanings (see Louis Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, 1943). Both semiotic ‘denotation’ and semiotic ‘connotation’ fall under the realm of analytic ‘connotation’, and analytic ‘denotation’ is the semiotic ‘referent’. In this thesis, I use mostly the structuralist terminology. Derrida, however, is referring occasionally to several different terminologies, and plays between their discrepancies. A further problem is that the verb ‘to denote’ can also be used in a layman’s way. Consequently, I cannot claim that my use of it is always completely consistent.

¹³ *Cours de linguistique générale*, (1906-11) 1916

¹⁴ ‘On Sense and Reference’, 1892

¹⁵ This, at least, is the definition. Post-structuralists and representatives of post-modernity have been seriously sceptical regarding the very possibility of reference.

¹⁶ We shall see the generalisation taking place in structuralism, from natural languages to any semiotic system and thence to their organisation into the larger systems of cultures

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sense, as the ability to form semiotic systems through which to perceive, describe and explain the world, constitutes the epistemological limit of the human realm. Whether this is to be perceived as a bridge or as a barrier depends on further metaphysical assumptions. And reference is the epistemological limit of language¹⁷. The act of naming, in a way, partakes of this function to a lesser extent because it is the definitional extreme of arbitrariness, of non-motivation. So knowledge is *everything but the name*, ‘sauf le nom’. Simultaneously, however, naming is the paradigmatic act of reference, an act of anchorage to the world, the least semiotic of signs, least dependent on the semiotic system and making the ‘purest’ claim to catch the ‘outside’. So knowledge is *nothing but the name*, ‘sauf le nom’. There is a ‘transcendent’ quality in reference; Derrida calls it the ‘referential transcendence’. Quite possibly this is the one and only mode of transcendence. Derrida, paradoxically, even compares reference to ‘*différance*’ with an ‘a’¹⁸. ‘Paradoxically’ because ‘*différance*’, as we shall see, is the condition of possibility of the semiotic game, including reference. However, by being its condition of possibility, it is ‘beyond’ that game. This is a kind of transcendence under erasure. But then again the referential transcendence, for Derrida, is also under erasure. So indeed it is comparable in this respect to ‘*différance*’. What we encounter again and again, from Kant to Derrida, is this impossible transcendence. Naming is impossible; but ‘we have to do the impossible’¹⁹. We can say nothing but the name. We can say everything but the name. We can’t and yet we do.

Secondly, a name includes a pre-comprehension and carries the burden of the system in which it was first pronounced. The meaning of any word, including name-

¹⁷ Derrida remarks on reference in its relation to knowledge, *Nom*, p.64

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.61

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63

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like concepts, depends on the entire system to which the word belongs, as well as to the context in which it is used; this is one of the principles that Derrida inherits from structural semiotics, as we shall see. Words, however, retain a trace from the contexts in which they were used before and particularly from the one that introduced them²⁰; the names of concepts much more so. This is not some inherent property of the words. It is a result of the collective memory of their previous usages. It is, of course, quite conceivable that the sound or image of a word may become completely detached from its first usage and meaning. However, people, when confronted with a word, often hear resonances of its different usages. On this fact is based what structural semiotics calls ‘connotation’²¹. Even if one is to redefine a word, taking particular notice of the latent links to other definitions, it is still very difficult to erase the connotational echo of its past. One has only to observe the ideological or even armed conflicts over the names of countries and territories, to understand the very real force of this connotational burden. Derrida insists on that connotational property of words to the extent of almost contradicting the very principle of arbitrariness which he holds so dear. Words in his texts are on the edge of gaining an independent existence of their own, each carrying the entire metaphysics²².

For Derrida, the burden of meaning that a word carries independently from its context is the other side of its ability to be separated from any context, including its ‘original’ one²³. This is what he calls his “‘graphematic” thesis’. The ‘contextual difference’ both ‘changes everything’ and ‘leaves certain aspects intact’

²⁰ Compare to Kripke’s theory of reference, *Naming and Necessity*, (1970)

²¹ See Chapter 3

²² ‘chaque emprunt déterminé fait venir à lui toute la métaphysique’, ED, p.413 / ‘every particular borrowing brings along with it the whole of metaphysics’, WD, pp.355-6

²³ ‘force de rupture’, *Mar*, p.377 / ‘breaking force’, *Lim*, p.9. The ‘breaking force’, the ‘force of rupture’, along with the notion of iterability, will be further expounded in chapter 4.

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this signifies that these aspects can always separate themselves from the allegedly “original” context in order to export or to graft themselves elsewhere while continuing to function in one way or another²⁴

However, one has to remember that in order for a word to carry anything over from one context to another, its receivers must partake in the discourse of both contexts, even if to a minimal degree. So, in an extended sense of context, both uses would be contextual. The sound /sign/ can communicate nothing if it is not at least recognised as a signifier. And the sound /sign/, even if recognised as a signifier, still carries nothing for someone who has no knowledge whatsoever of any Indo-European languages. Derrida speaks of ‘graft’ and ‘graphematics’ in order to stress the complicity between signifier and signified and in order to recollect the repressed importance of semiotic substance. For the same reasons, he would probably object to my description of this aspect of language as a ‘connotational’ burden. The very term ‘connotation’ carries a connotational burden and implies a particular view regarding language, one which Derrida interrogates. He would probably prefer something like ‘metaphysical’ burden, considering that the words he criticises are ‘non-innocent’ because of their belonging to ‘Western metaphysics’. I am afraid, however, that the use of the term ‘metaphysical’ in this instance could unintentionally imply that words, as words, are metaphysically independently existing entities, which leads to a form of Platonism. Nothing could be further from Derrida’s²⁵, and the structuralists’, intention. For this reason, I would insist that the capacity of words to carry meanings across different contexts can be better conceptualised as an extended kind of connotation, always taking into account Derrida’s very radical critique of the term.

²⁴ *Lim*, p.78

²⁵ ‘je n’ai jamais cru qu’il y eût de concepts métaphysiques en eux-mêmes’, *Pos*, pp. 77-78 / ‘I have never believed that there were *metaphysical* concepts *in and of themselves*’, *Pos Eng*, p.57

One may observe in the previous paragraphs a rather complicated use of the terms ‘name’, ‘concept’ and ‘word’, which are not co-extensional. Their precise order of interconnection depends on one’s assumptions regarding the onto-epistemological status of language. As the answers to these questions are not taken for granted by Derrida, one who analyses Derrida cannot start with received definitions. The most neutral of the three terms is ‘word’. In the context of this thesis ‘word’ is mostly replaced by ‘sign’, with which – of course – it is not identical. Following structuralist linguistics, ‘sign’ is the more general term: a word is a kind of sign. As Derrida’s project exceeds spoken language and this thesis is particularly interested in the possibility of change of expressive substance, ‘sign’ seems the most appropriate term and will often be used. Nevertheless, Derrida puts the concept of ‘sign’ under a very intense questioning, showing its metaphysical conditions of possibility. Therefore, I have so far avoided using the term ‘sign’, until I engage more closely with the debate over its use. I have used ‘word’ as metaphysically more neutral than ‘sign’, despite its narrower extension, as it happens to be appropriate for the subject under consideration²⁶. ‘Deconstruction’, ‘structuralism’, ‘semiotics’ are words, before being anything else. As the projects/theories/movements which bear those words as names happen to be very much interested in words, their insights necessarily inform any effort to address the issue of these words, as words.

The particular kind of words, which bear the name ‘name’ and ‘concept’, are deeply embedded in metaphysical issues and presuppositions. There are several marks that may differentiate the two: (a) Firstly, whether the word depends or not, and to what extent, on the linguistic system; or whether it is the other way round. Often language was considered as an accumulation of names, the way Adam named all

²⁶ I mean that in this sub-section I address ‘deconstruction’, ‘structuralism’ and ‘semiotics’ as words.

creatures in Genesis. Here appears the family connection between ‘name’ and ‘noun’, as opposed to verbs, and particularly the copula, and syncategoremes. Structuralism, conversely, considers all the elements of a language produced by its system. (b) Secondly, we may classify a word as either a ‘concept’ or a ‘name’ according to the epistemological status of the particular word or of words in general. It could be said of a concept, being strongly interconnected with the theory that supports it, that its epistemological value depends on the articulation of the entire theory with the world²⁷. A name, on the other hand, seems to make an independent move of articulation. In a narrower sense, a concept is related to a definition, a name to a referent. It is quite apparent that the first two criteria ((a) and (b)) do not forbid an empirical communication between the notions of ‘name’ and ‘concept’.

(c) Thirdly, Derrida in *Positions*²⁸, distinguishes name from concept, attributing to concept a presumed stability and uniqueness indicative of Western metaphysics. This is not the most usual criterion of differentiation between the two. Why should the term ‘name’ allow for more textual play than the term ‘concept’? This *prima facie* mysterious choice of Derrida’s points to the crux of the two terms’ differentiation, which is connected to a very particular opposition at the level of connotational resonances: signifier vs. signified, i.e. sensible vs. intelligible. Both ‘name’ and ‘concept’ as words, signs, unite a sensible and an intelligible element. However, ‘name’ is sometimes used to refer to the sensible element alone, and ‘concept’ to the intelligible element. The result is that the terms bear the resonance of these particular uses. So ‘name’ seems to place a stress on the sensible element of the semiotic and ‘concept’ on the intelligible element. Derrida, who uses an extended

²⁷ As in Quine, ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’ (1951)

²⁸ ‘un nom ne nomme pas la simplicité ponctuelle d’un concept’, *Pos*, p.96 / ‘a name does not name the punctual simplicity of a concept’, *Pos Eng*, p.71

notion of the sensible aspect to destabilise the intelligible/sensible opposition, is consistent in using ‘name’ against ‘concept’. And this is the reason ‘name’ appears on the side of ‘text’ in this particular text. Elsewhere, and notably in *Sauf le nom*, Derrida addresses the theological resonances of the ‘name’. Derrida’s multiple use of words is usually the mark of textual work, not of lack of consistency. The destabilisation of the sensible/intelligible opposition plays an important role in the Derridean project and it is interwoven with this thesis to such a degree that I cannot maintain an absolute difference between the terms ‘name’ and ‘concept’. Their communication proves to be more than empirical, if by no means a matter of conceptual necessity. Anyway, even in the most traditional of classifications, ‘semiotics’, ‘structuralism’ and ‘deconstruction’ function both as names of historical movements/theories/methods and as concepts belonging to these theories; they are concepts that became generic names. In this chapter we concentrate mostly on their naming function, and in subsequent chapters on the conceptual system that supports them.

New theories have always proposed strategies of naming and concept production, more or less subtle or refined depending on their degree of linguistic self-consciousness. Some of these are considered as improved definitions of existing concepts, others as introduction of new concepts, others again as discoveries of new entities²⁹. In this process, the naming of the theory itself is a highly significant act; whether the name of the theory is selected by its originators or supporters or imposed by its opponents or commentators, whether it occurs through an inaugural choice or *a posteriori*, on purpose or accidentally.

²⁹ See Lakatos, *Proofs and Refutations*, (1976) for the equivalent scientific process

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Structuralists, as bearers of a new theory and proud of it – they actually evangelise the beginning of a ‘new science’³⁰ – have introduced neologisms and have re-defined most of the terms they use. They are very careful to stress that their terms are not to be assigned metaphysical associations carried over from previous usages. Inheriting a positive Enlightenment spirit, they value highly conscious innovation, the moment of epistemic rupture. As Derrida rightly observes, structuralism, as a theoretical move, needs the assumption of a rupture, a disruption. This does not mean that structuralism does not take time and history into account. It just means that

one can describe what is peculiar to the structural organisation [as such] only by not taking into account, in the moment of this description, its past conditions ³¹
[bracket addition my own]

Rupture is a conscious methodological choice. The result is the co-existence of two strategies of naming, which are exemplified by the personae of the *engineer* and the *bricoleur*. On the one hand, structuralists build new systems and terminologies. On the other, they continue to make pragmatic use of old terms, which they detach from their past, treating them just as handy or makeshift tools, to be abandoned when better tools are available. Derrida observes that quite possibly *engineering* is structuralists’ desire, their methodological ideal, while *bricolage* is of necessity their actual condition. In the terms of his famous dictum: ‘the odds are that the *engineer* is a myth produced by the *bricoleur*’³². There is a tension, a paradox, inherent in any critical project: the only tools we can deploy against metaphysics belong to metaphysics and constantly bring us back to it. The only possible difference we can make, according to Derrida, is *in the way*³³ we deal with this paradox. Derrida follows structuralism in the conscious recognition of this paradox but differs as to the belief in the possibility of

³⁰ See chapter 3

³¹ *WD*, p. 368 / *ED*, p.426

³² *WD*, p.360 / *ED*, p.419

³³ ‘*une certaine manière*’, *ED*, p.422 / ‘*in a certain way*’, *WD*, p.364

escaping it. Structuralists consider their terms metaphysically neutral because they provisionally define them as such.

Derrida, on the other hand, has a very different relation to the possibility of the new and is much more suspicious of intentional choice. He is also more conscious of the reasons for which we continue to use the same word, despite our allegedly radical re-definitions. Just as his conception of words incorporates time, so likewise his strategy for dealing with naming incorporates time too. So, instead of the classical definition, he defines through a textual process. His most idiosyncratic strategy is what he calls ‘paleonymics’³⁴, from the Greek ‘*palaion onoma*’ (παλαιόν όνομα), *old name*. The strategy consists in keeping an old name to denote a new concept³⁵, but involves a complicated process. It is inscribed in the double gesture of deconstructive writing, which will be further elaborated in chapter 4, where the project and ‘method’ of deconstruction is specifically described. In *Positions*, Derrida gives an extensive description of ‘paleonymics’:

1. au prélèvement d’un trait prédicatif réduit, tenu en réserve, limité dans une structure conceptuelle donnée, ... *nommée X*;
2. à la dé-limitation, à la greffe et à l’extension réglée de ce prédicat prélevé, le nom X étant maintenu à titre de *levier d’intervention* et pour garder une prise sur l’organisation antérieure qu’il s’agit de transformer effectivement.³⁶

Therefore, in ‘paleonymics’ the ‘old name’ is used as ‘a lever of intervention’ in the old conceptual structure. While the old concept is liberated from its predicates and

³⁴ The French term ‘paléonymie’ (*Mar*, p.392 and *Pos*, p.95) is translated in English by Weber and Mehlman as ‘paleonymics’ (*Lim*, p.21) and by Alan Bass as ‘paleonymy’ (*Mar Eng*, p.329) and as ‘paleonomy’ (*Pos Eng*, p.71). ‘Paleonomy’ is certainly inappropriate, as it seems to refer to ‘nomos’ (law) rather than ‘onoma’ (name). Between ‘paleonymics’ and ‘paleonymy’, I chose the former, although the latter is morphologically closer to the French term. The reason is that ‘paleonymics’ implies more a strategy, while ‘paleonymy’ implies a property, like ‘polysemy’. I use the term ‘paleonymics’ uniformly whenever ‘paléonymie’ is translated.

³⁵ ‘paléonymie ... la nécessité « stratégique » qui commande de garder parfois un *vieux nom* pour amorcer un concept nouveau’, *Pos*, pp.95-96 / ‘paleonymics ... the “strategic” necessity that requires occasional maintenance of an old name in order to launch a new concept’, *Pos Eng*, p.71

³⁶ *Pos*, p.96 / ‘(1) to the extraction of a reduced predicative that is held in reserve, limited in a given conceptual structure... *named X*; (2) to the de-limitation, the grafting and regulated extension of the extracted predicate, the name X being maintained as a kind of *lever of intervention*, in order to maintain a grasp on the previous organisation, which is to be transformed effectively’, *Pos Eng*, p.71

‘grafted’ onto a new set of predicates, the conservation of the old name gives to the new concept ‘the chance and the force, the power of communication’³⁷. This strategy bears certain similarities to the function of Levi-Strausseau *bricolage*. Or rather, it exploits the unavoidable ‘*nature bricolatrice*’ (to commit a disseminating *onomatopoeia*) of semiosis. The significant difference from the structuralist strategy is that this one, instead of ‘bracketing’ the old name’s unwanted connotational burden, has as its structural function to criticise it by a process of transformation. Old names are used not because they can be emptied of their connotations but precisely because they cannot. The process of ‘paleonymics’ is a good example of deconstruction; in a way it could be another name for ‘deconstruction’. Actually, every Derridean neologism functions ‘paleonymically’. Even novel terms, such as ‘différance’ and ‘deconstruction’ itself, draw their power from existing semantic resonances, which are mostly indicated explicitly and critically transformed by a textual process. What must be taken into account is Derrida’s contention that

Un nom ne nomme pas la simplicité ponctuelle d’un concept mais un système de prédicats définissant un concept, une structure conceptuelle *centrée* sur tel ou tel prédicat³⁸.

This is closely related to the deconstructive critique of the concept of the concept, and its logocentric assumptions. The unifying and stabilising ‘concept’ is replaced by the open and generative ‘text’. In imitation of another dictum³⁹, it could be said that ‘the concept is an illusion created by the text’. Therefore, no name – authoritative or other – can unify a text; neither ‘Derrida’ nor ‘deconstruction’. In the Derridean project, names are replaceable through a subtle process of displacement.

³⁷ *Lim*, p.21 / *Mar*, p.393

³⁸ *Pos*, p. 96 / ‘a name does not name the punctual simplicity of a concept, but rather a system of predicates defining a concept, a conceptual structure *centered* on a given predicate’, *Pos Eng*, p.71

³⁹ See footnote 33, in this chapter

2.3. About the naming of deconstruction

Interestingly enough, one of the least replaceable names in the project of deconstruction has proved to be ‘deconstruction’ itself. Crucially, Derrida claims that this was not an intentional act of baptism⁴⁰. Nevertheless, he has more or less accepted it after the fact. The allegedly accidental and extraneous nature of this naming matches perfectly with Derrida’s own positions on intentionality. Theoretically, a number of other names could substitute for deconstruction: writing, *différance*, trace, supplement, *pharmakon* etc. As we shall see, there is a slippery dislocation between words and concepts in the deconstructive project in general. However, the name ‘deconstruction’ seems to prevail both in Derrida’s own accounts of what he does and, most certainly, in the reception and classification of his work. Rodolphe Gasché has noted⁴¹ how ‘deconstruction’ has become the kind of unifying label Derrida so abhorred. As this name has ended up by denoting positions radically different from Derrida’s and provoking too many ill-informed prejudices against his work, Gasché thinks it should be abandoned. He proposes ‘vigilance’ to substitute for ‘deconstruction’. The term ‘vigilance’ appears in ‘Violence et métaphysique’⁴², an early text on Levinas, where it describes the unavoidable violence, ‘a certain other violence’, of a critical project, against the violence of silence. Gasché is right; this is one of the many terms Derrida uses to describe his project. I doubt, however, that it could work as an equally effective substitute for ‘deconstruction’. Firstly, it is the

⁴⁰ See *Pos* and *Let*

⁴¹ In the International Conference: *Following Derrida: Legacies*, organized by the journal *Mosaic*, in Winnipeg, Canada, in October 2006, as posthumous homage to Derrida. He also commented on the unavoidable fate of all theories to be misconstrued and classified in the history of philosophy. After all, every theory claims – by its very existence – to be the right and final one, even the most moderate ones; it is their structural property. Yet, every theory cannot be more than a step in the history of humanity.

⁴² ‘Violence et métaphysique: essai sur la pensée d’ Emmanuel Levinas’, *ED*, (p. 172) / ‘Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas’, *WD*, (p.146); ‘Vigilance’ also comes up repeatedly in later texts, like ‘Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy’, where Derrida is conveying his ambivalent relationship to the heritage of the Enlightenment.

very history of the reception of Derrida's work, including distortions and misconstructions, that now makes it impossible to abandon the name 'deconstruction'. Then, it is the complicated textual work which Derrida has performed on the term 'deconstruction' which is far richer than his use of the term 'vigilance'. Finally, there are certain structural aspects that make 'deconstruction' more amenable to Derridean games and more representative of his project. Significantly, it is ambiguous as to its active or passive nature; a text 'deconstructs' itself and 'is deconstructed', at the same time. 'Vigilance', on the other hand, is quite clearly the act of a subject. Additionally, the term 'deconstruction' – as we shall see below – carries resonances of the two main philosophical affiliations of Derrida's project: phenomenology and structuralism. For these many reasons, I think that 'deconstruction' is an appropriate name.

One understands that the deconstruction of the name cannot but affect to the highest degree the name 'deconstruction'. Its definitional structure is inter-linked with other Derridean terms such as 'différance' and 'écriture' – all of which are playing between neologism and paleonymics. They share a peculiar difficulty of definition. Often it is said of them that they are not concepts, not even words⁴³. Derrida has occasionally compared the naming of 'deconstruction' with the strategies of naming, or not being able to name, God. It is a comparison by similarity⁴⁴ or by opposition⁴⁵, or rather both simultaneously⁴⁶. We know nothing of God but His name – not even the name. Like Dasein, deconstruction is not in the ontic realm of beings; like the God of negative theology, it is beyond Being; but unlike God, this is not a positive beyond, it is not another kind of Being, it is the very impossibility of transcendence. In a

⁴³ This issue will be addressed in chapter 4.

⁴⁴ *Nom*, p.56

⁴⁵ pp. 82-83 of 'Limited Inc a b c...', in *Lim*; and 'Ellipse' in *ED* / 'Ellipsis' in *WD*

⁴⁶ *Let*, p.3

negative reminiscence of negative theology: deconstruction is not. 'Deconstruction' is not a name. 'Deconstruction' is just a name. Can anything be less just than a name?

In the 'Letter to A Japanese Friend', where he tries to help with the translation of the term 'deconstruction' into Japanese, Derrida writes the famous aphorism: 'What deconstruction is not? Everything, of course! What is deconstruction? Nothing, of course!'⁴⁷. In the same letter, he gives information about the historical and structural genealogy of the word, which information has been widely used by Derrida's commentators as a substitute for its definition. After an introductory paragraph describing the circumstances of the exchange, the text starts with the sentence:

When I chose the word, or when it imposed itself on me – I think it was in *Of Grammatology* – I little thought it would be credited with such a central role in the discourse that interested me at the time

The claim that he 'little thought it would be credited with such a central role' initiates a series of disavowals of the name 'deconstruction' by Derrida, who appeared worried by the momentum this name had gained. Understandably, he was thinking it could take the role of a 'transcendental signified'⁴⁸, which would totally contradict his project. Following his lead, most favourable commentators insist on the accidental history of this naming; either to exonerate the 'master' of his followers' sins or to save the project from inconsistencies. This discourse has turned out to inflate rather than deflate the name 'deconstruction' and is now, I believe, part of 'what deconstruction is'.

⁴⁷ *Let*, p.5. In the English translation, one wonders whether 'of course' refers to 'nothing', or 'nothing' to 'of course'. Unfortunately, the French leaves no such ambiguities: 'Ce que la déconstruction n'est pas ? mais tout ! / Qu' est-ce que la déconstruction ? mais rien !'

⁴⁸ This term is introduced by Derrida and will be dealt with in chapter 4. It denotes a signified that appears to escape the semiotic system, and therefore centers and stabilises it. This is the metaphysical gesture par excellence; what deconstruction deconstructs.

The ‘incidental’ history apart, there is indeed a consistency in this disavowal, an effect of dramatic symmetry, whether intended or not. As the phrasing ‘it imposed itself on me’ implies, and as implied by the entirety of Derrida’s work, there is a questioning of the notion of authorial intention. Twice Derrida’s authorial intention and control is questioned here: firstly in the choice of the word and secondly in the role this word acquires. In the first instance, where the word ‘imposed itself on [him]’, one may hear the implication of a metaphysical *intentio operis* or even a divine inspiration. This would be a wrong assumption, as any reader of Derrida will understand. It is not a question of substituting something else for the author but of destabilising the authorial position. That is why he writes ‘when I chose the word, *or* when it imposed itself on me’ [my Italics]; this ‘or’ is neither an alternative nor a correction, it means an addition and a ‘sameness’⁴⁹. Any choice of any word would be subject to deconstruction but this observation does not contradict the empirical experience of choice, at least for someone accepting the general Derridean argument. Therefore, Derrida proceeds to describe his intentions and the process of choosing the word ‘deconstruction’. Now, the second instance of questioning his authorial control concerns the role that the word subsequently acquired. Even accepting this claim at face value, it fits perfectly with deconstruction – and the perfect fit introduces doubts about the claim’s ‘sincerity’. Deconstruction destabilises various oppositional couples, among others necessity/contingency and before/after, as belonging to Western metaphysics. Consequently, there is no fundamental difference between an accidental choice and a structurally essential choice; or between a choice before or after the fact. ‘A posteriori a priori’ is the temporality of deconstruction. And, finally,

⁴⁹ This peculiar logic is further explained in chapter 4.

in this context, any question as to the ‘sincerity’ of the claim itself is meaningless; what is important is that it repeats the double gesture of deconstruction.

Further, the claim that he did not intend ‘deconstruction’ to gain ‘such a central role in [his] discourse’ has two possible explanations: it may mean (a) that it was not his intention that the description of ‘deconstruction’ be identified as a description of his project; or (b) that it was not his intention that ‘deconstruction’ be chosen above others as the sole name of his project. I argue that the former is refuted and the latter is relatively insignificant.

The term ‘deconstruction’ appears in all three of the books that he published in 1967: *De la grammatologie*, *L’écriture et la différence*, and *La voix et le phénomène*. These are his first independent books; they are only preceded by the long introductory essay to his translation of Husserl’s *Origin of Geometry*, in 1962, where the term ‘deconstruction’ does not appear. The term is mostly used in *De la grammatologie*, which is probably the work that established it. In the first part of the book, where Derrida’s project is presented in by far its most systematic form, the term ‘deconstruction’ and its derivatives appear 21 times⁵⁰ in 130 pages (once every 6.5 pages). One may observe that this is not such a high frequency. ‘Deconstruction’’s appearances are by far outnumbered by those of the words ‘writing’ and ‘difference’, for example. They are significant, however, and distributed in the entire text. And there is a programmatic ambience, whenever the term appears. One third of the occurrences⁵¹ are combined with the verbs ‘falloir’ or ‘devoir’ (‘it must’); many of them are in sentences in the future tense or in conditional, implying imperative; once

⁵⁰ pp 21, 25, 26, 33, 35 (twice), 39 (twice), 55, 68, 71, 89 (twice), 91, 97, 99, 107 (three times), 124, 128; obviously, I count the occurrences in the original French.

⁵¹ 25, 33, 89, 99, 107, 107, 124

‘deconstruction’ is considered a ‘necessity’⁵²; it is also termed a ‘work’⁵³ and an ‘enterprise’⁵⁴. There is no doubt that ‘deconstruction’ is what Derrida calls us to do⁵⁵. He finds his project, or elements of his project, in the texts that he reads (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Saussure, Peirce, Hjeltmslev etc), because of the complicated relation he has with the notion of novelty. He insists, however, on the demarcation between ‘deconstruction’ and its ancestry. Throughout *De la grammatologie*, there is not an absolute consistency in terminology. Concepts are clarified through the progress of writing, not only because of the usual Derridean playful strategies but also possibly because it is an early work and written over a long period of time. ‘Deconstruction’ in its noun form appears as ‘déconstruction’ (10 times) or ‘dé-construction’ (3 times), with (twice) or without quotes. The verb form is ‘déconstruire’ (8 times). I could not discover any clearly-marked difference in meaning between the different forms. The first part of *De la grammatologie* was initially published independently as an article in January 1966. Taking into account Derrida’s own words, ‘I think it was in *Of Grammatology*’⁵⁶, we can count this as the public birthday of ‘deconstruction’.

As I mentioned earlier, the term also appears in the other two books that Derrida published in 1967. In *L’écriture et la différence*, which includes essays initially published between 1959 and 1967, the term appears twice⁵⁷: once in each of the two final essays, first made public in 1966 and 1967 respectively. Although all the essays describe and pursue more or less the same project, ‘deconstruction’ as a term does not appear before 1966. The text ‘La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours

⁵² ‘nécessité’, p.107

⁵³ ‘travail’, p.26, ‘qui travaille’, p.35

⁵⁴ ‘entreprise’, p.39

⁵⁵ Strictly speaking, deconstruction is not something someone can ‘do’ but let us use the verb here provisionally.

⁵⁶ *Let*, p.1

⁵⁷ pp 414, 429

des sciences humaines’ was delivered in October 1966 at the famous conference held in the John Hopkins University⁵⁸; it is, therefore, officially posterior to the first part of *De la grammatologie*, though it could have been written at the same time. The extract including ‘deconstruction’ is clearly normative and self-descriptive again:

Il s’agit là d’un rapport critique au langage des sciences humaines et d’une responsabilité critique du discours. Il s’agit de poser expressément et systématiquement le problème du statut d’un discours empruntant à un héritage les ressources nécessaires à la dé-construction de cet héritage lui-même. Problème d’économie et de stratégie.⁵⁹ [Italics are Derrida’s, the underlining is mine]

‘Ellipse’, on the other hand, is the last essay of the collection and was written specifically for it. The verb ‘déconstruire’ appears on its first page, not in a particularly prominent position. Still, being on the first page and denoting what ‘we’ may do in vain, it can’t be judged insignificant either. In *La voix et le phénomène*, the term ‘deconstruction’ also has a marginal place, appearing just three times⁶⁰. In pages 57-58, a description and a definition are given. It is quite clear that this ‘deconstruction’ is a process Derrida is engaged with and which is interlinked with a system of differences.

We have shown that the question of whether ‘deconstruction’ is a name for Derrida’s project can be answered safely in the affirmative. I think we also have enough indications that this was an intentional choice on Derrida’s part, from the moment of its first appearances. About the question of whether he initially chose the term above all others as the sole name of his project, the chances are that he didn’t. At least in *L’écriture et la différence* and *La voix et le phénomène* his use of the term is

⁵⁸ Symposium: ‘The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man’; participated among others: Eugenio Donato, Lucien Goldman, Tzvetan Todorov, Roland Barthes, Jean Hyppolite, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Pierre Vernant; published in 1971 under the title *The Structuralist Controversy*.

⁵⁹ *ED*, p.414 / ‘Here it is a question both of a critical relation to the language of the social sciences and a critical responsibility of the discourse itself. It is a question of explicitly and systematically posing the problem of the status of a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself. A problem of *economy* and *strategy*.’, *WD*, pp.356-7

⁶⁰ pp 57-8, 83 (twice)

rare and peripheral, though considering Derrida's positions with regard to essence and centrality this can hardly be considered a conclusive argument. In *De la grammatologie*, on the other hand, as we have shown, he seems to favour the term. He even writes: 'la dernière intention du présent essai. Cette déconstruction'⁶¹. It strains credibility that Derrida should have unintentionally used two of his own 'forbidden'⁶² terms, 'intention' and 'présent', together with the new term. So they must mark something important, at least for this particular book. It is not difficult to imagine how the prominence of the term here led to its adoption by Derrida's readers as the general name of his project. The first part of *De la grammatologie* has the form of an academic exposition and was more widely read and possibly better understood than his other works. It is also expressly described as a 'theoretical matrix' of his work. So, if he names his project 'deconstruction' in *De la grammatologie*, it is reasonable to assume that this is the name of his project. His complicated questioning of naming had not yet infiltrated the minds of his readers. Furthermore, their assumption was reinforced by the paper 'La structure, le signe et le jeu' which he delivered in the Baltimore conference, the event that made Derrida more widely known. The result was that the Derridean project became known to friends and enemies as 'deconstruction', and it little matters whether its author would prefer to call it by a

⁶¹ *Gram*, p.103 / *De la grammatologie*, 1967 was translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as *Of Grammatology*, 1997. For the translation of the citation, see the next footnote.

⁶² By saying that they are 'forbidden', what I mean is that the terms 'intention' and 'present' are closely interwoven with the Western metaphysical tradition and, therefore, their unqualified use is avoided by Derrida. The English translation is even more anti-Derridean, to dazzling effect: 'my final intention in this book. This deconstruction' *Gram Eng*, p.70. Here we have the accumulation of five 'forbidden' terms: 'my', 'final', 'intention', 'this', 'book'. One should observe that, firstly, 'final intention' would be the translation of 'intention finale', which includes implications of teleology. 'La dernière intention' of the original could simply be 'the last intention'. Secondly, a 'book' is a significantly more closed entity than an 'essay'. Thirdly, in the original, the intention is attributed to the essay, not to the author, which is rather more consistent with Derrida's positions. Of course, 'présent' is much stronger than the deictic 'this'. However, Derrida lightens its use with the word that follows 'déconstruction', which is precisely 'présence'. So, the *present* essay deconstructs *presence*. In any way, the English version is evidence to the translator's understanding of the book.

multitude of equivalent names. In any case, by the time of *Positions*, in 1972, the collection of interviews that followed the 1967 books, Derrida seems to have accepted the name, at least as a generally recognised convention.

Returning to the initial sentence of the ‘Letter’, it remains to be pointed out that ‘deconstruction’ has gained ‘a central role in the discourse’ of Derrida in general and not only in what ‘interested [him] at the time’. The specification ‘at the time’ seems to imply that the term ‘deconstruction’ is connected to a particular period of his work. This, in hindsight, has proved to be false. On the one hand, through the process of public appropriation that I have already described, ‘deconstruction’ has become the name-label of Derrida’s entire ‘corpus’; a corpus that if it was not accepted structurally as such by his author, has at any rate become empirically definable after the historical fact of his death. My observation and the working hypothesis of this thesis is that – despite its wide range – the method, principles and objectives of Derrida’s work remain the same. It is, therefore, appropriate that the name used to describe it remained correspondingly the same. On the other hand, since 1966 and throughout his life, Derrida used constantly, but not exclusively, the term ‘deconstruction’ as a characterisation of his own project, always keeping a cautious distance through qualified expressions. In 1980, in ‘Ponctuations’, where he gives an overview of his work, Derrida acknowledges that ‘Tout cela rassemble sous le titre de la *déconstruction*’⁶³.

As I have mentioned earlier, ‘deconstruction’ has proved exceptionally effective for naming the Derridean project, among other reasons because it seems to carry resonances of the double philosophical ancestry of the project: phenomenology

⁶³ p. 447 of ‘Ponctuations: le temps de la thèse’ (1980) in *Du droit à la philosophie*, 1990 / ‘All this was assembled under the title of deconstruction’. ‘Ponctuations’ was delivered orally by Derrida in 1980 during the viva of his *doctorat d’Etat* at Sorbonne and was first published in English three years later.

and structuralism. All his three books of 1967, that introduced the term, are explicitly concerned with this double tradition; every text of his since then bears its marks; and he often openly acknowledges it⁶⁴. The following two subsections, 2.4. and 2.5., will try to trace the double origin of both the project and the term. Allegedly, the structuralist resonance of the term was not planned or intended by Derrida. This lack of planning, however, refers to the particular connotational burden of the *term* alone. Nowhere does he question the structural and intentional relation of his *project* with structuralism. From the next chapter, my thesis deals with the structuralist connection of the project of deconstruction, and is no longer particularly interested in the term ‘deconstruction’ itself.

2.4. ‘Déconstruction’: from ‘Destruktion’ and phenomenology

Derrida has shown a keen and profound interest in phenomenology since the beginning of his academic career, as he recounts in ‘Ponctuations’. Both his Master’s⁶⁵ and unfinished Doctoral Thesis⁶⁶ were on Husserl, and his first published book was the translation with a lengthy critical introduction of Husserl’s *Origin of Geometry*⁶⁷. This interest is evident in his three books of 1967, both in conceptual vocabulary and subject matter; one of them is dedicated to Husserl again, *La voix et le phénomène*, while in *L’écriture et la différence* most essays address questions of phenomenology and two are directly and primarily dedicated to it, “‘Genèse et structure’ et la phénoménologie’ and ‘Violence et métaphysique’. Most of the essays

⁶⁴ See particularly *Ponc*

⁶⁵ ‘La problème de la genèse dans la philosophie de Husserl’ (The problem of genesis in the philosophy of Husserl), written in 1954 and published in 1990

⁶⁶ Started in 1957 with the title ‘L’idéalité de l’objet littéraire’ (The ideality of the literary object), under the supervision of Jean Hyppolite.

⁶⁷ *Edmund Husserl, L’origine de la géométrie: traduction et introduction*, 1962 / Derrida’s essay was translated in English by John P. Leavey, Jr as *Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, 1989, with Husserl’s text as an appendix.

in *L'écriture et la différence* address questions of structuralism too, while two of them and the entirety of *De la grammatologie* are dedicated to structuralism, but we will deal with this other affiliation in 2.5.

Phenomenology⁶⁸ is one of the main philosophical paradigms of modernity. It was initiated by the work of Edmund Husserl and particularly his *Logical Investigations* in 1900-1. It is a movement, a discipline, and a method. It aims at a description of the ultimate irreducible elements of consciousness, which it finds in the flow of pure, unmediated experience. Its domain of study is conscious experience from the first-person point of view and its conditions of possibility. Phenomenology should not be confused with 'phenomenism', which studies what *appears* as opposed to what *is* in-itself. For phenomenology there is no opposition between essence and appearance and, therefore, the 'phenomenon'⁶⁹ is redefined in a somewhat paradoxical way. For phenomenology, the phenomenon, the thing as it shows itself, is the irreducible origin, which is found in the pure flow of experience as experience and precedes every concept and every judgement. Its method introduces a 'bracketing' of all the prejudices that cloud our experience of things themselves. This 'bracketing', also called 'phenomenological reduction' and 'epoche', does not mean forgetting or abstracting, but momentarily not using or suspending. There are four successive

⁶⁸ For my overview of phenomenology I used the following sources: Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 1927; Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos, *Epistemologies of Meaning, Structuralism and Semiotics*, 2004; David Allison, 'Husserl' and Robert Bernasconi, 'Heidegger' in *Understanding Derrida*, ed. by Jack Reynolds and Jonathan Roffe, 2004; Georges Gurvitch, 'Husserl' and Françoise Dastur 'Martin Heidegger' in *History of Philosophy, Encyclopédie de la Pléiade*, (1974), Greek trans. 1987; Gérard Granel, 'Observations on the approach of the thought of Martin Heidegger "Sein Und Zeit"' and René Schérer, 'Husserl, phenomenology and its developments' in *Philosophy*, ed. by François Châtelet, (1979), Greek trans. 1990; the entry 'Phenomenology' in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. by Ted Honderich, 1995; and in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, in the Internet, 2003.

⁶⁹ 'Phenomenon', latinization of the Greek 'φαινόμενον'. According the dictionaries of N.P. Andriotis and Ioannis Stamatakos, 'φαινόμενον' is the present participle of the passive voice of the ancient Greek verb 'φαίνω', i.e. to bring to light. Therefore, 'phenomenon' literally means 'that which is brought to light', 'that which appears'. Traditionally in philosophy, since Plato, 'phenomena' are the appearances, usually opposed to 'noumena'.

stages of reduction: (a) historical reduction, where we bracket the historical context; (b) existential reduction, where we leave pending the question of the existence of the perceived thing; (c) eidetic reduction, where we are interested in the eidos of the perceived thing and not its particular instantiations; and finally, (d) transcendental reduction, where we return to the transcendental consciousness as condition of possibility. Some of the best-known slogans of phenomenology, as defined by Husserl, are ‘the return to the things themselves’, ‘the intentionality of consciousness’, ‘the lived experience’ and ‘the demand for scientificity’.

After Husserl, many other philosophers have written in the frame of phenomenology, often redrawing it radically. Heidegger and Sartre have been among the most influential and most radically divergent from Husserl. Heidegger’s version of phenomenology is of particular interest here, as it has avowedly influenced the Derridean approach. Heidegger starts by distinguishing beings from Being. He uses phenomenology as a method no longer oriented toward phenomena but toward phenomenality. Its ultimate destination is the Ground of Being. This primordial origin has been forgotten since the beginning of history, and metaphysics is the name of this forgetfulness. Heidegger opposes Husserl’s demand for scientificity, as well as his emphasis on consciousness and subjectivity, as deeply embedded in metaphysics. He promotes an idiosyncratic form of philosophical etymology, as he believes that ‘language is the dwelling-place of Being’. Sartrean existentialism exercises an anthropomorphic (mis)reading of Heidegger. It is a practical and committed philosophy, centred on the issues of freedom and subjectivity. It was the dominant philosophy in France before the rise of structuralism, which fervently opposed it⁷⁰.

⁷⁰ François Dosse, *Histoire du structuralisme t.1*, 1992, pp.19-25

Derrida engages with phenomenology in two principal ways: (a) He considers Husserl as the last and paradigmatic case of Western metaphysics to be deconstructed⁷¹; (b) he considers himself inheritor of a line of destructors of metaphysics, the last of which is Heidegger. Things are more complicated than that of course, as they always are where Derrida is concerned. Derrida is deeply indebted to Husserl, as to the entirety of the philosophical tradition, while he clearly demarcates himself from Heidegger, whom he sees – contrary to Heidegger’s own estimate – as deeply implicated in Western metaphysics. However, the general nature of his relation to phenomenology consists in this double move and has a certain analogy to Heideggerian philosophy. As David Allison rightly observes, the novelty of Derrida’s interpretation of Husserl is that he does not organise Husserl’s philosophy under one of the issues that this philosophy directly introduces but ‘by the examination of a certain prejudice – namely, the epistemological and metaphysical value of presence’⁷². He finds in Husserl the set of essential distinctions that constitute the basis of traditional metaphysics, which he precisely names the ‘metaphysics of presence’ and poses as the object of deconstruction in his entire work. This counter-metaphysical gesture Derrida traces back to Nietzsche, Freud and, finally, Heidegger⁷³.

In ‘L’Oreille de l’autre’ in 1979, Derrida claims that his first use of the term ‘deconstruction’ was a translation of a Heideggerian term with marginal importance in his thought, and that it was only when others valorised it in the context of structuralism that he tried to define it rigorously in his own manner. In the ‘Letter’ in

⁷¹ *Pos*, p.13 / *Pos Eng*, p.5

⁷² ‘Husserl’, in *Understanding Derrida* (p.113)

⁷³ See, for example, *ED* and *Pos*

1983, he says of ‘deconstruction’ that when he used it initially, possibly in *De la grammatologie*:

Among other things, I wished to translate and adapt to my own ends the Heideggerian word *Destruktion* or *Abbau*. Each signified in this context an operation bearing on the structure or traditional architecture of the fundamental concepts of ontology or Western metaphysics.⁷⁴

The narrative goes on to describe how the canonical translation into the French ‘destruction’ had overtly negative implications, closer to the Nietzschean project than Heidegger’s and Derrida’s own. The word ‘déconstruction’ ‘came to [him] it seemed quite spontaneously’ and then he looked it up on the dictionary. It was a rarely used French word that included a ‘mechanical’ sense that suited his purposes⁷⁵. Its use value has since been determined by the discourse by and on Derrida.

For Heidegger, ‘Destruktion’⁷⁶ is the last of three components of phenomenological method – reduction, construction, destruction – which are mutually implied by each other. It is ‘a critical process in which the traditional concepts, which at first must be employed, are un-constructed down to the sources from which they were drawn’⁷⁷. The term first appears and is mainly used in *Being and Time* in 1927. Robert Bernasconi observes, however, that Derrida used the term to describe and correspond to the project of late Heidegger, at least a decade later⁷⁸, of overcoming metaphysics. In late Heidegger, the history of Western philosophy is perceived as a history of forgetfulness of Being. The stress is in on this forgetfulness, whose name is ‘metaphysics’. Philosophy’s task, therefore, is to find itself again through a productive

⁷⁴ *Let*, p.1

⁷⁵ Derrida is interested in the ‘mechanical’ sense of ‘communication’, in order to destabilise its ‘subject-oriented’ sense, as he explains in ‘Signature, événement, contexte’ in *Mar*, 1972 and later in *Papier Machine: Le ruban de machine à écrire et autres réponses*, 2001

⁷⁶ For ‘Destruktion’, apart from the sources mentioned in footnote 69, I also used: Hans-Georg Gadamer, ‘Destruktion and Deconstruction’ in *Jacques Derrida*, ed. by Christopher Norris and David Roden, 2003.

⁷⁷ *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, p. 23.

⁷⁸ After the mid-thirties, and clearly expressed in his *Nietzsche* in 1961

destruction of its own history, the history of metaphysics. Philosophy has to destroy its own ontological concepts in order to find itself.

It is obvious that there are many similarities between the late Heidegger's and Derrida's project. However, there are also very significant differences. I would even agree with Bernasconi that 'deconstruction' 'was introduced to initiate a radical confrontation with Heidegger's thought'⁷⁹. The most striking difference between the two is Heidegger's discourse on the Ground, the source and inaugural moment of philosophy. To destroy a mistaken tradition, in his case, means the search for an originary, primordial truth. This is not Derrida's position. For him, the search for the condition of possibility has no end. As a result, an important difference lies in the positivity of Heidegger's project as opposed to Derrida's 'double register'. For Heidegger, destruction is a fully enacted gesture which can reach the origin, at least in certain privileged moments. For Derrida, the exit from metaphysics can never be enacted and the origin has never existed and never will. The different connotations of the very terms are significant. 'Destruktion'/destruction implies a complete ruination. On the other hand, 'déconstruction'/de-construction implies an untangling of elements that compose something, maybe the undoing of a structure but not a complete devastation. Derrida argues in the 'Letter' that the element of untangling is already contained in the Heideggerian notion, which is moderate if compared to the Nietzschean 'demolition'. However, it is Derrida who stresses this element and introduces the double structure to the concept and the term. After all, he does 'not just translate' – Destruktion and the philosophical tradition in general – but 'adapt[s] [it] to [his] own ends'⁸⁰. As Marian Hobson suggests, a double structure is implied by the

⁷⁹ 'Heidegger' in *Understanding Derrida* (p 121)

⁸⁰ *Let*, p.1

double prefixes ‘de’ and ‘con’: ‘Does the *de* apply to the *con*, or do they simultaneously gesture to different though not opposed directions?’⁸¹ So the novel term ‘deconstruction’ already points to the characteristically Derridean ‘double register’, i.e. both accepting and criticising the philosophical tradition, using the deconstructed tools of the object of his deconstruction. Deconstruction, in transformed Kantian terms, searches for the conditions of (im)possibility of philosophy; and its name implies precisely that.

Possibly the first appearance of the term ‘déconstruction’, on page 21 of *De la grammatologie*, seems indeed to be a translation from Heidegger

la destruction, non pas la démolition mais la dé-sédimentation, la dé-
construction de toutes les significations qui ont leur source dans celle de logos.
En particulier la signification de *vérité*. [Italics are Derrida’s, underlining mine]

To consolidate the resonance, the name of Heidegger appears two lines later. Interestingly enough, however, it is in order that Heidegger be included among the objects of deconstruction and not that he be credited with its paternity. After all, the specified object of deconstruction is truth, which was the ultimate objective for its Heideggerian counterpart. From the 21 appearances of the term in the first part of the book, nine are in relative close proximity to the name of Heidegger and at least another three are close to recognisably Heideggerian terminology such as ‘arche’, ‘finitude’, or ‘history of metaphysics’. The relation to Heidegger is ambiguous, though, as he is included as either the source of the method, or its object, or usually both. Additionally, Heidegger is not presented as the only source of inspiration for the project of ‘deconstruction’: on the one hand, he is twice related to Nietzsche in this regard; on the other, the term ‘deconstruction’ also appears in the context of discussions of Saussure, Peirce and Hjelmlev, who are also indicated as ancestors of

⁸¹ *Opening lines*, 1998, p.16

the method. So we should speak of ‘reference to’ or ‘adaptation from’ rather than ‘translation of’ the Heideggerian notion.

In ‘La structure, le signe et le jeu’ in *L’écriture et la différence*, ‘deconstruction’ makes its only appearance, on page 414, just after the description of the tensional relationship of the new science of structural anthropology with the Eurocentric tradition. It takes its place as the culmination of a line of ‘destructors of metaphysics’ that are lined up two pages before: Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger. The term used repeatedly in connection with these three names and, finally, with structural anthropology is ‘destruction’. ‘Deconstruction’ is used only once and in order to describe what Derrida is proposing. So the term is not introduced, as the ‘Letter’ implied, to differentiate Heidegger from Nietzsche but rather to differentiate Derrida himself from his ancestral line of Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger and structuralism. The other appearance of the term in the same book is on page 429, in ‘Ellipse’, a text in quasi-poetic style which avoids the immediate reference to any philosopher’s name but which reverberates with echoes of them – particularly Nietzsche, but also Heidegger and Lacan. *La voix et le phénomène*, on the other hand, could justifiably be conceived as a certain Heideggerian reading of Husserl and in this context any use of the term ‘deconstruction’ can be considered a translation, adapted as it may be, of the Heideggerian term. Two of its three appearances are located in a paragraph clearly engaged with a Heideggerian thematic – the verb ‘be’ – which paragraph, earlier (in a parenthesis), includes his name. The sentences in question are:

Le privilège de l’être ne peut pas résister à la déconstruction du mot. *Etre* est le premier ou le dernier mot à résister à la déconstruction d’un langage des mots.⁸²
[Italics are Derrida’s, underlinings mine]

⁸² *La voix et le phénomène*, 1967, p.83 / translated in English by David B. Allison as *Speech and Phenomena: and other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Language*, 1973, p.74: ‘The prerogative of being cannot withstand the deconstruction of the word. To *be* is the first or the last word to withstand the deconstruction of a language of words’

In *Positions*, the collection of interviews published in 1972, one observes an interesting development from interview to interview. In the first interview, of December 1967, immediately after the publication of the three books, the two⁸³ appearances of ‘deconstruction’ (in verb form) are in proximity to Heidegger’s name, and in one of the two cases it is explicitly attributed to him. In the 1968 interview, none of the three⁸⁴ appearances of the term are in any way connected with Heidegger’s name, although two of them have as their object ‘the history of metaphysics’. Finally, in the 1971 interview, of the 32⁸⁵ appearances of the term, the only three⁸⁶ occurrences where it is related to Heidegger are in a paragraph where Derrida explains the differences between them. He actually insists that

J’ai marqué, très explicitement et, on pourra le vérifier, dans *tous* les essais que j’ai publiés, un *écart* par rapport à la problématique heideggerienne.⁸⁷ [Italics are Derrida’s own]

It seems that by this time ‘deconstruction’ has been clearly defined ‘in [Derrida’s] own manner’. In the essay ‘Les fins de l’homme’⁸⁸, delivered in 1968 and published in the 1972 volume *Marges de la philosophie*, for example, he writes of three kinds of deconstruction. First is the Heideggerian kind, second is ‘the one which dominates France today’⁸⁹, and third is the kind that he proposes: ‘A new writing [that] must weave and interlace these two motifs of deconstruction’.

⁸³ pp.15, 19

⁸⁴ pp. 30, 48 (twice)

⁸⁵ pp. 56, 57 (twice), 63, 64, 68, 69, 70, 72, 73, 75, 78 (twice), 88 (twice), 98 (three times), 93 (twice), 109 (twice), 116 (twice), 118 (twice), 125 (three times), 129 (twice)

⁸⁶ pp. 72, 73, 75

⁸⁷ p. 73 / *Pos Eng*, p. 54: ‘I have marked quite explicitly, in *all* the essays I have published, as can be verified, a *departure* from the Heideggerian problematic’.

⁸⁸ *Mar*, p. 162-3 / *Mar Eng*, p.135

⁸⁹ John P. Leavey (in his Preface of *Or Eng*, p. 5) interprets this phrase as referring to structuralism. Another possibility, considering the rest of the essay, could be Marxism. If we take into account the fact that the particular essay was first delivered orally in 1968, the chances are that what is meant is an amalgam of the two.

Before leaving the phenomenological origin of the term ‘deconstruction’ aside, we should also briefly address its second presumptive source in the term ‘Abbau’ (dismantling). In the ‘Letter’, Derrida seems to consider the two terms more or less synonymous, ‘the Heideggerian word *Destruktion* or *Abbau*’⁹⁰ [underlining mine]. Rodolphe Gasché⁹¹ sketches the history of the terms. It seems that Husserl was the first to use the term ‘Destruktion’, which was later to be differently defined and used by Heidegger, while Heidegger first used the term ‘Abbau’ which then became a Husserlian term. The terms obviously communicate philosophically with each other, particularly considering that Heidegger develops his concept on the basis of Husserlian philosophy. Husserl uses the term ‘mental destructions’ for the three first kinds of reduction. In contrast to these, what Husserl names in 1938 ‘Abbau’ is transcendental reduction. Heidegger, on the other hand, uses both the terms interchangeably for his concept of ‘Destruktion’ which we discussed earlier – and this explains the passage cited earlier from Derrida. The phenomenological line of deconstruction’s ancestry, therefore, can be traced back to the transcendental phenomenological reduction. There is also a specific technique of Derrida’s that has its source in phenomenological reduction, in general, and Heidegger, in particular: the technique of ‘putting under erasure’. The technique deals with the problem that such approach has necessarily to use terms which are inadequate. It consists in writing the word, crossing it out and, then, printing both the word and the deletion. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak⁹² explains, Heidegger used this technique in *Zur Seinsfrage* to deal philosophically with the impossibility of defining Being. Derrida’s questioning, as we shall see, goes further and the technique is modified to accommodate it.

⁹⁰ *Let*, p. 1

⁹¹ ‘Abbau, Destruktion, Deconstruction’, in *The Tain of the Mirror*, 1986, pp.109-120

⁹² Introduction to the *Gram Eng*, pp. xiv - xvii

There is no doubt about the strong relationship between Derrida's project and phenomenology. Its other chief line of philosophical ancestry leads back to structuralism.

2.5. 'Déconstruction': from 'structure' and structuralism

Structuralism makes an equally strong appearance with phenomenology in Derrida's three early landmark books of 1967, and many of his texts since. As we have mentioned, of the three 1967 books, one is entirely dedicated to structuralism, *De la grammatologie*, which was also Derrida's *thèse de troisième cycle*. Most of the essays in *L'écriture et la différence* address questions of structuralism and two are immediately dedicated to it, 'Force et signification' and 'La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines'. Even the essay on phenomenology, "'Genèse et structure" et la phénoménologie', chooses to address the issue of 'structure' and general structuralism. One should remember that, in the mid-sixties, when Derrida started his philosophical career, structuralism was the established socio-scientific ideology in France, while the increasingly fashionable movement of post-structuralism still shared most of its conceptual vocabulary. Even phenomenology at the time was subject to a structuralist reading. As Derrida recalls in 1980, in 'Ponctuations':

...tout ce qui semblait alors dominer le massif le plus visible, le plus voyant et parfois le plus fertile de la production théorique française et qu'on appelait sans doute abusivement 'structuralisme', sous ses différentes formes⁹³.

⁹³ *Ponc*, p.447 / 'all that which seemed then dominating the most visible, the most visionary [or far-seeing?] and often the most fertile volume of the French theoretic production and which we called, doubtlessly abusively, "structuralism", under its different forms'

Structuralism⁹⁴ is a movement that characterized the twentieth century – despite the fact of its not being very popular in Britain – and still influences our way of thinking, particularly through the incorporation of many of its insights into the conceptual vocabulary of the social and human sciences. It spread from Geneva to Moscow and Prague, from Copenhagen to Paris; from linguistics to anthropology and cultural studies, from art to politics, from psychoanalysis to the social and even natural sciences; it influenced the rising of May '68; and then Post-structuralism, Deconstruction and the several Post-modernisms. As Michel Foucault wrote in 1966, 'Structuralism is not just a new method – it is the awakened and restless consciousness of modern knowledge'⁹⁵. Some of the key figures of the movement are Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson and Louis Hjelmslev, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes; and, with the addition of a certain 'post' prefix, Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida himself.

'Structure', which christens the movement, is obviously among its central and self-defining notions. 'Structural'⁹⁶ is both the model of knowledge and the specific method to attain knowledge. It is very difficult to cover all the subtle varieties of the concept of structure, as it passes from one level to another, from one author to another, from one theory to another, from one field to another. However, the central importance of the concept means that it is the definition of the term that determines what structuralism is and who is a structuralist. As Jean-Marie Auzias⁹⁷ observes, too

⁹⁴ For the historical overview of structuralism I used mainly the following sources: Jean-Marie Auzias *Clefs pour le structuralisme*, 3rd ed., 1971; Emile Benveniste, "'Structure" en linguistique' (1962), in *Problèmes de linguistique générale, t.1*, 1966; François Dosse, *Histoire du structuralisme*, tomes I and II, 1992; Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos, *Epistemologies of Meaning, Structuralism and Semiotics*, 2004; David Robey ed., *Structuralism: an introduction*, 1973.

⁹⁵ 'Le structuralisme n'est pas une méthode nouvelle : il est la conscience éveillée et inquiète du savoir moderne', *Les mots et les choses*, 1966, p.221

⁹⁶ The English word 'structural' translates both the French terms 'structurel' and 'structural'. The difference between the two will be discussed in Chapter 3.

⁹⁷ *Clefs pour le structuralisme*, p. 199

restrictive a definition of structure may result to the exclusion from structuralism of important representatives of the movement. I will attempt an exposition of the fundamental characteristics of (structuralist) structure in Chapter 3 of the thesis. For the time being, let us stress that structuralism uses a particular conception of structure, as defined by ‘structural semiotics’; this conception of structure is closely intertwined with the main theoretical principles of the movement.

François Dosse⁹⁸ traces the history of the use of the term ‘structure’. The notion of ‘structure’ initially had a distinctively architectural meaning; it meant ‘the way something is built’. In the 17th century the term was widened to include living creatures, organisms. It referred to the way the parts of a being are organized into a totality. Finally, the term was used in a more abstract sense, for the first time as late as the 19th century, by Spencer, Morgan, Marx and, particularly, Durkheim. It signified a phenomenon with a certain stability and power of endurance that unifies, in a complex and abstract way, certain individual phenomena. The neologism ‘structuralism’ was introduced in the early years of the 20th century in psychology and used in opposition to ‘functional psychology’. However, the real starting point of the movement was in linguistics, where it opposed the then dominant ‘comparative linguistics’.

Structuralism’s inaugural text is widely accepted to be the *Cours de linguistique générale*⁹⁹, based on three courses delivered by Ferdinand de Saussure in Geneva between 1906 and 1911, as recorded by his students. The text was edited and published posthumously to Saussure by his colleagues Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, with the help of his student Albert Riedlinger, in 1916. Interestingly enough, the term ‘structure’ appears rarely in the *CLG*, and certainly not in the

⁹⁸ *Histoire du structuralisme*, t.1, pp.11-12

⁹⁹ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, ed. by Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye and Albert Riedlinger (1916), critical ed. and intro. by Tullio de Mauro, Paris: Payot, 1972 – from here on referred to as *CLG*.

structuralist sense¹⁰⁰. Saussure uses the term ‘system’ to name the concept on which subsequent structuralists have modelled the concept of (structuralist) structure. Nevertheless, despite the absence of the term, Saussure without doubt formulates the fundamental axioms of structuralism, posing the radical de-essentialisation of signification and stressing the relational aspect of language. In the same text, as we shall see, he founded the novel science of semiotics. Semiotics, by permitting or rather postulating the application of certain axioms and theorems of linguistics to the entirety of the human and social sciences, became the condition of possibility for the existence of the structuralist movement.

The formalists of the Moscow Circle (founded in 1915) and the functionalists of Prague Circle¹⁰¹ (f. 1926), notably Roman Jakobson and Nikolai Troubetzkoy, are the ones who played a major role in spreading the use of the terms ‘structure’ and ‘structuralist’. In 1929, they publish their manifesto, *Theses*, on the occasion of the 1st Congress of Slavic Philologists, where the term ‘structure’ and its derivatives appear often and in relation to ‘systems’. We can safely claim that the members of the Prague Circle are the first conscious members of the structuralist movement.

Explicit reference to ‘structuralism’ as a founding program was first made by the Copenhagen Circle¹⁰² (f.1931) in the inaugural issue of *Acta Linguistica* in 1939. The Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev established the Circle in 1931, and in

¹⁰⁰ The term appears twice in the text, in p.180 and in p.244. Tullio de Mauro explains that only the second use is actually found in the Courses’ notes. However, it seems that Saussure used the term in several occasions in his work but always in the sense of a ‘linear grouping’, which is definitely not the structuralist sense; see de Mauro’s notes 247 and 259.

¹⁰¹ See François Dosse, *Histoire du structuralisme*, t.1, pp.72-79; and Emile Benveniste, “‘Structure’ en linguistique” (1962), in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, t.1, 1966, (p.94); David Robey, ‘Introduction’ in *Structuralism: an introduction*, 1973, (p.1); Thomas A. Sebeok ed., *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, p.981

¹⁰² Viggo Brøndal and Louis Hjelmslev, editors’ note in *Acta Linguistica*, vol.I, (1939), pp. 1-2; Viggo Brøndal, ‘Linguistique structurale’, *ibid*, pp. 2-10; Louis Hjelmslev, ‘La notion de rection’, *ibid.*, pp. 10-23. See also François Dosse, *Histoire du structuralisme*, t.1, p.12, 77; Benveniste, “‘Structure’ en linguistique” (p.96-97); ‘Louis Hjelmslev’, www.uni-erfurt.de; Algirdas-Julien Greimas, Preface to Hjelmslev, *Le langage*, 1963

collaboration with Hans Jörgen Uldall, elaborated the theory of ‘glossematics’. *Acta Linguistica*, subtitled ‘revue internationale de linguistique structurale’ (international journal of structural linguistics), edited by Hjelmslev and Viggo Bröndal, was the official publication of the Circle. In the editorial of the first issue, the term ‘structural’ appears four times in one page and a half. The programmatic ambience is obvious. The term ‘structuralism’ appears in the article-manifesto ‘Structural linguistics’, signed by Bröndal, to denote the ‘new conception’ of linguistics, which is ‘already known by [this] name’¹⁰³.

As Saussure predicted¹⁰⁴, the principles of structuralism were soon to be applied beyond the field of linguistics. In the 50’s, France became the center of the structuralist explosion. Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes are the two best known figures of the movement¹⁰⁵. Lévi-Strauss imported the linguistic model in anthropology. His doctoral thesis, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, supported in 1948 and published in 1949, became a corner-stone for structuralism. Barthes popularized structural semiotics through a series of articles analyzing everyday culture, which appeared in the French magazine *Les lettres nouvelles* between 1954 and 1956, and were collectively published in 1957 as *Mythologies*.

Structuralism, as an intellectual movement, was the enthusiastic project of applying the radical principles of the novel science of semiotics to the analysis of all the fields of human culture. Structuralism was not short of manifestos and efforts at unification and systematization. Rupture with the past and aspiration to a generalized human science were important elements of its ambience. Nevertheless, it has never

¹⁰³ ‘La nouvelle conception connue déjà sous le nom de *structuralisme*’, Viggo Bröndal, ‘Linguistique structurale’, *Acta Linguistica*, vol.1, (p.7)

¹⁰⁴ *CLGs*, p.33: ‘La linguistique n’est qu’une patrie de cette science générale’ / ‘Linguistics is just a part of this general science’, i.e. semiotics, structural semiotics.

¹⁰⁵ François Dosse, *Histoire du structuralisme*, t.1, pp. 26-42, 94-101

been a dogma or a consistent and unified theory. The reason is a combination of its founders' intentions and historical contingency. Strictly speaking, there were at least as many structuralisms as structuralists. Structuralism as a theory is an a posteriori construction. At the time, it was a 'new point of view'¹⁰⁶, a 'new orientation'¹⁰⁷, a 'hypothesis'¹⁰⁸. Edmund Leach calls it 'a way of looking at things'¹⁰⁹, while Michael Lane considers it 'a mode of thought common to disciplines widely separated'¹¹⁰, which 'describes and prescribes operations' rather than proposing 'a consistent system of beliefs and values'¹¹¹. Therefore, what I present in this thesis as the theory of structuralism is the product of synthesis and abstraction.

Further conceptual and methodological choices determine what and whom a researcher finally classifies under 'structuralism'. Let me clarify four points regarding what is classified as structuralism in this thesis.

Firstly, 'structuralism' is often used as a meta-theoretical, meta-historical characterization referring to theories and authors throughout the history of human thought¹¹². As Derrida puts it: 'a certain structuralism has always been philosophy's most spontaneous gesture'¹¹³. However, in this thesis we are concerned with the specific historical movement of structuralism, as already described, which I consider pertinent regarding Derrida's work. Not every interest in structure or use of the term can be classified as structuralist in this stricter sense. Many of the authors writing on the subject of structuralism choose a wider definition of the term. However, I believe

¹⁰⁶ Hjelmslev and Bröndal, *Acta* Vol. I, p.1; Hjelmslev, *Acta* Vol. I, p. 12

¹⁰⁷ Hjelmslev, *Acta* Vol. I, p. 10

¹⁰⁸ Hjelmslev, *Acta* Vol. IV, pp. v-vi

¹⁰⁹ 'Structuralism in Social Anthropology' in *Structuralism: an Introduction*, (p.37)

¹¹⁰ Introduction in *Structuralism: a Reader*, (p.11)

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, (p.13)

¹¹² 'general tendency of thought', Ernst A. Cassirer, 'Structuralism in Modern Linguistics', *Word*, Vol.1, No. II, (1945), (p. 120); 'l'ancienneté de la méthode', Jean Piaget, *Le structuralisme, Que sais-je ?*, 1972, p. 101.

¹¹³ *WD*, p.200 / 'un certain structuralisme a toujours été le geste le plus spontané de la philosophie', *ED*, p.237

that the interest in structuralism in the meta-theoretical sense often has its origin in a structuralist view in the contemporary sense.

Secondly, the use of ‘structure’ both as a term and as a concept, defined in different ways, was widespread during the 20th century and particularly after the Second World War. So we have an orientation toward non-semiotic structures¹¹⁴ too, in mathematics for example, which exceeds the structuralist movement as I have defined it. This can be partly explained by the success of the structuralist movement, as a kind of ‘cultural imperialism’, but only partly. I think we could speak of a general epistemological tendency of the last century, a ‘general structuralism’ as Lagopoulos terms it, of which the ‘semiotic structuralism’ is just the most influential, and possibly most original, sub-set. However, Derrida’s project is around the issue of meaning, therefore in this thesis ‘structuralism’ refers to semiotic structuralism alone.

Thirdly, during the 20th century, apart from the structuralists I have described above, there was another linguistic school often bearing the same name: the distributionalist school following Leonard Bloomfield¹¹⁵. The American linguist proposed his theory in the ‘20s, which was developed by his students and became popular in America during the ‘40s and ‘50s. Bloomfield’s notion of structure, however, is very different from its European counterpart, being more or less synonymous to ‘organization’. This ‘taxonomic’ conception of language contradicts the most central, radical and original principles of European structuralism, namely arbitrariness and differentiability – the principles on which Derrida has developed his own ‘différance’ and ‘écriture’. Another significant difference between the two

¹¹⁴ See Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos, *Epistemologies of Meaning, Structuralism and Semiotics*, pp. 35-44; Jean Piaget, *Le structuralisme, Que sais-je ?*, pp. 17-45

¹¹⁵ See Algirdas Julien Greimas and Joseph Courtès, *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, 1979, p.360; Oswald Ducrot, ‘Distributionalisme’ in *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, 1972, pp.49-55

schools is that distributionalists exclude the aspect of signification from their studies, although their object is language, i.e. semiotic in nature. As John Lyons¹¹⁶ observes, English-speaking attacks on structuralist theoretical and methodological deficiencies are often addressed to this kind of structuralism. Despite its historical importance, this school did not influence philosophical thought in the way European structuralism has. In my thesis, I will not deal with Bloomfieldian structuralism at all.

Fourthly, many researchers – particularly in the English speaking world – include under the broad heading of ‘structuralism’ the post-structuralist theories. As these theories have been the means through which structuralist ideas infiltrated the English-speaking Universities, and particularly the American literary and cultural studies, they are often construed as paradigmatic of the structuralist movement. So, ‘structuralism’ ends by actually referring to ‘post-structuralism’. The reverse attitude, very popular in the so-called ‘post-modern’ circles, is the over-simplification of the structuralist principles, used as a back-ground for the arrival of post-structuralism. In this case, many of the radical innovations of structuralist thought are attributed to its post-structuralist critics. I do not agree with either of these classifications. The close relationship between structuralism and post-structuralism, and more specifically certain aspects of deconstruction’s debt to structuralism, is the hypothesis my thesis seeks to prove. However, there are several very clear differences between the two movements, which Lagopoulos¹¹⁷ even classifies as belonging to different epistemological paradigms. Whatever complications the process of the argument of this thesis produces, when we refer to structuralism without qualification, we mean ‘classical’ structuralism.

¹¹⁶ ‘Structuralism and Linguistics’ in *Structuralism: an Introduction*, (p.5-6)

¹¹⁷ *Epistemologies of Meaning, Structuralism and Semiotics*, pp.7-33

In the mid-sixties, the structuralist avant-garde underwent a transformation into the post-structuralist movement. Structuralism was by then the dominant ideology of the intelligentsia and it became the object of fervent attack by the young post-structuralist intellectuals. The leading representatives of post-structuralism gathered around the journal *Tel Quel*, which was published by Les Editions du Seuil between 1960 and 1982. As the *Oxford French Literature Companion* describes it,

From 1963 to 1966 *Tel Quel* explored the linguistic and philosophical implications of writing (*écriture*), and began to elaborate a critical theory which transcended generic and disciplinary boundaries¹¹⁸.

This was the immediate context of Derrida's early and intellectually formative years. It was part of the larger frame of the short and intense period of generalized ideological questioning, social upheaval and political hope that is remembered as the Parisian May of 1968. In the intellectual atmosphere of enthusiasm that led to and followed for a short period after the events of May, the young post-structuralists demanded 'Revolution Here Now'¹¹⁹ and believed that they could point the way by theoretical study groups, lectures and discussions. Theoretically, they still used the main tools and principles of structuralism. However, they radicalized its system, producing effects that opposed its scientism. Marx and Freud and Nietzsche and Heidegger entered the picture again¹²⁰. Derrida's texts of the time participate in this radical, visionary and programmatic ambiance.

Derrida describes his relation to structuralism as 'oblique, deviant, sometimes frontally critical'¹²¹. As my thesis shows in the subsequent chapters, Derrida's relation to structuralism is double: he finds there both his foundation and his main opponent,

¹¹⁸ 'Tel Quel', *The Oxford French Literature Companion*

¹¹⁹ *Tel Quel*, no 34, summer 1968

¹²⁰ According to Manfred Frank (as cited by Lagopoulos, 'From *sémiologie* to postmodernism: A genealogy', p. 28), 'the poststructuralist approach comes from the joining together of classical structuralism and a reinterpretation of German philosophy'. It is quite clear that Derrida's approach, as a combination of structuralism and phenomenology, fits well to this definition of poststructuralism.

¹²¹ 'oblique, déviant, parfois frontalement critique', *Ponc*, p. 447

an opponent which is so close as to be particularly useful for a self-definition by opposition. When Derrida describes his ambiguous relation to structuralism, in ‘Punctuations’ and the ‘Letter’ for example, he intends also to demarcate himself from his fellows of *Tel Quel*, whom he implicitly includes in structuralism. He does not succeed in this, however. Self-situation by opposition, after all, was a common gesture for the members of their group. It is as Henri Ronsse observes in one of his 1967 questions to Derrida: his works appear often ‘très apparentés’¹²² to those of the *Tel Quel* group; which does not make them less original and worthwhile.

By Derrida’s own admission, the term ‘deconstruction’ demonstrates the double relationship of the Derridean project to structuralism. What he denies is that the choice of the term was *intended* to express a relationship to this particular movement. The structuralist connection was allegedly imposed on Derrida by his first readers; the *Tel Quel* group, one infers. As he writes in the ‘Letter’:

At the time structuralism was dominant. ‘Deconstruction’ seemed to be going in the same direction since the word signified a certain attention to structures (which themselves were neither simply ideas, nor forms, nor syntheses, nor systems). To deconstruct was also a structuralist gesture or in any case a gesture that assumed a certain need for the structuralist problematic. But it was also an antistructuralist gesture, and its fortune rests in part on this ambiguity. Structures were to be undone, decomposed, desedimented.¹²³

So the term ‘deconstruction’ ‘seems’ to simultaneously be indebted to structuralism and opposed to structuralism; precisely in the way of the Derridean project, which it ended by naming. According to Derrida, the happy coincidence was read as intentional, which directed him to include it in his definition thereafter.

One should observe, however, that the structuralist reading of the term could not have been that unexpected and, in any case, was not unjustified. To start with, the two texts that introduced the term ‘deconstruction’ in 1966, the first part of *De la*

¹²² *Pos*, p.20 / ‘affiliated’, *Pos Eng*, p. 11

¹²³ p. 2

grammatologie and ‘La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines’, have structuralism as their explicit subject. How could a reader or listener who meets ‘deconstruction’ for the first time in a text or lecture referring to structuralism, and full of repeated instantiations of the word ‘structure’, not hear in the term the resonance of ‘structure’? And the connection would be reinforced by the fact that ‘deconstruction’ is related to Saussure in *De la grammatologie*, and also to Peirce and Hjelmslev, whereas in ‘La structure, le signe et le jeu’ the term appears after a paragraph on Lévi-Strauss. Then, in Derrida’s words from the part from the ‘Letter’ I cited above, ‘the word signified a certain attention to structures’, which ‘assumed a certain need for the structuralist problematic’. I would suggest that this structuralist problematic is what differentiates Derrida’s project from its Heideggerian counterpart. Furthermore, the effort to deal philosophically with the particular double gesture that characterises his generation’s relation to structuralism, modernity and Western metaphysics, constitutes one of his most important innovations. His readers recognised not only what was familiar to them as Derrida obliquely implies, but also what was original philosophically.

There is a certain fallacy in the implication that an ‘attention to structures’ ‘assumes a ...need for the structuralist problematic’. Derrida is aware of it and that is why he twice adds a qualification: ‘a *certain* attention’, ‘a *certain* need’. If structuralists were the only ones interested in structures, then even the external observation of how often Derrida needs the word ‘structure’ to clarify what he is saying would be enough to classify him as a structuralist – because he does use it very often and particularly when explaining deconstruction. However, as explained earlier, structuralism does not have exclusive right to use of the term ‘structure’. Phenomenology, for example, uses it too, referring to the ‘structures of

consciousness'. Of course, the centrality given to the notion of 'structure' and the frequent repetition of the term are indications of a structuralist stand. And the only Derridean discourse on consciousness consists in its deconstruction, while even the term 'consciousness' is one that he very rarely uses. Moreover, the contextual facts that we enumerated earlier also argue for the structuralist background of the Derridean use of 'structure'. However, the decisive argument is that the properties attributed to structure by Derrida are clearly of structuralist origin¹²⁴. Most significantly, structure is differential for him, and this is one of the distinctively structuralist premises. Derrida's discourse on 'structurality' is very prominently displayed in 'La structure, le signe et le jeu', where it is shown how its origin is to be found in structuralism and the Saussurean linguistics.

Derrida almost always has a double relationship with the texts he reads, philosophical or otherwise. As Robert Bernasconi observes, describing 'the parasitic nature of Derrida's readings'¹²⁵, Derrida borrows from those texts – concepts but also methods and structural schemas and stylistic traits – which he simultaneously appropriates and criticises, in a process of cross-fertilisation with other texts. This means, on the one hand, that the structure of affiliation and opposition can be claimed for almost any philosopher, movement or text Derrida is commenting on – which is consistent with his attitude regarding of our possible relation to our philosophical, and cultural, past. On the other hand, it also means that several philosophers and philosophical movements are omnipresent in Derrida's work apart from phenomenology and structuralism; Nietzsche and Freud, at the very least, Plato and Aristotle, Hegel, and – as Norris argues and this thesis confirms – Kant. It would be a

¹²⁴ See the next two chapters

¹²⁵ 'Heidegger' in *Understanding Derrida*, (p.124)

mistake, though, to try to dissolve Derrida in his philosophical affiliations. It would equally be a mistake, I think, to level with each other the kind of influence these philosophies have on Derrida's work. Phenomenology and structuralism indeed have an exceptionally close relationship to the Derridean project.

By Heidegger, Derrida is inspired to undertake a project of dismantling Western metaphysics using language as an instrument, whereas from structuralism he takes the axioms regarding language that make possible the dismantling. In Husserl, he recognises the paradigmatic culmination of Western metaphysics, but in structuralist concepts he discovers its final and most inescapable instantiations. And he uses the tools of structuralist analysis in order to locate the Husserlian essential distinctions in the texts he deconstructs. In a way, he uses structuralism in order to criticise phenomenology and vice versa, taking the logic of both to their extremes.

It should be noted here that phenomenology and structuralism are not mutually exclusive. Despite the fact that they belong to different epistemological paradigms¹²⁶, they communicate both structurally and historically. Husserlian phenomenology, for example, shares a great deal with classical structuralism – significantly, the scientific demand and 'a certain attention to structures', both of which can be traced back to the Enlightenment. It should be remembered that structuralism in its widest sense characterises many theories. It could even be said that 'a certain structuralism has always been philosophy's most spontaneous gesture'¹²⁷. As already explained, when we refer to 'structuralism' in this thesis, we intend the narrower sense; however, the communication between the different senses of the term will not be insignificant in our analysis. Then again, structuralism in the narrower sense owes to phenomenology

¹²⁶ Lagopoulos, *Epistemologies of Meaning, Structuralism and Semiotics*

¹²⁷ *WD*, p.200 / *ED*, p.237

too¹²⁸. Also, there is the historical circumstance of the close co-existence of the two discourses which led important philosophers, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gaston Bachelard, to attempt to combine them. Finally, both Heidegger and structuralism belong to the ‘linguistic turn’ that has been such a prominent aspect of the 20th century. Furthermore, as Marian Hobson¹²⁹ rightly observes, what phenomenology and structuralism share is ‘a structured relation between the empirical and the transcendental’. This Derrida inherits from both theories. As a structuralist, he is interested in ‘a form of meaning which is not lexical, but structural’; as a phenomenologist, he ‘articulates philosophy with history of philosophy’. Both these moves constitute ‘structured relation[s] between the empirical and the transcendental’. We can safely claim that a background in and a critical engagement with both structuralism and phenomenology are very apparent and central in Derrida’s project.

I think, however, that Derrida’s relation to structuralism is of a different kind than his relation to phenomenology; possibly more essential, in any case more ... structural. Firstly, one notices that Derrida’s approach to metaphysics is through language. This gesture can be traced to Heidegger, as we have already described. However, Derrida’s understanding of what language is, which understanding makes his project possible, is structuralist in origin. Precisely because his theory of language animates his metaphysics, the kind of linguistic theory he uses is essential to the project. And this theory, as the present thesis shows, is a version of structuralist linguistics. Secondly, Derrida’s epistemologically radical framework is entirely based on the Saussurean epistemological breakthrough concept of the linguistic ‘valeur’: the revolutionary claim that meaning is the product of differences ‘without positive

¹²⁸ Both in the 1929 *Theses* of the Prague Circle and in the inaugural issue of *Acta Linguistica* (1939) of the Copenhagen Circle reference is made to Husserl.

¹²⁹ ‘Histories and transcendentals’ in *Opening Lines*

terms'¹³⁰. This constitutes without any doubt the main axiom of the Derridean project. And it is through the Saussurean concept of linguistic difference that Derrida reads the Heideggerian ontico-ontological difference and the Freudian concept of *Verspätung* in order to develop his central quasi-concept of 'différance'. Finally, it is from structuralism that Derrida inherits his tools for addressing theories as signifying structures; tools such as codes, isotopies, symmetries etc.

Derrida's involvement with philosophers and other writers is always related to the question of their semiotics; and his view on semiotics contributes greatly to his originality. Structuralism not only puts the question of the sign as the centre of its interest, a characteristic shared in some degree with Heideggerian phenomenology, but defines it as a relational and differential form. This particular rupture in the sign's definition, which initiates the science of modern semiotics, is the starting point of Derrida's discourse.

2.6. About studying signs

'Semiotic' is the adjective deriving from the Greek noun 'σημείον'¹³¹ (*sēmeíon*), i.e. sign. 'Semiotics'¹³² or 'semiology' is the science or the method or the theory of signifying entities and their systematic organisation. Semiotics constitutes its own

¹³⁰ Saussure, *CLG*, p. 166

¹³¹ As I have explained in chapter 1, for practical reasons, I use the modern accents in Greek. In this case, for example, as the transliteration bears witness, in the older spelling the iota (ι) takes a different accent (~).

¹³² For this general and historic overview of semiotics I used mostly: Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 1976 and *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, 1984; Pierre Guiraud, *La sémiologie, Que sais-je ?*, 1971; Anne Hénault, *Histoire de la sémiotique*, 1992; Roman Jakobson, 'A Glance at the Development of Semiotics' (1974) in *Language in Literature*, 1987; Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos, *Epistemologies of Meaning, Structuralism and Semiotics*, 2004; and the four invaluable semiotic dictionaries: Oswald Ducrot and Tzvetan Todorov, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, 1972; Algirdas Julien Greimas and Joseph Courtès, *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, 1979; Thomas A. Sebeok et al. ed., *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, 2 tomes, 2nd ed, 1994; Oswald Ducrot and Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Nouveau dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, 1995.

object of study; as Saussure puts it: ‘It is the point of view which creates the object’¹³³. Therefore, it is not easy to answer what a sign is outside the framework of semiotics, or even a particular semiotics, a particular understanding of what semiotics is. The science and its object are conceptually co-temporal. Every definition runs the risk of circularity. How exactly the sign is defined by structuralist semiotics will be addressed in the following chapter.

Linguistics holds a prime position in the history of semiotics, words being the most frequently studied kind of signs. There is a great controversy regarding its exact relation to semiotics¹³⁴. Saussure, in the *CLG*’s famous citation, situates linguistics as ‘but a part of this general science [semiology]’¹³⁵. Barthes, on the other hand, has paradoxically said that ‘it is semiology which is part of linguistics’. There is no doubt that Saussure’s linguistics has been ground-breaking in the study of signs, whereas one of his important steps toward the constitution of linguistics as a science was the recognition of the nature of words as semiotic. The question is to what extent the historical contingency of language’s primacy in the semiotic studies mirrors an essential primacy over the other semiotic systems. In the *CLG* one can find elements to support both positions, i.e. both for and against language’s primacy. One can claim, and my thesis tends to agree, that one of the most interesting possibilities opened by structural semiotics is the non-hierarchical relation between the ways of communication. In any case, the extension of methods and principles first introduced in linguistics to the study of other semiotic systems has been encumbered with two symmetrical fallacies: On the one hand, there is the uncritical, analogical application;

¹³³ *CLG*, p. 23

¹³⁴ See, for example, Irmegard Rauch, ‘Semiotics and Linguistics’, in Sebeok, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, pp. 912-920

¹³⁵ p. 33

to turn the other systems into (natural)¹³⁶ languages. On the other, there is the assumption of a deep, metaphysical difference between the systems, ultimately undermining their semiotic nature. Both underestimating and overestimating the differences between non-linguistic semiotic systems and (natural) languages can be, and often is, combined with a devaluation of the non-linguistic systems. This is particularly relevant to Derrida's work.

Linguistics historically has been a part either of philosophy or philology, and has taken the form of morphology, grammar, logic, rhetoric, poetic, etymology, questions of linguistic origin. Saussure in his brief summary of the history of linguistics¹³⁷, after a mentioning of grammar and philology since antiquity and a reference to comparative grammar, situates the beginning of linguistics as a science proper around 1870 with Whitney and the Neogrammarians. Ducrot and Todorov in their list of modern linguistic schools¹³⁸ include general grammars since the 17th century and the 19th century historical linguistics. Then, they put Saussure, Glossematics, Functionalism, Distributionism and Generative linguistics. All the four schools after Saussure include 'structure' in their conceptual vocabulary. However, it is only Glossematics and Functionalism that can be classified as structuralist, in the way my thesis defines it. Leonard Bloomfield's Distributionism and Noam Chomsky's Generative linguistics belong to a different tradition.

Modern semiotics, along with structuralist linguistics, was born with Saussure. Semiotics and structuralism are conceptually distinct. On the one hand, structuralism,

¹³⁶ As will be explained in chapter 3, in the structuralist semiotic jargon all semiotic systems are called 'languages'. The non-technical register of the term is re-named 'natural language'. However, there are serious problems with the term. The attribute 'natural' to a language is somehow contradictory with the main principles of structuralist semiotics, whereas the implication that some of them are more – or less – so is even more contradictory.

¹³⁷ 'Coup d'œil sur l'histoire de la linguistique' (A Glance at the History of Semiotics), in the *CLG*, pp.13-19

¹³⁸ 'Les écoles' (The Schools), in *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, pp. 15-67

as we have seen, can be perceived as wider than semiotics, including an interest in structure beyond the domain of signifying practices, strictly so defined. However, structuralism defined as the particular cultural movement popular in France after the Second World War, the one significantly influencing Derrida's work, is certainly semiotic. On the other hand, semiotics can also be conceived as wider than structuralism. Throughout the history of human thought, there are many theories regarding significance which do not include an interest in structures generally, and of course precede the 20th century movement of the structuralist movement. However, semiotics as an independent field of study was constituted in the beginning of 20th century and, at least in Europe, has been closely intertwined with structuralism. In other words, strictly speaking, general structuralism and semiotics are two intersecting sets. The reason they are often considered co-extensive is that the movement of structuralism was founded on structuralist semiotics, whereas reference to semiotics as science or a method usually denotes structuralist semiotics¹³⁹. Therefore, both terms are often used as synechdochai for their intersection, i.e. 'structuralist semiotics', which is the object of interest of my thesis.

In Ferdinand de Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*¹⁴⁰, published in 1916, the appearance of a general theory of signs is predicted, one which 'has a right

¹³⁹ Compare Jonathan Culler's statement: 'semiology and structuralism – [...] in fact the two are inseparable, for in studying signs one must investigate the system of relations which enables meaning to be produced, and, reciprocally, the pertinent relations between items can be determined only if one considers them as signs', 'The Linguistic Basis of Structuralism, in *Structuralism: an Introduction*, (p.21)

¹⁴⁰ As I have already explained in 2.5 (see also note 102) the published text is the product of editorial work after Saussure's death. Roy Harris in *Saussure and his Interpreters*, p.3 explains very well the complications created by this fact. When one refers to 'Saussure' she may mean (a) 'the putative author of the *CLG*', (b) 'the lecturer who actually gave the courses of lectures at Geneva on which the *CLG* was based', and (c) 'the putative theorist "behind" the Geneva lectures'. This complication, as we will see, is not unrelated to Derrida's questioning of authorial control. In this thesis, anyway, we are not interested in the exact attribution of the *CLG* paternity. What interests us is the way the text has influenced structuralist semiotics. Consequently, we are mostly interested in 'Saussure, the author of *CLG*', by this I don't mean the real persons of Saussure, his students and his editors. 'Saussure' for our purposes is the *CLG*.

to exist, its place is determined in advance'¹⁴¹. Structuralists rallied to fulfil this prediction, founding the new science on some of Saussure's most original and radical insights. As it is often the case with fertile and widespread theories, we have an eclectic a posteriori quest for precedents. This happens either as a way to lend prestige to the new theory or to question its originality. Tullio de Mauro observes¹⁴² that to diffuse the findings of a theory to its historical precedents is one of the subtler strategies of academic hostility. Of course, Saussure's propositions did not appear *ex nihilo*. As de Mauro explains in his introduction to *CLG*¹⁴³ many of the themes that we consider today as characteristically Saussurean circulated widely in the beginning of 20th century. However, several of his formulations and propositions – among them the *langue / parole* division and, particularly, the radical arbitrariness of the sign – were innovative, founded structuralism and influenced decisively the social and human sciences.

As Tzvetan Todorov¹⁴⁴ observes, there is 'an implicit semiotic theory' in every linguistic speculation since antiquity, from China to India, from Greece to Rome. These, however, were not distinguished from a general theory or philosophy of language. John Locke, in his 1690 *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, was the first to propose the term

... *sēmiōtikē* or the 'Doctrine of Signs', the most usual whereof being words¹⁴⁵

Jakobson cites several other philosophers who, following Locke, used terms derivative from the Greek word for sign: Jean Henri Lambert, Joseph Marie Hoene-Wrónski, Bernard Bolzano, Edmund Husserl. None of them, however, conceives of

¹⁴¹ *CLG*, p.33

¹⁴² Critical notes to *CLG*, p. 380

¹⁴³ Introduction to *CLG*, pp. iii-iv

¹⁴⁴ In *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, p. 113

¹⁴⁵ As quoted by Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, p.437

semiotics as a distinct science. At the beginning of 20th century, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), in the 1908-11 lectures that later formed the *CLG*, foresaw the birth of

*une science qui étudie la vie des signes au sein de la vie sociale ; [...] nous la nommerons sémiologie (du grec sēmeion, « signe »). Elle nous apprendrait en quoi consistent les signes, quelles lois les régissent. [...] elle a droit à l'existence, sa place est déterminée en avance. La linguistique n'est qu'une partie de cette science générale*¹⁴⁶ [Italics in the original].

According to Rudolph Engler¹⁴⁷, when Saussure first used the term 'semiology', he was referring to a linguistic semiology. His first mention of it as a 'general theory of signs' was made in 1894; a science the object of which would be 'socially determined signs'. His contemporary Charles Sanders Peirce¹⁴⁸ (1839-1914) had been interested in the scientific study of signs since 1863. He considered himself

a pioneer, or rather a backwoodsman, in the work of clearing and opening up what I call *semiotic*, that is the doctrine of the essential nature and fundamental varieties of possible semiosis¹⁴⁹.

There are no indications that either of them was conscious of the other's work.

Tzvetan Todorov in *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*¹⁵⁰

considers as the three sources of modern semiotics Peirce, Saussure and

Cassirer. Jean-Marie Schaeffer, in the revised edition of the dictionary¹⁵¹, lists

Peirce, Saussure, Husserl, Cassirer, as well as the logic of Frege, Russell and

Carnap.

What makes Peirce and Saussure stand out is their consciousness of the need for a *distinct science* studying signs, as well as the historical fact of their initiating the

¹⁴⁶ *CLG*, p.33 / 'a science that studies the life of signs within the life of society; [...] we will name it *semiology* (from the Greek *sēmeion*, "sign"). It would show us what constitutes signs [and] what laws govern them. [...] it has a right to exist, its place is determined in advance. Linguistics is but a part of this general science'

¹⁴⁷ In Sebeok et al. ed., *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, p.846-847

¹⁴⁸ Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, p.441

¹⁴⁹ As quoted by Eco, *Theory of Semiotics*, p.15

¹⁵⁰ The entry 'Sémiotique', pp.113-122

¹⁵¹ The entry 'Sémiotique', pp.213-227. One could comment on the difference between the 1972 and 1995 version. It is obvious the effort of an opening towards non-structuralist affiliations.

two traditions of modern scientific semiotics. Starting from them, semiotics is no longer simply a field of study; it becomes an organised discipline¹⁵². On their work were founded two different traditions, independent and – at least to begin with – almost unaware of each other's existence and achievements. Saussure's tradition puts the emphasis on the social aspect of signs, Peirce's on their logical aspect¹⁵³. Saussure clearly takes semiotics out of philosophy and philology. He apparently did not know about the philosophical antecedents of the issues regarding signs, and he certainly took no account of them. His influence in Europe was immense, both by his modernizing linguistics and by his providing the basic principles of the structuralist movement. His influence world-wide, mediated by structuralism and post-structuralism, was to wait until after the Second World War. Peirce, on the other hand, was very much aware of philosophers preceding him and can be situated in Locke's lineage. His influence was great in the United States of America. As a semiotician, his work was introduced to Europe much later. The study of his work has been impeded by the fact that there are successive versions of his theory, of advancing complexity.

The Saussure filiation, starting from structural linguistics working in a semiotic perspective¹⁵⁴, eventually to be identified with the structuralist movement, included the schools of Prague and Copenhagen, and figures such as Nicolaï Troubetzkoy, Roman Jakobson, Louis Hjelmslev, and Emile Benveniste. In the same lineage, after the Second World War, particularly in France, explodes the structuralist phenomenon, inspired by the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, and Algirdas-Julien Greimas. More recently, the post-structuralists and the Greimacian

¹⁵² We follow here Umberto Eco's distinction between 'semiotics as a *field of studies* and thus a repertoire of interests' and as 'a *specific discipline* with its own method and precise object', *A Theory of Semiotics*, (1976) 1979, p. 7

¹⁵³ *La sémiologie, Que sais-je ?*, p.6

¹⁵⁴ Ducrot and Todorov, p.117; Ducrot and Schaeffer, p.221

Paris School of semiotics follow the same lineage. What unites all these very diverse approaches is their perception of the semiotic as a social and cultural phenomenon. Peirce's work was interpreted and expanded mainly by Charles William Morris, as well as Charles Kay Ogden and Ivor Armstrong Richards. After the Second World War, this lineage was pursued mostly in the U.S.A. by Thomas Sebeok and his School of semiotics, and more recently in Scandinavia. This perception of semiotics extends the notion of semiosis beyond human communication, a position which has been the cause of great controversy. The followers of these two traditions, unlike their founders, were not ignorant of each other's existence. There were theoretical exchanges between them from quite early¹⁵⁵, though few. The Second World War brought about the contact between them by the flight of Jewish intellectuals from Europe; notably Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss. The Linguistic Circle of New York was founded and in 1945 there appeared the first issue of the review *Word*. Schaeffer¹⁵⁶ distinguishes a third tradition, which – although it can trace its lineage to structuralism – developed independently, in the Soviet Union. This was the Circle of Tartu, interested in a semiotics of culture founded on cybernetics and the theory of information.

In the 60's, for the first time, semioticians from different schools aspired to collaborate toward an ecumenical conception of semiotics¹⁵⁷. In 1966 the first international semiotics conference was organized in Poland. In 1969, in Paris, the *International Association for Semiotic Studies – Association Internationale de*

¹⁵⁵ De Mauro in his notes to *CLG* refers to the 1927 negative critic of Saussure by Ogden and Richards, spectacular proof of their complete misunderstanding (pp. 439, 449); he also refers to Jakobson's frequent use of Peirce's concepts of 'icon', 'index' and 'symbol' (p.445). Harris in *Saussure and his Interpreters* also refers to Ogden and Richards's misunderstanding of Saussure (pp. 69-70).

¹⁵⁶ *Nouveau dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, p.220-1

¹⁵⁷ See the site of International Association for Semiotic Studies, <http://filserverarthist.lu.se/AIS/IASS>

Sémiotique was officially established. Among its founding members were Greimas, Jakobson, Kristeva, Benveniste, Sebeok and Lotman. It has the following goals:

1. promote the semiotic researches in a scientific spirit
2. re-enforce the international co-operation in this field
3. collaborate with similar associations
4. organize national and international conferences, and educational seminars
5. publish an international review...: *Semiotica*

This gallant project has not been easy. As Anne Hénault¹⁵⁸ complains, *Semiotica* has become a tribune of semiotic philosophical exchanges, leaving little room for semiotic theory proper, particularly of the radically innovative kind. The main reason, let me suggest, is that the Saussurean and Peircean lineages are divided by some very deep and crucial epistemological differences, the crux being Saussure's principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness. Umberto Eco is the exceptional case of a semiotician who belongs to no tradition and manages successfully to combine elements from the different traditions. As Schaeffer puts it, he is

one of the rare European semioticians having developed a general semiotics searching the continuous dialogue with the advanced propositions of other researchers¹⁵⁹

Eco gives an inclusive definition of the 'theoretical possibility' of a general semiotic theory as 'a unified approach to every phenomenon of signification and/or communication'¹⁶⁰. It has as its object 'the entire universe (and nothing else)'¹⁶¹. This alludes to the fact that everything that is social and cultural is semiotic, but it does not mean that there is nothing more. It refers to 'the universe' as object of cognition, which structuralism considers by definition as social and cultural.

In the context of a thesis submitted in a British University, one is more or less obliged to ask about the relation between Analytical philosophy and semiotics,

¹⁵⁸ *Histoire de la sémiotique*, pp.3-4

¹⁵⁹ *Nouveau dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, p.222

¹⁶⁰ *Theory of Semiotics*, 1976, p.3

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7

particularly as they share some main topics of interest. From the Analytic point of view, the semiotic approach is merely descriptive, while theirs is critical. From the semioticians' point of view, the Analytic approach is encumbered with metaphysical assumptions, while theirs is scientific. Actually both approaches carry their own metaphysical assumptions and critical insights. Traditional hostility aside, their meta-theoretical difference resides between philosophy and applied theory; which does not prevent philosophy from having its applications and the applied theory its underlying philosophy. Historically, semioticians have been more interested in the structure of language, analytical philosophers in its use; semioticians have been more interested in signification and intentional semantics, analytical philosophers in extensional semantics and the question of the referent. These differences are not pertinent any more, as both sides have extended their fields of study.

Derrida has been engaged with many semiotic theories and philosophies, including Analytic philosophy of language. However, as I have explained and will expound further in subsequent chapters, his project is particularly indebted to the structuralist definition of the semiotic. This definition will be presented in Chapter 3. Its most original and influential proposition concerns the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness, as opposed to the arbitrariness of each isolated sign. Structuralist semiotics, in its striving to become a science, undertakes a project of subtracting metaphysics from its object of study, much of which is based on the premise of this fundamental semiotic arbitrariness. Again, these issues will be analysed in the next chapter. What interests us for the moment is that this project of de-mystification becomes apparent in a terminological shift.

Firstly, structuralist semioticians feel a certain reluctance to use the word 'meaning' (sens), despite the fact that both in a traditional philosophic and in a

layman's vocabulary this is exactly the object of their investigations. The reason is that traditionally the term 'meaning' seems to imply its pre-existing to expression in signs, which contradicts the premise of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness. For structuralist semioticians meaning is produced by the semiotic relation alone. Signs are no longer considered autonomous units pointing to autonomous essences. They are defined through function – in both senses of the term. Jakobson, defines the semiotic through its function, i.e. its use, as communication. Hjelmslev defines the semiotic as a function, in the mathematical sense, i.e. a map between two sets. These two definitions of the semiotic, as communication and signification, are complementary and co-existent. 'Semiotic function' or 'semiosis' is the relation between signifier and signified, in Saussure's terminology, or between content-form and expression-form, in Hjelmslev's terminology. One should pay attention to the fact that semiosis has a slightly different meaning in Peirce; in this thesis, however, we are mainly interested in the Saussure-Hjelmslev tradition.

Secondly, structuralist semioticians deliberately and programmatically empty the metaphysical import of the terms 'expression' and 'representation'. The reason lies again in the premise of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness. No longer is the one component of the sign an expression of the other, intrinsically linked with it. No longer is the sign an expression or representation of something pre-existing in the subject's mind or expressive intent. No longer is the sign the representation of a pre-existing object in the world¹⁶². The terms 'expression' and 'representation' may still be used but they are re-defined. Thirdly, for all the above reasons, questions about subjectivity and intentionality become secondary to semiotic research, while the

¹⁶² This does not necessarily mean that the sign has no referent or that the world does not exist independently of our consciousness. It will be explained in Chapter 3, where the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness is expounded.

‘subject’ loses much of its metaphysical import. Functionally, semiotic subjects appear just as points in the circuit of communication. All the same this never led to any implication that communication does not concern real human subjects.

Post-structuralist semioticians took further steps in the direction of philosophical de-mystification and terminological change. Even the term ‘sign’ is abandoned as metaphysically burdened and is replaced by ‘text’. Barthes describes it:

It is not a structure, it is a structuration;
It is not an object; it is a working process and a play;
It is not a set of closed signs, having a meaning which one would have to find,
but a volume of traces in displacement¹⁶³

Derrida is probably the most extreme case of terminological destabilisation. His philosophical critique of not only the terms but also the very possibility of making a statement, makes very difficult to articulate what is the object of our study; and his. We are left, if not with a conceptual, then at least with a terminological void regarding the place the ‘sign’ once held. What is this ‘something’, which can no longer be called either ‘expression’ or ‘communication’, certainly not ‘meaning’, and which is called – provisionally and neologically and paleonymically – ‘écriture’ or ‘différance’; and what is it for? It remains unnamed and its function unnamed: an unnamed connection between two negated poles¹⁶⁴. It is ‘without’, ‘sans’¹⁶⁵. Sign without signification, expression (as trace) without expression (as act), communication without communication.

This thesis, while taking into account Derrida’s critique, cannot but name its field of study, which is semiosis, i.e. signification and communication. We will be

¹⁶³ *L’aventure sémiologique*, p.13

¹⁶⁴ *Nom*, p.47

¹⁶⁵ *Nom*, p.27

mostly concerned with the topic of signification. Even with these conditions, however, the choice of the term ‘semiotics’ is not un-complicated¹⁶⁶.

As we have seen, Saussure used the term ‘sémiologie’ and Peirce the term ‘semiotic’. It is often the case that Saussure’s followers use the term ‘sémiologie’, whereas Peirce’s deploy the term ‘semiotics’. English authors, however, translate the French ‘sémiologie’ interchangeably as either ‘semiology’ or ‘semiotics’. As this thesis is interested in Saussure’s tradition, in order to stress this lineage, a possible choice would have been ‘semiology’. Nevertheless, the term ‘sémiotique’ also appears in structuralist bibliography quite often, either as an adjective or as a noun. Firstly, it often denotes a particular semiotic system: ‘une sémiotique’¹⁶⁷. Secondly, as it does not include the root ‘-logie’ (‘-logy’)¹⁶⁸, it does not imply any relation to the so-called natural languages. So, it became customary to use that term when referring to the study of semiotic systems other than natural languages, particularly in cases when there is some doubt as to their deserving the full title of a *langue*; for example, ‘la sémiotique de l’espace’ (semiotics of space). Considering that both Derrida and Hjelmslev, and this thesis in general, question the primacy of natural languages, the term ‘semiotics’ seems metaphysically more neutral. Thirdly, the term ‘fonction sémiotique’ (semiotic function, sign-function), as substitute for ‘signe’, was introduced by Hjelmslev. Indeed, the use of the term ‘sign’ can be seen to have diminished progressively. Julia Kristeva¹⁶⁹ initiated the re-organisation of the discipline no longer around the notion of ‘sign’ but of ‘text as productivity’, accepting

¹⁶⁶ See Greimas and Courtés, *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, pp.339-346; Jerzy Pelc, in Sebeok et al. ed., *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, pp. 893-912

¹⁶⁷ To be precise, ‘a semiotic’ comprises a semiotic system and its corresponding semiotic process, as will shall see in the next chapter.

¹⁶⁸ From the Greek ‘λόγος’ (logos), i.e. ‘speech’, ‘speaking of’; the word has other meanings, among which, ‘word’ and ‘reason’.

¹⁶⁹ See Ducrot and Todorov, pp. 449-453

the critique of the sign's appartenance to the idealistic-logocentric tradition. Finally, the choice of 'semiotics' as the name to denote the unified field of semiotic and semiological sciences was chosen by the inaugural Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies. I will follow their choice for all the reasons explained above, having made clear that I mean 'structuralist semiotics'.

2.7. 'Déconstruction' and 'structure' in *Positions*

As we remarked earlier, Derrida claims that the use of the term 'deconstruction' is contingent and that he had not intended it to gain such a central position in his texts. I argue that to begin with the term was used in order to refer to what he was doing, even if this was not chosen as the unique term to name the project. Another claim of Derrida's that we investigated concerns the source of the term 'deconstruction's' in Heidegger's 'Destruktion' and the fact that its relation to 'structure' and structuralism was not initially consciously intended. The Heideggerean connection is unquestionable but I argue that the 'structure' connection is equally essential. I will here try to support my argument regarding 'structure', if not yet 'structuralism', by a formal study of the text of *Positions*.

The status of *Positions* in Derrida's work is peculiar. It is a collection of three interviews which took place between 1967 and 1971. Its peculiarity consists, on the one hand, in its being primarily the record of oral exchanges, and on the other hand, in its clarifying, highly assertive style. Derrida obviously feels uncomfortable with the theoretical implications of the interview form. His argument throughout his work has been against the metaphysical privilege of speech over writing. Understandably he worries that his spoken words may be taken as more final concerning his writings, which would completely undermine his general argument. The preface to the 1972

publication of the three interviews bears witness to his anxiety and takes precautions against this danger. The consciousness of danger, though, does not prevent him from actually explaining what he wanted to say in a quite confident and explicit manner. And this is not just the performative paradox of any interview. A large part of these particular interviews revolves around answering criticisms and responding to interpretations of his work, and he is very clear and forceful about the correct meaning of his texts¹⁷⁰.

However, this is not the most interesting paradox of Derrida's position regarding the function of interviews. He actually seems to consider them as hierarchically *less* valuable than his written texts, as becomes evident by his repeated comments:

la parole improvisée de l'entretien ne peut se substituer au travail textuel¹⁷¹

je ne peux pas 'parler' l'écriture [...] c'est la dernière chose qui se laisse maîtriser par un entretien¹⁷²

This is at odds with his general argument. A superficial reading would probably see no contradiction in the devaluation of speech by someone who has striven so hard against its overvaluation. However, the entire argument against the overvaluation of speech is that it is 'a kind of' writing, not in any way 'less than' or 'inferior to' writing. The whole point of maintaining that speech is *not more* intentional, authoritative, controllable than writing, is that it is *just as un-controllable* as writing, being writing. Derrida says that all texts, including oral ones, partially escape intentionality, escape the metaphysics of presence. His mistrust of interviews

¹⁷⁰ See for example: 'on me constitue propriétaire de ce que j'analyse', *Pos*, p.67 / 'I am constituted as the proprietor of what I analyse', *Pos End*, p.50; 'on me prête ce que je dénonce', *Pos*, p. 72 / 'what I denounce is attributed to me', *Pos Eng*, p.53

¹⁷¹ *Pos*, p. 91 / 'The improvised speech of an interview cannot substitute for the textual work', *Pos Eng*, p.67

¹⁷² *Pos*, p. 93 / 'I cannot "talk" the writing [...]; this is the last thing that can be mastered in an interview', *Pos Eng*, p.69

contradicts this line of argument. He seems to value control over one's text but to place the locus of this control in the written text and not in oral exchange. This symmetrical inversion is definitely at odds with the deconstructive project as practised and described by him throughout his work. I will, therefore, include his interviews in the corpus of his texts. I will not grant them a privileged status but neither will I refrain from analysing them and drawing conclusions from them.

Positions is important to me not because its interview form allows it to make more authoritative claims regarding Derrida's work but because it comes just after the first books published by Derrida, those that constitute the main object of my thesis, and therefore functions as an overview and brief conspectus of them. By both repeating and synthesising these initial positions, he actually forms what came to be his 'project'. And the fact that the terms 'deconstruction' and 'structure' have a very prominent position in this text is, I think, significant.

I have counted every occurrence of the terms 'déconstruction' and 'structure' and their derivatives in the text of *Positions*. I obviously did not count the instances of the terms in the interviewers' questions. In the case of 'déconstruction', I also excluded those instances when Derrida cites another's words referring to his own work¹⁷³, and when he uses the term with immediate reference to Heidegger and can possibly be interpreted as a translation of 'Destruktion'¹⁷⁴. In the case of 'structure', I did not count the cases when the term explicitly or implicitly refers to structuralism or when it is used as belonging to another's discourse – so that I won't attribute to him what he is criticising¹⁷⁵: these occurrences amount to 11. If one wanted to be even more exact, one should probably count the use of similar and equivalent terms; in the

¹⁷³ Once on page 70

¹⁷⁴ Once on page 19

¹⁷⁵ He seems particularly alarmed by this possibility, see footnote 174

case of ‘déconstruction’, terms such as ‘démontage’¹⁷⁶, ‘déconstitution’, ‘découdre’¹⁷⁷; in the case of ‘structure’, the very frequent use of the term ‘système’, which is often co-extensional with ‘structure’ in structuralist jargon. I limit myself, however, to the words ‘déconstruction’ and ‘structure’ and their derivatives, in noun, verb, adverb and adjective form.

Positions consists of 133 relatively short pages, of which about one fourth cover the questions. So, we can say that we have about 100 short pages of Derrida’s text. In this text, and not counting the above mentioned exceptions, the word ‘déconstruction’ and its derivatives appear 36 times, while the word ‘structure’ and its derivatives appear 29 times. We can, therefore, say that on average each of them appears once every three pages. This number can hardly be insignificant.

The next step is to observe in what sorts of phrases the terms appear, related to what other terms and for what purpose. ‘Déconstruction’, ‘déconstruire’, ‘déconstructrice’, ‘déconstruisant’ etc are always used to describe what Derrida is doing or what he thinks should be done. Each and every one of the 36 uses of the term and its derivatives refers to Derrida’s project, descriptively or prescriptively. There can be no doubt that the use is intentional. He even says once: ‘j’ai proposé ... le projet de déconstruction’¹⁷⁸. And he explicitly differentiates his ‘deconstruction’ from the Heideggerean project of ‘Destruktion’¹⁷⁹. Deconstruction is described as a ‘general strategy’¹⁸⁰, a ‘critique’¹⁸¹, a ‘project’¹⁸², an ‘operation’¹⁸³, a ‘fracture’¹⁸⁴, a

¹⁷⁶ p. 70

¹⁷⁷ p. 117

¹⁷⁸ p. 69 / ‘I proposed [...] the project of *deconstruction*’, *Pos Eng*, p.51

¹⁷⁹ p.73

¹⁸⁰ p.56

¹⁸¹ p.63

¹⁸² p.69

¹⁸³ pp. 73, 125

¹⁸⁴ *entame*, p. 109

‘practice’¹⁸⁵, a ‘labour’¹⁸⁶. Therefore, deconstruction is an act and a process. The act / process of deconstruction appears to have as its object either a metaphysical system¹⁸⁷ or an oppositional structure¹⁸⁸ – which amount more or less to the same thing because the metaphysical system is structured¹⁸⁹, while the oppositional structures are metaphysical. So, the object of deconstruction is metaphysical structures. Then we often have a description of the act / process of deconstruction¹⁹⁰; and it consists of the double gesture one always observes in Derrida’s texts.

‘Structure(s)’, ‘structuré(e)’, ‘structural(e)’, ‘structurel(le)’, ‘structurellement’ appear mainly in three connections: (a) in relation to the process of deconstruction – ‘différance’, ‘grammē’, ‘text’ etc are described either as structures or as structured¹⁹¹; (b) in relation to the object of deconstruction – metaphysics and its constituent oppositions are either structures or structured¹⁹²; and (c) in relation to necessity or impossibility¹⁹³. The latter use is of Kantian origin.

The terms ‘déconstruction’ and ‘structure’ appear not only very often but always in key-phrases for the understanding of the Derridean argument. Their use also seems to be inter-connected. They often appear close to each other. One ‘deconstructs’ a ‘structure’, while ‘deconstruction’ is ‘structural’. I think one can safely infer that ‘deconstruction’ in *Positions* is the name of Derrida’s project, while the notion of structure is closely interwoven with this project.

¹⁸⁵ p.125

¹⁸⁶ p.129

¹⁸⁷ e.g. pp. 15, 30, 48, 57, 57, 64, 78, 88, 88, 93, 109

¹⁸⁸ e.g. pp. 57, 72, 125

¹⁸⁹ e.g. p.15

¹⁹⁰ e.g. pp. 56-58, 89, 109

¹⁹¹ pp. 13, 38, 39, 78, 94, 111, 120, 122

¹⁹² pp. 15, 45, 57, 74, 86, 96, 96, 117

¹⁹³ pp. 15, 45, 54, 57, 68, 82, 92, 119

3. STRUCTURALIST SEMIOTICS

3.1. Introduction

My hypothesis is the importance of structural semiotics to Jacques Derrida's project. I argue that structural semiotics provides him with the most significant axiom of his theory, as well as the basis of his methodological approach. It also constitutes one of his favourite objects of critique. Additionally, it is important to this thesis because it provides a large proportion of my analytical tools. The purpose of this chapter is critically to present the elements of structuralist semiotics that are necessary to support my argument: elements used and/or forcefully attacked by Derrida, or useful to my analysis. This amounts to a multiplicity of inter-related subjects: 'sign' and 'structure', their definitions, their articulations, their ontological status and epistemological implications; the main theoretical characteristics of structuralist semiotics and semiotic structuralism, and their implications; as well as the definition of several related concepts. The difficulty, however, is not so much in the co-existence of these themes in the same chapter, as in their systematic distinction and organisation into a linear narrative.

The first danger encountered is repetition and circularity. This is the result of three factors. Firstly, as we have already mentioned, semiotics constitutes/constructs its object study. This is even more so in the case of structuralist semiotics because it gives a radically new definition of the sign. This definition is closely interrelated with the invention of the 'structural object', which is different in significant ways from previous uses of the word 'structure'. Consequently, strictly speaking, one cannot address the definitions of sign and structure separately from each other, and from their theoretical preconditions and implications. Secondly, semiotics has as object of study

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what other sciences use only as a means¹. This could not but lead to a pre-occupation with its own methods, an extreme expression of which are the post-structuralist theories. The result is that meta-theoretical propositions are intrinsically part of structuralist semiotic theory. Thirdly, consistent with its premises, structuralist semiotics is structural, i.e. it is a structure. As we will soon see, this means – among other things – that everything is interconnected, nothing can be taken out without affecting the whole and that one cannot have an understanding of a part without taking into account the whole. In each level of the structure, there is no intrinsic priority of any element. Therefore, my presentation of the theory in a sequence of subsections is necessarily arbitrary and deficient. I can only hope that by the end of the chapter the reader will be able to see the whole picture.

The second danger this chapter encounters is terminological confusion. A habit that can be perplexing for one unacquainted with the structuralist vocabulary is what could appear as ‘terminological metonymy’. In other words, structuralists often use a term which initially described one phenomenon or concept in order to denote another phenomenon or concept, usually of wider application than the first one². This is far from being just a rhetorical device, because it is combined with very rigorous re-definitions of the terms. The familiar term actually becomes a neologism. When the phenomenon of language, for example, is fully defined as a ‘semiotic system’, to call any semiotic system a ‘language’ is more than a synecdoche; it is substitution

¹ Louis Hjelmslev makes a similar observation about language and linguistics: ‘We may overlook the means of knowledge – language itself [...] It is in the nature of language to be overlooked, to be a means and not an end [...] Linguistics [is] a study of language and its texts as an end in itself.’, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, (1943) 1953, p.2. So linguistics is the science that puts as an object of knowledge the means to knowledge. Generalising from language to semiotic systems, as Hjelmslev himself did later, the claim can be interpreted as: semiotics is the science that puts as an object of knowledge the means to knowledge. Roland Barthes adds ‘semio[tics] is the only [science] that puts into question its own discourse; science of language, of languages, it cannot accept its own language as a given’, *L’aventure sémiologique*, (1974) 1985, p.14.

² As we shall see, this technique bears resemblances and can be claimed to be precedent to deconstructive reading.

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between equivalent terms. Then, however, one has the problem of distinguishing the particular phenomena both conceptually and terminologically; in our example, the ones initially called ‘languages’. These have to be renamed; in this case, they are called – not unproblematically – ‘natural languages’. Subsequently, their specificity has to be investigated. A further terminological complication is, as expected, the persistence of the layman’s use of the terms, to which is added the equally unavoidable ‘connotational burden’ the scientific term carries³. This situation may have deeper implications than semantic confusion. It may lead to the unwitting endorsement of uncritical assumptions about the familiar term and their generalization to the wider phenomenon it now describes. An example would be the attribution to all semiotic systems of characteristics we accept that a ‘natural language’ possesses. This, however, is an inherent danger to all scientific appropriation of everyday vocabulary⁴. A possible solution is to coin complete neologisms, as occasionally structuralists do, which however may be very burdening to the reader.

A third danger, related to the previous one, is the co-existence of several different sets of scientific terminologies. As it is often the case with new theories, for which an existing conceptual vocabulary is no longer appropriate, semiotics had to name its concepts in the process of inventing them. Each semiotician who has made some contribution to the subject has proposed to a certain degree his or her own terminology. Every effort to unify them is in a way proposing a new terminology too. Most difficult, however, are not the cases of terminological discrepancy but of homonymy. Of particular interest is the term /function/. Hjelmslev uses it in the

³ As we have mentioned earlier and will expound further, Derrida is particularly sensitive to connotational burden.

⁴ Roy Harris comments on how the intermingling of the technical and non-technical registers has allowed French speaking commentators of Saussure to camouflage misunderstandings (*Saussure and his Interpreters*, p.vi); Tullio de Mauro likewise remarks on how the easy equation between Saussurean terminology and its translation does not necessarily benefit understanding (critical notes to *CLG*, p. 442).

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mathematical sense, which means – oversimplifying things – as a relation. Jakobson uses it in the sense of use, what something is for. So, in Hjelmslev's sense, the 'semiotic function' is the relation that constitutes signification; in Jakobson's sense, 'semiotic functions' are the uses we can make of signs – according to him, they are six. The two theories are not in contradiction with each other and one who accepts elements of both can find herself with a sentence where both senses of 'function' co-exist.

A similar case is the confusion around /semiotic structure/. It can either mean 'the internal articulation of the sign' or 'the articulation between signs'. Hjelmslev's stratification is about the semiotic structure in the first sense; language is a semiotic structure in the second sense. These two senses are not easily distinguishable, and the reason lies in the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness. As we shall see, it is a language that articulates its units and not the other way round. However, it is clear that Saussure's definition of the sign and Hjelmslev's stratification refer to a meta-structure common to all semiotic systems, by reason of which they are semiotic, whereas each semiotic system is a particular structure different from every other. Consequently, 'the structure of the semiotic function' is completely different from 'the functions of semiotic structures'. My thesis is particularly concerned with the former. When addressing later the definition of 'structure', we will examine several other complications regarding the use of the term. The above preliminary remarks are needed simply because this chapter develops around the different senses of 'semiotic structure'.

I will start with the definition of the sign and semiotic function. Then, I will investigate issues regarding the semiotic medium. Subsequently, I will present the definition of semiotic systems as structures and the ways they are organized. This will

help my attempt to deduce a definition of structure. Then, I will investigate the specificity of semiotic structure, as opposed to structure in general. Finally, I will try to show the interconnection between structuralist principles and the definitions of ‘sign’ and ‘structure’. I will particularly address questions regarding the ontology of semiotic structure and the epistemology of structuralist semiotics.

The leading thread of this chapter’s argument is the premise of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness. It is so important that I could not dedicate a separate sub-section to it. It will be first presented after and in relation to Saussure’s definition of the sign, and will re-appear in every sub-section. Furthermore, a most important conceptual distinction for structuralist semiotics is the difference between *langue* and *parole*; roughly put the difference between rules and processes. It will be extensively explained in sub-section 3.5. Preliminarily, however, I have to point out that the conception of *langue* as a structure is a definitional characteristic of structuralist semiotics; *langue* is the semiotic structure *par excellence*. Since in this thesis we are mostly concerned with the structural aspect of signification, *langue* is our preferred field of investigation.

The main primary sources for this chapter are Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* and the work of Louis Hjelmslev; complemented, of course, with the work of other semioticians, such as Roman Jakobson, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco. The choice of Saussure needs no further explanation; the choice of Hjelmslev, however, may seem eccentric.

Louis Hjelmslev (1899-1965) is the Danish linguist who founded the Linguistic Circle of Copenhagen in 1931. He collaborated between 1933 and 1939 with Hans Jørgen Uldall in the elaboration of a theory of language, which they named ‘Glossematics’ – from the Greek word ‘γλῶσσα’, i.e. ‘tongue’ or ‘language’. He co-

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published with Viggo Brøndal the review *Acta Linguistica* (1939ff). As we have said, Hjelmslev and Jakobson represent the father figures of the two main interpretations of the Saussurean tradition. Hjelmslev's importance for mainstream structuralism of the 50's and 60's lies particularly in his rigorous reading of Saussure⁵. His work greatly influenced the leading French semioticians Roland Barthes⁶ and Algirdas-Julien Greimas⁷, and therefore the semiotic program in France. It is indicative that Tullio de Mauro's critical notes to his corner-stone edition of *CLG* are full of references to Hjelmslev⁸. However, Hjelmslev's work is exceptional and not paradigmatic of structuralism. Most important is his elaboration of the stratification of semiotic systems; namely the introduction of the distinction between 'expression-form' and 'expression-substance', and between 'content-form' and 'content-substance'. As I will attempt to show in the next chapter, I consider Hjelmslev as having a theoretical affinity with Derrida. This is the reason for my extensive preoccupation with his theoretical claims.

⁵ One should remember that there were no critical editions of *Cours de linguistique générale* in the early 60's. Saussure's manuscript notes of his lectures, along with his students' notes from the lectures, were published in 1957 by R. Godel. R. Engler's critical edition, which takes these notes into account, appeared in 1968; whereas Tullio de Mauro's critical edition appeared as late as 1972. The entire corpus of Saussure's manuscript notes were published in 2002. Hjelmslev's work, on the other hand, is very often written or translated in French or English, and therefore available to the international community, since the beginning of his career in the late 20's. Particularly with regards to his interpretation of Saussure, his essay 'La stratification du langage' first appeared in 1954 in the 10th issue of the American journal *Word* (in French); a collection of his essays was published in France in 1959; his *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, published in Danish in 1943, appeared in English in 1953 and in French in 1968.

⁶ Barthes' main theoretical construction in the 1956 essay 'Le mythe aujourd'hui' (included in *Mythologies*, 1957) is based on Hjelmslev's definition of connotative semiotic and meta-semiotic. Most importantly, his 1964 'Eléments de sémiologie' (in *Communications* 4), which became the text-reference of the French structuralism in the '60s, is clearly founded on Hjelmslev's interpretation of Saussure. Nevertheless, Barthes' interpretation of Hjelmslev's interpretation is rather personal. I would dare say that Barthes' divergences from Hjelmslev are due to not only difference of opinion but quite often to straightforward misunderstanding.

⁷ Greimas' 1966 work *Sémantique structurale: recherche de méthode*, which opened the field of structural semantics, is greatly indebted to Hjelmslev.

⁸ I have counted only in the 73 pages of endnotes 31 appearances of Hjelmslev's name.

3.2. The structure of the semiotic function

The *CLG* approaches the definition of the sign in several ways, the composition of which allows the reader to have a complete view. As I have explained, this is not only because of the particular editorial history of the book, its being an a posteriori composition of three different series of lectures, but because of its methodological choices and the nature of its object. Here, we will start from the point of view of the semiotic unit, which will be then extended to the semiotic function. It is important always to remember, however, that for Saussure – and structuralist semiotics in general – the semiotic unit is the product of the semiotic system and not the other way round. I should also remind the reader that in *CLG* Saussure most of the time speaks of the ‘linguistic sign’, the sign in ‘natural’ languages. It is his introductory reference to semiotics⁹, the science of which linguistics will be part, which allows us to apply his claims to signs in general.

In the first chapter of the first part of *CLG*, the sign is defined as follows:

Nous appelons *signe* la combinaison du concept et de l’image acoustique [...] [du] *signifié* et [du] *signifiant*¹⁰ [Italics already in text]

(We name *sign* the combination of a concept and an acoustic image [...] [the] *signified* and [the] *signifier*)¹¹

⁹ *CLG*, p. 33

¹⁰ p. 99

¹¹ As I have explained in Chapter 1, the translation of Saussure is mine. The reason is that I have some significant disagreements with Roy Harris’ translation of the Saussurean terminology, in his otherwise very useful 1983 translation of *CLG*. This extract is an excellent example of our divergences. Harris translates ‘*signifié*’ as ‘signification’. I think that the equivalent of English ‘signification’ would be the French ‘signifiante’. Therefore, I have chosen ‘signified’ as equivalent to the term ‘*signifié*’. Harris translates ‘*signifiant*’ as ‘signal’. ‘Signal’ is the term used by Peirce to denote one of the three types of sign, according to his theory. Every reader interested in semiotics today has at least a remote acquaintance with this part of Peircean terminology. To avoid misleading connections, I have chosen ‘signifier’ as equivalent to the term ‘*signifiant*’. Finally, Harris translates ‘*l’image acoustique*’ as ‘sound pattern’. This choice changes the theoretical perspective of Saussure’s term from phenomenological to ontological. The adjective ‘*acoustique*’ – from the Greek ‘ἀκοή’ (akoē), i.e. ‘the sense of hearing’ – as well as the noun ‘*image*’, focus on the perceptive aspect: signifier is an entity created by the subject’s perception. ‘Sound’, in contrast, seems to focus more on what is there to be perceived. As we will soon see, this would be a serious misunderstanding. Nevertheless, the term ‘pattern’ is in a different way more faithful to Saussure’s spirit than his own term. ‘Pattern’ refers to form without any implicit relation to similarity; whereas the term ‘image’ is at the risk of carrying this implication. Still, I have chosen ‘acoustic image’ as the closest interpretation of ‘*image acoustique*’.

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Two premises are combined in Saussure's definition: (a) the sign is the *inseparable* co-existence of two aspects; (b) the sign is *not* of material nature. On the one hand, the signified and the signifier are inseparable 'like the two sides of a piece of paper'¹², as the famous simile goes; they are 'intimately joined and each calls to the other'¹³. On the other, 'both [terms] are *psychological* and are united *in our head*'¹⁴; and the sign is 'a double-faced *psychological* entity'¹⁵ [my Italics]. Both premises are directed against the traditional position of language as 'nomenclature'¹⁶, according to which language names things. The first premise opposes the notion that the sign is the connection of two entities that can exist independently from each other. The second opposes the notion that the sign is a material object, e.g. the spoken or written word, substituting for another material object. Both premises, as we will soon explain, derive from the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness.

So, Saussure insists that the sign is the inseparable co-existence 'not [of] a thing and a name but [of] a concept and an acoustic image'¹⁷. The signifier is defined as an 'acoustic image' because

[it] is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but *the psychological imprint*¹⁸ of that sound, its representation¹⁹ by the testimony of our senses²⁰
[Italics mine]

¹² *CLG*, p. 157

¹³ p. 99

¹⁴ p. 98

¹⁵ p. 99

¹⁶ p. 97

¹⁷ p. 98

¹⁸ Derrida comments extensively on the use of metaphors of writing in order to describe language.

¹⁹ One notices the frequent use of the term 'representation' in *CLG*. However, as it will become apparent, Saussurean 'representation' differs significantly from its traditional definition. It becomes a technical term, devoid of metaphysical implications of similarity. The tension between the technical and traditional register of 'representation' is particularly relevant to Derrida's work.

²⁰ *CLG*, p. 98

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‘Acoustic²¹ image’ is opposed to ‘material sound’. The signifier is a form perceived by the senses of the subjects of communication, existing ‘in [their] head’. As the editors explain²², the acoustic image is a ‘potential’ linguistic fact, independent of its actual realization by speech. The term ‘psychological’²³ is used precisely in order to stress the *sensuous* and not *material* quality of the signifier; it has nothing to do with ‘psychology’ as we mean it today. Saussure was very hostile to ‘psychologism’, because he belonged to the trend among intellectuals of his generation who had scientific aspirations, among them Husserl and Frege. Anything pertaining to the subjects’ personal psychology is safely outside the realm of Saussurean linguistics. Hjelmslev²⁴ also puts the question in what sense semiotic research is of the ‘psychological order’ and answers that it has nothing to do with ‘sentiment’ and ‘aesthetics’. For his part, he chooses to avoid the term.

The signified is of a ‘psychological’ nature too, i.e. not-material. It is called ‘concept’ not at all in the platonic sense of a free-standing entity; Saussure makes very clear that the signified cannot exist without its signifier. It is called ‘concept’ in opposition to the ‘thing’, to stress the difference – for example – between the concept “shoe” ‘in one’s head’ and the shoes people wear on their feet. A few pages later, it is also clearly explained that these ‘concepts’ are not modeled on the existing objects of the world but are formed by the internal articulation of language. Generally in semiotics and philosophy of language, the object that exists – or could exist or be

²¹ The fact that the ‘acoustic image’ is particularly ‘acoustic’, and not let us say ‘optic’, is not intrinsic to the nature of sign as sign. See, for example, ‘the essential in language [...] has nothing to do with the phonic character of the linguistic sign’ (CLG, p. 21). Hjelmslev’s refinement and expansion of Saussure’s positions develops particularly the implications of this observation. See also footnote 9, about the choice of the terms ‘acoustic’ and ‘image’.

²² Eds note, CLG, p.98

²³ Tullio de Mauro explains the terminological difficulty with which Saussure was faced, not being able to use the term ‘abstract’ because of its negative definition in the context of the epistemology of his time, which was Kantian, idealist and positivist (critical notes, CLG, pp. 425-7).

²⁴ ‘La stratification du langage’ (1954), *Essais linguistiques*, 1971, (p.64)

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thought or even imagined to exist²⁵ – is called the *referent*. To be more exact, as Umberto Eco²⁶ points out, the referent is more a logical entity than a perceptible object. In the above mentioned example of shoes, the concept “shoe” has as referent all existing shoes (as well as future and past ones), not any particular shoe one is wearing. All these points, however, go beyond our present purposes. What we need to keep in mind is that the existence of a real referent is not a necessary precondition for a signified. For example, one can speak about “unicorns” with no fear of meeting a horn-bearing horse. In the Analytical jargon, a sentence can be meaningful or possess sense without being true or denoting any referent – hence, Eco’s definition of semiotics as ‘a theory of lie’²⁷. The problem of the referent does not belong to the proper domain of structuralist semiotics. It lies at its epistemological limits.

CLG complements the definition of the sign with two characteristics considered ‘primordial’²⁸: the arbitrariness of the sign and the linearity of the signifier. The latter refers to the specificity of ‘natural’ languages to ‘be unrolled’²⁹ in one dimension and is juxtaposed to visual semiotic systems. It does not constitute a particular novelty of *CLG* but it has been central in the discussion regarding the distinction between semiotic systems. As we shall see, it has been philosophically contested by Derrida.

The former characteristic, however, the arbitrariness of the sign as defined by Saussure, is the most radical of *CLG* contributions to semiotics and, I dare say, to

²⁵ See also Frege (‘On Sense and Reference’ and elsewhere) on the difference between ‘sense’ and ‘reference’, and also on fictive/imaginary pseudo-referents.

²⁶ *A Theory of Semiotics*, (1976) 1979, p. 66

²⁷ ‘... semiotics is in principle the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie. If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth; it cannot in fact be used “to tell” at all’, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p.7. This citation will be further discussed later.

²⁸ *CLG*, p.100

²⁹ ‘se déroule’, *CLG*, p.103

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human thought. I name it ‘the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness’³⁰, to differentiate it from previous positions regarding the conventional nature of signs. An intrinsic part of the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness is the notion of differentiability, which is expounded in *CLG* in connection with the concept of ‘linguistic [semiotic] value’³¹. Arbitrariness and differentiability are the two aspects of the same principle³²; I address them separately only for expository convenience.

Semiotic differentiability is summarised by the famous dictum:

*dans la langue il n’y a que des différences. Bien plus : une différence suppose en général des termes positives entre lesquels elle s’établit ; mais dans la langue il n’y a que des différences sans termes positifs*³³

in language there are only differences. Even more: a difference generally supposes positive terms between which it is established; however, in language there are only differences without positive terms

For Saussure, it is founded on an axiom regarding human understanding according to which:

les termes *a* et *b* sont radicalement incapables d’arriver, comme tels, jusqu’aux régions de la conscience, – laquelle n’aperçoit perpétuellement que la différence *a / b*³⁴

the terms *a* and *b* as such are radically incapable of reaching the level of consciousness – consciousness always perceives only of the *a / b* difference

According to *CLG* what language does is to articulate the unperceivable and amorphous continua of sound and thought into double-faced formal units. The signified and the signifier are in this way given specific definitions, instead of the

³⁰ I was inspired to adopt this phrase name from Oswald Ducrot’s phrase ‘il existe *un arbitraire linguistique fondamental* – à distinguer de l’arbitraire de chaque signe isolé’ [Italics mine] / ‘there exists *a fundamental linguistic arbitrariness* – to distinguish from the arbitrariness of each isolated sign’, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, p.30. In his critical notes of *CLG*, Tullio de Mauro informs us that Saussure’s initial wording of the phrase that opens the sub-section on the arbitrariness of the sign, which now reads ‘The link unifying the signified and the signifier is arbitrary’, was ‘The link unifying the signified and the signifier is *radically* arbitrary’. He argues that the purpose of the adverb was not just a general re-enforcement of the statement but meant that ‘the link is arbitrary *radicitus*, in its very foundations’, *CLG*, p. 442

³¹ *CLG*, pp. 155-169

³² ‘The *arbitrary* and the *differential* are two correlative qualities’, *CLG*, p. 163.

³³ p. 166

³⁴ p. 163

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approximate descriptions of ‘acoustic image’ and ‘concept’. Signifiers are the formal units produced by the articulation of the sonorous continuum by language, each inseparably connected with a signified. Signifieds are the formal units produced by the articulation of the conceptual continuum by language, each connected with a signifier. As units, *articula*, they are perceived only in opposition to other units of the same order. An example in the level of signifier is /bid/ being perceived in opposition with /big/, /bill/, /bin/ etc. An example in the level of signified is “green” being perceived in opposition with “blue”, “yellow” etc. So, a signifier (or a signified) is defined by two relations: (a) with its counterpart signified (or signifier, respectively), and (b) with other signifiers (or signifieds). Correspondingly, a sign is defined (a) by the internal relation between its signifier and its signified, and (b) by its relation to other signs. The first relation determines the sign’s *signification*. The second relation, i.e. the relation with entities of the same order, determines the sign’s *value*³⁵. The value of an entire sign can change every time that the signifier or signified of a nearby sign changes.

Signs are, therefore, completely relative entities. There are two ways they relate to other signs³⁶: either they follow each other in speech³⁷ or they have something in common which leads us to associate them in our memory. Saussure calls these respectively ‘syntagmatic’ and ‘associative’ relations. The first kind of relation, as we shall see later, can expand from the syntax of sentences to the textual context and general situation. The second kind of relation may be founded on an association in the level of the signifier or in the level of signified or both. For example, ‘altruism’ may be associated with [altar, altimeter etc], with which it shares

³⁵ The origin of this terminology is financial, see *CLG*, p. 159-160

³⁶ *CLG*, pp.170-175. They will be further expounded in 3.5.

³⁷ As we will see in 3.4., ‘speech’ (i.e. *parole*) in this sense includes a written phrase.

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/alt/; or with [courage, generosity, kindness etc], with which it shares the conceptual property of being a virtue; or with [alter, alternate, alternative etc], with which it shares the root ‘alter’, i.e. both /alt/ and “other”; or with [altruist, altruistic etc] etc. However, the element that the signs ‘share’ should not be perceived as having a positive existence; it is rather the remainder of what differentiates them. It does not exist outside their relation. In Saussure’s words, ‘in every semiological system, what distinguishes a sign, this is all that constitutes it’³⁸.

An issue relevant to this new definition of the sign is how one defines and disambiguates the cases that traditional lexicography calls ‘synonymy’, ‘homonymy’ and ‘polysemy’³⁹. Traditionally, ‘synonymous’ are two words with the same meaning or almost, such as ‘altruism’ and ‘selflessness’; ‘homonyms’ are two words which sound or are written in the same way – homophones or homographs - but have different meanings, such as ‘cent’/ ‘sent’ and ‘reading’ / ‘Reading’; ‘polysemous’ is a word that has more than one meaning, such as ‘administer’ meaning “provide” and “apply”. Approximately put, ‘synonyms’ would be two signs with the same signified, ‘homonyms’ two signs with the same signifier and ‘polysemous’ a sign with more than one signified. However, in Saussurean terms, strictly speaking, one cannot refer to signifiers or signifieds separated from the signs to which they belong. Two signs cannot have the same signified; their signifieds cover the same fragment of the conceptual continuum but belong to different signs – which, anyway, rarely if ever happens. They usually differ slightly and define each other reciprocally. Accordingly, two signs cannot have the same signified; their signifiers cover the same fragment of the sonorous continuum. Finally, more than one signified means more than one sign.

³⁸ CLG, p. 168

³⁹ See Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou, ‘What is semiotics?’, (p.18); Greimas and Courtés, *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, pp. 175, 284-5, 375

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So what we call a ‘polysemous’ sign is one of two things: either a sign whose the signified covers the fragment of the conceptual continuous corresponding to the signifieds of more than one other signs, or there are more than one ‘homonymous’ signs. The important point is that as signs do not exist by themselves, all these cases are disambiguated by situation in context.

Consequently, the value of a sign is determined by the combination of the differential position of its signifier and its signified, as well as by its own position in relation to other signs. We are led to the definition of language – semiotic systems – as pure form. The positive terms, if any, are produced by their position in a system of relations. We can, therefore, call semiotic systems ‘differential’.

The principle of fundamental linguistic arbitrariness depends on the differential nature of language, as just described. The signs gain their value by their position in the semiotic system and not because of some intrinsic similarity or analogy with the extra-semiotic world. Linguistic arbitrariness, in the sense that the relation of a sign to its referent is the product of social convention, is not new; it was supported by many philosophers, from Democritus (allegedly) to Whitney. Saussure subscribes to the conception of language as social convention, as it is obvious even to the most superficial reader of *CLG*. He explains that his use of the term ‘arbitrary’ does not mean ‘dependent on the free choice of the speaking subject’⁴⁰, which would contradict the social nature of semiosis, but ‘unmotivated’. In a first level, this means that there is no intrinsic reason why a particular signified is paired with a particular signifier, and consequently no intrinsic connection between a sign and its referent. However, the Saussurean position is much more radical than this. By defining language as a form articulating the continua of sound and thought, he indicates that it

⁴⁰ p. 101



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is us, social communities, who give shape to the world through the process of giving meaning. It is not just the relation between words and things, but the very distinction of the world into ‘things’ which is no longer natural. This does not amount to a denial of the objective existence of the world. What it calls into question is the intrinsic existence of its divisions. There are many famous examples of how the division of the world into concepts changes from one semiotic community to another; such as the existence of four words in the Eskimo language denoting the different density of what in English is called ‘snow’⁴¹.

This radical form of arbitrariness, where language comes first and determines the constitution of concepts, as well as the distinction between sounds, is what I name ‘the principle of fundamental linguistic arbitrariness’. The completely formal definition of language as a semiotic system that this principle entails provides a basis for the generalisation of Saussure’s definition to all semiotic systems, which will be the object of the next sub-section. Moreover, in this new definition, the sign is no longer originary. This opens the possibility that the significant semiotic unit be larger or smaller than what traditionally was called sign⁴².

Hjelmslev, when summarising the working hypotheses of his theory of Glossematics, in ‘La stratification du langage’⁴³, includes in them: ‘considering language, in the sense commonly adopted by linguists, as a particular case of semiotic system’⁴⁴. A few paragraphs later, he admits that the exact title of his essay should be ‘The stratification of semiotic system’, with the condition that one would include in

⁴¹ The degree of interdependence between our conceptual language and our perception is not an answered question.

⁴² See, for example, Roland Barthes, ‘Eléments de sémiologie’, pp.117-118

⁴³ This very significant essay first appeared in 1954 in the journal *Word*. It was republished in 1971 in *Essais linguistiques*, pp. 44-76, to which I refer from now on as *Strat*. The translation from French to English is mine.

⁴⁴ *Strat*, p.46

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the concept of system the process which determines it⁴⁵. His stratification is one of his most original contributions to semiotics and the foundation of his theory. It is an elaboration of the Saussurean definition of language, particularly as presented in part I – chapter IV of *CLG*, in relation to linguistic value. As the sign is constituted by its relations, Hjelmslev turns the investigation into the sign into an investigation into the structure of the constitutive relations of the semiotic phenomenon, ‘sign-function’. ‘Function’ Hjelmslev defines as a ‘dependence’⁴⁶, which means more or less a logical relation⁴⁷. The terminals of a function, i.e. the entities among which there is the relation, are called ‘functives’. In the case of the semiotic phenomenon, the functives are constituted by the function.

Hjelmslev defines a semiotic system as ‘a specific form organized between two substances: that of content and that of expression’⁴⁸. This is clearly in agreement with *CLG*⁴⁹. Systematizing Saussure’s positions, Hjelmslev analyses semiotic systems according to a double distinction: (a) that between content and expression and (b) that between form and substance. The fundamental distinction is the first, between the planes of content and expression. In this definition, ‘expression’ and ‘content’ are just the terms designating the functives that contract the sign-function. They are ‘defined only oppositively and relatively’⁵⁰, they have no intrinsic properties. They are connected by a relation of reciprocal implication, they presuppose each other. The

⁴⁵ ‘nous aurions dû mettre: *La stratification du système sémiotique*’, p.47.

⁴⁶ See *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language* (1943), translated from Danish in English by Francis J. Whitfield, 1953. From now on referred to as *Pro!*; pp. 20-24.

⁴⁷ Hjelmslev’s ‘function’ is equivalent to the mathematical concept of ‘map’, of which a sub-case is the mathematical concept of ‘function’.

⁴⁸ *Strat*, p.44

⁴⁹ It is actually a very accurate summary of Part I – Chapter IV of *CLG*, ‘The linguistic value’, pp. 155-169. For example, we read in *CLG* ‘language elaborates its units by constituting itself between two amorphous masses’ (p.156) and, further on, ‘Linguistics operates on the margin where elements of two orders are combined; this combination produces a form, not a substance’ (p.157).

⁵⁰ *Pro!*, p.38

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second distinction, between form and substance, takes place within each plane⁵¹. Hjelmslev states explicitly that form and substance are, once again, relative and not absolute terms. He reminds the reader of the prehistory of the two terms⁵², where the former denoted everything pertaining to definitions, whereas the latter signified all that was not included in the form but nevertheless belonged to an exhaustive description of the object; form always seems to expand in the domain of substance, always demanding a new complementary substance. The relation between form and substance is *not* a double implication; substance pre-supposes form, whereas form is independent of substance. The two distinctions are significantly different in nature. ‘Content’ and ‘expression’ are two planes oppositionally defined, completely symmetrical and equivalent to each other; the terms are arbitrary. ‘Form’ and ‘substance’, conversely, are as terms relative to each other but as entities are not equivalent. Semiotic substance owes its existence to semiotic form.

From this double division – content-expression, form-substance – result the four parts of every semiotic system, named *strata*: ‘content-form’, ‘content-substance’, ‘expression-form’, ‘expression-substance’. In the case of a spoken language, such as English, expression-substance is the sonic continuum as perceived by speaking subjects; expression-form is its differentiation by the semiotic system into signifiers; content-substance is the potential conceptual universe as perceived by a semiotic community; content-form is its differentiation by the semiotic system into signifieds. The sign-function proper is the relation between content-form and expression-form⁵³, which is a mutual dependence, a double implication, under the name of *denotation*. It is the equivalent of the Saussurean relation between the

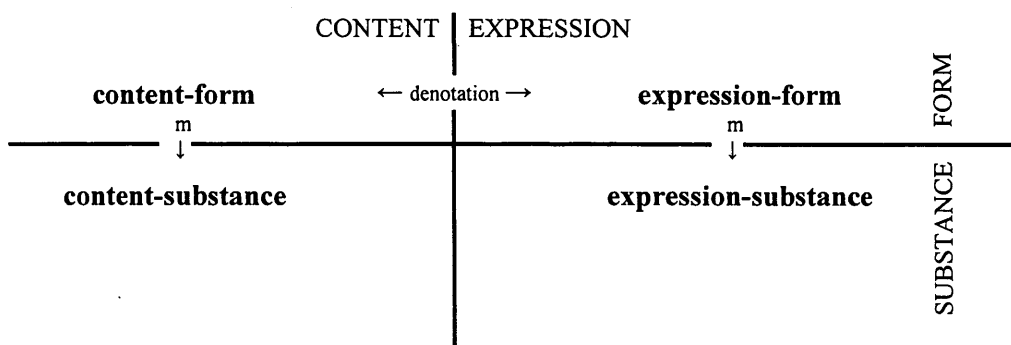
⁵¹ *Strat*, p.46

⁵² *ibid*, pp. 55-56

⁵³ *ibid*, p. 54

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signified and signifier. The relation between form and substance inside each plane is a one-way implication, where substance presupposes form but not the other way round, which relation Hjelmslev calls *manifestation*⁵⁴. The only two strata that have no immediate relation to each other are the content-substance and the expression-substance.



[Figure 3.1. – Hjelmslev's stratification of semiotic systems]

So, a semiotic system is 'a specific form organized between two substances', whereas a 'sign' is defined as a particular kind of function between two planes⁵⁵, the 'sign-function'. The sign-function is theorized from the level of an entire semiotic system down to the level of its different signifying articulations, all of which can be called in this sense 'signs' – or better 'sign-functions'. In the case of natural languages, this means, as Hjelmslev observes, that 'entities commonly referred to as sentences, clauses, and words seem to fulfil the stated condition [of sign]'⁵⁶ and also '[w]ords are not the ultimate, irreducible signs'⁵⁷. This is the reason the term 'sign-function' is less misleading than the term 'sign'. The fact that every semiotic system is a sign-function obviously does not mean that every sign-function is a semiotic system⁵⁸. I should mention here that Hjelmslev often substitutes the term 'a semiotic' (as a noun) for the term 'a semiotic system' – 'une sémiotique' instead of 'un système

⁵⁴ *Prol*, p.68; *Strat*, p.53

⁵⁵ *Prol*, p.27

⁵⁶ *ibid*

⁵⁷ *ibid*

⁵⁸ The definition of 'semiotic system' will be addressed in the sub-section 3.5.

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sémiotique’. Actually, ‘a semiotic’ is a more general term than ‘a semiotic system’, as we will see later in this chapter.

The reciprocal relation between the two planes of the sign-function means that changes in the one plane cause changes in the other. This property⁵⁹ provides the way of knowing⁶⁰ whether a variation of an expression-form – or content-form – produces a new sign-function or not. If the change entails a difference in the other plane, then we are in the presence of two distinct sign-functions. For example, in the couple ‘pet/pat’ the substitution of /a/ for /e/ produces the distinct content-forms “pet” and “pat”, therefore we have two distinct sign-functions. Conversely, different pronunciations of /e/ in ‘pet’ would not affect the content plane; therefore they will produce different variants of the same sign-function.

A definitional property of a semiotic system is that its planes of content and expression are not isomorphic⁶¹, i.e. that their content-form and expression-form do not have exactly the same inner structure. This means that the articula of content should not correspond one-to-one to the articula of expression, although it does not prevent the occasional articulum to do so.

If a structure with reciprocal implicational relation between content and expression is to be recognized as a language, we require that there must not be a one-one reciprocal implicational relation throughout between its expression elements and its content elements⁶².

The prerequisite for the necessity of operating with two planes must be that the two planes... cannot be shown to have the same structure throughout, with a one-to-one relation between the functives of the one plane and the functives of the other⁶³.

⁵⁹ *Language: An Introduction* (written in 1943, published in Danish in 1963), translated in English by Francis J. Whitfield, 1970. From now on referred to as *Lang*; p. 100

⁶⁰ ‘On the principles of phonematics’, *Proceedings of the second international congress of phonematic sciences*, 1936, p.51: method of commutation; *Prol*, pp.40-41

⁶¹ According to Greimas and Courtés, ‘isomorphism is the formal identity between two or more structures’ [the translation mine], *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, p.197 ; see also Ducrot and Todorov, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, p.39

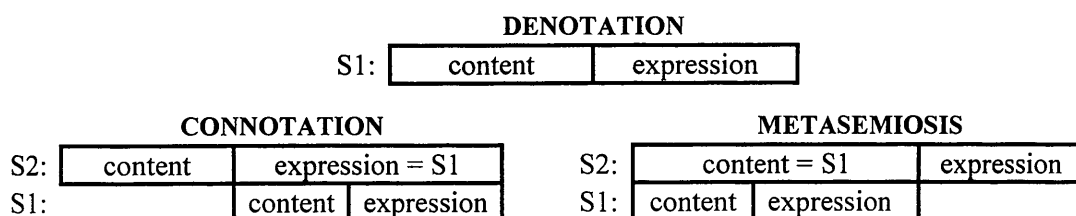
⁶² *Lang*, p.104.

⁶³ *Prol*, p.72

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Considering that the difference between content and expression is purely differential, two absolutely isomorphic plans would be reduced into one. Hjelmslev regards mono-planar structures as outside the realm of semiotics⁶⁴.

Hjelmslev uses the algebra of sign-function to explain connotation and metalanguage (viz. metasemiosis). When a semiotic system has as its content-plane or its expression-plane a wholly distinct semiotic system, we call it a ‘second-degree’ semiotic system⁶⁵. This process may be repeated ad infinitum, creating higher degree semiotic systems. A semiotic system whose the *expression*-plane is a semiotic system is called ‘connotative semiotic’. A semiotic system whose the *content*-plane is a semiotic system is called ‘metasemiotic’⁶⁶. Therefore, we define connotation and metasemiosis as higher degree sign-functions. First degree function, denotation, is the most common connection between a content-form and an expression-form for a specific semiotic community.



[Figure 3.2. – Degrees of the sign-function]

To give an example of connotation, let us take the sign-function ‘Ithaca’. In the context of English speaking people with some knowledge of geography, the denotation of ‘Ithaca’ is the connection of the expression-form /Ithaca/ with the content-form “Ithaca, the island in Greece”. However, for a sub-set of the above-mentioned people who also happen to have knowledge of Homer’s *Odyssey*, the expression-form /Ithaca/ is also connected to the content-form “final destination”.

⁶⁴ The implications of this premise to the definition of semiosis will be addressed in 3.8.

⁶⁵ Lang, p.132

⁶⁶ Prol, p.73; Strat, p.51

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This is a second degree sign-function, because it pre-supposes the previous one. In the *Odyssey*, the entire sign-function ‘Ithaca’ is connected to the content-form “final destination”: /Ithaca/ is the “island in Greece” that is Ulysses’ “final destination”. For a sub-set of the previous sub-set of people, who also happen to know of Kavafis’ poem ‘Ithaca’⁶⁷, there is a second degree connotation, i.e. a third degree sign-function, with regard to the sign-function ‘Ithaca’. The expression-form /Ithaca/ can also be connected to the content-form “life purpose”; which connection pre-supposes the two previous ones. A possible objection to this exposition would raise the case of, let us say, a schoolboy who knows Ithaca from studying the *Odyssey* without ever realizing that this is an island in Greece. However, this case does not refute the structuralist description of connotation, because signification is socially constituted. What we discuss here is not the knowledge of each speaking subject but the knowledge of social groups, smaller or larger, the abstraction of which constitutes signification. The question of the schoolboy is very interesting as a matter of how semiotic systems are used by individual subjects, but it does not affect the way signification is constituted, which is the object of our investigation⁶⁸.

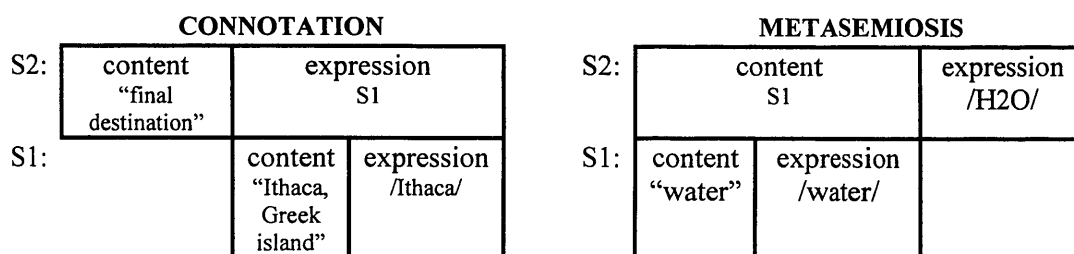
To give an example of metasemiosis, let us take the connection of the expression-form /H₂O/ and the content-form “water, the liquid we commonly drink”. In the context of English speaking people, the most common connection for the content-form “water, the liquid we commonly drink” is the expression-form /water/. However, the sub-set of the English speaking people who have an elementary knowledge of chemistry also connect the content-form “water, the liquid we commonly drink” with the expression-form /H₂O/ because they were taught that

⁶⁷ Κωνσταντίνος Π. Καβάφης, ‘Ιθάκη’ (1911)

⁶⁸ This distinction is connected to the definition of language as a structure and the distinction between *langue* and *parole*, as we shall see.

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water, the liquid we commonly drink, is composed of two molecules of hydrogen and one molecule of oxygen. Therefore, the sign-function ‘water’ is connected with the expression-form /H₂O/ to form a second-degree sign-function, in this case a metasemiosis. Metasemiosis is particularly interesting for our purposes because theory itself is a kind of metasemiosis⁶⁹: a semiotic system *about* another semiotic system, i.e. a semiotic system having as a content-plane another semiotic system. Interpretation and translation can also be construed in terms of metasemiosis.



[Figure 3.3. – Connotation and Metasemiosis: Examples]

Nevertheless, there is a blatant contradiction between the above definitions and the conception of content plane and expression plane as purely ‘oppositively and relationally’⁷⁰ defined functives of the sign-function. If indeed content and expression can mutually exchange their positions, then connotation and metasemiosis are reduced to the same thing. Hjelmslev is aware of this problem. He points out that:

Since expression plane and content plane are defined only in opposition and in relation to each other, it follows that the definitions we have given here for the connotative semiotics and metasemiotics are only provisional ‘real’ definitions, to which we cannot ascribe even operational value.⁷¹

He proceeds to re-define connotation and metasemiosis. This time the differentiating criterion is scientificity. He first distinguishes between ‘scientific’ semiotic systems and ‘non-scientific’ semiotic systems⁷². According to his previous definitions

⁶⁹ Lang, p.132

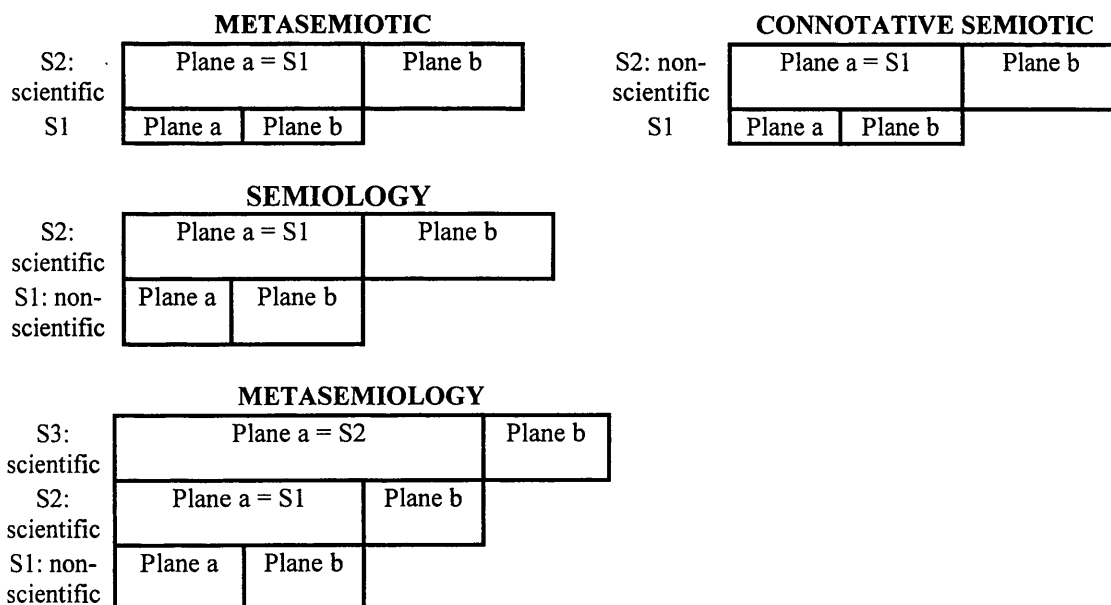
⁷⁰ Prol, p.38

⁷¹ ibid, p.73

⁷² ibid, p.77

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regarding scientificity⁷³, scientific is a semiotic system which is free of contradiction, exhaustive, and as simple as possible. He then defines as ‘connotative’ the *non-scientific* semiotic system whose one (or both) plane(s) is (are) a semiotic system. He defines as ‘metasemiotic’ a *scientific* semiotic system whose one (or both) plane(s) is (are) a semiotic system. Finally, he names ‘semiology’ the particular case of metasemiotic system, whose the object semiotic is a non-scientific semiotic system. ‘Metasemiology’ would be the scientific semiotic system whose the object is a semiology⁷⁴. My thesis would be classified in this last category.



[Figure 3.4. – Hjelmslev’s second definition of higher degree semiotics]

The new definition of connotation and metasemiosis avoids the problems of the previous one and is consistent with the other propositions of Glossematics. However, it introduces the issue of scientificity, which is far more ambiguous than it seems. Uldall, in the *Outline of Glossematics*⁷⁵, admits that in the last resort the choice of the scientific method rests on aesthetic and practical reasons: it looks better and it works. As Hjelmslev’s second definition never gained widespread acceptance, I

⁷³ *ibid*, pp.6, 9

⁷⁴ See also Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p.30

⁷⁵ p. 14

will continue using the first definition, which is the one most structuralists used. We should just keep in mind that Hjelmslev knew it was no longer strictly consistent with the definition of semiosis⁷⁶.

Glossematics was a systematic effort to apply the consequences of semiotic differentiability to every aspect of semiotic theory. In this way it was more true to the principles introduced by the *CLG* than the text of *CLG*, itself. Striving for consistency, it made apparent the radical implications and innovative possibilities of *CLG*, as well as several new questions and unsolved problems. Most important for understanding the work of Jacques Derrida are the implications and questions around the concept of semiotic value, which are – as we have seen – intimately connected with the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness, i.e. arbitrariness and differentiability.

As we have said, the value of a sign as a whole is determined by the combination of the differential position of its signifier and its signified. *CLG* analyses value firstly from the point of view of its ‘conceptual aspect’⁷⁷, then of its ‘material aspect’⁷⁸ and then ‘the sign considered in its totality’⁷⁹; this means ‘from the point of view of the signified [...], of the signifier and the entire sign’⁸⁰. Saussure’s terminology is not consistent, possibly because of the editorial history of the book. One of the things that are not completely clear is whether the sign’s value is the product of the differential positions of the signifier and the signified, or it has a value with regards to its signifier and another value with regard to its signified. The

⁷⁶ He himself often kept using the first definition for reasons of convenience. For example he uses it in *Strat* in 1954, despite having shown its contradictions in *Prol* in 1943.

⁷⁷ *CLG*, pp. 158-162

⁷⁸ pp. 163-166

⁷⁹ pp. 166-169. Obviously the term ‘material’ is used as a convention, considering that by definition value is an issue of form. It is precisely the text under this title that shows that a semiotic value has absolutely nothing to do with the material.

⁸⁰ p. 158

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first interpretation is supported by the fact that we speak of the ‘conceptual’ and ‘material *aspects* of value’ and not of the ‘conceptual value’ and the ‘material value’. Conversely, the second interpretation is supported by the fact that value is defined as the relation between similar terms, in opposition with signification (denotation) which is the relation between dissimilar terms, i.e. between the signifier and the signified.

Hjelmslev seems to choose the second interpretation. He says:

The form is defined by the value, that is, by the differential minimum of content [or expression] necessary to keep this unit apart from others units of the same sort⁸¹ [the addition is mine, in accordance with the symmetry attributed to the sign-function by Glossematics]

Hjelmslev defines value in regard to each plane separately. However, it remains the fact that in *CLG* value is always ‘of the sign’ or ‘of the word’; it never appears as ‘of the signifier’ or ‘of the signified’.

What is clear, however, is that for *CLG* pure differentiability is a property of the signifier and the signified, and not of the sign as a whole; translated into Hjelmslev’s terminology, for *CLG* pure differentiability is a property of the expression-form and the content-form separately, and not of the sign-function. In a less cited extract from a much cited page of *CLG*, it is claimed that:

to say that everything in language is negative [...] is not true but for the signified and the signifier taken separately: from the moment that we consider the sign in its totality, we find ourselves in the presence of a thing that is positive in its order⁸²

and a bit further:

two signs [...] are not different, they are distinct⁸³

Conversely, Hjelmslev situates pure differentiability at the level of form, which covers the entire sign-function proper; whereas he considers that it is substance which gives to the sign-function positiveness and stability:

⁸¹ ‘On the principles of phonematics’, p. 50

⁸² p. 166

⁸³ p.167

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It is form that constitutes the value and the constant; and it is substance that closes the variables, to which different values are attributed according to the circumstances⁸⁴

The question the answer to which would allow us to choose between the two positions is: whether the superposition of two purely differential systems, the one of the content-form and the one of the expression form, produces once again a purely differential system or not.

What is at stake is the exact meaning of *CLG*'s famous dicta:

language cannot be but a system of pure values⁸⁵

*in language there are only differences [...] without positive terms*⁸⁶

both of which agree with Hjelmslev's position but seem to contradict the above citations of *CLG*. It is possible that this is a case of contradiction. However, as two of the apparently contradictory propositions are situated on the same page, with just ten lines between them, it would be more plausible to search for an alternative explanation. It is possible that what *CLG* meant was that the superposition of the two differential nets produces stability in the semiotic system around the semiotic unit. It is in this sense that the sign is not a completely negative entity. In its turn, the sign can be distinguished from other relatively positive terms. Nevertheless, it is what distinguishes it from them that constitutes it⁸⁷. Lagopoulos⁸⁸ would agree with this interpretation. According to his reading, the signifier and the signified are each defined negatively due to 'a value', i.e. in relation to other signifiers or signifieds respectively; moreover, they are defined positively, with regards to their mutual relation. However, there is clear priority of the differential relation; the relation of signification depends on value and not the other way round. So, semiotic systems are

⁸⁴ 'Langue et parole' (1943) in *Essais*, (p.85)

⁸⁵ *CLG*, p. 155

⁸⁶ p. 166

⁸⁷ See, *CLG*, p.168: 'what distinguishes as sign, this is all that constitutes it'.

⁸⁸ 'Static structuralism versus the dynamics of structure', pp. 2-3

indeed purely differential, in the sense that there is nothing essentialist in their constitution; whereas, the point of connection of the two superposed differential nets is characterised by certain stability. This proposition, apart from the advantage of self-consistency, is also in no contradiction with Hjelmslev's position: the point of intersection of the two nets is a completely formal entity, which becomes concrete when it is manifested in substance; and can have more than one manifestation. However, there is a completely different interpretation. The interpretation supported by Derrida, as we shall see in the next chapter, would have it that the superposition of more than one differential net does not reduce the degree of mobility of the system, but augments it.

Whichever interpretation one endorses, in *CLG* we are led to the definition of language – viz. semiotic systems – as pure form. The positive terms, if any, are produced by their position in a system of relations.

*Language [langue] is a form, not a substance*⁸⁹

3.3. The semiotic medium

The structuralist definition of the sign as pure form appears somehow counter-intuitive, for the sign has been and is still commonly understood as the material means of expressing our thoughts. In more or less scholarly definitions, there has always been some kind of relation to a material element. The conception of the sign as being a channel of communication between our minds and the world is expressed in the conceptual and terminological amalgamation of 'in between' and 'material', as well as 'a way', in the concept/term of 'medium'⁹⁰. Whether viewed from an ontological or a phenomenal point of view, i.e. as connected either to matter or to the senses, the

⁸⁹ *CLG*, p. 169

⁹⁰ 'Medium' means literally the 'middle'.

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media of expression have often been hierarchised according to different metaphysical criteria⁹¹. Traditionally, language has been intimately connected to voice, sound, breath, and thus the medium of voice or sound has been given an exceptional position in the metaphysical hierarchy of the media⁹². The field of ‘non-linguistic’ media of expression has been connected with questions about the arts and about writing.

Saussure’s differential definition of the sign is in complete harmony with his explicit claim that:

The essential in language [langue]... has nothing to do with the phonic character of the linguistic sign⁹³.

CLG disconnects semiosis from any particular medium, either in the ontological or the phenomenal sense, and opens the possibility of subsuming all the different modes of expression under the aegis of a unified science. Saussure compares language – i.e. ‘natural’, spoken language – with writing, the alphabet of the deaf-mutes, symbolic rituals, the forms of politeness, military and naval signals etc⁹⁴. Apart from opening new horizons, *CLG* provides the source of many of the questions addressed by subsequent semioticians, among them the possibility of different degrees of semiotic motivation⁹⁵. Saussure is emphatic about the radical arbitrariness of the sign in natural languages. He juxtaposes it, though, with what he names ‘symbol’, where there is some ‘rudiment’⁹⁶ of natural connection between signifier and signified. He gives the example of scales as a symbol of justice. One is not sure whether he means it as a connotation in natural language or in a visual form of expression. As we have seen when addressing the issue of connotation, the connotative relation is purely

⁹¹ e.g. Aristotle and Hegel

⁹² We will discuss the issue further in chapter 4, in relation to Derrida’s critique of Western metaphysics.

⁹³ *CLG*, p.21; ‘phonic’ means ‘vocal’, from the Greek ‘φωνή’ (phōnē) = ‘voice’

⁹⁴ e.g. pp.33, 103, 165.

⁹⁵ pp.100-102.

⁹⁶ ‘rudiment’, p.101

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conventional, of social origin, exactly as is denotation. As the story of Ulysses connects 'Ithaca' with "final destination", other stories – such as the Egyptian and Christian weighing of the soul – connect 'weighing up' with "judgement". There is no reason to conclude any differently for a visual connotation. What is more delicate, though, is the arbitrariness of *denotation* in a visual system; the issue is implied in Saussure's uncertainty regarding the arbitrary, and therefore semiotic, nature of pantomime. Some form of similarity seems to be functioning in visual and kinetic signs, which contradicts their arbitrary nature. Saussure answers himself that the other forms of expression are not less fixed on convention than natural language. Therefore, if they are motivated, it must be only partly. His certainty of natural languages' radical arbitrariness leads him to consider them as the paradigmatic case of semiotic systems; what is semiotic in any other system is radically arbitrary too. Furthermore, he unwittingly gives an answer to the question of similarity when he explains why onomatopoeia and exclamations do not constitute counter-examples to his claim concerning natural languages' radical arbitrariness. The very recognition of similarity is an issue of convention. An instructive example supporting this position, gives the comparison between languages of the sounds specific animals are supposed to make: English cats apparently 'mew' or 'miaow', Greek cats 'niaou' or 'niar', whereas Swedish cats 'jam'! Another possible difference Saussure recognises between natural languages and visual semiotic systems is that the former develop on a single dimension, a line, whereas the latter 'can offer simultaneous complications on multiple dimensions'⁹⁷. We shall address again later the issues of the semiotic constitution of perception and of semiotic dimensions.

⁹⁷ CLG, p. 103

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Hjelmslev's algebra clarifies the Saussurean position. The complete symmetry of the stratification has two immediate results. On the one hand, it puts all semiotic systems on equal status. Not only does it make clear that all expression-substances are equivalent to each other and that they have no necessary connection whatsoever with a specific semiotic system, but it shows that the content also is comprised of content-form and content-substance, and there is nothing essential about content-substance either. As Ronald Schleifer puts it,

The distinction between 'form' and 'substance' allows [Hjelmslev] to distinguish between structural and phenomenal aspects of language without incorporating phenomenology into structuralism⁹⁸

On the other hand, the double distinction of the stratification makes clear that the sign-function is directed toward the world in two ways, through content-substance and through expression-substance. This is a property that traditional binary or tri-partite models of the sign seem to underestimate. Unlike Hjelmslev, Jakobson and the Prague school do not consider form as independent from substance, which leads them to prioritise natural languages over the other semiotic systems⁹⁹. Hjelmslev's position is, I think, closer to the nucleus of what is radical about structuralist epistemology and holds great promise as regards the study of 'non-linguistic' semiotic systems. It also has a direct relevance to Derrida's project. For this last reason, we will now investigate further some aspects of this theory, which are related to substance and of particular interest for my thesis.

Firstly, Hjelmslev investigates the principles of *the inner structure of substance*¹⁰⁰. As paradoxical as it may sound, the substance-strata consist of substance

⁹⁸ A.J.Greimas and the Nature of Meaning, 1987, p. 63

⁹⁹ For the difference of position between the Copenhagen and Prague Circles regarding substance, see Louis Hjelmslev, 'L'analyse structurale du langage' in *Essais*, (p.38) ; and Anne Hénault, *Histoire de la sémiotique*, Que sais-je?, p.60

¹⁰⁰ *Strat*, p.56

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‘semiotically formed’¹⁰¹. This is not so unexpected as it seems, if one considers Hjelmslev’s conception of ‘form’ and ‘substance’ as relative terms, where form always expands in the domain of substance, demanding a new complementary substance¹⁰². To speak of the *manifestante* without implying that it is semiotically formed, Hjelmslev uses in French the term ‘*matière*’ (= matter), in English ‘purport’, in Danish ‘mening’. The choice of the terms ‘purport’ and ‘mening’ are rather misleading, as they could be interpreted by the uninformed reader as “signification”, which is almost exactly the opposite of Hjelmslev’s definition. I think they were initially used to denote the ‘content-matter’ and then generalized for the expression-plane too, for reasons of symmetry. Anyway, in the Hjelmslevian context ‘purport’ means ‘something like’ matter; I will use it in this sense from now on. Hjelmslev’s purport/matter, however, is also already in a certain sense formed, otherwise it would completely escape cognition¹⁰³. It is ‘scientifically’ formed and sciences are also semiotic systems. There is, at least implicitly, the suggestion that the subdivision of substance into form and substance goes on *ad infinitum*. The explicit implication of the semiotic formation of substance is that one purport, let us say sound, can produce many semiotic substances, and a semiotic substance is neither necessarily confined to one purport nor does it exhaust the entire purport. In Hjelmslev’s texts there is confusion about whether the term ‘purport’ should be also used for an even ‘rawer’ entity, that which escapes cognition altogether, and which cannot be referred to in the plural. There also sometimes seems to exist an asymmetry between the content-purports and the expression-purports. We will address these issues a few paragraphs later.

¹⁰¹ *ibid*, p. 57

¹⁰² pp. 56-57

¹⁰³ p. 58

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Secondly, each *substance consists of multiple levels*, which have ‘defined functions and hierarchical order’¹⁰⁴. These levels are supposed to be symmetrical in content-substance and expression-substance, although it is not completely clear how this happens. They are also symmetrical irrespectively of which purports they use as raw materials. Hjelmslev distinguishes three levels of substance: (1) the semiotic substance par excellence, i.e. the level of social, collective perceptions, which belongs to his stratification in the strict sense and which he also calls ‘immediate substance’¹⁰⁵; (2) the socio-biological level; (3) the physical level. When using the term ‘semiotic substance’, we mean the first level only. Level 3 depends on both levels 1 and 2, whereas level 2 depends on level 1. This does not mean that the existence of the physical entities as such depends on the semiotic substance. What depends on it is their selection that constitutes them as relevant to the semiotic system. It is also important to understand that ‘the level of perception, or immediate semiotic substance, does not necessarily cover the entire domain of the other levels’¹⁰⁶. Therefore, for example, when one writes the characters of the alphabet color is of no semiotic interest, while in the case of a road signal color is a part of the semiotic substance.

¹⁰⁴ *Strat*, p.62

¹⁰⁵ This is probably an unfortunate choice, as the whole point of Hjelmslev’s position is that there is nothing ‘unmediated’ in substance, much less in its primary level. What he means is that this level of substance is in immediate proximity to the sign-function and of immediate pertinence from the semiotic point of view.

¹⁰⁶ *Strat*, p.68

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CONTENT	EXPRESSION		
<i>content-form</i>	<i>expression-form</i>		<i>Sign-function articulations</i>
content-substance 1	expression-substance 1	Semiotic	Level 1 social, collective perceptions
content-substance 2	expression-substance 2		Level 2 socio-biological
content-substance 3	expression-substance 3	Non-semiotic	Level 3 physical
			FORM
			SUBSTANCE

[Figure 3.5. – Hjelmslev’s stratification of semiotic systems: levels of substance]

As Lagopoulos¹⁰⁷ observes the lower two levels of substance refer respectively to (2) the mechanisms of production of the sign and (3) the bare objects or other material entities from which the social apperception derives: the ‘things’. In an effort to combine semiotics with historical materialism¹⁰⁸, he articulates Hjelmslev’s levels in a different way, stressing the importance of productive *praxis*. The process of material production is called exo-semiotic I, and includes the second level of a system’s content-substance and expression-substance together. Exo-semiotic II and exo-semiotic III are similar to a system’s third levels of expression-substance and content-substance, respectively. These two comprise the Matter.

The fact that the first level of substance does not necessarily cover the entire domain of the other levels, along with form’s independence from substance, lead us to a third point regarding substance: the *multiplicity of semiotic substances*; or, at least, of semiotic expression-substances. ‘One and only one form of expression can be manifested by a diversity of substances’¹⁰⁹. For example, a national flag can be painted on paper or embroidered on silk or projected on a wall by an OHP etc. There

¹⁰⁷ ‘In quest of architectural theory’ in *Semiotica* 55 – ½ (1985), (p.108)

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*, (p.109)

¹⁰⁹ *ibid*, (p.57)

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are at least as many substances as semiotic systems, considering that a substance depends upon and cannot exist without its corresponding form. There must be more semiotic substances than semiotic systems, as a matter of fact, because each system can be and often is manifested by many substances. The question, however, as to how many ‘purports’ we have is a completely different one and it is not immediately addressed by Hjelmslev.

Hjelmslev’s two most radical and problematic propositions are the equivalence of substances and the symmetry between expression-substance and content-substance. Their implications become more urgent when our study extends beyond natural languages. When analyzing semiotic systems other than natural languages, it is relatively easy to recognize which is the expression-substance. It is not equally obvious, however, which is the content-substance. Then, the symmetry between the planes should result in the possible existence of more than one content-substance. Actually there is no reason to suggest that any purport could not act as raw material for both an expression-substance and a content-substance. Finally, the definition of language by its form alone and the complete dependence of semiotic substance on semiotic form must imply that the definitional distinction between different semiotic systems is a question of form and not of substance. We can no longer define semiotic systems according the substance in which they are manifested. I will now investigate these questions further and also attempt to draw implications about relevant issues that Hjelmslev did not sufficiently address.

Let us start with the application of Hjelmslev’s distinction of semiotic form and levels of substance to the *expression*-plane of natural languages¹¹⁰. By ‘natural languages’, as already explained, we mean what is commonly called ‘languages’, such

¹¹⁰ *Strat*, p.59

as English or French. I must also specify that – initially at least – I mean, as structural semioticians always do, their spoken version. We will address separately the question of writing. So, in the expression-plane of a natural language, the primary level of expression-substance is the auditory aspect, concerning the apperception of the continuum of the sounds of the language by speaking subjects. This is then articulated into expression-form, i.e. a system of signifiers: words, sentences etc. The socio-biological level refers to the ‘myokinetic’¹¹¹ aspects of producing and receiving the sounds. The physical level is the sound-wave as such. One can find these distinctions with regard to the expression-plane of natural languages already in *CLG*¹¹². They are not so systematically classified but they stem immediately from Saussure’s communication circuit and his definition of the sign. Saussure distinguishes between the phonetic substance and its differentiation into signifiers, which corresponds to Hjelmslev’s distinction between expression-substance and expression-form; between the ‘material’ and ‘sensuous’ parts of the sound, which correspond to Hjelmslev’s level 3 and level 1 of substance; between speech as mechanism of articulation-hearing and as acoustic phenomenon, which in turn correspond to Hjelmslev’s levels 2 and 1. He ascribes the study of the non-semiotic aspects of speech to the science of Phonology.

I will now try to analyze in a similar way the example of the visual semiotic system of national flags, with regard to its expression-form and the levels of its expression-substance. Semiotic expression-substance is the visual apperception of the continuum of possible shapes and colors, by the group of people for which the flags are meaningful. Expression-form is the articulation of the expression-substance into

¹¹¹ ‘myokinetic’ (in French ‘myocinétique’) derives from the Greek and means “of the movements of the muscles”

¹¹² See, for example, *CLG*, pp. 20-30, 37, 66, 98, 157

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the particular shapes and colors which become meaningful when related to content-form. The expression-form of this semiotic system is a visual image – as opposed to the acoustic image of the natural languages we investigated before. An interesting question is whether the color pertains to form. Color is certainly part of their semiotic expression-substance but I think that it is the difference between colors that constitutes the expression-form. This becomes apparent if we think of translating all the colors into a grey-scale. If only one shade of grey corresponds to one of the meaningful units of color in flags, then we have lost no information. In flags, it is units of colors, articulations, that are meaningful and not the entire visible continuum of light. The British flag is still the British flag whether we use in it petrol blue or ultramarine blue. This differentiation of the expression plane does not enter into the sign-function of the national flags' semiotic system. However, a flag with a red, a white and a turquoise stripe would be ambiguous. We would have to specify whether the turquoise is classified as blue or green, to know whether the sign we face is the French or the Italian flag. The disambiguation would be possible by comparing it with other signs, for example the British or the Algerian flag, or by taking into account the general situation. A counter-argument to the discarding of color from the expression-form would raise the different connotations that are attached to the different colors of the flags. However, according the structuralist definitions, connotations are constituted by cultural texts, semiotic processes, and not by immediate perception. Continuing our analysis, the level 3 of expression-substance of the flags' system is comprised by the materials from which the flags are made. It makes no difference if these are paint and paper, or ink and threads, or pebbles. It makes no difference even if the flags are built with bricks or engraved in stone; in these cases, though, one of the elements of substance level 3 that will be discarded by the semiotic substance will

be the third dimension. The expression-form of this system is two-dimensional. The level 2 of expression-substance comprises all the processes needed for the construction of the flags and also the optical mechanisms needed for the reception of their image.

In ‘La stratification du langage’¹¹³, Hjelmslev also applies his distinctions to the *content*-plane of natural languages. Semiotic content-substance of a natural language is the apperception of the world by the community of speakers of the language, the conceptual continuum. Content-form is its articulation into distinct concepts, signifieds. As concepts are not meant only the conceptual images of what are commonly called things – such as “dog” or “house” – but also evaluations, relations, processes – such as “good”, “similar”, “working”. Level 3 of the content-substance is the physical level: the physical entities used as raw material for the community’s apperceptions. Lagopoulos suggests, and I am inclined to agree, that this is the equivalent to referent in Hjelmslev’s system. Level 2 of the content-substance comprises what Hjelmslev calls ‘socio-biological conditions and psycho-physiological mechanism[s]’, everything that

either because of natural dispositions or because of acquired habits, reliable for sensory and other experiences, allow to the speaking subjects [...] to create, reproduce, evoke and handle in different ways the elements of appreciation¹¹⁴

One could interpret the level 3 of natural languages’ content-substance as including the physical existence of the entire world. An inattentive reader could then be led to the conclusion that there is only one possible content-substance. However, this pseudo-syllogism ignores the fact that that, in Hjelmslev, it is form that shapes substance and it is each higher level of substance that determines what is relevant from a lower level. The only legitimate conclusion from this proposition, if indeed it

¹¹³ p.59-62

¹¹⁴ *Strat*, pp. 61-62

is true, is that each community can speak in words about everything it experiences. Nevertheless, Hjelmslev is indeed led to a similar conclusion to that mentioned above, but from different premises¹¹⁵.

It is easy to imagine different content planes; for example, between English and French. What is difficult, though, is to imagine different *kinds* of content-planes; not their existence but what and how they might be different. Intuitively, particularly when engaged professionally with a semiotic system other than natural languages, we suspect that their content must be of a different kind than that of the natural languages. The most professional and detailed architectural description in words cannot give you all the meaningful information conferred by the building. Nevertheless, it is not obvious at all what constitutes denotation in architecture.

Lagopoulos makes an effort in this direction, exceptional in that it avoids completely any ‘loan’ from natural languages. Using the results of Hjelmslev’s analysis, he defines semiosis as ‘the process of corresponding between two material systems in order to communicate something’ and applies the four strata in order to analyze architecture. In his opinion, in the case of the architectural sign-function, content-substance is functionality – in the sense of use – as perceived by the community of users. Expression-substance is the social apperception of the part of the object/building where the sign is anchored. For example, in Cardiff castle the number of embrasures is of no semiotic importance; therefore, it does not participate in its semiotic expression-substance – it is part of its third level expression-substance. Content-form is the perception of a particular object’s function – always speaking of denotation. Expression-form is an abstraction of the visual image of the object. The articulation of functionality into specific functions and of visual perception into

¹¹⁵ We will investigate this a bit later in connection to the specificity of natural languages.

specific visual images is produced by the architectural language, and it is not imposed by the material objects. Uses and images of objects depend on each other but are not articulated isomorphically. Therefore, architecture fulfills the conditions of being considered a language, i.e. a semiotic system. My only possible addition to this description would be with regard to the expression-plane. In my opinion, the expression-form of architecture should include a third dimension. Correspondingly, the expression-substance would include spatial perception; possibly, even kinetic perception. What is important and radical about this proposal, however, is that it shows that it is not only the *expression*-substance that can vary between semiotic systems but also the *content*-substance. I am not entirely sure that Hjelmslev would ever have imagined it this way but I think that this interpretation is more faithful to his spirit than he was himself.

Having opened the way for the admission of many other systems to the status of language, Hjelmslev inquires as to what is the definitional difference of natural languages¹¹⁶; what distinguishes them from other semiotic systems and constitutes them as a recognizable group. Once again, intuitive obviousness does not prove easy to substantiate. From what we have already expounded, the ‘inevitable logical consequence’ is that expression-substance ‘cannot in itself be a definiens for a language’¹¹⁷. After all, music shares with spoken French the expression-substance level 3, whereas written French does not. Hjelmslev needs a new criterion. He considers that the descriptive property shared by all natural languages is that all other

¹¹⁶ ‘la *differentia specifica* de la langue linguistique’, *Acta Linguistica*, volume IV (1944), (p.v); Hjelmslev uses the terms ‘natural language’ (e.g. *Prol*, p.65), ‘everyday language’ (*Lang*, p.104), ‘linguistic language’ (*Acta IV*, p.v) and ‘linguistic semiotic’ (*Strat*, p.69) to denote semiotic systems such as English or French, as distinguished from other semiotic systems such as painting, music or architecture. Initially, the investigation is about their spoken forms, as it was the custom between structuralist linguists; however, as it must be obvious by now, whether they are spoken or not becomes irrelevant in Hjelmslev’s context.

¹¹⁷ *Prol*, p.65-66

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semiotic systems can be translated into them¹¹⁸. So, he defines natural languages through the concept of translability. Consequently, the first question is what is meant by ‘translation’ in this description. The second question is which structural characteristic of natural languages causes this property. The third question considers, obviously, the truth of each of the premises, the validity of this syllogism and, therefore, the truth of its final conclusion.

In *Language: an Introduction*¹¹⁹, which was composed around 1943 and was intended for a non-specialized public, there is no clarification as to what is meant by this ability to translate every semiotic system. The property, however, is associated with ‘universalism’ and the ability to be used ‘for all purposes’. In *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*¹²⁰, which was written about the same time and addressed to a specialized audience, there are given the definitions of two different kinds of ‘translation’, only the first of which is connected with the distinctive characteristic of natural languages. The distinctive characteristic of natural languages is that they can be manifested by all purports; or, in other words, can form any purport whatsoever. It is not clarified whether this is meant to apply to the expression or the content plane, but we can assume that it is meant in both. The other kind of translability relates to what is commonly so called – let us say turning an English text into French – and is described as the substitution of one expression plane by another. As we have seen, this substitution is strictly speaking impossible, because of the mutual dependence between the two planes. What it is possible, however, is the attachment of a new expression plane to an entire sign-function¹²¹. Therefore, the common sense of

¹¹⁸ *Prol*, p.70; *Lang*, p.104; *Strat*, p. 69

¹¹⁹ pp. 104-105

¹²⁰ pp. 70, 75

¹²¹ According to Hjelmslev’s first definition, this would be metasemiosis; according his second definition, it would be connotation.

translation is construed as a higher-degree sign-function; this is not immediately connected to the specificity of natural languages in *Prolegomena*. In ‘La stratification du langage’¹²², which was written about ten years later, the natural language is a semiotic ‘destined to form all purports’; precisely the definition we read in *Prolegomena*. Here, it is explicitly stated that the property refers only to the content-substance. In ‘Stratification’, the two definitions of translability from the *Prolegomena* are connected – because of the structural cause of natural languages’ distinctive property.

In *Prolegomena*, Hjelmslev writes:

We cannot here investigate the basis of this remarkable quality; *there is no doubt that it rests on a structural peculiarity*, on which we might be able to cast better light if we knew more about the specific structure of non-linguistic semiotics.¹²³ [Italics mine]

In ‘Stratification’, however, he seems to have found it. He claims that the structural specificity of natural languages is that their semiotic content-substance covers the entire domain of the inferior levels, without concentrating on a particular sector of them. Conversely, in all the other semiotic systems, the semiotic content-substance concentrates on some sectors of the inferior levels. According to Hjelmslev, this structural specificity of natural languages makes it possible for them to include in their content-substance everything, even their own expression-substance, even their own forms. This is the necessary condition for a semiotic system to act as its own metalanguage. It is also the reason that the content of natural languages has only one substance. There are two interpretations of this claim: a weaker and a stronger. It either means that each natural language can have only one content-substance, or that all natural languages have the same content-substance. I am inclined to choose the

¹²² p. 69

¹²³ *Prol*, p.70

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weaker interpretation because, considering that each natural language has a different content-form and that substance depends completely on form, the other interpretation would be self-contradictory.

I don't think that this treatment of the *differentia specifica* of natural languages is either the most successful or the clearest of Hjelmslev's arguments. I think that there are several possible objections both to his premises and to the assumed logical connections between them. The fact that natural languages can translate any other semiotic system is supposed to be description by observation. This cannot precede, at least conceptually, the definition of what is meant by translation in this case. It is then defined as the ability of their content-plane to be manifested by all purports, or form any purport whatsoever. It is not at all obvious why this is named 'translability' unless one takes into account later conclusions. It is not completely obvious either what it means exactly, but one can assume that it means what we suggested earlier: that a linguistic community can speak about all its experiences in words. Most importantly, taking into account this interpretation, one cannot positively claim that this is an observable fact. Moreover, even if we assume it is observable and true, 'speaking about' something does not necessarily mean that one does so without loss of information. One question would then be whether Hjelmslev assumes that this is a process without loss of information or not.

What is interesting is that Hjelmslev speaks about the relation between higher and lower levels of the content-plane in terms analogous to metalanguage. Metalanguage refers to degrees higher than the sign-function, which – according to the first definition we investigated – use as content-plane an entire sign-function; one can construe this as using a sign-function as content-substance. Moving the analogy one level lower, Hjelmslev uses metalanguage to explain the relation between the

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sign-function and the content-substance. That is why the initial definition of metalanguage is related to content-substance. According to the second definition, this would be re-phrased as a relation between the higher degree sign-functions and semiotic substance.

When we proceed to the structural cause of natural languages' descriptive differential property, things get even more confusing and in a certain respect circular. As we said, natural languages' semiotic content-substance is supposed to use the entirety of the lower levels of substance and, therefore, it ends by having as level 3 the entire world. Considering, however, that inferior levels depend on superior, content-substance can never be 'the entire world'; it can only be 'the entire world as perceived by this linguistic community'. Hjelmslev himself has often stressed that it is meaningless to speak of substance by itself. Two different semiotic systems, natural languages or not, simply cannot have the same semiotic substance unless they have the same form. The immediate results of natural languages' structural peculiarity are claimed to be the oneness of their content-substance and their ability to be their own metalanguages. These seem to imply the definition of natural languages as 'universal metalanguages', which – combined with the second definition of translation in *Prolegomena* – would explain the use of the term 'translability' for their descriptive differentiatonal characteristic. This final connection is not explicitly formed. What is also implied but not exactly addressed is the property that allows to a semiotic system in general to become metalanguage. What is clearly said is that, in the sub-case of natural languages, the property of having this specific content-substance makes it possible for them to become metalanguages of themselves and – for some unspecified reason – this implies that they can become universal metalanguages. One cannot clearly deduce what properties a semiotic system should have in order to be a

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metalanguage, without being a universal metalanguage; and observation indicates that these cases do exist. Two definite conclusions one can derive from these arguments are that, for Hjelmslev, metalanguage/translability is somehow connected with content-substance – or at least with substance in general – and that the specificity of natural languages is situated in their content-substance. Both premises seem, and possibly are, quite inconsistent with the spirit of Hjelmslev's most radical assertions.

First of all, to define a kind of semiotic system by reference to its substance clearly contradicts the formal character of the sign-function. Hjelmslev has stated very clearly the argument that semiotic systems are not to be defined by their expression-substance; it cannot be different with the content-substance. This leads to the second problem: the fact that the definition relies on content-substance alone contradicts the absolute symmetry between the planes. Strictly speaking, one should not be able to distinguish between the two. Thirdly, the analogy with metalanguage is valid only for the relation between sign-function and the semiotic (content-) substance, not for the relations between the different levels of substance. Even then, it is a loose analogy. The only way to conform the definition of natural languages to the rest of Hjelmslev's theory would be to construe it in terms of form. Whereas 'substance' or 'purport' are not elements of form, 'to manifest itself in every possible purport' is a function, therefore formal. This not enough, though. This function must be the outcome of the form of the semiotic system. Therefore, a more consistent definition – I make no claim about its truth – could be: natural language is the semiotic system of which the content(or expression)-form is such as to select a semiotic substance of which the level 3 includes potentially every possible purport. I am not sure that this definition, either in its initial formulation or in my re-formulation, necessarily entails universal translability. In any case, translability should also be re-defined in terms of form.

Finally, if by translability we mean a complete transfer of significant information between semiotic systems, then it is questionable if natural languages or any semiotic systems fulfill this condition with regard to other semiotic systems; though it is not inconsistent with any of Hjelmslev's premises.

The question of the *differentia specifica* of natural languages is one of the most problematic in Hjelmslev's work. The reason is that one of the traditional tendencies of Western thought, and therefore linguistics, is to combine the specificity of natural languages with their priority over other forms of expression. Hjelmslev does not subscribe to the second position but he brings it along with him unawares through his rather traditional definition of specificity. One cannot blame him for that. Even today, we haven't gone too much further than Hjelmslev's investigations. He made clear, at least, that there are other ways of seizing signification than natural languages. Jakobson and Barthes had the opposite opinion¹²⁴ and were, I think, mistaken. Barthes, for example, when he says he's analysing fashion, what he does is analyzing written articles about fashion. He chooses to ignore that the first-degree semiotic system of fashion is constituted by clothes, not words. According to Hjelmslev's terminology, fashion magazine articles are part of a higher-degree semiotic system – connotation or metalanguage – distinguishable from the semiotic system they comment upon.

I think that the production of signification by systems different from natural languages can be considered an observable fact. It is outside the scope of my thesis to expound this in any detail; I will give some examples instead. There is a particular way of producing signification specific to each different kind of semiotic system. A film produces signification, among other ways, by its decoupage and editing. The

¹²⁴ See Hénault, *Histoire de la sémiotique*, p. 60

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succession and juxtaposition of two images is meaningful in a way that can be described with words to some degree but which is both distinguishable from and non-reducible to them. A further proof of this can be found in the fact that composite semiotic systems which include natural language, such as opera, cannot be reduced to their natural linguistic component; reading the libretto of Dvořák's *Rusalka* will hardly give you all the meaningful aspects of the work. The existence of more than one interpretation of a painting, to give another example, is an indication that the painting constitutes an object distinguishable from its interpretations. One could then claim that this object is meaningless until it is invested with words. The existence of styles and schools of painting, of conventions and rules, of symbols and references indicates that this claim would be mistaken. The difficulty in proving these positions is that my argument is in words. Natural languages are indeed the most widely used metalanguages. It may be difficult to imagine – particularly for somebody professionally engaged with words – what would it be denotation, metasemiosis or connotation outside from the context of natural languages; what would an argument be. However, I think that this is an obstacle which will eventually be overcome and, certainly, does not constitute a refutation by itself. Much research has been done since Barthes on the different semiotic systems, both by theoretic semioticians and practitioners of different arts. Christian Metz, for example, has done ground-breaking work on the semiotics of cinema, while the architect Peter Eisenman has claimed that his buildings constitute a critique of the anthropocentric ideology of dwelling. A comment in the language of architecture is a new building; so, a dialogue in architecture assumes a scale of time, space and effort dissimilar to what we are used to call dialogue. This does not prevent architecture from fulfilling all the definitional conditions of a language. To return to Eco's definition of language through the

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possibility of lying, one can lie in architecture: a construction that appears to be a door and yet cannot be used as such, for example, is a lie; it can also be ironic. Conversely, it is most probable that one cannot say everything through architecture. Even if a building can be a love poem, it cannot translate Donne's 'Elegy: On His Mistress Going to Bed'; on this we can all agree. Then, undeniably, one can write in English a description or a critique of a building or a musical concerto. The question is whether English can *translate*, let us say, the temples of Karnak or Vivaldi's *Concerto in D major RV 210*. Hjelmslev seems to say that it can. I doubt it; unless one claims that describing is translating. In a sense this is true; they both fall under the category of metalanguage. However, when referring to texts in natural languages, we make the distinction between the two actions. I think that they are two different kinds of metalanguage and one should investigate what constitutes the difference between them – though this is beyond the scope of my thesis.

Hjelmslev's semiotic system combines two different theoretical gestures with regard to the material world: on the one hand, it clarifies the fact that semiosis is anchored in two directions to the material, both in the expression and in the content plane; on the other, these anchorages to materiality seem to be perpetually transferred. This second gesture, we need to investigate further; particularly as it can illuminate the ways the semiotic phenomenon is intertwined with the human senses and the different materials, both of which have traditionally been connected with the semiotic medium.

The perpetual transfer of the connection to the physical world is expressed in the long scale of subdivisions between form and purport, inside each of the planes. The different levels of substance are situated in between these extremes. As we have seen, the term 'substance' is used for an entity wholly dependent for its definition to

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form; this is not the case with ‘purport’. As we have also seen, substance level 1 is formed by the semiotic form and thus allows it to be manifested. The relation of each level of substance to its above is described as analogous to the relation of semiotic substance (i.e. substance level 1) to semiotic form. This description, however, is not strictly correct; in the sense that the dependence between the different levels is not of the same kind. Substance level 1 has the nature of a perceptual image situated ‘in the mind’; an image, though, which does not presuppose the real existence of any entity of which it is the image. It is continuous and undifferentiated and not shaped into recognizable units until it is articulated by form. Substance level 2 comprises the processes and mechanisms of production and perception of the sign. One could say that level 1 depends on level 2, and not the other way round. The reason this is not the case is because the sign-function is not an actual object but an abstraction. So the actual way that we manage to pronounce a vowel or see a picture is irrelevant to their semiotic function. Moreover, substance level 2 are only the processes and mechanisms necessary for the potential actualization of the specific semiotic system, not the entirety of our abilities. In this sense, substance level 1 ‘forms’ substance level 2; it chooses some sectors from their potential continuum. Substance level 3 is comprised by the parts of the physical world which the semiotic system either refers to or uses to manifest itself; it can, obviously, include parts or the entirety of levels above it. Once again, its being formed by the levels above means mostly a process of selection and not differentiation. Form, the higher level of this scale, is what makes them all perceivable and by a process of differentiation.

The term ‘purport’ or ‘matière’ is introduced by Hjelmslev in order to address a slightly different question¹²⁵. He needs a term describing physical entities

¹²⁵ *Strat*, p.58

independently of whatever relation they may establish with the semiotic phenomenon under description in order to explain, for example, that the sound wave can be used as raw expression-material by both music and English or that cinema uses both the sound wave and the light wave. The ‘purports’, i.e. the materials, need to be plural and, of course, recognizable. The problem is that for anything to be cognizable and distinguishable, it is necessary for it to be formed. This is one of the axioms of structuralism. For this reason, Hjelmslev claims that purports, if not semiotically formed, are ‘scientifically formed, at least to a degree which allows them to be distinguished from other purports’¹²⁶. A further complication is the fact that sciences are semiotic systems too; so, purports end up as the articula produced by a semiotic form. What is happening is that certain sciences are used with regards to this issue as metalanguages. Whether this causes an inescapable circularity or not, is for each researcher to decide. Purports are the elements combined in substance level 3, of both the content and the expression plane. Occasionally, they are also called ‘substances’, not in the technical sense.

Although Hjelmslev generally considers purports as internal to knowledge, there is a specific passage in the *Prolegomena* where he describes it as ‘inaccessible to knowledge’¹²⁷. This purport, I suspect, is different from the previous ones, because it defies any analysis. It is equivalent to the Kantian noumenon. This purport in the singular is the inaccessible continuum of the world-in-itself before any formation. Both the content and the expression planes seem to point toward it. This could be, finally, where the substances meet, in this common undifferentiated continuum, the pool from which we extract our signs.

¹²⁶ *Strat*, p.58

¹²⁷ p.48-49

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On the opposite side of the form/substance scale is form, i.e. the sign-function. In the structuralist view, the medium, the ‘in between’ is not material any more; it is formal. More importantly, the ‘in between’ is signification itself. Signification does not reside independently somewhere else. Having re-defined what we mean by semiosis and what we mean by substance, we need to re-investigate what we mean by form. One of the difficulties created by the complete insignificance of substance for the definition of a semiotic system is that the criterion must be sought in form. The question is, for example, how to distinguish Architecture from English if not by referring to their different semiotic substances. It is not enough to say that they have different forms, because this is also true for the difference between English and French. What we must have here is different *kinds* of form. I will propose, as a hypothesis, that the difference is in the dimensions that characterise each kind of form; dimensions both in space and time. When Saussure¹²⁸ posed linearity as a fundamental characteristic of the signified of natural languages, thus implying a possible difference between them and visual semiotic systems, he was giving a principle according to which we could investigate different types of form. The first question is whether these dimensions refer to the expression-form alone or concern the content-form too. Hjelmslev’s principle of symmetry suggests the latter. Furthermore, I think that the generic form of a semiotic system may be defined by the combination of the generic forms of both its content and expression planes. This could explain the difficulty of translation between different kinds of semiotic system. The second issue arising is the worrying possibility of the concept of ‘form’ losing its abstract nature and reverting to something like its Aristotelian meaning; it seems to slip from differentiability to intrinsic shape. It is a question of ‘concretisation’ of

¹²⁸ CLG, p.103

form. Then, it is possible to imagine that form is also subdivided in different levels; shape would belong to a less ‘formal’ level of form, whereas there would be a more abstract level comprised only of elements of second degree spatiality and temporality. We will re-address all this later.

It has been traditional to classify semiotic systems either by their material of expression – such as ‘graphic’ – or by the senses that we use in order to perceive them – such as ‘visual’. Let us briefly see to what these classifications correspond in Hjelmslev’s systematisation and the reasons that they might still be relevant to our quest. The material of expression can be safely corresponded to expression-substance level 3, although there is also an oscillation between expression-substance level 1 and the purports used by the level 3, as the systematic distinction of the three was not previously performed. This is the constitution of the actualisation of the semiotic system. It is expectable that it was traditionally identified with the sign itself, particularly as the sign was defined as the ‘materialisation’ of an idea. The question is whether even in a formal definition of the sign-function there is still a necessary connection between semiotic system and expression material. We said that the kind of semiotic system is defined by the kind of its form alone. Its generic form, however, has some limitations as to what kinds of semiotic substance it can form. These limitations are related to the dimensions into which it is developed. Furthermore, as the substance level 1 is the abstraction of a perceptual image, it has some limitations regarding to which purports needs as substance level 3. For example, the expression-form of national flags can be manifested by an expression-substance level 1 of visual images or of tactile images but not of acoustic images. Accordingly, the visual expression-substance level 1 of national flags can be manifested by cloth or stone but not by the sound-wave. It seems that, whereas each stratum can be manifested by

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something with equal or more dimensions than itself – choosing in the latter case to semiotically discard the surplus dimensions –, it cannot be manifested by something with less dimensions than itself.

The senses that we use in order to perceive the actualisation of a semiotic system are situated in Hjelmslev's expression-substance level 2. The classification of semiotic systems by perceptive sense is particularly practical because, once again, the substance level 1 is the abstraction of a perceptual image. Each kind of perceptual image has a necessary connection with the perceptual abilities that potentially produce it; e.g. we can't perceive two spatial dimensions through our hearing. As each kind of expression-form can be manifested only by certain kinds of expression-substances level 1, and these, in their turn, can be connected only to certain of our senses, a relationship is established between certain kinds of form and certain of our senses. This connection is not free of ambiguities, however. One rests with the distinction between the human senses, which are traditionally considered five; a distinction depending on other sciences than semiotics – in the same way the distinction between purports does. Another question relates to the nature of our perceptual images; e.g. whether we perceive digitally or analogically, whether we perceive space in all its three dimensions or reduce it to two etc. As Hjelmslev admits, the further investigation of these issues:

would additionally demand a whole other multitude of preparatory researches [...] which for the time being are not at all available. It also needs to take into account many other facts [...] among which, syneesthesia¹²⁹.

¹²⁹ *Strat*, p.64

3.4. Material matters

The arts have traditionally been defined, classified and hierarchised according to the expressive materials they use or the senses by which we perceive them. The new definition of semiotic system does not allow the use of these criteria anymore. A further consequence is that the mere use of a semiotic system other than natural languages is not criterion enough for the definition of an art. Arts need to be defined as sub-set of semiotic systems, in the same way one distinguishes a novel from a weather report in the context of a natural language. Hjelmslev never addressed, to my knowledge, the question of art. Jakobson defined ‘artness’ – or rather ‘literariness’, ‘poeticness’ – as a property of a text not of a system, and situated it in the level of communication not of structure. It is one of the six *functions of language* he proposed¹³⁰, corresponding to the six factors determining any circuit of communication¹³¹: the addresser, the message, the addressee, the context, the code and the contact (i.e. the physical channel).

[1] [A]n orientation towards the context [is...] the so-called REFERENTIAL, ‘denotative’, ‘cognitive’ function [e.g. ‘She left the web.’]

[2] The so-called EMOTIVE or ‘expressive’ function, focused on the addresser, a direct expression of the speaker’s attitude toward what he is speaking about. [e.g. ‘I like this web!’]

[3] Orientation toward the addressee, the CONATIVE function [e.g. ‘Do leave this web!’]

[4] There are messages primarily serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works [...], to attract the attention of the interlocutor or to confirm his continued attention [...] PHATIC function [e.g. ‘Are you listening to me?’]

[5] Whenever the addresser and/or the addressee need to check up whether they use the same code, speech is focused on the code: it performs a METALINGUAL [...] function. [e.g. ‘When I say “web” I mean a piece of tissue.’]

[6] The set toward the message as such, focus on the message for its own sake, is the POETIC function of language. [e.g. ‘She left the web, she left the loom, / she made three paces thro’ the room’]¹³²

¹³⁰ ‘Linguistics and Poetics’ (1958, 1960) in *Language in Literature*

¹³¹ The circuit of communication appears in the *CLG*. Jakobson develops it further and Eco even further. We will briefly address it in the next sub-section.

¹³² ‘Linguistics and Poetics’, pp. 66-69. The numbers and the examples in the square brackets are mine. The last example is two verses from Alfred Lord Tennyson’s ‘The Lady of Shalott’ (1832).

Jakobson makes clear that ‘although we distinguish six basic aspects of language, we could, however hardly find [...] messages that would fulfill only one function’. ‘Literary’, ‘poetic’ is a message/text where the poetic function prevails.

Jakobson’s functions can be generalized beyond natural languages to every semiotic system; the ‘poetic function’ can then be considered the function of art in general¹³³. Poetic is the function of attracting attention to the text itself: to the way the particular text works, to the way its semiotic system works, to the way – ultimately – the sign-function in general works. Consequently, one of the significant characteristics of poetic texts, viz. works of art, is that they exemplify the interdependence between the content and expression plane; this is a structural characteristic. Jakobson names it the ‘empirical criterion’ for the recognition of poetic function. Eco translates it into the terms of Hjelmslev’s systematization as a certain effort of isomorphy between the different strata. He observes that the art-work does not only concentrate on the content-form and expression-form but also on the substance, and particularly on the lower levels of the expression plane. In art we have a ‘semiotisation’ of the medium of expression. Let us take one of the famous still lives with oranges and apples by Cézanne: The expression-form would be the composition, the relative position of lines, the analogy between shapes, the relationship between the luminosity of colours etc. The conventional semiotic expression-substance would include the colours, such as the fruit being orange and the drapery being white. However, these do not cover everything that is meaningful in the expression-plane of

¹³³ Umberto Eco calls it ‘aesthetic function’ (*A Theory of Semiotics*, p. 262). The term ‘aesthetic’, however, initially related to the senses and then to the concept of beauty, has been highly questioned by the 20th century theory of art. So, I think it may be more appropriate to continue using the term ‘poetic’, but in a generalised sense. Eco in *A Theory of Semiotics* (pp. 261-276) makes a very impressive synthesizing overview of the semiotic definition of art, which is my main source for this paragraph and the following one. I also used Jakobson, ‘Linguistics and Poetics’; and Boklund, ‘Contemporary methods of literary text analysis’ in *Φιλολογος* 29, (1982)

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the painting. The particular hue of orange, the real size of the painting, the kind of brush-strokes, even the material of the oil colours and the canvas take part in its signification. What in other cases would be a sign-variation without semiotic interest, in art gains a formal value and becomes semiotically relevant.

Works of art use several devices in order to draw attention to their own structuring. The Russian formalists singled out the ‘device of making it strange’, through breaking rules and increasing the difficulty of perception. The art-work obliges one to reconsider the usual correlation between the expression and content planes of a semiotic system, as well as the relation between substance and form, and therefore to challenge the system itself. As we perceive the world through our semiotic systems, challenging them leads us to see the world in a new way. For this reason, Eco argues that ‘art not only elicits feelings but also *produces further knowledge*’. These brief remarks will be useful in situating some elements of the deconstructive project. Fully defining the phenomenon of art is, of course, a much more complicated endeavor and completely outside the scope of my thesis.

Writing is the other case commonly defined in relation to the medium of expression, as ‘a durable, visible means of representing something’¹³⁴. It is also traditionally defined as derivative with regard to natural languages, a characteristic which is often assigned some metaphysical value. Saussure ascribes to the definition of writing as dependent on a natural language, though he does not attach metaphysical properties to this derivation. He defines writing as a semiotic system whose ‘raison d’être’ is to represent natural language¹³⁵. He has an ambiguous position in relation to writing’s evaluation, on which Derrida builds one of his most famous arguments. On

¹³⁴ Sebeok ed., *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, p. 1165

¹³⁵ *CLG*, p. 45. The chapter VI of the Introduction of *CLG* is entitled ‘Representation of language by writing’, pp. 44-61

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the one hand, Saussure opens the possibility of not considering writing as metaphysically inferior to spoken language, as he breaks the ‘naturalness’ of the connection between what we call ‘natural’¹³⁶ languages’ and the medium of voice. He claims both that

The essential in language [langue]... has nothing to do with the phonic character of the linguistic sign¹³⁷.

and that

it is not proven that the function of language the way it is manifested when we speak is completely natural¹³⁸

So, neither does he consider the vocal character as an essential part of the nature of the linguistic sign nor does he accept the choice of our vocal organs as our most common means of expression as unquestionably based on natural grounds – though he thinks that the latter is highly probable. He also uses writing as an example of semiotic system or in order to clarify issues with regard to the spoken form of natural languages¹³⁹. On the other hand, he is particularly fervent against what he considers an over-valuation of writing by traditional linguistics. He observes the discrepancies between the spoken languages and what was considered as their graphic notation, and he rightly concludes that one should not use the latter as the main means for studying the former. This opinion is expressed, however, in a surprisingly passionate vocabulary; all the more so, considering it is found in a book mostly bereft of any emotionality¹⁴⁰. Most structuralist linguists, Jakobson among them, follow Saussure in defining writing as a second degree semiotic system, derived from and dependent upon a natural language.

¹³⁶ Here it becomes obvious why the use of the term is problematic.

¹³⁷ *CLG*, p.21

¹³⁸ *ibid*, p. 25

¹³⁹ e.g., *ibid*, pp. 33, 165

¹⁴⁰ One wonders whether the source of this passion was Saussure or his editors.

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Hjelmslev disagrees. Firstly, he considers irrelevant the questions about derivation: on the one hand, the fact of a semiotic system being ‘derived’ or not does not affect in any essential way its character; on the other, ‘it is not always certain what is derived and what is not’¹⁴¹. Secondly, the principle according to which substance depends on form but not the other way round, along with the observation of discrepancies between the forms of natural languages in their spoken and written ‘versions’, leads him to the recognition that they are not versions at all but independent semiotic systems.

In the case of a language such as French or English, the phonematic analysis and graphematic analysis of the expression plan would show two different semiotic forms [i.e. two different semiotic systems] and not the same form manifested by different substances¹⁴²

A case where a sonic substance and a graphic substance would manifest the same form would be if they denoted exactly the same formal relations, as would be the case with a purely phonetic writing. Even then, none of them would be considered conceptually or metaphysically ‘primary’ as there is no necessary connection between sound and language; as about the historical primacy, we simply don’t know. Thirdly, Hjelmslev does not doubt that English writing, for example, is a ‘natural language’. In other words, there is something that spoken Arabic and written French have in common, as opposed to music or painting. This takes us back to our previous discussion about the *differentia specifica* of natural languages and how it must be situated in the level of form. Written and spoken languages do not belong to different kinds of semiotic system. A fourth issue concerns the specific relation between spoken English and written English, for example, as opposed to any other natural

¹⁴¹ *Prolog*, p.67

¹⁴² *Stratagem*, p.57

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language. Hjelmslev¹⁴³ tends to conclude that they share the same content-form, which is a distinctly at odds with his position about the interdependence between the planes of expression and substance. We could modify the identity to close resemblance.

Classifications of the kinds of writings depend on the researcher's definition of writing; however, their motivation is not simply epistemological interest but mostly practical need. I will briefly present the classifications of writings according to the most respected semiotic dictionaries¹⁴⁴. Saussure¹⁴⁵ makes a distinction between only two systems of writing: the ideographic and the phonetic, the latter sub-divided to syllabic and alphabetic. Greimas and Courtés¹⁴⁶, by 1979, take into account Hjelmslev's theory and define writing as the manifestation of a natural language, of which manifestation the expression-substance is visual and graphic. Their classification, provisional and still unsophisticated, distinguishes between three kinds of writing: narrative, morphematic and phonematic. The entry also refers briefly to Barthes' and Derrida's treatment of the concept of writing, and not in the most flattering terms. Todorov in the 1972 *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*¹⁴⁷ gives a wider and a narrower definition of writing: the former comprises all visual and spatial semiotic systems, a field wider than Hjelmslev's definition; the latter is close to the traditional definition of writing. Both are rather un-Hjelmslevian. He makes a more detailed description and classification of the systems of writing than Greimas and Courtés. The two general categories are mythography, where the writing system does not refer to any verbal language, and logography, where it does. The

¹⁴³ See for example *Prol*, p.67

¹⁴⁴ I do not include Sebeok's *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics* because the entry is of a too obviously Peircean inspiration which takes us beyond the context of the present discussion. However, I cited earlier its general definition of writing.

¹⁴⁵ *CLG*, p.47-48

¹⁴⁶ *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, p.115

¹⁴⁷ pp. 249-256, 435-437

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most widely used form of mythography is pictography. Then, there are two chief ways of logography: morphemography and phonography, the latter sub-divided into syllabographic and alphabetic. Todorov explains that what he classifies are principles, which in real systems of writing are often combined. Then, he offers a brief overview of the ‘science of writing’, *grammatologie* (grammatology)¹⁴⁸, with special reference to the 1952 book by I.J.Gelb, *A study of writing, the foundations of grammatology*. The dictionary appeared five years after the edition of Derrida’s *De la grammatologie*, which is included in the entry’s bibliographical notes. Moreover, Todorov dedicates an entire separate entry to Derrida’s treatment of writing.

Twenty three years later, in 1995, in the second edition of the same dictionary¹⁴⁹, every reference to Derrida’s relation to writing disappears. Schaeffer classifies writing under the super-category of graphic notations, which are defined as durable semiotic systems with a visual and spatial support, i.e. expression-substance. He offers a very detailed description and classification of the principles of graphic notations and agrees with Todorov that no writing follows purely a single principle. His first distinction is between mythography and writing: the former does not refer to a verbal language, the latter does. Here we must observe that Schaeffer’s ‘durable semiotic systems with a visual and spatial support’ do not seem to include painting or architecture; all of them, mythographies and writings, fall under what we have earlier defined as ‘natural languages’. Mythography appears in many forms, the most important of which are two: the symbolic notation, where an object is used to refer to something – the connection may be motivated or arbitrary; and, pictography, where figurative designs are used as communicative units. Writings are constructed upon

¹⁴⁸ Grammatology, from the Greek ‘γράμμα’ (gramma) + ‘λόγος’ (logos) = letter + speech/reason, i.e. theory about the letters.

¹⁴⁹ *Nouveau dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, pp. 301-310

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two principles: the morphemographic and the phonographic; in the former the graphic signs denote signifying linguistic units and in the latter they denote phonetic units. There are at least four ways in which morphemography can connect the graphic sign to the signifying linguistic unit: (a) pictogram, which connects it to morphemes through analogical representation; (b) ideogram, which connects by association; (c) logic aggregations; and (d) abstract logograms. Conversely, the phonematic principle rules three types of writing: (a) segmental; (b) syllabic; and (c) alphabets.

Before closing, we should make a few observations. Firstly, for structuralist semiotics, writing is a class of manifestations of semiotic systems, grouped according to the characteristics of their expression-substance. It is not inherent to a semiotic system to be classified as writing. This does not mean that written English is a different manifestation of the form of spoken English. Written English and spoken English are manifestations of different forms. Secondly, in most classic structuralist definitions, not all semiotic forms when manifested in expression-substances using graphic purports can be classified as writings; it is only the semiotic forms classified as 'natural languages'. The form of spoken English if manifested in graphic substance would not be written English as we know it, but it would be writing. Romantic painting, though, would not be classified as writing in this definition. Thirdly, the question remains open as to how we can formally define the particular affinity between the spoken and written forms of what we commonly call 'the same language'. Spoken English and written English may not have the same form but they still are not French. Fourthly, precisely because a manifestation is classified as writing according to its expression-substance, grammatology focuses on the study and classification of expression-substances. However, the study of the principles of writing reveals that they give also information about the semiotic form. As we have

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indicated earlier, because of the dependence of the semiotic substance on the semiotic form, a semiotic substance cannot but give information about the semiotic form that articulates it. Fifthly, and as a consequence of the previous points, several issues regarding the way semiosis works are thrown into sharper relief by a study of writing – the interconnections between content and expression, between form and substance, between the different levels of substance, but also between different manifestations and even between different semiotic systems. Such issues include the questions of motivation and analogical reference. Most epistemologically instructive are the ways the different principles of writing are combined. Both editions of Ducrot's dictionary¹⁵⁰ dedicate some space to ways of combination of phonographism and logographism (or morphemographism), which show a communication between spoken and written forms of what is commonly called 'the same language', as well as between different languages. Among them is the 'rebus', the process in which we note one word using the character of another homophonous word. For example, in ancient Egyptian the signified "master" is noted with the hieroglyph of "basket", because 'master' is pronounced /nb/ and 'basket' /nb.t/. Then, sometimes an a posteriori semantic relation is produced between the two words. What these examples reveal, however, are the mechanisms of the process of production of semiotic systems; they don't affect their structure as studied at any given moment. As we shall see in the next sub-section, the provenance of a semiotic system is of no interest when the system is studied synchronically. From a synchronic point of view, what is significant in a semiotic system is fully described by its form.

The notion of writing played a central role in the researches of the *Tel Quel* group. One of the reasons was precisely their choice to abandon the synchronic point

¹⁵⁰ *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, pp.253-254 ; *Nouveau dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, pp.305-306

of view; another was a particular interest in ‘literariness’. ‘Writing’ in this context is expanded and sometimes radically re-defined. One of the most idiosyncratic definitions is Barthes’¹⁵¹. As about Derrida’s definitions of writing and grammatology, we will expound them at length in the next chapter.

3.5. Semiotic structures and semiotic processes

In structural semiotics, the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness and the choice of point of view are of primary importance; an importance that spreads from the level of theoretical principles to the level of methodology. The principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness, apart from ruling – and because it rules – the production of signification, makes impossible any definition in other than differential terms. Consequently, semiotic entities are defined in relation to each other; which means that they appear at least in couples. Furthermore, the centrality of the concept – and the practice – of choice of point of view is not unrelated to the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness: on the one hand, semiotic research constitutes its own object of study; on the other, a process of differential definition entails the choice between the two sides of a couple. The concept of point of view is connected to a topology of theoretical thought and not to the traditional concept of the subject. The topological perception of theory is a definitional characteristic of structuralism.

‘*Langue*’, or ‘semiotic system’, is the paradigmatic object of structuralist semiotics. On the one hand, it is its central object of study, which is constituted by its particular point of view. On the other, it is a specific kind of semiotic structure. As such it combines the two main philosophical innovations of structuralist semiotics: the introduction of the structural object and the re-definition of the semiotic order.

¹⁵¹ ‘Le degré zéro de l’écriture’ (1953)

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Langue is defined by Saussure through a process of delimiting what is ‘inside’ and what is ‘outside’ relationally drawn borders. The underlying criterion is that the science of linguistics – and subsequently semiotics – must investigate what constitutes the ‘semiotic’ as such, as opposed to different levels of exteriority; whereas other factors related to the semiotic phenomenon are investigated by other sciences, such as history, sociology, biology etc. *Langue* is defined through three juxtapositions. Firstly, it is juxtaposed to the semiotic ability. Then, it is juxtaposed to the semiotic act. Finally, it is presented through two different points of view: in a state of co-existent relationships and in evolution. The former point of view allows the researcher to perceive its structurality. The second and third of these juxtapositions are two of the most important methodological distinctions of structuralist semiotics.

The English term ‘language’ translates both the French terms ‘*langage*’ and ‘*langue*’, each of which has more than one meaning. Generally, the former tends to correspond to a wider and less technical definition than the latter. When defined by juxtaposition, *langage* is the general human ability to communicate, while *langue* is the social product of this ability. Nevertheless, in different contexts they are used differently. ‘*Langage*’, as we said, is the general ability to communicate, i.e. to form semiotic systems. However, in a less technical register, it appears sometimes either as the ability to produce the so-called ‘natural languages’ or as the general class comprised by all the ‘natural languages’. Obviously, this meaning persists from a pre-Saussurean use of the term. Unfortunately, it is often used in the same texts as the technical register; this leads occasionally to more than one possible interpretations of the same passages. It is also often the case in classical semiotic texts that terms and concepts are initially introduced with regards to natural languages and then generalised to every semiotic system. This practically leaves open a margin of choice

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as to how to correspond the terminology before and after the generalisation is made. Moreover, the term '*langage*', combined with a determination, is sometimes used to denote ways of semiosis not organized enough as to deserve the name of '*langue*'. Some definitions of '*langue*' are quite restrictive, obliging dance or cinema, for example, to be excluded; so in this context, they are called '*le langage de danse*' and '*le langage cinématographique*'. In this sense '*langage*' can be used in the plural and is of the same order as '*langue*': '*langues*' and '*langages*' are the products of the ability of '*langage*'. For the same reasons, the term '*langage*' is also used when referring to non-human ways of semiosis. For classical structuralism, this is a contradiction-in-terms because semiosis cannot but be human. However, lately, semioticians influenced by the Peircean tradition investigate, for example, '*le langage des abeilles*' (the language of the bees). Conversely, '*langue*' since Saussure is quite clearly equivalent to 'semiotic system'. In a structuralist context, it is never used in any other than its strictly technical register. Every time that it is applied to describe natural languages, it is always implied that the conclusions are generalisable to all semiotic systems. However, the same theoretical definitions that led some semiotic systems to be considered undeserving of the name '*langue*', have caused a slippage of the term back close to a co-extension with 'natural languages'. In my thesis, I will not introduce this debate. I use '*langue*' and '*langage*' as defined by mutual opposition, referring generally to the semiotic system and the semiotic ability respectively.

For Saussure *langage* is the human semiotic ability. He makes clear that

it makes no difference what the exactly nature of the agreed sign is¹⁵²

It is not spoken language [*langage parlé*] which is natural to man, but the faculty of constructing a language [*langue*], i.e. a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas¹⁵³

¹⁵² CLG, p.26

¹⁵³ *ibid*

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a more general faculty, the one which commands the signs¹⁵⁴

We see that the semiotic ability is ‘natural to man’. Here we have a certain anchorage of the Saussurean theory to objective reality. We are not told whether some of the basic characteristics of the semiotic systems, apart from those that constitute them as semiotic, are also naturally, inherently human – as Noam Chomsky and others claim. There is nothing to suggest this position in *CLG*, although the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and other structuralists imply it. What is certain is that the ability to construct semiotic systems is considered natural to human beings and shared by all of them. It could be said that it amounts to being the definitional characteristic of humanity, analogous to the Aristotelian ‘social animal’.

Langue, on the other hand, is

a social product of the faculty of *langage* and a set of the conventions adopted by the social body necessary to allow the exercise of this faculty by the individuals¹⁵⁵

It is a *system*, i.e. a stock of elements and rules governing their relationships – with the peculiarity that the elements are not determined in advance¹⁵⁶. It is also a *social* institution. Moreover, it is different from other systems and social institutions; its special nature is of a ‘new order’¹⁵⁷ of entities: the *semiotic*. Finally, *langue* is ‘a whole in itself and a principle of classification’¹⁵⁸. *Langue*, i.e. the semiotic system, constitutes the prototype on which the structuralist concept of structure is based. It is, therefore, not wrong for ‘*langue*’ to be translated as ‘linguistic structure’, as Roy Harris proposes. However, this introduces a *husteron-proteron* because Saussure did not use the term /structure/ in this sense. Furthermore, conflating with no questions

¹⁵⁴ *CLG*, p.27

¹⁵⁵ *ibid*, p.25

¹⁵⁶ This peculiarity, i.e. the differential nature of *langue*, is implied in p. 26 and described in detail later in *CLG*.

¹⁵⁷ *CLG*, p.33

¹⁵⁸ *ibid*, p.25

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‘system’ and ‘structure’, it obscures some questions regarding the definition of structure. I prefer to keep the French term when necessary; otherwise I use /semiotic system/.

There are many *langues*, i.e. semiotic systems, whereas the capacity for *langage* is common to all. What all *langues* have in common is the (meta-) structural principle that constitutes them as semiotic structures; consequently, all *langues* share a meta-structure. This universal meta-structure is the object described by *CLG*¹⁵⁹ and by Hjelmslev’s stratification¹⁶⁰. However, the particular structure of each *langue* – the articulation of its content and expression planes – is specific to it; it is social and fundamentally arbitrary. The question of the ‘naturalness’ of language (*langue*) we have already addressed in connection to the *differentia specifica* of the so-called ‘natural languages’, as well as in connection to the refuted priority of spoken language over writing. We have shown how the *proprium* of the semiotic system is the principle of fundamental arbitrariness. Traditionally, the term ‘natural language’ is opposed to ‘formal’ languages, such as mathematics and logic, to ‘artificial’ languages, such as the Morse code, to the supposedly derivative writing and to all other forms of expression. As we have shown, none of these differences can be construed in terms of ‘naturalness’ anymore. In a certain way, by their nature, all *langues* are not natural. What is natural is the ability to produce them.

In order to clarify *langue*’s social nature and its closely related particular mode of existence, which by subsequent semioticians will be named ‘structural’, Saussure needs to place it inside the general semiotic phenomenon. He starts by a simplified description of the individual act which puts into action the circuit of

¹⁵⁹ *CLG*, pp. 35, 44

¹⁶⁰ See *Prol*, p.48; *Acta Linguistica* IV, p.ix

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communication¹⁶¹, in the case of a spoken language. The circuit presupposes at least two individuals. It starts in the mind of the individual A, where concepts and acoustic images are associated¹⁶² – the units produced by this correlation are later named signs. This is purely a *psychological* phenomenon. It is followed by the order of the brain to the body organs to move so as to produce sounds corresponding to the acoustic images and then by the *physiological* process of production of sound. This produces the *physical* existence of sound-waves which travel from the mouth of A to the ear of B. Then, the circuit continues inside the body organs of B, which receive by a *physiological* process the sounds and send the acoustic images to the brain. Inside the mind of B, the acoustic images are once again correlated to concepts, which again is a phenomenon of *psychological* nature. All individuals connected by a communication circuit need to associate the same concepts to the same acoustic images. Consequently, there needs to be a medium (*moyen*) between them, something which all of them already know, which makes possible the individual acts of communication¹⁶³. This entity is of purely *psychological*¹⁶⁴ nature. This is *langue*.

Our first approach to the structural nature of language is, therefore, made through the opposition to ‘*parole*’ (speech). *Parole*, once again not to be confined to ‘natural’ languages, is the act of using *langue*; whereas *langue* is the social stock of the signs and the rules of their relationships which make *parole* possible. They are completely inter-dependent and can be fully understood only in juxtaposition to each

¹⁶¹ *CLG*, p.27-29

¹⁶² This description is situated in the Introduction of the *CLG*, before the Chapter I of the First Part, where the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness is introduced for the first time. Therefore, it is not as yet fully clarified the fact that the two faces of the signs are constituted by the system. However, there is a reference to the principle in p. 26 of the Introduction, where the faculty of *langage* is connected with the act of articulation, which is explained as follows: ‘In Latin *articulus* means “member, part, subdivision in a sequence of things”; as regards language, articulation can designate either the subdivision of the spoken chain in syllables or the subdivision of the chain of significations in signifying units’; see also the note 157 of *CLG*.

¹⁶³ See also de Mauro, *CLG*, p.iv

¹⁶⁴ See my previous explanations regarding the use of the term ‘psychological’.

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other. The dependence of each to the other, however, is of different order: *langue* is the structure upon the basis of which *parole* develops, while historically it was created by *parole*. *Langue*, the individual receives passively and cannot change; *parole* is an act of will and consciousness, allowing for initiative and originality. *Langue* is *not* the sum of all the individual acts of *parole*. *Langue* is spoken by no-one; it exists partially ‘in the mind’ of each member of a linguistic (semiotic) community and it is complete if their minds are considered collectively¹⁶⁵. It is a kind of contract between the members of the community and needs to be learnt.

Distinguishing *langue* from *parole*, we distinguish at the same time: firstly, what is social from what is individual; secondly, what is essential from what is auxiliary [*accessoire*], more or less accidental¹⁶⁶

Saussure argues that the two faces of the semiotic phenomenon are heterogeneous to each other and, therefore, cannot be studied simultaneously. He chooses to concentrate on linguistics of *langue*¹⁶⁷.

I think it will be useful to clarify a certain confusion with regard to the classification of *langue* as either ‘subjective’ or ‘objective’. In the philosophical tradition, there are two different senses of the ‘objective vs. subjective’ distinction. (a) In one sense this distinction is used to differentiate between ‘the world as existing independently of humanity’ and ‘the world as conceived by humans as a species’. If, therefore, we have the general disposition to perceive the world as having a property, for example as existing in space and evolving in time, and this perception is due to the human point of view alone, then the property is ‘subjective’. (b) Another sense is to

¹⁶⁵ One would tend to say that *langue* is an abstraction of all the acts of *parole* of the members of a semiotic community. However, Saussure insists that this is not the case (*CLG*, pp.32, 44). For Saussure, *langue* is an entity that exists *concretely* ‘in the minds’ of the members of a semiotic community. He have already mentioned Saussure’s hesitancy with regards the use of the term ‘abstraction’. We will try to address the ontological status of *langue* in the last sub-section of this chapter.

¹⁶⁶ *CLG*, p.30

¹⁶⁷ *ibid*, pp. 36-39

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distinguish between the perception of ‘all’ and the perception of any particular individual. We may all agree, for example, that the table is round but disagree regarding its beauty. Our tastes, then, are called ‘subjective’. And if I perceive the table as talking to me, this would most likely be considered a subjective perception. Of course, there is also the question of what this ‘all’ encompasses – a large group of people, all of humanity, a ‘representative sample’ of the species ‘human’. The important point about this definition is that ‘objective’ is something that has warrant outside my individual perception. Therefore, following the first sense of the distinction ‘objective/subjective’, *langue* is subjective. Whether there are some objective elements in the constitution of the human being that provide the grounding of *langage*-capacity is another question. Following the second sense of the ‘objective/subjective’ distinction, *langue* is objective. It is not solely dependent on any particular individual act of parole. Its objectivity regarding any particular member of a semiotic community, and more importantly regarding any particular act of parole, is of social origin, not natural. This is a relative objectivity.

Another much debated point is the assumed ‘static-ness’ of *langue*. Saussure was clearly aware of the evolutionary aspect of semiotic systems. After all, this aspect was emphasised by the dominant trend of linguistics of his time, i.e. comparative linguistics. He recognises that there are two points of view from which a semiotic system can be studied: in relation to an axis of succession and in relation to an axis of simultaneity; ‘*diachronie*’ and ‘*synchronie*’¹⁶⁸. The former resembles a horizontal cross-section of an object and the latter resembles a vertical cross-section. In *CLG*, a whole part is dedicated to each of them¹⁶⁹. Saussure’s methodological innovation consists in establishing the importance of the synchronic point of view; strictly

¹⁶⁸ *CLG*, pp. 114-140

¹⁶⁹ Second Part: Synchronic linguistics, pp. 141-192; Third Part: Diachronic linguistics, pp. 193-260

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speaking, the synchronic point of view was constituted for the first time by him. On the one hand, he makes clear that what constitutes a semiotic system as a semiotic system are the relations between ‘entities’ that co-exist. It is the concept of semiotic value which founds the structural nature of semiosis. This was new in the context of a linguistic science studying the etymology and the affiliations of isolated terms. On the other hand, the synchronic point of view is explicitly aimed against a ‘panchronic’ view of language¹⁷⁰, often implicit in the ‘grammarians’ kind of linguistics. Far from being outside time, *langue* is situated in a particular socio-historical circumstance. Therefore, Saussure binds linguistics, viz. semiotics, to society and history. Not to confuse things, Saussure clearly considers socio-historical circumstances as external to the semiotic nature of *langue*. The dependence on them becomes apparent in the way each state of a language differs from the previous and successive ones. Consequently, in order to assess the structure of a semiotic system one has to study a single state. As this is a study of ‘states’, it can be called ‘static’. This does not imply that semiotic systems are static; it means that we choose to study ‘artificially immobilised’ states of them. In absolute terms, a ‘state’ is defined by absence of change¹⁷¹. Saussure is once again fully aware that *langue* is constantly subject to transformation and to choose a state practically means not to take into account what one considers unimportant for one’s research. One would have to choose, for example, whether English has changed sufficiently in a decade or a century to be studied as a different language; whether American-English and Australian-English can constitute the same object of study etc. There are no definitive answers. This is a methodological choice, not a metaphysical one. It is left to each researcher to give their own provisional interpretation and put their own scientific hypotheses.

¹⁷⁰ *CLG*, pp.134-5

¹⁷¹ *ibid*, p. 142; see also

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One has to stress here that the question of *parole* and the question of diachrony are not one and the same, although they both introduce the dimension of time into the basically spatial conception of the semiotic system. The distinction between *langue* and *parole* is one between a social structure and an individual act. The distinction between synchrony and diachrony, conversely, concerns points of view on the semiotic phenomenon, and mostly on *langue*; this particular social structure studied at a given state or through the sequence of successive states. However, Saussure claims that ‘everything that is diachronic in *langue*, it is so by *parole*’¹⁷². This means that the semiotic structure changes by incorporating innovations introduced by *parole*; nevertheless, not all of *parole*’s innovations are eventually incorporated into it. Saussure, unlike his immediate followers, does not consider the existence of either structural rules of transformation or *parole*-structures; he is aware, though, that the ideal, theoretical distinctions do not always impose the exigencies of practical research.

To sum up, *langue* is a social construct and a structured system. I have observed that audiences with an analytic-philosophical background have a difficulty in grasping those notions, particularly in their combination. I think that this may be an inheritance of empiricism and logicism. So let me repeat the three points least understood: Firstly, *langue* is *socially constructed*; not to be identified either with the native set of abilities and pre-dispositions, on the one hand, or with the individual use of language, on the other. Secondly, *langue* is a socially constructed *structure*; it encompasses something more abstract and complicated than a particular semantic range. Finally, *langue* is *not* static. Societies evolve along with their conventions; structures evolve. What is ‘static’ is a methodological choice of point of view.

¹⁷² CLG, p.138

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Hjelmslev is particularly interested in the relation between *langue* and *parole*. He observes that Saussure’s distinction of *langue* vs. *parole* encompasses three oppositions: institution vs. execution, social v. individual, restricted vs. free. Hjelmslev¹⁷³ uses each opposition as a criterion for a more detailed inner differentiation of the semiotic phenomenon and he distinguishes four facets in it, instead of Saussure’s two: (a) schema, (b) norm, (c) usage, and (d) act.

Institution	Execution		
Social	Individual		
Restricted	Free		
SCHEMA	NORM	USAGE	ACT

[Figure 3.6. – Hjelmslev: facets of the semiotic phenomenon]

‘Schema’ is the semiotic system as pure form; oppositional, relational and negative, without any positive quality. This is the level that constitutes the semiotic value. It is a social institution. ‘Norm’ is defined as the ‘material form’. This is the semiotic system including the level of semiotic substance. ‘Usage’ includes not only what is permitted by the system but also what is usual; i.e. ‘how people are accustomed to acting in given situations, or have in fact acted up to now’¹⁷⁴. Finally, what remains is the free, individual semiotic ‘act’. Whether each of these facets is classified as belonging to the realm of *langue* or *parole* depends on which of the oppositions is considered as the definitional opposition between *langue* and *parole*. Hjelmslev considers that ‘the essential border [is] the one between pure form and substance’¹⁷⁵ and that what is really new in Saussure’s concept of *langue* is what Hjelmslev himself has named ‘schema’¹⁷⁶. Therefore, the most important sub-division for semiotic science is between schema and usage, which more or less correspond to Saussure’s *langue* and *parole*. As Barthes observes, the difference is that in Hjelmslev we have ‘a

¹⁷³ ‘Langue et parole’ (1943) and ‘La stratification du langage’ (1954) in *Essais*, (pp. 77-89, 75-76)

¹⁷⁴ *Lang*, p. 42

¹⁷⁵ ‘Langue et parole’, (p.87)

¹⁷⁶ *ibid*, (p.88-89)

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formalization of *langue* and a socialization of *parole*'¹⁷⁷. One should notice that the distinction form vs. substance is not one of the three Hjelmslev initially used as definitional criteria for his four-part division of the semiotic phenomenon, although he used it in describing each sub-division.

Usage is the semiotic process, i.e. the 'texts', where 'text' here includes the spoken utterances; whereas schemata are the semiotic systems, the structures that underlie them. Hjelmslev claims explicitly that '*a priori*... for every *process* there is a corresponding *system*'¹⁷⁸. He is critically self-aware enough to admit that his belief in the necessary existence of underlying structures is a metaphysical conviction. The relation between system and process is not a mutual implication. The existence of a process always presupposes the existence of a system; the existence of a system does not always presuppose the existence of a process¹⁷⁹. Furthermore, he believes that what 'determines the identity and constancy'¹⁸⁰ of a semiotic system is its structure alone. If one adds his conviction that a theory must seek what is the invariant element underlying fluctuations and changes¹⁸¹, one understands why he chooses the structure of signification as his main object of study. He believes that, while the object domain of semiotics is the semiotic processes, its object of study is the structures that underlie them; in other words, semioticians should study texts in order to learn about the semiotic systems¹⁸². However, beyond semiotics proper, which he names 'glossematics', there are opened the fields of studying the usage. It is there that Hjelmslev classifies phonetics, grammatology, semantics, and even conceptual logic.

¹⁷⁷ 'Eléments de sémiologie', (p.95)

¹⁷⁸ *Prol*, p. 5

¹⁷⁹ *Prol*, p.24-25; see also Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p.9

¹⁸⁰ *Lang*, p. 37-38

¹⁸¹ *Prol*, p.4

¹⁸² *ibid*, p.9-10; *Acta IV*, pp.vii-viii

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The relation between *langue* and *parole*, schema and usage, is a relation between structure and process. Hjelmslev connects it with the relation between form and substance. There is no question about the purely formal nature of the schema-*langue*. However, the connection between substance and *parole* is *not* a definitional one. A process is not by definition connected to the notion of substance. This is an incidental characteristic of the semiotic phenomenon. Considering that structure is purely formal and the semiotic phenomenon includes elements of substance, the consequence is that what is not structure in the semiotic phenomenon is left with all the elements of substance. In Hjelmslev's systematization of the semiotic phenomenon, the distinction between form and substance is of primary importance; so, we are given the impression that what constitutes usage as such is the relation to substance. There is a constant symmetry in the use of the two concepts. For example, a schema is 'manifested' by its usage, as a form is 'manifested' by its substance¹⁸³; 'behind' a text is a system, as 'behind' a substance is a form¹⁸⁴. However, Hjelmslev is not conceptually confusing the two distinctions¹⁸⁵.

In the relation between schema and usage, the former is a constant and the latter a variable¹⁸⁶. There is an implicit temporality in this opposition. The schema as a constant and its usage as a variable imply a difference in temporal terms; which involves a different order of temporality than the fact that semiotic systems, as schemata, change¹⁸⁷. This second kind of temporality is connected to the relation

¹⁸³ *Prol*, p. 51

¹⁸⁴ *ibid*, p.61

¹⁸⁵ 'L' analyse structurale du langage' (1948) in *Essais*, (p.38)

¹⁸⁶ *Lang*, p.40

¹⁸⁷ *Lang*, p.122

between synchrony and diachrony in Saussure; this relation Hjelmslev chooses not to study and to limit himself in the research of synchrony¹⁸⁸.

As we have seen, Saussure introduces two fundamental distinctions: between *langue* and *parole*, and between the synchronic and diachronic point of view. Correspondingly, he distinguishes between linguistics (viz. semiotics) of *langue* and linguistics of *parole*, on the one hand, and between synchronic and diachronic linguistics, on the other. He chooses to investigate the linguistics of *langue* and not of *parole*. In his courses he mentioned that he would later investigate the linguistics of *parole*; but he never did. For Saussure, the synchronic and diachronic linguistics are two points of view of the linguistics of *langue*. He is concerned with both. Hjelmslev makes a slightly different classification. His glossematics is limited in the synchronic point of view. He discusses the relation of *langue* and *parole* inside the synchronic point of view. He chooses to concentrate on *langue*. So, whereas Saussure considers synchrony and diachrony inside the semiotics of *langue*, Hjelmslev considers the relation of *langue* and *parole* inside synchronic semiotics. The two fundamental distinctions – between *langue* and *parole*, and between the synchronic and diachronic point of view – are not isomorphic. They are, however, closely interlinked. It is the synchronic point of view on the semiotic phenomenon which revealed its systematic character, allowing structuralist semiotics to constitute its paradigmatic object of study: the *langue* or semiotic system. The synchronic point of view on *langue* is the novel and definitional methodological choice of structuralist semiotics.

Alexandros Lagopoulos¹⁸⁹ explains the fundamental importance of the concept of ‘point of view’ in Saussure’s theory. He reminds us of Saussure’s observation that in linguistics the object is not given but created by the point of view. One legitimate

¹⁸⁸ ‘Langue et parole’ (1943) in *Essais*, (p.79); see also Prol and Uldall, *Outline of Glossematics*.

¹⁸⁹ ‘From *sémiologie* to postmodernism: A genealogy’, p.12

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question would concern the ontological status of an object depending on the researcher's point of view. One would have to decide whether the choice of point of view constitutes the object *langue* in the sense of creating it *ex nihilo* or revealing it or distinguishing it. The sense given to this 'constitution' of the object of study affects what one considers the epistemology of semiotics to be. However, no matter what sense is given to it, the concept of strategic choice of point of view is indeed important for structuralist linguistics and, subsequently, semiotics. It is a case, maybe the most characteristic, of how the methodology in structuralism communicates with the content of the theory both ways: the choice to view the semiotic phenomenon in its structural aspect reveals its structural nature.

The structuralist semioticians are faced from the beginning of their research, even before the beginning, with choices of this kind: *langue* and not *parole*, synchrony and not diachrony. What is additionally interesting is that it is usually a choice between two terms, defined relatively the one to the other; not necessarily in opposition but certainly in mutual relation. Saussure claims that

the linguistic phenomenon presents perpetually *two faces* that correspond to each other and of which the one has no value without the other.¹⁹⁰ [my Italics]

He offers the examples of enunciation/perception, sound/idea, viz. signifier/signified, individual/social, established system/evolution; we could add others, among which form/substance, signification/communication. One observes that what is described in the passage I cited is the principle of differentiation: two elements that have value by their relation. It is significant, I think, the use of the verb 'valoir', i.e. 'have value'. The very choice to perceive the semiotic phenomenon through these differentially defined couples is the first step toward a structuralist point of view. More precisely,

¹⁹⁰ CLG, p.23

the structuralist innovation is the realization of the differential nature of these couples.

A differential definition means that the two terms have no properties *per se*. They don't have an essence. The properties of each are consequences of its relation to the other. Therefore, much depends on the positing of their relation by the researcher, which may mean the simple placing of the distinctive border between them or a more complicated function. As we have seen, the two initial methodological distinctions for semiotics are: (a) *langue/parole*, or system/text, or structure/process, and (b) synchrony/diachrony, or static/evolutionary; which are not isomorphic but connected to each other. Lagopoulos, in 'Static structuralism versus the dynamics of structure', classifies structuralist semiotic theories according to their way of making the first distinction, and rightly observes that 'the very definition of what constitutes the system or text in each case, depends on [the corresponding] theory'¹⁹¹. He also observes that this choice is 'linked to a fundamental epistemological decision concerning the main locus of the creation of signification'. On the other hand, Saussure's distinction between synchrony and diachrony has been one of his most controversial and highly contested positions. Many have claimed to overcome the division; first among them the members of the Prague Circle¹⁹². It is possible that most critiques are based on a key misunderstanding. As Tullio de Mauro¹⁹³ rightly observes, the distinction has been misunderstood as being *in re*, whereas it is quite clear that Saussure considers it

¹⁹¹ p.1; Lagopoulos distinguishes four different currents of structuralist semiotics according to their strategic choice to focus on: '(I) the system, *langue*; (II) *parole* as the assumed *direct result* of the use of *langue*; (III) *parole* as resulting from both *langue* and the conditions of semiotic *use*, and also as forming *langue*; (IV) *parole* as a self-sufficient and creative semiotic *use* in situation.'

¹⁹² See, for example, Roman Jakobson, 'Language and Literature' (1928) in *Language in Literature*, pp. 47-49, where he claims that 'the history of a system is in turn a system' and refers to 'types of structural evolution'.

¹⁹³ *CLG*, note 176, pp.452-455

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an opposition of ‘points of view’; it has a methodological character, it concerns the researcher and his *object* [of study] and not the entirety of the things of which the researcher is occupied, his *matter* [of study].¹⁹⁴ [additions mine]

Furthermore, the actual theoretical differences regard mostly the exact combination of the two methodological distinctions. As we have already noticed, whereas Saussure considers synchrony and diachrony inside the semiotics of *langue*, Hjelmslev considers the relation of *langue* and *parole* inside synchronic semiotics. In the case of the Prague Circle, a main differentiation is their claim about the structurality of diachrony. De Mauro analyses this notion of structural diachrony into two elements: the first is teleologism, according to which the changes are produced for some reason immanent to the system; the second is anti-atomism, according to which changes are conditioned by the system to which they belong. Only the first notion is against the Saussurean positions. It is quite clear that for Saussure the changes occur accidentally; and he is right at least partially, otherwise knowing a language we would be able to predict its future changes. Another diversion, or rather extension, of the Saussurean position is the notion of structures directing the way the *langue* is used, introduced by Hjelmslev’s concept of ‘usage’. Additionally, there is the notion of structures organizing each specimen of *parole*, i.e. each text, as elaborated by Greimas and others.

On the different takings of the two basic distinctions (*langue/parole*, synchrony/diachrony) depends the particular conceptualization of the relation between ‘structure’ and ‘function’ with regards to the semiotic phenomenon, which is often different between semiotic theories. We have already referred to the two complementary points of view of the semiotic phenomena, as signification and as communication, and how it is generally accepted that the Copenhagen Circle placed

¹⁹⁴ De Mauro, *ibid*

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the main emphasis on signification, whereas the Prague Circle to communication. However, the very decision of which descriptions belong to each point of view very much depends to what a theory considers the relation to be between structure and function-in-the-sense-of-use. To start with, semiotic structures are by definition functional, in the sense of not being essential. Here, the ambiguity between ‘function-as-relation’ and ‘function-as-use’ goes deeper than the level of the signifier. *What* an element of a semiotic structure *is* depends both on *where it is* in the structure and *what it does*; however, *what it does* depends on *where it is*, as it must be obvious from the principle of fundamental arbitrariness and the relation between *langue* and *parole* in *CLG*. The question is *to what extent* the function depends on structure – and we have seen that this dependence may extend beyond the limits Saussure considered. Dependence on a semiotic structure, however, does not mean necessarily depending on the semiotic system; we may consider other semiotic structuralities than the *langue*. Consequently, it is not easy to unambiguously classify a definition as structural or functional. The central semiotic paradox is the fact that every semiotic function in order to be semiotic has to depend on a structure, whereas it is still possible not only to say something new but also to change the structure in an unpredictable way.

3.6. Semiotic entities and semiotic relations

Langue, as we have seen, is a system; as such, it comprises elements and their relations. Being specifically a *semiotic* system, it is ruled by the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness. This principle entails that the elements of semiotic structures are constituted by their relations. Therefore, in a semiotic system the relations precede the elements; one may conceive the elements as intersections, as

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knots produced by the net of relationships. In this sub-section, on the one hand, I will briefly refer to (a) the definition of the semiotic entities that are most interesting for our purposes; on the other, I will investigate (b) the mechanisms and the kinds of relations in semiotic structures.

Through our investigation up to now, we had the opportunity to make two observations which are relevant here: the semiotic phenomenon can be perceived in two interlinked ways, as signification and as communication; and semiotic entities are organised in different ways and levels. As regards the first observation, the definitions of semiosis as signification and communication are complementary to each other. The structure of signification is the *how*; whereas the function of communication – in a general sense – is the *why*. Structuralist semiotics has a functional conception of structure and a structural conception of function. Therefore, in this context, the prioritisation of one of the definitions never entails forgetfulness of the other; it is a choice of point of view, secondary if compared to the main principles of structuralism. However, this choice does determine to some degree a semiotic theory; most importantly, delimits and orientates its field of investigation. I should explain that when we distinguish between structural and functional semiotic entities, we may mean two different things. On the one hand, a unit is structural (or functional) if it is defined with reference to its structure (or function). On the other, it is structural (or functional) because it has a structure (or function). According the latter definition, most entities that we study here are both structural and functional; although some tend to be more structural or more structured than others. However, it is the formal distinction to which I refer in this sub-section. In this sense, it is important to stress that a structural and a functional unit may designate the same entity. Additionally, because structure and function are so closely interconnected in structuralism, it is

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often difficult task to make a clear cut between structural and functional units, both conceptually and practically. As regards the second observation, when previously analysing the structure of the sign-function, we have seen how it describes entities of different levels of complexity: for example, both an English word and the English language. Therefore, we need to analyse the interlinked issues of how the elements fulfilling the condition of sign-function are organised so as to produce structures of higher complexity, as well as how they are themselves produced by the semiotic structure. The question of ‘semiotic structures’, in the plural, is of a different order than the question of ‘the structure of sign-function’. Furthermore, we need to formally define the distinguishable entity ‘semiotic system’, viz. ‘*langue*’, as differentiated from the more general use of the term ‘semiotic structures’, previously opposed to semiotic processes. As the kinds of relations that the semiotic units form in space and time depend on and determine the semiotic phenomenon as signification and communication, their study falls accordingly within different fields and points of view of semiotic investigation.

The most important scientific objects from the point of view of signification are the minimum semiotic unit and the semiotic system; in *CLG* they correspond to the sign and *langue*. We consider them as structural entities because we distinguish and define them by a structural description¹⁹⁵. Conversely, the central scientific object from the point of view of communication is a functional entity, called by Saussure and Jakobson ‘message’, while Hjelmslev calls it ‘text’. Later, as used by the post-structuralists, the term ‘text’ becomes a term that blends both structural and functional senses, embodying the very impossibility of such distinctions. Let us just note in

¹⁹⁵ Of course, they also are structured; they are actually the structures *par excellence* in structuralist semiotics.

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passing that the term derives from a vocabulary of writing and it was used by Hjelmslev before taken by the post-structuralists.

So, the main functional semiotic entity according Saussure and Jakobson is the message, a term they borrow from communication theory. Message is the semiotic object that is exchanged in an act of communication¹⁹⁶. We have seen Saussure's taking of the communication circuit. Jakobson's outlines it in the following terms:

The ADDRESSER sends a MESSAGE to the ADDRESSEE. To be operative a message requires a CONTEXT referred to [...]; a CODE fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and the addressee [...]; and, finally, a CONTACT, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee¹⁹⁷

It is not by accident that Hjelmslev avoids the term 'message' in his theory, even when he wants to describe the given object by the semiotic process to semiotic analysis. He is not interested in the specific communicational process that provided him with the object of his study. What he has is 'a given'.

If the linguistic investigator is given anything [...], is the as yet unanalyzed *text* in its undivided and absolute integrity¹⁹⁸

It goes without saying, and Hjelmslev states it anyway, that the term 'text' is generalizable to the entirety of semiotic phenomena, beyond natural languages. The choice of the term concentrates on the main structural characteristic of this given: the co-existence of its elements under the scientific gaze of the researcher. Of course, a piece of spoken language or performed music would also be classified as 'text'. So, this 'co-existence' should more accurately be perceived as closeness in space and time. Moreover, Hjelmslev in particular considers the relationship as abstract, only the manifestation of which expresses itself in spatio-temporal terms¹⁹⁹. Nevertheless, the

¹⁹⁶ In structural terms, a message is each instantiation of *parole*.

¹⁹⁷ 'Linguistics and poetics' in *Language in Literature*, (p.66)

¹⁹⁸ *Prolog*, p. 7

¹⁹⁹ The question of whether the concept of structure can really be stripped of any form of spatiality and temporality is further addressed in my thesis.

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written text is a good example of how this closeness may be vividly actualized in spatial terms, and I think this is the reason for its choice as exemplary. It is the concentration on the structural characteristic of a functional unit that proves very helpful for researchers, such as Roland Barthes and Algirdas-Julien Greimas, who attempt to extend their studies beyond the distinctions as put by *CLG*. Additionally, the term 'text' is better suited than 'message' to describe the complexity of the semiotic 'given'. Umberto Eco²⁰⁰, taking into account Hjelmslev and Greimas, as well as newer findings of semiotic studies and communication theory, provides a much more complicated description of the communication circuit. Finally, for the post-structuralists of the *Tel Quel* group, 'text' combines the advantages of avoidance of the metaphysics of communication with an emphasis on the creative aspect of semiotic production. Therefore, the use of the term 'text' substitutes for and gradually almost effaces the use of the term 'message' in semiotic studies.

Conversely, through a structural description of the semiotic phenomenon, we have gained a view of what Hjelmslev calls 'the semiotic function', i.e. the particular relation that constitutes semiosis. As we have seen, the semiotic relation characterises from a structural point of view entities of different degrees of complexity; in the case of a natural language, for example, it characterises a prefix, a word, a sentence, a paragraph, the entire language. Then again, each of these entities possesses other structural characteristics apart from the general structural principle which determines its semiotic nature. According to Saussure²⁰¹, there are two mechanisms determining the semiotic structuration: 'differentiation' and 'grouping'; Barthes²⁰² rephrases them as 'articulation' and 'integration'. Articulation is the differential mechanism. The

²⁰⁰ *Theory of Semiotics*, pp. 139-142; see also 'Introduction: The Role of the Reader' in *The Role of the Reader*, (pp. 3-43)

²⁰¹ *CLG*, p.177

²⁰² 'Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits', (p.23)

units produced by the articulation may and often are subject to further articulation. Integration, on the other hand, is the mechanism by which entities are composed into other entities of a higher order of complexity. What Saussure did not concern himself with, while followers such as Barthes and Greimas did, is the way these ‘groups’ are organised, the inner structure of them; he simply ascribed them to the realm of *parole*.

Two structural semiotic entities are particularly interesting for semiotic research. The first is the minimum semiotic unit under which the articulation no longer produces *articula* characterised by the semiotic function; in other words, the subdivision whose subdivisions no longer possess both an expression and a content plane. This is a refinement of the traditional concept of the sign; a necessary refinement after Hjelmslev’s attribution of the structural characteristic of ‘semiotic function’ to many entities of different complexity. *Articula* that are not sign-functions but enter into a sign-system as parts of some sign-function are called by Hjelmslev ‘*figurae*’.

The second interesting structural semiotic entity is, of course, *langue*, i.e. the semiotic system. The semiotic system includes elements and rules for their combination. It is a different criterion of structural classification which would lead us to recognise an entity as a ‘semiotic function’ from that which would lead us to recognise it as a ‘semiotic system’. Semiotic function is every entity that possesses the definitional double structure of semiosis. This structure, or rather meta-structure, is common to all semiotic systems, as well as any other entity worthy of the name ‘semiotic’. A semiotic system, conversely, is a particular and arbitrary semiotic structure of elements and rules. Here we should point out that whereas a semiotic

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system is a semiotic structure, not every semiotic structure is a semiotic system²⁰³; unless 'structure' is given a restrictive definition²⁰⁴. A semiotic system has other characteristics apart from being semiotic and a structure, such as being 'a whole in itself and a principle of classification'²⁰⁵. It is a limited object, whereas a structure is not necessarily so. It is a limited object, although it can produce unlimited and unpredictable number of texts. It is a limited object, even if no user possesses it in its entirety. So, it is limited in different ways. However, it is quite difficult to delimit a semiotic system, both conceptually and in practice. The process of delimitation includes oppositions of different orders:

(a) Firstly, the semiotic system is opposed to what is not systematic in semiosis. This is the opposition we already have discussed at length, between *langue* and *parole*. The opposition combines, however, two slightly different distinctions. On the one hand, there is the opposition between what is structured and follows some rules, and what is not. As both Hjelmslev and Jakobson have claimed, and despite Saussure, there is no question that *parole*, far from being a completely free act, is structured and subject to rules of many kinds. On the other hand, there is the distinction between what is determined by the semiotic system and what is not. The question of the extent of determination of the semiotic phenomenon by the semiotic system, is the inverse side of the question of where the semiotic system extends; in other words, it depends on what we define as semiotic system. If we consider everything that has to do with structuring and rules as belonging to the semiotic system, then the two distinctions coincide. Saussure, however, limits the field of *langue* to the level of the sentence; and even then, he only considers the particular

²⁰³ This is an additional reason I disagree with Roy Harris' choice to translate 'langue' as 'linguistic structure'.

²⁰⁴ I address this question in the next subsection.

²⁰⁵ *CLG*, p. 25

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kind of sentence that is a codified expression used as a single sign. Hjelmslev, conversely, allows for different levels of structuration. His initial problem was probably that defining *langue* as pure form, he could not account for the formal aspects of specific manifestations of a semiotic form, i.e. aspects purely formal but pertaining only to the specific manifestation. He solves it by introducing the distinction between ‘schema’, ‘norm’ and ‘usage’; as opposed to the completely non-structural part of semiosis, the semiotic ‘act’. So, in order to define the extent to which ‘the semiotic system’ determines the semiotic phenomenon, we need to clarify in which of its senses we mean it.

(b) Secondly, a semiotic system is opposed to other semiotic systems. When we speak of the relation between *langue* and *parole*, we actually mean the *langue* and the *parole* of the same entity; it wouldn’t do to try and derive a German text from the French *langue*. So, we are actually often using the term ‘semiotic system’ to denote this more general entity including a systematic and a non-systematic aspect. It is not a technical register of the term but it is necessary, considering that ‘semiotic system’ substitutes for ‘language in a generalised sense’. In this sense, Hjelmslev introduced the term ‘semiotic’ as a noun; ‘une sémiotique’²⁰⁶ is comprised by ‘une paradigmatique’ and ‘une syntagmatique’ – only the former, as I shall explain, corresponds to the semiotic system strictly speaking. In any sense, a semiotic system is compared to and delimited from other entities of a similar nature to it. The question as to how one semiotic system is distinguished from another is conceptually easy: a semiotic system is a group of rules and elements; therefore, a different semiotic system has different rules and different elements. Practically, this is not such an obvious process as both rules and elements are shared by different semiotic

²⁰⁶ *Essais*, p.49

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systems, whereas in the same system one may find variations of rules and elements. Furthermore, the differential character of the elements means that they fully depend on the system; ideally, the result is that the system must be a closed and autonomous entity of inter-dependent *articula*. The difference between one semiotic system and another, as we have examined at length in relation to Hjelmslev's stratification, is a difference between forms. In practice, however, there is no rule as to what precise amount of difference in form constitutes a different system. As already Saussure²⁰⁷ had observed, the borders of a semiotic system are not closed. While it is relatively easy to practically draw the line between French and painting, where we have two different *kinds* of semiotic system, it is more difficult to draw the line between French and Italian, and even more difficult to draw the line between two different Italian dialects. In practice, the criteria delimiting a semiotic system include factors completely outside the realm of semiotics, which can be by no means considered either intrinsic or structural. In the case of national languages and local dialects, the determining factors are history and politics²⁰⁸. However, in semiotics our criteria need by definition to be intrinsic; and it is practically impossible by intrinsic criteria to rigorously delimit a semiotic system. Nevertheless, this does not affect conceptually the definition of the semiotic system but rather the determination of any particular semiotic system. We should note here that in the functional entity of 'text', which we discussed earlier, it is possible the fusion of elements of different origin; i.e. the co-existence of elements, structures, codes and rules belonging to different semiotic systems. One can observe a difference between the structural entity '*parole*', which is

²⁰⁷ He addresses the question of frontiers between *langues*, in the conceptual and geographical sense, as well as the difference between language and idiom in Part IV of *CLG*.

²⁰⁸ A very instructive example is the Serbo-Croatian language, which was officially divided into two languages, the Serbian and the Croatian, after the division of Yugoslavia in 1991. Ironically enough, double dictionaries have been published since to translate between what until recently was considered the same language. Differences of dialect were accentuated or introduced. In a few hundred years, it is quite possible that people will really need translation between them.

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the opposite facet of a *langue*, and the functional entity 'text', which is the semiotic 'given'.

(c) Thirdly, the semiotic system is opposed to the structural entities, of different degrees of complication, which it articulates. Hjelmslev defines a semiotic as a hierarchy²⁰⁹; and analyses in detail the relations inside this hierarchy. A semiotic system may include sub-systems and be included in super-systems. This does not mean, of course, that all the structural entities composing a system are systems themselves. Nor does it mean that the difference between a semiotic system and other structural semiotic entities is just a difference in degree of complication. There can be very simple semiotic systems; there can also be very complicated structural semiotic entities which are not systems. There is no threshold of size or complexity. The criterion for recognising a semiotic system as opposed to other structural semiotic entities is its autonomy, self-containment and self-reference. A semiotic system constitutes its sub-divisions; it produces and groups them in the same move. Each sub-division becomes signifying by its position in the overall system, as we have seen. Its position in the system is not the only criterion deciding the meaning of an element; its communicational environment, at each particular use, also determines it. However, the signification produced by the structure is a necessary precondition for any further meaning an element can acquire. It is a condition of possibility of any production of meaning and needs to be learnt.

There are two ways of articulation-integration of semiotic elements: *in praesentia* and *in absentia*; they have come to be called, respectively, the 'syntagmatic' and the 'paradigmatic'. The first relation is between elements that co-exist in a communicational unit; the second is a relation between present and absent

²⁰⁹ *Prol*, p.68

elements, associated by the human ability of memory. Both are ‘in large part established by the *langue*’²¹⁰. Both relations contribute to the generation of signification by constituting its structure. On the one hand, the syntagmatic relation, being defined by the co-existence in a communicational unit, seems to show an affinity with the communicative aspect of semiosis. However, it is no less structural relation than the paradigmatic. Furthermore, we should clearly distinguish the term ‘syntagmatic’ from the term ‘syntactic’, deriving from ‘syntax’; we will eventually see that syntactic is a subset of syntagmatic. On the other hand, the paradigmatic relation, taking place ‘in memory’, must remind us of the way higher-degree semiotics are constituted²¹¹. Finally, the sense of the term ‘paradigmatic’ in this context should not be confused with the sense ‘exemplary’ that the term has in different contexts, a meaning that derives from its Greek ancestry.

The two kinds of structure-generating relations – syntagmatic and paradigmatic – have been described, in slightly different terms, by all prominent semioticians. Saussure²¹² says that the relations and differences between linguistic terms develop in two different spheres, each generating values of different order. The first is founded on the linear character of language and produces groups of consecutive units, syntagms. The second is founded on something that different elements share in the level of the signifier, of the signified, or both; it produces groups of thus associated units, paradigms²¹³. A semiotic term, therefore, belongs to and is

²¹⁰ *CLG*, p.176

²¹¹ See sub-section 3.2. Actually, connotation as studied by Jakobson is based on both kinds of relation: metaphor on the paradigmatic relation and metonymy on the syntagmatic relation. We will see, however, that an extended definition of the paradigmatic relation includes previously made syntagmatic connections. A further point to be made is that, considering connotation and meta-semiosis are not structurally distinguished, meta-semiosis has to rely on the paradigmatic relation too.

²¹² *CLG*, pp.170-184

²¹³ Not to be confused with the ‘epistemological paradigm’ (see Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*) or the Greek meaning of the word (i.e. ‘example’), although there are interesting interconnections.

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determined by, on the one hand, a chain of co-existing terms²¹⁴ and, on the other, a constellation of absent terms, of which it is the center. Hjelmslev²¹⁵ calls ‘hierarchy’ a ‘class of classes’. He distinguishes two sorts of hierarchies, processes and systems, which he names respectively, ‘syntagmatics’ and ‘paradigmatics’²¹⁶. They are founded on two different mechanisms of human reason: the function ‘both-and’, on the one hand, and the function ‘either-or’, on the other. Couples of terms constituted by either mechanism can be related to each other with regards causality in three ways: mutual implication, one-way implication or no causal relation at all²¹⁷. The classes comprising a syntagmatic are called syntagms, and they are chains in the case of natural languages; they are further partitioned into smaller parts. The classes comprising a paradigmatic are called paradigms; they are articulated in smaller members. A semiotic – *une sémiotique* – is a super-hierarchy comprised by both kinds of hierarchies. Hjelmslev identifies ‘syntagmatic’ with ‘text’²¹⁸ and ‘paradigmatic’ with ‘*langue*’²¹⁹. For Jakobson²²⁰ there are two double-faced modes of arrangement: the first is combination/contexture, in which any linguistic unit ‘serves as a context for simpler units and/or finds its own context in a more complex linguistic unit’; the second is selection/substitution, in which there are arranged units that are ‘equivalent in some respect and different in another’. In the former, the entities are conjoined in

²¹⁴ It is interesting to notice that in *CLG* the term ‘structure’ refers to these ‘chains’ – a sense which is completely unrelated to the subsequent use of the term by structuralists.

²¹⁵ *Prol*, pp.18-37; *Essais*, pp.49-52 ; and Hans Jørgen Uldall, *Outline of Glossematics*, pp. 42 ff.

²¹⁶ The terms ‘syntagmatic’ and ‘paradigmatic’ are used here as nouns (‘*une syntagmatique*’, ‘*une paradigmatique*’), the same way as the term ‘semiotic’ is used (‘*une sémiotique*’). It is important to remember that both a syntagmatic and a paradigmatic possess a content-plane and an expression-plane.

²¹⁷ Hjelmslev names each of these relations: interdependence, determination and constellation.

Additionally, he gives two other sets of names according to whether these are syntagmatic or paradigmatic.

²¹⁸ See earlier in this sub-section how co-existence constitutes the structural characteristic of the functional unit ‘text’.

²¹⁹ The main difference between Saussure’s *langue* and Hjelmslev’s *paradigmatique* is that the latter includes explicitly the rules of formation of phrases, the equivalent to Noam Chomsky’s ‘competence’.

²²⁰ ‘Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances’ (1956) in *Language and Literature*, (pp.95-114)

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the actual message, although they may also be conjoined in the code; the relation is based on contiguity. In the latter, the entities are conjoined in the code but not in the message; the relation is based on similarity. Jakobson finds a correspondence between the two modes of semiotic arrangement and the two types of aphasia: the first type of aphasia is a disturbance of the combination/contexture relation and causes problems with the hierarchy of linguistic units and the use of metonymy; the second type is a disturbance of the selection/substitution relation and causes problems with the use of metalanguage and metaphor. Jakobson also makes correspondences of the two modes of semiotic arrangement to the two sets of Peirce's interpretants, to Freud's mechanisms of the dream, and to Frazer's classification of magic rites. Barthes²²¹, in his idiosyncratic presentation of the elementary concepts of semiotics, identifies the syntagmatic mechanism to the function of decoupage and the paradigmatic mechanism to the function of classification. He traces this division of the semiotic phenomenon through Hjelmslev, Jakobson and Martinet. He observes that there are two cases where this fundamental division becomes less clear: dream and art. Interestingly, he uses the terms 'monstrous', 'perverted' and 'scandal' to describe them.

We will investigate a bit further the two different classes of semiotic subdivisions: the syntagm and the paradigm. The syntagm²²², as we have said, is the group of *in praesentia* related semiotic terms. Having accepted the linear character of natural languages²²³, we infer that the syntagm in this case is linear – a 'chain' as

²²¹ *Eléments de sémiologie*, pp. 114-130

²²² For the following two paragraphs, I mainly used the three semiotic dictionaries: Ducrot and Todorov, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, pp. 139-146, 375-382, 443-448; Ducrot and Schaeffer, *Nouveau dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, pp. 594-607, 764-775; Greimas and Courtès, *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, pp. 66-67, 102-106, 376-377, 389-390; I also used Hjelmslev, *Prol*, p.28 and Lagopoulos, 'Static structuralism versus the dynamics of structure', p.23 and 'From *sémiologie* to postmodernism: A genealogy', p. 14

²²³ At least classic structuralists share this premise.

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Saussure and Hjelmslev call it. We also infer that, accordingly, different *kinds* of semiotics may have syntagms of more dimensions. There are two definitions of syntagm: the wider definition considers syntagm every element that co-exists in an utterance; the narrower definition demands that the terms are related according to the rules of the system, which include syntax and grammar. In the latter definition, the inner organization of the syntagm becomes important; in the case of natural languages, this means the order of succession. Thus, [she left the web] and [the web she left] are syntagms in English language, while [she the left web] is not. Another divergence between definitions is that some semioticians, following Saussure, consider that the syntagmatic relation exists only between semiotic, i.e. two-plane, elements; others, like Hjelmslev, recognize its existence even in the level of *figurae*. Finally, Saussure limited the range of syntagms in compound words and typified phrases, whereas since it has been extended in larger semiotic units.

Hjelmslev, as we have just seen, identifies the syntagmatic hierarchy with the text, i.e. 'the semiotic given'. Initially, 'text' and 'writing' were opposed to 'utterance' and 'discourse' according to the difference in substance of expression. When this difference ceased to be considered of structural importance, the generalized versions of the terms became co-extensive. Furthermore, 'writing' and 'discourse' as opposed to 'text' and 'utterance' imply the difference between an action and the product of this action. However, the two meanings are amalgamated already in classical structuralism, and more explicitly after the post-structuralist critique. Then, 'discourse' and 'text' imply more strongly than 'utterance' the fact that they are internally structured. Finally, the reasons for the preference of the term 'text' over all the others, a term that derives from a vocabulary of writing, were already implied earlier and will be further explained in relation to Derrida's project. In structuralist

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semiotics today all these terms are often used interchangeably as they are founded in the syntagmatic relation. 'Context' is the wider unit of text that surrounds the text under consideration. There are two kinds of contexts: the explicit context, which belongs to the same semiotic with the text under consideration, and the implicit or situational context, which does not. Hjelmslev believes that natural languages can render any implicit context explicit. The concept of context is also in a way the bridge between the semiotic and the extra-semiotic, as situational context includes semiotic and extra-semiotic components. Jakobson rightly relates the determination of the referent of a semiotic entity to its context.

The *in absentia* related group of semiotic terms is called a paradigm²²⁴. For Saussure, the terms of a paradigm should share some common characteristic, either at the level of signified or at the level of signifier or both. So, for example, some of the paradigms to which the word 'web' belongs are: [web, wed, weld, well, wend, ...], where the terms are grouped together by their signifier; [web, tissue, loom, cloth, pall, net, nexus, plexus, complex, grid, text,...], where the terms are grouped together by their signified; and [web, weave, weaver,...], where the terms are grouped together by both their signifier and their signified. The wider definition of paradigm, however, includes any class of semiotic elements, irrespectively of the principle of classification which unites them. This eventually includes previously existed syntagms, as long as they are stored in the collective memory of a semiotic community. Jakobson gives a much narrower definition of paradigm: its members,

²²⁴ For the following three paragraphs, I mainly used the three semiotic dictionaries: Ducrot and Todorov, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, pp. 137, 139-146; Ducrot and Schaeffer, *Nouveau dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, p. 538; Greimas and Courtès, *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, pp. 26-34, 39-40, 266, 197-199, 229-230; I also used Barthes, *Le degré zero de l'écriture* and 'Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits'; Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, pp.57-136 ; Greimas, *Sémantique structurale: recherche de méthode*, Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1966; Norris, 'Review Article – *Questions of Method: Greimas's Structural Semantics*'

According to him, must be able to substitute for each other in the same syntagm. This coincides with Hjelmslev's definition of category, which is a specific kind of paradigm. The terms of a paradigm are generally of no predetermined number or hierarchical order. However, there are paradigms of limited number of members, such as the declinations of a noun; there are also paradigms with internal structure. An organized paradigm is a code. Hjelmslev considers the entirety of a *langue*, along with its rules of usage, as a paradigmatic hierarchy – *une paradigmatique*. There are larger structured paradigms than the particular semiotic systems; such as Quantum Mechanics or Western metaphysics²²⁵. The entire culture of a semiotic community is a structured paradigm, a kind of super-code, including all the other semiotic systems used by the community along with their rules of construction and inter-relation. This is called a 'semiotic universe' and it can be only partially accessible, through the texts it generates.

Hjelmslev defines 'category' as a paradigm endowed with a determined function. Because of the relational nature of semiosis, a category can be designated only in relational terms. We can, therefore, refer to the 'masculine /feminine' category but not in the category of 'masculine' alone. This does not mean that the categories are necessarily two-termed; they may contain more terms. It means, however, that the elementary semiotic structure is a relation of *at least* two terms. Of great interest for semiotic study are the kinds of relation that can be formed between these terms. Many semioticians have attempted to construct models and typologies of these relations. Greimas's famously obscure 'semiotic square' is the visual representation of the logical articulation of semantic categories, according to its inventor. Hexagonal models have also been also proposed. Categories are organized into larger paradigmatic

²²⁵ This sense relates to Kuhn's 'scientific paradigm' and Foucault's 'épistémé'

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packages, which are called ‘micro-universes’. A paradigm detected in a particular text is an ‘isotopy’. The term was introduced from chemistry to semiotics by Greimas. Operatively, it is the repetition in the text of terms belonging in the same paradigmatic package that allows us to recognize an ‘isotopy’. Isotopies include paradigmatic packages of which the members are entire categories. We can thus recognize in a text multi-isotopies, complex isotopies and modalities. Greimasian isotopies belong to the content-plane. Enlarged definitions, however, include the expression-plane.

The concept of isotopy constitutes the correspondence between a paradigmatic group, usually structured, and its syntagmatic expression. It thus allows us to achieve a more detailed and rigorous structural description of the ‘text’. Greimas and Barthes have extensively investigated the paradigmatic aspect of the content of texts; and their studies are particularly relevant to Derrida’s technique of deconstructive reading. For them, texts have also structural criteria of delimitation, other from their accidental appearance by an act of communication. A text, in this sense, is both a coherent unit and a part of a greater organization. On the one hand, it becomes unified and coherent by the repetition of terms belonging in the same paradigmatic packages; i.e. isotopies. It has a style. It corresponds to a micro-universe, which can be articulated in subordinated micro-universes. On the other hand, it is exactly their including of paradigmatic packages that opens texts to their wider context. Texts incorporate through their isotopies relations to other texts. This function was analyzed by Kristeva, who called it ‘intertextuality’. Consequently, interpreting texts involves analyzing the internal organization of their isotopies into codes and their inter-relation into super-codes, which eventually leads us to relate them to a much wider context.

An issue that emerges recurrently in the previous paragraphs is the structure of both syntagms and paradigms. This organization is interwoven with notions of

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spatiality and temporality. The differential aspect of the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness dictates that the ‘deeper’ generative mechanism of the semiotic is digital. Semiotic terms are constituted by what they are not. However, when grouping terms together, we treat them as entities that share some characteristic; we group them according to what they are. It is important to stress that this is not a contradiction. The differential mechanism conceptually precedes the mechanism of classification. Actually, the mechanism of classification is based on the mechanism of differentiation. The criterion of classification – whether this is a position in a system or a text – is the product of a differential process. Thus, properties depend on position.

Initially, Saussure conceptualized syntagms and paradigms as simple ‘groupings’, ‘*groupements*’, without any indication about an inner structure. However, when he refers to syntagms as ‘chains’ and connects them to the linearity of the signified of natural languages, a dimension is introduced. He conceives it as a temporal dimension; he speaks of the succession of signs in speech. It is just the representation of this temporal linearity by writing that appears as a spatial dimension. Not sharing Saussure’s certainty of the primacy of the spoken forms of natural languages over their written forms, we may generalize that the linearity of a syntagm means that it possesses one dimension, either temporal or spatial. Additionally, this dimension is directed. Either as a spoken utterance or as a piece of written text, the syntagm of a natural language has a determined direction. This necessarily implies that the terms constituting a syntagm appear in a particular order. Saussure does not analyze how its particular order affects a syntagm. His suspicion that semiotic systems other than natural languages, such as the visual semiotic systems, probably have signifieds of more dimensions implies that he could symmetrically conceive of multi-dimensional syntagms too. Paradigms, on the other hand, are compared in *CLG*

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to constellations around the term under consideration. It is explicitly stated that the terms of a paradigm are of ‘indeterminate order’²²⁶. Saussure clearly conceives of the paradigm as a group of ‘loose’ terms; in the model of constellation he uses the spatial dimensions in a figurative and not literal sense.

Saussure’s successors were very much interested in the inner organization of syntagms and paradigms. Many semioticians, notably Jakobson, visualized the opposition between the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations as intersecting axes, introducing direction in the syntagmatic axis. The model of axes has been proved very strong and was almost hypostasized by the collective imagination of semioticians; it has stealthily introduced a double linearity. Hjelmslev is not part of this tradition. He conceptualizes syntagms and paradigms as classes, and classes of classes. He analyses and classifies all the possible relations that can be established inside and between them. Of particular interest is the relation of ‘hypotaxis’, which subordinates an element or a structure to a superior element of structure. This relation introduces the conceptual possibility of exceeding linearity. Following him, and as predicted by Saussure, semiotic systems other than natural languages were studied, with syntagms possessing more than two spatial and/or temporal dimensions. Following him, as we have already seen, structural semantics studied extensively the structure of paradigms, from categories to codes. What is interesting, however, is that, unlike Jakobson, Hjelmslev conceived the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations as completely bereft of spatiality and temporality. He thought that space and time were part of their manifestation alone, which he considered contingent. Nevertheless, against his intentions, we have seen in sub-section 3.3. that elements of spatiality and temporality cannot but expand into the domain of semiotic form – both in the expression-plane

²²⁶ p.174

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and the content-plane. I think that a certain spatio-temporality is intrinsic to what is described as the structure of syntagms and paradigms; unlike the metaphoric use of 'axes' and 'constellations'.

Summarising the second part of the sub-section, semiotics are constituted and formed by different orders and kinds of relations, and they are structured in multiple levels. The fundamental principle of semiotic arbitrariness entails that the basis of all these relations is differentiability. Generative mechanisms of all the multiple levels of structure are the completely interdependent mechanisms of articulation and integration. General kinds of structural relations are, firstly, those that determine the co-existence or not of terms: *in praesentia* and *in absentia*; secondly, relations of dependence: interdependence, determination, constellation; thirdly, topological relations of order and subordination. The relations that characterise the meta-structure that share all semiotics are: firstly, signification, i.e. the relation between a plane of expression and a plane of content; secondly, manifestation of a form in substance; thirdly, manifestation of a system in processes; fourthly, as semiotic structures evolve, it is possible to study them synchronically and diachronically. Finally, there are the particular relations that characterise a semiotic and distinguish it from any other; there are also some particular relations that characterise only a specific instantiation of the semiotic, a text, and distinguish it from the other texts the same semiotic generates.

FUNDEMENTAL PRINCIPLE
differentiality
GENERATIVE MECHANISMS
articulation / integration
A. GENERAL KINDS OF STRUCTURAL RELATIONS
1. of co-existence: both-and, either-or
2. of dependence: interdependence, determination, constellation
3. of topology: order, hypotaxis-hyponymy etc
B. THE SEMIOTIC META-STRUCTURE
1. signification: content-expression
1a. degrees of semiotics (denotation, connotation, meta-semiosis)
2. manifestation (i): langue-parole
2a. levels of substance
3. manifestation (ii): system-process
4. in evolution → two points of view: synchrony-diachrony
C. PARTICULAR SEMIOTIC STRUCTURES
1. the structure of a particular semiotic
2. the structure of a particular semiotic instantiation, i.e. of a text

[Figure 3.7. – Semiotic relations]

3.7. The structuralist concept of structure

Having described quite extensively semiotic structures as perceived by structuralists, I will now attempt to deduce a definition of the structuralist concept of structure²²⁷. As I have implied earlier, the difficulty of this task lies not in the lack of definitions of the concept but rather in their redundancy, as well as in the hidden, unspoken premises of the existent definitions. In the structuralist discourse, several claims about structure are made; different uses of the term appear from theory to theory, as well as in the context of the same theory; several different structural objects are defined, of which the names sometimes become interchangeable; whereas structure is not only the central concept but also the main analytical tool. Additionally, ‘structure’

²²⁷ This sub-section is mainly an organisation of observations made during the analyses of the entire chapter 3 till now, as well as sub-sections 2.5 and 2.6 from chapter 2. It, therefore, relies to the same bibliographic sources as they do; which I won’t repeat here. It is, however, particularly indebted to Greimas and Courtés, *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, pp. 360-366; Louis Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena*; Alexandros Lagopoulos, ‘Static structuralism versus the dynamics of structure’; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*; and Hans Jørgen Ullsdall, ‘Outline of Glossematics’.

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communicates with other concepts, such as ‘system’ and ‘form’, with the danger of being confused with them²²⁸. Furthermore, as structuralist semioticians were aware of and in dialogue with the advances in abstract mathematics and mathematical logic, the structuralist definitions of the concept of structure are influenced in different degrees by mathematical definitions, but not identified to them²²⁹. Finally, the concept occasionally retains elements from its previous philosophical definitions, of building or organic origin; without sharing their metaphysics. The minimum common denominator of all these would define it as a mode of organization. Nevertheless, despite the complexity just described, structuralist semiotics – or rather semiotic structuralism – did unquestionably give a distinctively novel definition of structure, intimately connected with its radical re-definition of signification. This is the reason I needed to start from semiotic structures in order to deduce through abstraction the definition of the concept of structure; of which Lévi-Strauss says that has a structure too²³⁰. As the semiotic structure *par excellence* is *langue*, this is the obvious point of departure. We need, however, to compare it to the other uses of the term in structuralist semiotics in order not to fall in the trap of completely identifying the two concepts. Selecting elements from the analyses of the previous sub-sections, through a process of comparison and elimination, I attempt to clear up conceptual ambiguities. Particular stress is given on the spatial and temporal elements of the definitions, as it

²²⁸ Derrida, for example, cautions us not to confuse structures with ideas or forms or syntheses or systems, ‘Letter’, p.2

²²⁹ Concepts like ‘structure’, ‘system’, ‘set’, ‘function’, ‘category’, ‘linearity’, ‘complexity’, ‘isomorphism’, ‘isotopy’ etc are defined, sometimes in more ways than one, by different mathematical theories. There is no question that structuralist definitions communicate with the mathematical ones, particularly as classical structuralism subscribes to scientism, in its ambition to promote semiotics to the level of mathematical sciences. Structuralist semioticians had different degrees of knowledge and understanding of the mathematical concepts; Hjelmslev and Uldall were of the most mathematical-oriented among them, both in the sense of information and understanding. However, the differences between semiotic theories and the mathematical ones by which they are inspired are several. It is beyond the scope of my thesis to investigate the exact mathematical theoretical background of semiotic theories and their complicated inter-relations to it. I am using some mathematical concepts and terms, adapted to my object of study, when necessary for its clarification, as semioticians have done.

²³⁰ *Social Anthropology*, p.278

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is shown that structure is intimately connected with a kind of spatiality and temporality.

As Lagopoulos²³¹ observes, ‘structure’ may denote either an organization between existing elements or an organization by itself. In structuralist semiotics, it is the later, completely relational, sense of the concept that is used. The reason lies with the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness and the differentiability principle it entails. It is rooted, however, in a more general epistemological position, as it is explained by the founders of Glossematics. Uldall²³² argues that we are wrongly accustomed to think under the Aristotelian trichotomy of ‘things’, that have ‘properties’ and engage in ‘activities’. Modern science has shown this to be an illusion. It has first ‘obliterated the boundary between property and activity’ and then questioned ‘existence as divorced from property-activity’. The original three aspects are thus reduced to one, and this one is conceived in terms of functions; where ‘function’²³³ is meant in the sense of ‘relation’. Uniting existence, property and activity, ‘function’ in this context amalgamates different senses of ‘relation’, which include topology, operation and logical dependency. Therefore, as Hjelmslev²³⁴ puts it, the totality of knowledge does not consist of things but of relationships. Objects are ‘nothing but intersections of bundles of ... dependencies’. An entity is defined by the way it functions, i.e. its dependencies with other entities and the role it fulfills, the ‘place’ it assumes. The fact that semiotics is concerned with structure should not confuse us, he says. Structure is not an object but a ‘functional net’; its functions are defined by its functions. Whether all structuralist semioticians explicitly subscribe to

²³¹ ‘Static structuralism versus the dynamics of structure’, p.3

²³² ‘Outline of Glossematics’, pp.8-9, 37

²³³ According to one of its mathematical definitions, ‘function’ it is a particular kind of ‘map’ between two sets: a many-to-one but not one-to-many map. In Glossematics the term actually corresponds more closely to the general concept of ‘map’. The technical sense of the term ‘relation’ in Glossematics denotes particularly the syntagmatic function, whereas the paradigmatic function is called ‘co-relation’.

²³⁴ *Prol*, pp. 14, 21, 51 and *Lang*, p. 8. Also see Anne Hénault, *Histoire de la sémiotique*, p.60

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this general epistemological position or not, they certainly agree to it with regards to the semiotic domain. The primacy of relation, intrinsically connected to the de-essentialisation of signification, entails a completely topological conception of the semiotic.

An important characteristic of this functional net is that it *cannot* be reduced to binary oppositions, even if it is composed of binary oppositions. This was, for example, the innovation that Claude Lévi-Strauss²³⁵ brought to anthropology, opposing his predecessor in the field, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown. Radcliffe-Brown was the first to introduce some form of structuralism in anthropology but his kinship structures are eventually equated with dyadic relations between individuals. Lévi-Strauss shows that it is impossible to understand the kinship relations if you don't take into account also some relations between the relations, which make the system irreducible to binary relations. This happens because, as Hjelmslev observes, this system is hierarchical. And this makes structures different from mere intelligible concepts. They contain some form of spatiality. In this spatiality, as we shall see, is included a form of temporality, where time is considered as a kind of space²³⁶.

Therefore, the two definitional characteristics of structuralist structure are its being relational and topological. These introduce the concept into wider philosophical and scientific debates. On the one hand, if structure is considered as completely relational, its definition becomes interwoven with a typology of relations. The typology of *logical* relations has been historically the object of philosophical logic and more recently of mathematical logic. On the other, the spatio-temporal aspect of

²³⁵ 'Social Structure' in *Social Anthropology*, see particularly pp. 304-305

²³⁶ In Modern Theoretical Physics, there is a crucial controversy over whether time is a dimension or a parameter. The former position underlies the theory of General Relativity, whereas the latter the Quantum theory. The two theories, each explaining successfully but partially the world, are incompatible to each other. The solution of the problem of the time is one of the central objectives of the several theories that try, unsuccessfully till now, to combine the two foundational theories of Modern Physics. Structuralist semiotics generally subscribes to a conception of time as dimension.

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structure situates it in the wider context of philosophical and scientific debates about space and time. I will now analyze the classification of semiotic relations, as construed in the previous sub-section²³⁷, in order to deduce the characteristics of the structuralist notion of structure. In the process, I will deal with several related issues and necessary clarifications.

To start with, the principle of differentiability, which entails the relational nature of structure, is in a sense pre-structural. Whereas structures have dimensionality, this first principle, by being defined completely negatively, is based on a logic of excluded middle. This at least is the classical interpretation of it, as derived from the famous passages in *CLG*. The mechanisms of articulation and integration are the operation(s) that generate/construct the topological space of structures; they are the bridge between differentiability and structure. They also may be conceived as structural, in the sense of structural law.

The relations that I classified as ‘general kinds of structural relations’ (A) correspond to the general concept of structure before being specialized as semiotic; which is exactly what we seek to define in this sub-section. Firstly (1), there is the distinction between *in praesentia* and *in absentia* relations. Hjelmslev²³⁸, calls them the ‘both-and’ function and the ‘either-or’ function; and sees them as corresponding to the logical operations of ‘conjunction’ and ‘disjunction’, as well as to ‘co-existence’ and ‘alteration’, respectively. The former correspondence is logical, the latter topological. Secondly (2), there are three kinds of dependences. Hjelmslev²³⁹ calls them: interdependence, determination, and constellation. They correspond to mutual implication, one-way implication and the lack of causal relation, respectively.

²³⁷ See *Figure 3.7*.

²³⁸ *Prol*, p.22

²³⁹ *ibid*, pp.21-22

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Interdependence and determination are ‘cohesions’; they indicate the existence of some causal relation between the terms. Interdependence and constellation are ‘reciprocities’; unlike determination, they lack orientation. Thirdly (3), I have classified together all the relations that indicate the topological nature of structure, although they were never considered as a group and I have collected them from different passages. Such relations are hypotaxis-hyponymy, order, transformation etc. The fact that relations between relations make impossible the reduction of structure to an order of binary opposition, as Lévi-Strauss claims, introduces at least a second dimension. Hierarchical relations of sub-ordination, as Hjelmslev describes them, again indicate a spatiality; possibly also orientation. Order implies orientation and temporality-as-spatial-dimension. Evolution is an oriented transformation. Transformation is intrinsically connected to temporality. Considering that time is perceived as a spatial dimension, transformation is construed as another kind of combination. To the same consequence leads the fact that relation and process are reduced to one. Let us notice that in this context structure-transformation and structure-movement become indistinguishable. One observes that the first two kinds of structural relations (1,2) can correspond to logical, non-spatial operations. The third kind (3) belongs to, or rather constitutes, a topological space. Against the mainstream conception of logic, the question has been addressed philosophically whether some kind of topology underlies logic; and the notion of structure may have a role to play in this debate. However, irrespective of whether logic implies topology by itself or not, the structuralist concept of structure is the indistinguishable connection of the two.

Then there are the relations that characterise *semiotic* structures; all semiotic structures (B). From their examination, we can advance further our understanding of what structure in general is. Immediately one observes that the term ‘structure’

appears in more than one position: all the relations under consideration constitute the semiotic (meta-) structure; then, structure is related to ‘form’ as opposed to ‘substance’; then, it is related to ‘system’ as opposed to ‘process’; and, finally, it has an epistemological relation with its synchronic point of view. Firstly (1), there is the relation of signification, an interdependence between a content-plane and an expression-plane; which we have recognised as the definitional relation of the semiotic. Let us recall the completely de-essentialised and non-metaphysical definition of the two planes. Each plane is a structure, though not yet semiotic, and the function relating them constitutes a structure too. Such a structure is ‘a semiotic’ (noun). A semiotic that has another semiotic as one of its planes is a higher degree semiotic (1a); which adds another dimension to its structure. Then, there are two relations of determination, ‘manifestations’ as Hjelmslev also calls them: (2) between form and substance; and (3) between *langue* and *parole*. In each case, structure is sided with the former term, which ‘determines’ the latter. As regards the first distinction (2), structure is formal, as opposed to being sensible or material or essential. It is a consequence of the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness, which entails both the relational and the arbitrary nature of the semiotic. Thus, in this context, structure is not a property of the things as they are. When examining the concept of substance, we have seen how it is not devoid of formal elements, in different ways and degrees. Considering that ‘substance’ is not ‘matter’ but a product of the semiotic game, it is not devoid of structure too; therefore, we have the levels of substance (2a). Completely non-semiotic is the incognisable ‘purport/matter’. To make a claim about its having a structure or not would enter the realm of metaphysics. As regards the second distinction (3), following the matrix of the ‘*langue / parole*’ opposition, structure tends to be aligned with the system rather than the process.

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There is no question that the concepts of structure and system are intimately connected. We have seen, however, that the concept of ‘function’ includes processual relations; we should actually consider them systematic too. We have also seen that both the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic relations are structural. I think that, in this case, the significant difference between *langue* and *parole* is the one between generative structure and generated instantiation. Finally, considering that semiotics are dynamic structures, there are two points of view through which to approach them (4): the synchronic and the diachronic. Strangely, it seems that the concept of structure is more closely connected with the former point of view. However, as the distinction concerns the ways we study structure and not what structure intrinsically or objectively is, the intimacy between structure and synchrony is of an epistemological nature too. It is the synchronic point of view that has allowed us to perceive structure as structure; this does not make structure less structural in its evolution.

The last kind of semiotic relations are those that are constituted by particular semiotic structures (C). It is the way in which a semiotic (1), i.e. a *langue*, articulates its content-plane, its expression-plane and their inter-relation; which includes its laws of combination and evolution. This structure is specific to it and separates it from all others. This, importantly, entails that each semiotic proposes its own way to perceive the world, which is the ultimate consequence of the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness. As one semiotic generates more than one texts, there is a final kind of structure (2): the particular structure that organises a single text and distinguishes it from any other; this is often termed ‘surface-structure’. The text is the only observable semiotic entity-fact.

In the previous classification, the relations described first are ‘deeper’ and there is a gradual decrease of ‘depth’: differentiability, articulation-integration, general structural relations (A), the semiotic meta-structure (B), *langue* (C1), surface structures (C2). No metaphysical connotations are intentionally placed upon the notion of ‘depth’ by the structuralists. ‘Depth vs. surface’ is a relative distinction. The relation constituting the distinction is one of generation-manifestation: the ‘deeper’ level generates the ‘less deep’ level and is manifested by it. This ‘generation’ includes both a relation between type and token, and a relation between cause and effect. In a sense, all the ‘deeper’ levels are conditions of possibility of every ‘less deep’ level. This is a structural law, a kind of structural causality, which – like all structural laws – is itself a structure. Here we detect two different meanings of ‘structure’: structure-object and structure-cause. They are not easily distinguishable, not only because of the conceptual amalgamation of object-property-activity, but also because the same entity may be perceived in both ways. Accordingly, in this technical register of French, there are two terms for the adjective ‘structural’: ‘*structurel*’ and ‘*structural*’²⁴⁰. The former is a description of the relations constituting a structure; the latter refers to its ability to generate other, structured, entities. For the same reasons, ‘structure’ is both the entity under description and its property of being structured. Sometimes, these two senses are referred to as ‘*a* structure’ and ‘structureness’ or ‘structurality’, respectively. We can also add the process of giving structure: ‘structuration’; which also denotes the procedure of constructing a structural model for a phenomenon. We have thus gathered a multiplicity of senses for ‘structure’: structure-object, structure-law, structure-cause, structureness, structurality,

²⁴⁰ ‘A relation is ‘*structurelle*’ when we consider it in its role as determining a given organisation; the same relation is ‘*structurale*’ when we consider it as susceptible to be realised in several different and equally determining ways in several organisations’, Jean-Marie Auzias, *Clefs pour le structuralisme*, p.15

structuration; but we should remember that, strictly speaking, we cannot distinguish between them in a structuralist context.

We have just seen how the relation of ‘generation’ produces a structure of relative ‘depths’. Structures of different degree of ‘depth’ are not just different *kinds* of structure; they are of a different *order*. The conceptual relation involves dependence of the ‘less deep’ levels to the ‘deeper’ ones. However, there are crucial issues, regarding cases where ‘less deep’ levels seem to affect the ‘deeper’ ones. They can be grouped under two problematics: the way that structure may invade the pre-structural levels; and the way the semiotic may invade pre-semiotic levels. In the first problematic is included the question as to whether formal logic is already structural. In the second problematic are included questions as to whether logic is a semiotic and whether the semiotic meta-structure is a semiotic too, both of which are connected to the possibility of the existence of universal meta-structures and, ultimately, of objective knowledge. To clarify matters concerning the second problematic, as it proves to be relevant to Derrida’s critique and the epistemological investigations of my thesis, let us analyze further the ‘less deep’ orders of structure. Semiotic structures have two characteristics that the ‘deeper’ levels don’t share: an intrinsic internal ambiguity and an arbitrary connection to the non-semiotic world. On the one hand, unlike the ‘deep’ level of the principle of differentiability where a non-middle-term logic rules, in the semiotic level ambiguity is not only possible but structurally necessary; it is implicated by the necessary non-isomorphism between the content- and expression-planes. Disambiguation, which is always possible according to classical structuralism, happens – when desired – in *parole*, where a particular instantiation of a semiotic is placed in a context. On the other hand, the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness entails a kind of epistemological ‘disconnection’

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from the non-semiotic world. Each semiotic community ‘structures-structurates’ the world through its semiotic systems, in a way that does not depend on any property of the world itself. Therefore, two completely strange between them semiotic systems construct two completely different views of the world; and whereas disambiguation inside each discourse is considered possible, the translation between them becomes problematic. Even if one accepts the ontological existence of a unique objective reality, as classical structuralists do, it is impossible to know whether two entities belonging to mutually exclusive semiotic systems refer to the same entity in the non-semiotic world. This causes a serious problem with regards the possibility of universal claims. If we can’t access any objectivity, then every meta-structure which we think has universal application – such as logic and the semiotic function – is necessarily limited by our semiotic construction of the world. As Hjelmslev reminds us, science is a semiotic too²⁴¹.

Another inference from our review of the classification of semiotic relations is a confirmation that indeed structure is not reducible to binary oppositions; despite the underlying principle of differentiability. Each order of structure is irreducibly multi-dimensional, whereas the different orders of structure cannot be reduced to each other either. This is the reason why, as Lévi-Strauss and other structuralists have repeatedly stressed, structure is more than the sum of its elements. Structure is intrinsically connected with spatiality and temporality. The different orders of structure correspond to different orders of spatiality and temporality. There is again an escalation from the ‘deeper’ to ‘less deep structures’: from weaker to stronger topologies, to geometry, to geographic place and historical time. I will try now to clarify two ambiguities regarding semiotic spatiality and temporality. Firstly, let us see some structural

²⁴¹ He considers it, however, semiotic ‘of a different order’; but he doesn’t expand further on the subject, *Essais*, p.58

temporalities that we have met in our analysis. There is the temporality of an entire semiotic which is implied by the possibility of its evolution; e.g. the English language and church-architecture evolve through time. Then, there is the temporality that may be embedded in the form of a semiotic; this is the case, for example, with natural languages, music and cinema. Then, there is the temporality of a specific text. This includes different kinds of temporalities; in the syntactic and the semantic level, as thematic, as connotation, as referent²⁴². Then, a text, as observable fact, is perceived in a duration of time and is situated in a specific historical moment.

Secondly, in our analysis, we have met two different couples of ‘presence’ and ‘absence’, ‘co-existence’ or not; which may seem confused and contradictory with each other. On the one hand, we have synchrony and diachrony; the first is the point of view of structural relations as co-existing and the second as evolving in time. On the other, we have the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations, defined as *in praesentia* and *in absentia*, as co-existing and alternating, respectively. However, *langue* as object of structuralist semiotic study is related to ‘synchrony’ from the first couple and ‘paradigm’ from the second, i.e. to co-existence and absence simultaneously. The notions of presence, absence and co-existence depend all on position in space and time. Basically, two entities co-exist if they are present in the same space – but not at the same spatial point! – at the same point in time; the most general definition would be existence at the same temporal point. We should probably notice here that having defined time as another spatial dimension affects this definition. Therefore, alternation can also be construed as a kind of co-existence on the temporal dimension; i.e. existence at the same spatial point. Disambiguation of the

²⁴² See Antoinetta Angelidi, ‘Cinematographic Time’, 2008; and Rea Walldén, ‘The built mirror: between architecture and cinema’, in *Megacities: Από την πραγματική στη φανταστική πόλη*, 2000, pp. 39-40.

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above-mentioned apparent paradox is based on these observations. Synchrony and diachrony refer to points of view on the entire semiotic. Synchrony, as the term implies, is co-existence at the same temporal point, or rather the same relatively short duration. As such, it allows us to better observe the distribution of the elements in the rest of the semiotic's dimensions. Conversely, the presence and absence of the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relation refer to the text. The syntagmatically related terms co-exist in this segment of space and time that the text defines²⁴³; whereas the paradigmatically related terms co-exist in the space-time of the *langue* but not of the text. Additionally, if a text manifests a semiotic that includes the dimension of time in its form, then its syntagms develop in time; thus, strictly speaking, they don't co-exist. However, for this definition, we consider as the temporal point of reference the entire duration of the text.

Structural semiotics keeps the question of the ontological status of structure suspended; it 'puts it in parentheses' and uses the concept operationally²⁴⁴. The operational use, however, cannot really be devoid of ontological implications, especially not when accompanied by a multiplicity of definitional and programmatic claims. Let us see, then, what we can deduce regarding the ontological status of structure from its use and multiple definitions. To start with, it must certainly be of a different order than the phenomena. Collecting material from several different structuralist definitions, we find that structure is conceptually 'deeper' than the phenomena, relatively more stable than they are, unifying them, abstracting from them, generating them. We have analysed above how the concept of structure includes the function of 'generating' less 'deep' entities than itself; and that this function

²⁴³ Of course, they also co-exist in the space-time of the *langue*, as they are produced at a specific moment of the structure's evolution.

²⁴⁴ Greimas and Courtés, *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, p.361

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combines a relation of causality with subsumption under a type. Structure as an abstraction comes against Saussure's claim that *langue* is not abstract but concrete²⁴⁵. However, as Tullio de Mauro²⁴⁶ explains, the cause of this denial resides with Saussure's 'Kantian, idealist, positivist' epistemological background, for which an 'abstraction' is devoid of 'the force of the fact'. Structure is an abstraction that 'operates effectively in a "concrete" way'; a sense which the concept of 'abstraction' takes in the context of the work of philosophers such as C. S. Peirce, E. Cassirer, R. Carnap. In any case it is clear in *CLG* that *langue* exists 'in the mind'. Hjelmslev empties it even more from sensible elements by his form-substance division; the schema is purely formal. Even the textual process, however, is for him in a sense 'virtual'²⁴⁷, potential, a type of which the token alone is the object of our perception. So, we can safely claim that the structuralists' structure is not an entity immediately perceivable by the senses. There is every indication that it belongs to the intelligible realm. Nevertheless, it doesn't fit the traditional philosophic definition of the intelligible either, because it includes elements of spatiality and temporality. It is a form of thought which is beyond the senses and yet cannot be fully conceptualised.

Considering that structures are not immediately accessible, the belief in their underlying the observable entities-processes is strictly speaking metaphysic, as Hjelmslev observes. This is the reason that structuralist semioticians suspend any research on the issue, as they consider themselves scientists and not philosophers. The philosophical question would be where the *locus* of existence of structure is. In all structuralist semiotic literature, starting from the *CLG*, it is clearly stated that the *semiotic* structure is subject-constituted, but not in an act of will or even

²⁴⁵ *CLG*, p. 32

²⁴⁶ *ibid*, editorial note 70, pp. 425-427

²⁴⁷ *Prol*, p.24

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consciousness. We investigated its social subjectivity and context-relative objectivity earlier in this chapter. The question of structure in general takes us a step further: from (social) signification to (human) perception. The question would be whether structure is a property of the object or of the subject perceiving it. To clarify: On the one hand, we have to distinguish between the property of being structured in general and having a particular structure. On the other, we can distinguish as possible *loci* of structure: (i) the semiotic community, or (ii) the human constitution, or (iii) the world as existing independently from any subject – the existence of which no classical semiotician ever doubts. The textbook structuralist interpretation attributes the constitution/recognition of particular structures to semiotic communities; and the ability to perceive the world as being structured to the human constitution in general; whereas the world as subject-independent is referred to as ‘undifferentiated continuum’. However, let me articulate a few problems inherent to this position. Considering that knowledge is a semiotically constituted structure and thus depends on our society, how do we know that all humans perceive the world as structured? Inversely, it seems that particular structures – apart from the general property of being structured – are shared by all humans; such as the semiotic meta-structure. Then, considering that we constitute the world by our semiotic structures and perceptual abilities; how do we know anything about it, including its being an ‘undifferentiated continuum’? And, finally, why do we perceive-understand the world through structures, and by using them are able to survive better in it, if they don’t correspond in anyway to its reality? Eco observes that, as long as structures succeed in explaining many phenomena,

[o]ne is entitled to suspect [that] they may well reproduce some ‘natural’ order or reflect some ‘universal’ functioning of the human mind²⁴⁸

²⁴⁸ *A Theory of Semiotics*, pp.46-47

However, we should not jump to the conclusion that we have ‘grasped the format of the world’. Eco terms this fallacious assumption ‘ontological structuralism’. No structuralist semiotician subscribes to this position, as it clearly contradicts the central axiom of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness. We should admit, nevertheless, that the practice of structuralist semiotics carries a performative belief in the existence of structures. Playing it safe, structuralist semioticians prefer to define structures as operational hypotheses. In any case, the structures with which they work are no more than models of the structures to which they refer, ‘isolating strategic levels’ from them. Of course, the models of structures are structures themselves; simplified ones.

I will now try to draw the distinction between ‘structure’ and some concepts that are particularly close to it. ‘Form’ as used in Hjelmslev’s stratification appears semantically very similar to ‘structure’. As both of them – and particularly ‘form’ – have many meanings, their inter-relationship is very complicated. The exceptional degree of ambiguity regarding the sense of the term ‘form’ is the result of its double Greek ancestry. ‘Form’ – from the Latin term ‘forma’ – translates two very different concepts of the ancient Greek philosophy: Plato’s ‘ἰδέα’ (idea) and Aristotle’s ‘μορφή’ (morphe); the former is closer to ‘concept’ and the latter to ‘shape’. A first fusion of the two concepts was already made by the Aristotelian readings of Platonic texts during late antiquity, such as those made by Plotinus. The turning-point definition of ‘form’ for modern philosophy was proposed by Kant; this is the immediate philosophical ancestry of the term as used by Hjelmslev. In the context of structural semiotics, ‘form’ and ‘structure’ share the property of being conceptually located somewhere between the sensible and the intelligible realm. However, whereas Hjelmslev consciously and clearly uses the term ‘form’ in the Kantian sense, many of

his colleagues keep resonances from its Aristotelian ancestry. In most contexts, ‘form’ tends to imply a visual connotation, while ‘structure’ a kind of organisation; which are not mutually exclusive. In visual arts, for example, the opposition ‘form vs. structure’ is analogous to ‘outer shape vs. inner organisation’; however, as opposed to ‘matter’ or ‘content’, ‘form’ includes structural organisation. In every-day use, including structural semiotic jargon when not of the Hjelmslevian persuasion, ‘form’ is opposed to ‘content’. However, this is precisely what structure is *not*, i.e. opposed to the content. Structure ‘is content itself’, as Lévi-Strauss²⁴⁹ famously claims. Structure incorporates form and content in an insoluble connection; this is one of the structuralist axioms. It is Hjelmslev’s introduction of ‘content-form’ and ‘expression-form’, which between them constitute the semiotic structure, that allowed ‘form’ to gain a sense similar to ‘structure’.

We have seen that ‘semiotic system’ is often used as a synonym of ‘semiotic structure’; after all, what became the structuralist concept of ‘structure’ was born as ‘system’ in *CLG*. Synthesising from its definitions in structuralist semiotic writings, we can say that system is: a stock of elements and rules governing their relations, which is a whole by itself; this, more or less, is the mathematical definition of system too. Firstly, similarly to ‘structure’, ‘system’ may be either the collection of pre-existing entities or of entities composed by their relationships; we should obviously choose the *relational* definition. Secondly, a system is not necessarily non-reducible to the sum of its components, as structure is; a system with this additional property is called *non-linear*. Thirdly, ‘system’ is often opposed to ‘process’, as we have already seen; a system without the implication of static-ness is *dynamic*. Fourthly, a system is an ‘integrated whole’, which means that the relationships the system has with its

²⁴⁹ ‘Structure and Form: Reflections on the Work of Vladimir Propp’ (1960) as cited by Ronald Schleifer in *A.J. Greimas and the Nature of Meaning*, pp.12-13

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members are different to those that it has with non-members and the relationships a member has with another member are different to those it has with a non-member. A system has a border, it has an inside and an outside; this is not necessarily so, I think, in the case of structure in general. I think that the restricted definition of structure as ‘a’ structure does fulfill this autonomy premise but other senses, such as ‘structurality’, less so. Of course, there needs to be some cohesiveness for structurality to exist; so in a very weak taking of the term, we could speak of ‘autonomy’. Conversely, despite their definitional autonomy, we have seen how difficult it is to distinguish one *langue* from another. In conclusion, we can say that a structure in the structuralist sense is a relational, dynamic, non-linear system. And we should also add to our general definition of structure the premise of relative autonomy.

In Chapter 2, we followed the history of the term ‘structure’ from its building-sense to its organic-sense to the more abstract definitions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Building and organism metaphors have often been used in philosophical texts, with the result that ‘structure’ for philosophical audiences may carry strong metaphysical connotations, completely irrelevant to the structuralist definition of the concept²⁵⁰. I can’t stress enough that structuralist structure is *not* related either to the metaphysics of foundation, particularly to notions of origin and essence, or to the metaphysics of organic unity with its implications of naturalness. Structuralist structure is relational and relative, social and subjective, arbitrary and de-essentialised.

²⁵⁰ Very interesting is Ernst A. Cassirer’s ‘Structuralism in Modern Linguistics’, in *Word*, vol. I, no II, August (1945), 99-120 (particularly p. 110), where its author addresses this issue, without altogether avoiding to fall in the trap himself. One observes that Cassirer, who is not a semiotician and certainly does not belong to structuralism as defined for the purposes of this thesis, is in many ways close to the positions of structural semiotics.

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Summarising the definitional characteristics we deduced in this sub-section, firstly (a), structuralist structure is relational-functional, where ‘function’ combines topological relation, operation and logical dependence; therefore, on the one hand, structure is completely de-essentialised and, on the other, it includes rules of composition and evolution. Secondly (b), structure is topological, i.e. incorporates elements of spatio-temporality; it is, therefore, non-reducible to binary relations. Thirdly (c), in structure, logic and topology are indistinguishable. Fourthly (d), structure is not accessible by our senses. Fifthly (e), structure is ‘generating’; a notion that includes generality and causality. Sixthly (f), ‘structure’ includes the senses of structure-object, structure-law, structure-cause, structuredness, structurality, structuration. Seventhly (g), structure has a degree of autonomy. Finally (h), in structuralism, the exact ontological status of structure is suspended.

a. relational-functional
b. topological → non-reducible spatio-temporality
c. logic and topology indistinguishable
d. not immediately perceivable by the senses
e. ‘generating’: generality + causality
f. structure-object, structure-law, structure-cause, structureness, structurality, structuration.
g. a degree of autonomy
h. ontological status: suspended

[Figure 3.8. – Structuralist structure: definition]

3.8. The general structure of the semiotic

Having given a definition of structure, we will now return to the question of what distinguishes a structure as *semiotic*; no longer in order to describe semiotic structures but in order to give a structural and structuralist definition of the concept of the ‘semiotic’, i.e. signification. This, obviously, corresponds to level B of our previous

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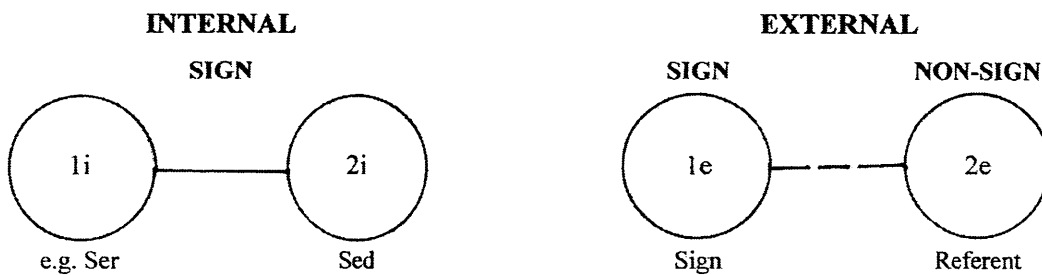
classification²⁵¹, i.e. the semiotic meta-structure. However, this time we will go backwards looking for a common nucleus throughout the history of definitions of the concept²⁵². To seek a common structure underlying different phenomena is the structural-ist movement *par excellence*; thus, the result of such an effort is unavoidably structural. Therefore, what we try to do is give a *structural* description of the definitional nucleus of the concept of the semiotic through history. We will then try to situate the *structuralist* definition in this tradition. We will seek what it shares with the other definitions of the semiotic and in what respects it radically differs, what kind of innovation it brings so as to constitute such a significant epistemological rupture. We should remember, however, that a retrospective organisation of concepts belonging to different theories is made according to categories exterior to them and necessarily entails some violence done to them. A significant instance of such violence is our classifying together here definitions of the ‘word’ and the ‘sign’. As Umberto Eco²⁵³ observes, it is the post-Stoic tradition that first unified the theory of language with the theory of signs. The exact relation between the two has never been fully established within the tradition of Western philosophy; and it is only the 20th century linguistic turn that put, with universal agreement, the word as the exemplary case of sign.

²⁵¹ See *Figure 3.7*.

²⁵² The historical information in this sub-section comes mostly from: Émile Benveniste, ‘Coup d’œil sur le développement de la linguistique’ (1963), in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, t.1, pp. 18-31 ; Umberto Eco, Thomas E. Hope, Holger van den Boom, ‘Sign’, entry in Thomas A. Sebeok et al., ed. *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, pp.936-947; Roman Jakobson, ‘A Glance at the Development of Semiotics’ (1974), in *Language in Literature*, pp.436-454; Tullio de Mauro, ‘La question des précurseurs’ in *CLG*, pp.380-389.

²⁵³ *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, (pp.937-940)

Throughout that tradition, every definition of the sign (or the word) is articulated on conceptual couples, such as – using a modern terminology²⁵⁴ – signifier/signified, form/content, expression/content, substance/form, sign/idea, thing/sign, sign/referent. We observe that the sign is defined either internally or externally as a relation between two elements. By ‘internal’ definition, I mean one which describes the parts that constitute a sign, such as signifier and signified. By ‘external’ definition, I mean a definition by opposition, as in the opposition between sign and referent.

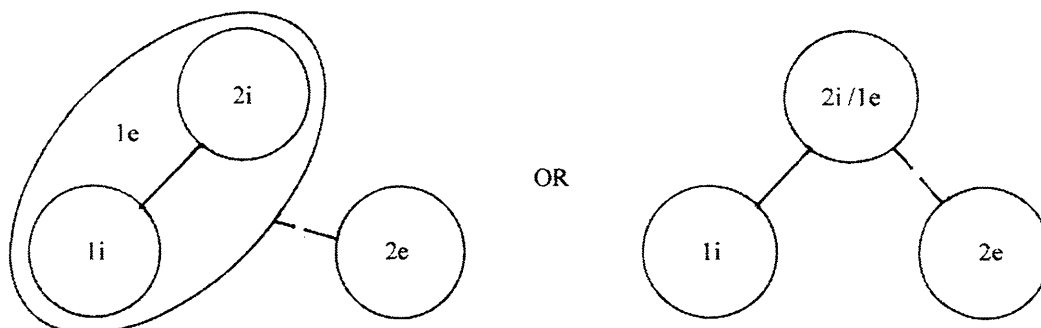


[Figure 3.9. – Definitions of the sign: DYADIC structures]

The two different kinds of definitions, internal and external, correspond more or less in analytical terms to an interest in intensional and extensional semantics, respectively; whereas in structuralist semiotic terms to the relations of meaning and reference. Obviously what is considered internal or external to the sign depends to its definition and its epistemological background. Sometimes, the sign has been identified with signifier alone; in that case, the signifier/signified relation becomes strictly speaking external. Then, semantic theories which concentrate on the relation with reality often use tripartite models in order to define the sign. These, however, can

²⁵⁴ I chose not to quote at all the historical terminology – such as Stoics’ ‘σημαίνον’ (*sēmainon*) and ‘σημαινόμενον’ (*sēmainómenon*) or Scholastics’ ‘signans’ and ‘signatum’. My point of view is not historiographic but structural.

be analysed as the superposition of the two bi-partite models of internal and external definition.



[Figure 3.10. – Definitions of the sign: TRIADIC structures and their DYADIC infra-structures]

The metaphysical properties and more specifically the difference between the elements that constitute the couples used both in internal and external definitions can be traced back to either the Platonic duality of noumena/phenomena, or the Aristotelian duality of form/matter, or combinations of both. The two elements that constitute each couple always differ in degree of sensuous salience and materiality. One element is always sensible or more sensible than the other; one element, not necessarily the same, is material or more material than the other. As we have mentioned earlier²⁵⁵, there has always been some kind of relation between the concept of sign and materiality, either viewed from an ontological or a phenomenal point of view, i.e. as connected either to matter or to the senses. To be more exact, what is necessary is the *difference* between its constitutive elements in materiality and sensibility; this is what makes the sign the particular kind of object that it is.

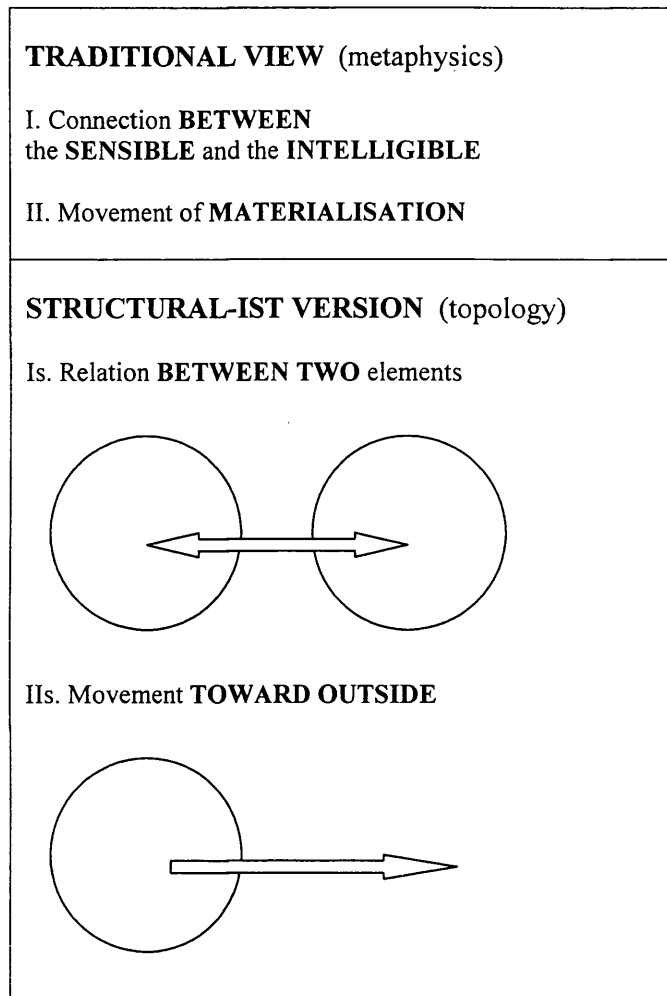
The next question concerns the sign's constitutional relation. One of the most traditional definitions would consider it a substitution, as it is expressed by the famous scholastic formula '*aliquid stat pro aliquo*' – 'something stands for something else'. It may also be considered as mediating between our mind and the world; or expression;

²⁵⁵ See sub-section 3.3

or representation. Eco²⁵⁶ divides the sign's definitions into two groups with respect to whether they consider this relation as one of causality or equivalence. He observes that the former choice traces its ancestry to theories of signs as indexes, proofs or symptoms in medical or juridical philosophy, the latter to linguistic theories about words. In any case, it is interesting to notice that the questions about the internal and the external definitional relation of the sign are analogous.

I think that all the different definitions – whether internal or external – of the semiotic in Western philosophical tradition share the co-existence of two characteristics, which can be claimed to constitute the conceptual nucleus of the concept. The semiotic always (I) forms a bridge between the intelligible and the sensible realm and (II) involves a movement of materialisation. If one puts these definitional characteristics in terms of topology, subtracting all metaphysical vocabulary, their structural expression would be: (Is) a relation between two elements and (IIs) a movement of externalisation.

²⁵⁶ *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, (pp. 939-940)



[Figure 3.11. – Semiotic: general structure]

Significant differences in semiotic epistemology relate to whether a theory considers signs as conventional or not. Thomas E. Hope²⁵⁷ classifies three possible senses that ‘conventionality’ may take in a semiotic and/or linguistic theory. Firstly, it may mean ‘produced by convention’, i.e. artificial as opposed to ‘natural’ signs. In this sense, an arrow of inference is a conventional sign, whereas smoke as a sign of fire is not. It is not entirely clear what this artificiality includes. As we have said, historically ‘natural’ languages were often considered ‘natural’ in this sense: as the naturally given to humans medium of expression-communication, opposed to artificial

²⁵⁷ *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Semiotics*, (pp. 942-943)

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codes. Moreover, obviously, smoke may be produced by humans, with or without a fire, with or without an intention to convey meaning. In modern semiotic terms, however, the first kind of conventionality is better re-phrased as ‘production with the intention to convey meaning’; which includes ‘natural’ languages and excludes an accidentally lit fire. Secondly, conventionality may mean ‘referring to an object by virtue of a convention’, i.e. non-motivated. The question here is whether the bond to the referent imposes some restrictions to the sign. In Peirce’s classification, ‘indexes’ and ‘icons’ are motivated as opposed to the completely conventional ‘symbols’. The discussion of whether even similarity and analogy are recognised through convention is still open. Thirdly, conventional may mean ‘interpretable on the grounds of a convention’, i.e. non-universal. Signs, being conventional in this latter sense, must be learned. Hope, along with every modern semiotician of whichever persuasion, considers that in the third sense conventionality is not a classificational criterion but a definitional characteristic of the signs. However, this has not been a given for the philosophical tradition. The belief in some natural link between names and things, known as Cratylism²⁵⁸, often makes its appearance in the philosophical tradition, particularly in the context of theology with regard to sacred, divine languages, whether they may be Hebrew or Greek or Latin or Arabic. We should also stress that the three conceptions of semiotic conventionality are neither equivalent nor related to each other in any necessary way. Furthermore, which signs are classified as examples of each is not a matter of universal agreement either.

Saussure and structuralist semiotics introduce a new kind of conventionality, radically different from the traditional conventionalist views from Aristotle to

²⁵⁸ Cratylus, a follower of Heraclitus, appears in Plato’s dialogue that bears his name, to support a non-conventional correspondence between words and things. He is opposed by Democritus.

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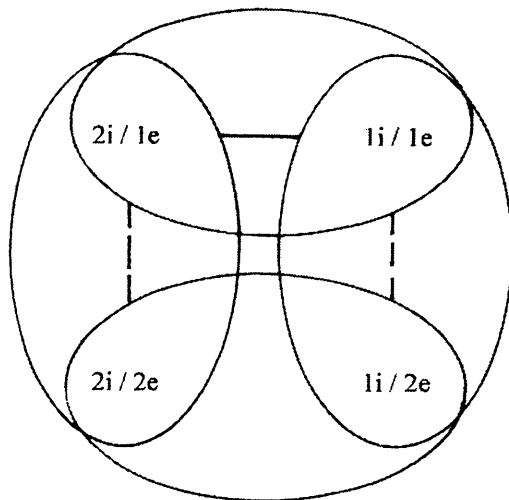
Whitney. As we have explained earlier²⁵⁹, the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness entails that it is not just the relation between words and things but the very categorisation of the world into ‘things’ which is conventional, socially constituted. As Tullio de Mauro²⁶⁰ observes, only Wittgenstein – forty years later than Saussure – had an equally clear vision of the radically social nature of the semiotic. This new kind of conventionality radically changes the notion of the sign. In Umberto Eco’s words: ‘the classical notion of “sign” dissolves itself into a highly complex network of changing relationships’²⁶¹.

An important difference of this new definition is that the entire sign belongs now to the non-sensible and non-material realm. Saussure explains clearly that both the signified and the signifier are of a ‘psychological’ nature and exist ‘in the mind’. Hjelmslev makes it even clearer. Turning the axis form-substance through a right angle relative to the axis content-expression, i.e. sub-dividing both form and expression into form and substance, he limits the semiotic in the realm of form alone. The semiotic retains its dyadic structure. Hjelmslev’s quadric stratification of the sign-function is again a superposition of the internal and external dyadic definitional couples of the sign. Furthermore, Hjelmslev’s stratification shows that the semiotic still has two anchorages to the material world; these, however, are now both external to the sign as such.

²⁵⁹ See sub-section 3.2.

²⁶⁰ *CLG*, p.XIII

²⁶¹ *A Theory of Semiotics*, p.49



[Figure 3.12. – Hjelmslev's definition of the sign-function:
its QUADRIC structure and DYADIC infra-structure]

Structural semiotics studies the internal relation of the semiotic alone, considering the external relations outside its scope, as belonging to epistemology. It clearly limits the question of meaning to the relation between signified and signifier, or – in Hjelmslev's terms – between content-form and expression-form. The result is that the structuralist definition of the semiotic converts it into 'a new order'²⁶² of entity. This means that (a) a sign is not a *physical* entity and (b) it is not a *fixed* entity either²⁶³. The order of the semiotic conceived as not belonging to the physical realm and yet distinguished from the intelligible is distantly analogous to Ernst Cassirer's notion of 'symbolic' order. The additional premise of its completely relational nature, introduces the particular structuralist conception of 'structural object', as described in the previous sub-section. The semiotic order becomes the *proprium* of humanity.

If we compare this new definition with the general structure of the semiotic as deduced earlier²⁶⁴, structuralist semiotics has minimised the metaphysical strength of

²⁶² 'un nouvel ordre de faits', Ferdinand de Saussure, *CLG*, p.33

²⁶³ Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p.49

²⁶⁴ Figure 3.11.

the definitional characteristics. In *CLG*, it is clear that Saussure considers the nature of the signified and the signifier to be ‘homogeneous’²⁶⁵. There is nothing innate making them metaphysically different. They are differentiated by their function alone. Hjelmslev defines the sign as a function between two planes, the plane of content and the plane of expression, which are related by reciprocal implication. The two planes do not differ metaphysically. The terms *content* and *expression* relinquish their metaphysical meaning, and come to denote the two absolutely symmetrical elements of a function. This neutrality becomes apparent by the fact that a whole sign-function can become the content or the expression plane for a new, second degree sign-function. Both are composed by *substance* and *form*, which are also relative and not absolute terms too. Structuralist semiotics attempts the emptying of metaphysical structures: *position* and *function* substitute for *essence*.

Let us see what is left from the general model of the semiotic. Firstly, both Saussure’s and Hjelmslev’s definitions of the semiotic²⁶⁶, like every other structuralist definition, fit the structural version of requirement (I), i.e. a relation between two elements; though now it is the relation itself which is primary and productive, as opposed to the elements that it relates. Having subtracted any metaphysical attributes, the bi-planar topology becomes crucial. The *at least* bi-planar structure actually becomes *the* definitional characteristic of the semiotic. Hjelmslev repeatedly insists that the two planes should not be isomorphic²⁶⁷; because in a relational definition of structure complete isomorphism means identity, which would reduce the two planes into one. The bi-planar structure makes structurally possible all the semiotic

²⁶⁵ p.32

²⁶⁶ ‘The connection between signified and signifier’ and ‘the specific form organized between two substances’.

²⁶⁷ See, for example, *Prol.*, p.73 and *Lang.*, p.104

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manipulations²⁶⁸ – such as poetry, irony and lying – the possibility of which is the *proprium* of semiosis. This structural possibility is revealed as the *proprium* of semiosis precisely through the clear demarcation between the relation of signification and the extra-semiotic relation of reference. Hans Jørgen Uldall, who clearly states that ‘with truth as such we are not concerned’, as ‘even the most whopping lie may be couched in the King’s English’²⁶⁹, provocatively claims that, from this point of view:

Truth is a peculiar style of the content to which a speaker may choose to restrict himself, just as he may choose to speak in Alexandrine verse, or to lead a moral life²⁷⁰.

What he means is that from an intra-semiotic point of view the truth of a proposition is not an issue because it does not affect its meaning. Moreover, this disconnection of meaning from reference is a structural necessity for the meaning to exist, as Umberto

Eco explains:

If something cannot be used to tell a lie, conversely it cannot be used to tell the truth: it cannot in fact be used ‘to tell’ at all.²⁷¹

*Every time there is possibility of lying, there is sign-function [...] Every time there is a lie there is signification. Every time there is signification there is the possibility of using it in order to lie. If this is true (and it is methodologically necessary to maintain that it is true) then semiotics has found a new threshold: between conditions of signification and conditions of truth*²⁷².

Another result of the double structure of the semiotic is that its elements ‘may at once be utilised and referred to’²⁷³, a property much exploited by Derrida’s writing technique.

Secondly, Saussure’s sign as a whole, being a completely ‘psychological’ entity, constitutes an ‘inside’ as opposed to the world: the inside of the social-subjective realm of semiosis, an inside which attempts to reach the extra-semiotic

²⁶⁸ Anne Hénault, *Histoire de la sémiotique*, p. 61

²⁶⁹ ‘Outline of Glossematics’, p.50

²⁷⁰ *ibid*

²⁷¹ *Theory of Semiotics*, p. 7

²⁷² *ibid*, pp. 58-59

²⁷³ Jakobson, and Greimas, as cited in Ronald Schleifer, *A.J. Greimas and the Nature of Meaning: Linguistics, Semiotics and Discourse Theory*, p. 2

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outside; see requirement (II). Hjelmslev's ever regressing notion of substance is also based on repeated relations of exteriority and interiority, where the 'inside' constitutes its relative 'outside' in a (vain) effort to reach the extra-semiotic 'outside'; which again is the structural version of requirement (II). Strictly speaking, in the structuralist definition, the structural movement toward the outside is limited to the relation between the semiotic and extra-semiotic; whereas the intra-semiotic relation is one of mutual dependence. Moreover, it must be stressed that the inside-outside relation between the semiotic and the extra-semiotic is not meant as a real-space relationship. Structuralists don't believe in the existence of a non-material realm in the full ontological sense. The semiotic is a kind of super-structure of the material world. Structuralists are, or at least mean to be, fervent materialists and very much against metaphysics. This complicates further the question of the ontological status of the semiotic. However, quite against their intentions, and as Derrida shows in great detail, the terms in their definitions keep traces from their previous metaphysical meanings. The stronger such trace is that of a sort of unintentional isomorphism between the content-expression and the form-substance relations; the result is that the exteriority relation creeps in the internal semiotic relation, so that the signifier often seems more external than the signified, the expression more external than the content.

Summarising, the de-essentialisation of signification leads to the primacy of relation and to a completely topological perception of the semiotic. Structuralism no longer accepts any *essential*, *metaphysical* properties of either the sensible/intelligible opposition or the matter/form opposition as pertaining to the semiotic. Its definitions of the sign need the *positions* of sensible and intelligible and matter and form in a functional structure. One may question, of course, whether it is ever possible to completely neutralise a metaphysical vocabulary. Whichever way one answers this

question, remains the fact that a particular dual structure still governs the definition of the semiotic; a dual structure with the characteristics we described above: (Is) a relation between two elements and (IIs) a (conceptual) movement of externalisation. We observe that the new structuralist definition is more or less the structural expression of the traditional view. Keeping what is topological from a definition previously expressed in a vocabulary of metaphysics, we end with the structuralist definition. The important difference is that the internal relation is defined as a mutual implication. The new kind of conventionality, as implicated by the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness, introduces the novel order of the semiotic-structural object. The structuralist conception of semiotic meta-structure²⁷⁴, which we analysed in previous sub-sections, is based on this radicalised definition.

We can conclude that the general structure of the semiotic in its structural expression, as shown in the lower part of Figure 3.11., applies to all the definitions of the sign, structuralist or not. It seems to point to the inherent connection of the concept of the sign with a representational theory of knowledge. In order to speak of signs, one enacts a distinction between two realms – the one is subjective, the other is ‘out there’ – even if the distinction is relative and purely epistemological, with no ontological import. The external relation of the sign is actually a sub-set of the relation between knowledge and reality. Consequently, the question of the relation of the sign to its referent is a sub-case of the question of epistemological realism. However, one observes that even the internal definitional relation is formed on the same structural matrix, of which it seems to retain elements even after its structuralist de-essentialisation. As we shall see in connection to Derrida’s deconstruction, this isomorphism may point to a difficulty of a clear-cut demarcation between the realms

²⁷⁴ Figure 3.7., level B.

of meaning and knowledge; in other words, even intensional semiotics – such as structuralist semiotics – may not be devoid of epistemological implications.

3.9. Structuralist epistemology

This sub-section attempts to outline structuralist epistemology. In structuralist semiotics, there is a close interconnection between the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness and the de-essentialisation of meaning, on the one hand, and scientism and de-mystification, on the other. The principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness and the de-essentialisation of meaning which it entails make possible the abstraction of metaphysics from semiotics; this leads to the de-mystification of the concept of meaning, in keeping with the scientific aspiration of structuralists. The two main innovations of structuralist semiotics is the introduction of the semiotic order and the structural object. These constitute a significant epistemological rupture. Nevertheless, structuralist semiotics also belongs firmly to the Kantian epistemological tradition, from which it inherits an *aporia*.

Structuralists, as participating to the spirit of Enlightenment and particularly to the more radical turn it took in the 20th century, admired the positive sciences and favored innovation. By founding the novel science of semiotics, as they meant it, they wished to give to the humanities the status of positive sciences. Structuralist semiotics did not wish to be a philosophy; which, as Jean-Marie Auzias²⁷⁵ observes, is itself a recognizable philosophic position, tantamount to putting into question all the previously unquestioned givens. The wish to avoid classification as philosophical theory and to gain the status of science, is one that structuralist semiotics shares with Marxism and psychoanalysis; this led to a devaluation of the term ‘philosophy’ for a

²⁷⁵ *Clefs du structuralisme*, p. 216

large part of the 20th century. Scientifism is more than an interest in the positive sciences; it is an emotional investment to what is considered as scientific, an admiration with aesthetic and moral resonances²⁷⁶. It is intrinsically connected with a critical stand, a demand for rigor and a concentration on method; it also entails a desire for de-mystification²⁷⁷.

Hjelmslev and Uldall's glossematics²⁷⁸ is probably the best example of structuralist semiotic scientifism. The purpose of glossematics is precisely the *scientific* definition and description of the semiotic. Its founders aspire to 'elevate' linguistics, and the humanities in general, to the status of science proper. This effort has two aspects: (a) the application of a specific method and (b) the abandonment of all metaphysical presuppositions, the latter being tied closely to the former. What differentiates the human from the natural sciences, according to Uldall²⁷⁹ is not the nature of their object, as our metaphysical prejudices have led us to believe, but their methodology. By changing their methods, therefore, the humanities could become more successful and gain more rigor and scientific warrant. They need to produce a method in order to distinguish 'what we know with certainty and what we do not know with certainty'²⁸⁰; and there is no reason to think that what we do not know now, we shall forever be unable to find out.

The method Hjelmslev and Uldall propose is an 'immanent algebra of language'²⁸¹, 'a non-quantitative science'²⁸². Glossematics is also termed 'theory'. By

²⁷⁶ Hjelmslev, for example, used to cite Henri Poincaré that science is an aspiration to beauty; in Hénault, *Histoire de la sémiotique*, p.76

²⁷⁷ Jonathan Culler, 'The Linguistic Basis of Structuralism' in *Structuralism: an introduction*, (p.29); François Dosse, *Histoire du structuralisme*, t.1, p.9; Anne Hénault, *Histoire de la sémiotique*, p.11

²⁷⁸ Glossematics is explicated in Hans Jørgen Uldall, 'Outline of Glossematics: A study in the methodology of the Humanities with special reference to linguistics, Part I: general Theory' ['Outline']; and in Louis Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language [Prol]*

²⁷⁹ 'Outline', p.6

²⁸⁰ Hjelmslev, *Lang.*, p.x

²⁸¹ *Prol*, p. 51

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theory is meant a method leading to a self-consistent and exhaustive description of an object, which is 'usually called knowledge or comprehension'²⁸³. Two factors are important: (a) the *arbitrariness* of a theory, i.e. the fact that it is independent of any experience and includes no existence postulate; and (b) its *appropriateness*, that it introduces certain premises which fulfill the condition of application to certain experimental data²⁸⁴. By virtue of its arbitrariness a theory is arealistic; by virtue of its appropriateness it is realistic. Definitions in glossematics are strictly formal, which means that they are only 'anchoring' their objects 'in respect to other objects similarly defined or premised as basic'²⁸⁵. They are not real, anchoring their objects to the world. The main principles of a scientific description are *simplicity*, *objectivity*, *self-consistency* and *exhaustiveness*. Uldall claims that 'from the principle of simplicity can be derived all the other scientific ideals'²⁸⁶. This is a claim that gains even more interest if combined with the comment, a few lines earlier, that 'the appeal of simplicity is probably, in the last resort, aesthetic'. One is tempted to infer that the principles of science have an aesthetic foundation; this claim, so uncharacteristic of structuralism, is unfortunately not further elaborated. Furthermore, and deriving again from the principle of simplicity, 'the unknown elements of the theory [...] must be kept down to a minimum'²⁸⁷, whereas implicit premises must be avoided as much as possible²⁸⁸. These last two rules lead to the condemnation of metaphysics. It is obvious that in this context 'metaphysics' has a negative resonance.

The new definition of the semiotic fulfils the counter-metaphysical demand, as it no longer needs any recourse to essences and metaphysical properties. They are all

²⁸² 'Outline', p.18

²⁸³ *Prol*, p.9

²⁸⁴ *ibid*, p.8

²⁸⁵ *ibid*, p.12

²⁸⁶ 'Outline', p.20

²⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p.23

²⁸⁸ *Prol*, p.12

replaced by topological relations, structures. The principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness, with its two facets of radical arbitrariness and differentiability, is unquestionably the source of structuralism in all respects.

As we have seen when investigating terminologies²⁸⁹, the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness has affected several concepts, emptying them of their metaphysical import. First among them is the concept of meaning. Its new definition is radically relational and insolubly double-faced. The completely functional-relational definition subverted the notion of signs pointing to autonomous pre-existing essences. In structuralist contexts, the term ‘signification’²⁹⁰ substitutes for ‘meaning’ (*sens*), which – when still used – mostly refers to the pre-articulated continuum of content. Signification designates the entirety of the semiotic phenomenon, both as doing-process and as state. ‘Content’ relinquishes its ontological weight, as it becomes the name of one of the functives of the semiotic function. It is completely symmetrical to the other functive, to the point of becoming interchangeable with it. As we have said in the previous sub-section, content/signified ceases to have a relation of interiority as opposed to expression/signifier, despite the lingering connotations. This is a significant difference from previous conceptions of the sign. Accordingly, meaning can no longer be conceptualised as expression or representation in the traditional way. The metaphysical definition of expression would be precisely the putting into material form of pre-existent ideas of the mind. This is no longer a valid description as the ‘ideas’ are not considered as existing prior to their

²⁸⁹ See sub-section 2.6

²⁹⁰ See Greimas and Courtés, *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, p. 352. In English language the use of the term ‘meaning’ is still common even in structuralist contexts. I will keep using it in my thesis, having made clear that structuralist semiotics has completely de-essentialised it.

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semiotic articulation²⁹¹. Similarly, representation traditionally would be the redoubling of pre-existing entities from the realm of ideas or of things, depending on the philosophical theory, to the inside our minds and then outside again in a material form. This metaphysical geography is flattened by structuralist semiotics. Considering that we perceive the world through our semiotic articulations, we have no access to any completely pre-semiotic givens, which we would then represent by our thoughts and signs. As we will see, a certain redoubling still underlies structuralist semiotic theory; however, it is completely emptied of any notion of mirroring or similarity. The opposition ‘form vs. substance’ is also relativised, to a lesser extent though than the ‘content vs. expression’ and ‘content vs. form’ oppositions. The term ‘substance’ is used in Hjelmslev’s stratification alleviated from its metaphysical import. It is a ‘formed’, even ‘formal’, kind of substance, as opposed to the unreachable ‘purport-matter’. Whereas the content-expression relation is conceived as an equivalence, the ‘form-substance’ relation is conceived as a determination; which means that whereas content and expression don’t differ in any essential way, form and substance do differ, even if only in relative degree. The fact, however, that form determines substance, and not the other way round, makes it clear that semiotic substance is disconnected from its traditional metaphysical past. Actually, the predominance of form in structuralism has led to accusations of formalism. Structuralists are particularly sensitive about this accusation²⁹². One must remember that in structuralist discourse the concept of structure has challenged the distinction between form and content; thus, when ‘form’ is studied, this does not entail a disregard for the content.

²⁹¹ See, for example: ‘La langue n’est plus l’expression d’une pensée qu’elle extériorise Elle *structure* la pensée’ (*Langue* is no longer the expression of a thought that it exteriorises. It *structures* thought.), Jean-Marie Auzias, *Clefs pour le structuralisme*, p.35

²⁹² See, for example, Michael Lane’s presentation of Lévi-Strauss in Introduction, in *Structuralism: A Reader*, p.31

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These conceptual changes affect the traditional definition of the subject as we perceive it in different ways. Firstly, as John Mepham²⁹³ observes, considering that the world we perceive is a product of its semiotic articulation, we are forced to reject the subject-object distinction as an epistemological given. Secondly, a structuralist semiotic analysis is not interested in the subjects unless as points in the communication circuit, for reasons both conceptual and methodological. Conceptually, meaning is not conceived as pre-existing in the 'interior' of a subject before its articulation; which articulation, even if taking place 'privately', is always immersed in society. Methodologically, the object of semiotic analysis is a signifying object or a signifying practice, in their property of being signifying; other possible parameters are simply objects of different analyses. Thirdly, in the case of Hjelmslev and his school of structuralist semiotics, subjects become insignificant even as points in the communication circuit, because the communication circuit is not part of the object of analysis either. In Hjelmslevian semiotics, the object of analysis is the semiotic given alone, the text. As Ronald Schleifer puts it with regard to Greimas:

his systematic or scientific metalanguage [...] attempts to articulate language without a subject. It attempts to effect [...] the 'objectification' of the text, that is, the elimination of all linguistic categories that depend (and indicate) the 'nonlinguistic situation of discourse' within the text²⁹⁴

Finally, the very nature of signifying structures exceeds the conscious will of subjects. As Robin Gandy explains²⁹⁵, we learn most of them without explicit instruction and we are able to apply them without being conscious of doing it. Lévi-Strauss has clarified in more than one case that the signifying structures which underlie the practices of a society are usually unconscious and don't coincide with the explicit norms and rules this society follows.

²⁹³ 'The Structuralist Sciences and Philosophy' in *Structuralism: An Introduction*, p. 125

²⁹⁴ A.J. Greimas and the Nature of Meaning, p.14

²⁹⁵ "Structure" in Mathematics', in *Structuralism: An Introduction*, p.153

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Consequently, it is clear that structuralist semiotics is not seeking the intention of a subject but the significance as embodied in the structure of a particular given text. However, the notion of intention remains as a pre-condition for the recognition of a text as text, i.e. as a semiotic entity. A structuralist semiotic analysis has as its object only cultural products. A rock as a physical entity would never be the object of semiotic analysis; it would gain semiotic interest only if it was part of a cultural practice, and therefore invested with signification – if it was used, for example, as a means of communication, or as a religious or art object, or even as a tool or weapon. Structuralists, unlike medieval theologians, do not attribute some meaning to the world by itself. This very un-metaphysical conception of intention, reduced to a human trace, carries a contradiction which is fully developed by the Derridian texts.

From the new definition of the semiotic, there arise three issues of particular meta-theoretical interest. Firstly, the de-essentialisation of meaning makes structures – semiotic structures – meaningful. As there is no longer a metaphysical differentiation between signified and signifier, meaning *is* form and form *is* meaning. This is a characteristic which had previously been contemplated only in relation to poetry and art. Structuralism makes it into general characteristic of the semiotic realm. Secondly, semiotic structures enact a bridge between the sensible and the intelligible, as well as between the formal and the factual²⁹⁶. Actually, each of the concepts ‘semiotic’ and ‘structure’, even without being combined, is in a position between the two poles of the traditional oppositions of ‘sensible vs. intelligible’ and ‘substance vs. form’. This cannot but remind to us the concept of Kant’s ‘schema’. Thirdly, there is a question of whether structuralism entails dualism in different levels. Semiotic structures are definitely not reducible to dyadic relations; that is the whole point of the

²⁹⁶ This observation is made by Ernst Cassirer and connected to a Kantian tradition in ‘Structuralism in Modern Linguistics’ in *Word*, vol. I, no II, August (1945), 99-120 (pp.103-104)

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concept of structure, as Lévi-Strauss made clear²⁹⁷. The question of dualism (or not), therefore, regards the elementary structures and infra-structures; of either the expression or the content plane. Anne Hénault records the life-long disagreement between the leading figures of structuralist semiotics on this subject; Hjelmslev accused Jakobson of

a mutilating binarisation, which privileged the disjunctive oppositions between two terms and excluded the participative oppositions²⁹⁸.

One question, therefore, is whether the elementary structure is dual; and another is whether this duality is a disjunctive opposition. What Hjelmslev, and Brøndal, meant by ‘participative’ oppositions, as opposed to the ‘disjunctive’ ones, are oppositions that are not fully analysable by formal logic. For example, in the couple ‘interesting vs. boring’, the term ‘interesting’, while contrary and mutually exclusive with ‘boring’, can also designate the entire category. An effort to disambiguate this particular complication has been to introduce an ‘interesting1’, for the contrary term to ‘boring’, and an ‘interesting2’, designating the entire category. It did not, however, manage to describe the way the couple functions. There is an asymmetry: to say of a book that ‘it is not interesting’ means that it is boring, but to say that ‘it is not boring’ doesn’t mean that it is interesting either; to ask whether a book is interesting allows both the possibilities of its being interesting and boring, to ask whether it is boring already implicates a negative disposition. There are cases of more complicated structures. There are also cases where the ‘simple’ difference between a non-marked and a marked term has immense philosophical implications, such as the case ‘man vs. woman’. Hjelmslev and Brøndal named this particular kind of logic ‘the sub-logic of language’. They investigated all possible structures of semiotic categories and

²⁹⁷ See sub-section 3.7.

²⁹⁸ Anne Hénault, *Histoire de la sémiotique*, p. 77

proposed a hexagonal ‘maximal category’²⁹⁹. This bears many resemblances to R.Blanché’s logical hexagon, with the exception that – unlike his model – their maximal category incorporates the notion of non-reducible semiotic ambiguity. Many efforts have been made to propose models that would fit the function of language into traditional logic schemas, most of which are applications or extensions of Aristotle’s logical square. Nevertheless, even semioticians who support the possibility of reducing the semiotic couples into ‘disjunctive’ ones, accept the existence of different kinds of relations between the terms of a couple. Jakobson, for example, subscribes to the distinction between ‘contradictory’ and ‘contrary’ oppositions; such as ‘black vs. non-black’ and ‘black vs. white’. Only the former opposition, i.e. contradiction, makes possible a digitalisation. The later opposition, i.e. the contrary relation, allows for the existence of a third term, and infinite others, which are neither the first nor the second. That is why Lévi-Strauss in his anthropological studies distinguishes the opposition ‘+/-’ from the opposition ‘+/0/-’.

Consequently, the question of binarism, for structuralism, does not concern the level of signification. However, our general intuition is that the mechanism of differentiability, at its purely relational minimum, does produce disjunctive, contradictory couples alone; i.e. the relation ‘a vs. non-a’. Therefore, an open question is *how* it is possible for this qualitative change to occur between the productive mechanism and the higher levels of structure. It is further connected to questions regarding the way this mechanism is inter-related to different levels of cognition; whether it affects the levels of logic, or human understanding and perception, or epistemology and metaphysics.

²⁹⁹ Ducrot and Schaeffer, *Nouveau dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, pp. 276-291; Greimas and Courtès, *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, pp.27-33.

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The first question would be what the mechanism of differentiability entails regarding logic. Here again, one should make a distinction between the semiotic level and an infra-structural level; or between logic as a sub-set and as a super-set of the semiotic realm. As we have seen, from a structuralist point of view, theoretically, logic is a kind of semiotic and, therefore, dependent on a particular semiotic community. Nevertheless, when investigating the meta-semiotic level and the infra-structures of the semiotic, logic is used as a tool, provisionally objective. On the one hand, at the semiotic level, it is quite clear that the rule of the excluded middle does not hold. As a matter of fact, it should not hold by definition, as a result of the non-isomorphism of the two planes that constitute a semiotic. The exact signification of an element is decided by its situation in context. Furthermore, the notion of ‘participation’ introduces a kind of semiotic logic irreducible to formal logic, even of the fuzzy variety. On the other hand, however, as signification is very clearly divorced from truth, semiotic value has nothing to do with a supposedly objective truth-value. Truth-value, as investigated in the context of a semiotic, is one of the possible significations, limited in this semiotic; a semiotic-independent truth-value is not accessible. This means, nevertheless, that although a general valuation is epistemologically impossible, nothing impedes its ontological existence. Actually, classical structuralists seem to believe in its existence, by their practice if not explicitly. If one observes the structuralist semiotic metalanguage, the semiotic infra-structure does not seem to be affected by any logical fuzziness.

The second question concerns the topology of human understanding and human perception, going back to the abilities of our brains. There is a strong controversy in cognitive sciences as to whether we understand and/or perceive the world digitally or analogically. It is not completely clear where structuralists stand

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with regard to this issue; Saussure seems to endorse the former position. There are several complications in this controversy. For example, it could be possible that the ‘deeper’ infra-structure of the semiotic realm follows a binary matrix, without our human abilities being confined in this way of perception; or it could be that the effect of ‘analogicality’ is the *proprium* of human perception. In any case, these issues are beyond the scope of my thesis.

Thirdly and finally, there arises the question of dualism in epistemology and metaphysics – two realms which structuralist semioticians consider beyond their studies. As far as general metaphysics is concerned, strictly speaking, structuralists (should) refuse to make any statement, as this would be un-scientific and contradictory to their epistemological positions. However, there is no doubt that privately they all are materialists; and therefore monists. With regard to epistemology, the issue is more delicate. At a first level, structuralist semiotics subvert the traditional philosophical dualistic distinctions, among them the distinction between subject and object. However, in a second level, they make use of it. In order to draw a distinction between the *existence* and the *knowledge* of reality, as structuralists do, one needs to presuppose, at least at a conceptual level, two different realms; the one is independent of us, of our existence, the other is not. By ‘us’ we may mean ‘persons’ or ‘human beings’ or ‘subjects’ or simple ‘intelligences’. One should observe that the presupposition of a conceptual distinction between an objective and a subjective realm is not necessarily equivalent to either a substantiation of the subjective realm or an evaluative judgement regarding either. In order to make the distinction between existence and knowledge of reality, it is enough to accept that what we perceive may not be the way things are; regardless of the metaphysical nature of the perceiver, the perceived or the process of perception. Theories of knowledge that presuppose two

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conceptually different realms and define the process of knowledge as some form of relation between the two, I call ‘reflective’ or ‘dualistic’. I think that the epistemology pre-supposed by structuralist semiotics is such a theory. On the one hand, it is important to stress that a reflective theory of knowledge is *not* necessarily founded on a *similarity* between the world and our perception of the world. This allows for the gap of epistemological anti-realism. On the other, it seems to me possible that there is an inherent relation between any theory of signs and some kind of dualistic theory of knowledge – this hypothesis we will investigate in the following chapters.

The epistemological distinction gives rise to the problem of reference: ‘the problem of the possible states of the world supposedly corresponding to the content [plane] of a sign-function’³⁰⁰. Additionally, an associated issue is the problem of recognition³⁰¹, i.e. the problem of the relationship existing between the subject and the perceived object. The latter problem traditionally is not considered as related to meaning. However, the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness entails that our perception of the world as containing various distinguishable objects is semiotically constituted. This makes perception mediated by meaning. It is the same principle of semiotic arbitrariness that separates reference from meaning. The existence of a reference is not a necessary condition for semiotic functioning. The assumption that a sign has something to do with a corresponding object is termed by Eco ‘referential fallacy’. Furthermore, the extensional value of a sign-function does not help us in any way to understand its semiotic functioning. The inverse assumption is termed by Eco ‘the extensional fallacy’. Therefore, meaning is not correspondence to a subject-independent object-domain, whereas knowledge is meaning-mediated. Regarding the

³⁰⁰ Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p.58, (the addition in square brackets is mine)

³⁰¹ John Mepham, ‘The Structuralist Sciences and Philosophy’ in *Structuralism: an Introduction*, (pp.122-123)

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position of subject-constituted knowledge, structuralism is heir of Kant's epistemology; as such, it inherits too the possibly insoluble problem of the gap between knowledge and reality.

We have seen earlier structuralists' scientism and how they share this characteristic with most of their contemporary thinkers. However, their approach to science has its particular characteristics that differentiate it from other approaches³⁰². Unlike positivism and empiricism, it maintains that experience and experimentation are founded on our hypotheses and, therefore, the object of science is not a spontaneous given. Unlike rationalism, its starting point are given texts and its object of study a particular stage of a specified structure; a structure which is likely to change in a discontinuous fashion. De Mauro describes the structuralist approach to science as 'a rationalist perspective in the service of a historicist conclusion' and Hobson as 'combination of the empirical with the transcendental'. As Cassirer and Norris observe, this bridge between rationalism and empiricism is, once again, Kantian.

In conclusion, we observe that the definition of semiotic structure determines a structuralist epistemology. The most radical element of this definition is the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness, which entails a de-essentialisation of meaning. Furthermore, the definition of meaning in purely topological terms enacts a bridge between the sensible and intelligible realms. Finally, the main problematic consequence of the theory is the possibly unbridgeable gap between knowledge and reality; and the tension between this gap and structuralists' intended realism.

³⁰² Viggo Brøndal, 'Linguistique structurale' in *Acta Linguistica*, Vol.I, (pp.4-5); Ernst Cassirer, 'Structuralism in Modern Linguistics' in *Word*, Vol.I, no.II, (pp. 116-118); Anne Hénault, *Les enjeux de la sémiotique: Introduction à la sémiotique générale*, p.17; Louis Hjelmslev, *Essais*, p.40; Marian Hobson, *Jacques Derrida: Opening Lines*, p.7; Tullio de Mauro, in *CLG*, (p.xiv); Christopher Norris, 'Foreword' in R. Schleifer, *A.J.Greimas and the Nature of Meaning*, (pp.xi-xiv).

4. DECONSTRUCTIVE META-SEMIOTICS

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents Jacques Derrida's deconstructive project. The centrality of semiotics in this project is revealed, as well as its particularly close interconnection with metaphysics. Deconstruction is shown as having two closely woven sides: a theory of semiosis informed by a critique of metaphysics, and a critique of metaphysics based on a theory of semiosis. Furthermore, deconstruction is proved to have a privileged relation with structuralist semiotics. Structuralist semiotics constitutes, on the one hand, the source both of its main axiom and of significant elements of its methodology and, on the other, an exceptional and paradigmatic object of critique. The unexpectedly two-way dependence between semiotics and metaphysics that characterises deconstruction seems also to have its roots in structuralist semiotics, whereas the two projects imply several similar epistemological propositions.

Derrida's deconstruction differs recognisably from the rest of *Tel Quel's* post-structuralism, from Paul de Man's deconstruction, from post-modernist philosophy and from deconstruction as applied in American literary studies; all of which tend to be confused with it, as they obviously share some characteristics with it. It is not my purpose to investigate these comparisons. However, as this chapter presents the defining characteristics of Derrida's project, it becomes clear that it cannot be confused with any of the above mentioned. Firstly, it is more analytical than most of the other post-structuralists' work, as Christopher Norris¹ observes. Derrida is very

¹ See, for example, *Minding the Gap: Epistemology and Philosophy of Science in the Two Traditions*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000, pp.134-135.

much concerned with the logical structure of the texts he deconstructs and he deals with traditionally philosophical problems. Additionally, despite his radical critique of the protocols of academic discourse, his writing is characterised by an uncompromising logical rigor. This fact usually passes unnoticed by his critics within the analytical philosophical tradition, such as John R. Searle², who are usually confounded by the unfamiliarity of his discourse. Secondly, Derrida's deconstruction is distinctively more structuralist than Paul de Man's deconstruction³. De Man is the other prominent figure usually connected with the name 'deconstruction', although the coinage of the term belongs to Derrida. Despite the similarities of their techniques, both based on close reading, Derrida's is clearly based on structuralist semiotic tools and premises, whereas de Man's is based mostly on traditional rhetorics. Furthermore, there is a marked difference in tone between them, closely related to their general position with regard to metaphysics. Derrida's critique of metaphysics, based on the structuralist principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness, keeps a distance from any positive metaphysical commitment; de Man's critique of metaphysics, directly indebted to Nietzsche, comes closer to proposing a positive metaphysical position, belonging to the post-modernist paradigm. Thirdly, Derrida's project, precisely, is radically different from post-modernist pragmatism, as Norris has often convincingly argued. It is true that the term 'post-modern' is used in several senses. For example, in the sense of the historical condition of late-capitalist societies, we all are post-modern, regardless of our ideological choices. Then, in the general sense of criticising several of the certainties of the Enlightenment, Derrida is post-modern; so is post-structuralism in general, as well as Marxism and

² 'Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida', *Glyph* (1977)

³ See Rea Walldén, 'Concepts of Materiality in Language with reference to the writings of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man', *MA thesis*, University of Cardiff, 2002

psychoanalysis; as a matter of fact, it can be claimed that the seed of its self-critique is embedded in the very discourse of the Enlightenment. However, there is a stronger sense of post-modernist philosophy, exemplified by Richard Rorty, which is characterised by a counter-philosophical pragmatism of a Nietzschean positiveness. In this stronger sense, Derrida is definitely not post-modernist. Fourthly, for all the above reasons, Derrida's deconstruction cannot be identified with its application in American literary studies; as a matter of fact, it is questionable whether it is correct to consider 'literary' deconstruction as an application of Derrida's project. Literary deconstruction is in large degree unaware of both the philosophical and, particularly, the structuralist semiotic background of Derridean deconstruction; whereas its underlying ideology is post-modernist in the stronger sense. Its use of Derrida is in the 'pastiche' way characteristic of post-modernism, which ignores both the inner structure and the position in larger structures of the elements it borrows. The transformation of deconstruction into a dogma is inconsistent with its spirit, at the very least.

Deconstruction, first and foremost, is a particular method of close reading. Derrida's texts do not appear independently, they develop 'parasitically'⁴ on existing texts of our culture – often philosophical ones.

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures⁵

They always have a double relation with the text under investigation, as they both criticise and use it. This use means that the tools for its critique are extracted from the text itself, which often includes a kind of structural and stylistic imitation. A text is in

⁴ 'Parasite' is one of the many quasi-concepts that Derrida introduces, as we shall see in the next sub-section. For the structural function of the parasite, see for example *Mar*, p.387 / *Mar Eng*, p. 325, *Lim*, p.17

⁵ *Gram Eng*, p. / *Gram*, p.39

a way self-deconstructed, as it carries all the elements that lead to its own deconstruction. This is consistent with the deconstructive critique of the subject-object division. As the levels of acceptance and critique co-exist, in an asymmetrical fashion, a deconstructive argument cannot be reduced to its conclusion. Its irreducibility means that one has to simultaneously keep in mind the entire ‘cogent and logically articulated process of argument’⁶.

Deconstructive reading is based on a conception of meaning deriving from structuralist semiotics: on the one hand, there are other meaningful elements in a text than thematic exposition; on the other, the meaning of a text exceeds the conscious intention of its author. This premise affects both Derrida’s texts and the texts he analyses.

Regarding his own writing, it means two things: Firstly, in order to be consistent, he needs to argue his position not only through his exposition but also performatively through his means of expression, which I think that he does in a remarkably original way. This technique, he names ‘double writing’. Secondly, he needs to take constant precautions in order to remind the reader the precariousness of his [Derrida’s] position as an author. Therefore, we see that even the use of various unexpected stylistic and narrative devices is part of a rigorous theoretical consistency; whereas as far as thematic exposition goes ‘Derrida for the most part argues his way with a strict regard for standards of logical rigour, consistency, and truth’⁷. As he puts it:

‘On the one hand, I try to submit myself to the most demanding norms of classical philosophical discussion [...] On the other hand, in so doing I multiply statements, discursive gestures, forms of writing, the structure of which reinforces my demonstration in something like a practical manner’⁸

⁶ Christopher Norris, *Minding the Gap*, p.163

⁷ *ibid*, p.161

⁸ *Lim*, p.114

The way meaning is produced affects equally the texts under consideration. This means, on the one hand, that one should interpret not only declarations and themes but also descriptions, connotations and imagery, rhetoric and stylistic devices, and – most importantly – how all these are structured, in the plane of content and expression and their interconnection. On the other hand, correspondingly, it means that a text possesses other levels of meaning than those intended by its author, different and possibly contradictory to it. It is these other meanings and their relation to the intended one that mostly interest Derrida. Their relation is shown to be structural; whereas, the very differentiation between intended and un-intended meaning, as well as between content and expression, is proved to be a product of the structure and not the other way round. As he puts it in *De la grammatologie*:

It is [...] this difference between implication, nominal presence, and thematic exposition that interests us⁹

We must measure this gap between the description and the declaration¹⁰

[The] text moves [...] between what we have called *description* and *declaration*, which are themselves structural poles rather than natural and fixed points of reference¹¹

Reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses. This relationship is [...] a signifying structure¹²

The question is how one accesses those other levels of meaning, different from the express thematic level. Derrida argues that, for this purpose, particularly useful are cases that constitute exceptions to the rules and moments where the text shows internal contradictions. The structural importance of these traditionally underestimated elements is a result of the very rigorous and uncompromising logic which, according to Derrida, is the only one applicable when concepts are concerned.

⁹ *Gram Eng*, p.213 / *Gram* 304

¹⁰ *Gram Eng*, p.217 / *Gram*, p.310

¹¹ *Gram Eng*, p.219 / *Gram*, p.312

¹² *Gram Eng*, p.158 / *Gram*, p. 227

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Every concept that lays claim to any rigor whatsoever implies the alternative
'all or nothing'¹³

This entails that no accident is possible or, better put, if something is possible then it affects the rule: an exception is a refutation. Thus, limit cases are privileged and *aporias*, i.e. moments of internal inconsistency in the texts, are not mere empirical accidents but examples of structural laws. The limit cases are not revealing because they are 'right', whereas the rest of the system is 'wrong', but because they allow one to see how the entire system works¹⁴:

It is the secondary, eccentric, lateral, marginal, parasitic, borderline cases which are "important" to me and are source of many things, such as pleasure, but also insight into the general functioning of a textual system¹⁵

Correspondingly, *aporias* are symptoms of an underlying structural tension. They are, as Norris describes them:

blindspots or moments of self-contradiction where a text involuntarily betrays the tension [...] between what it manifestedly *means to say* and what it is nonetheless *constrained to mean*¹⁶

Consequently, deconstruction needs a very careful close reading, 'a rigour and a scrupulous adherence to the letter of the text'¹⁷, in order to trace limit cases and *aporias* which tend most often to go unnoticed. These are then shown to be organised into a second level of meaning, different and usually opposed to the intentional one. This 'second register' does not annul the first but co-exists with it. In a nut shell, deconstructive reading shows attention to detail in order to access a general structure.

The result is a multiply rigorous philosophical text, both regarding the standards of consistency of argument and the attention to the object under consideration. Derrida's project combines a general theory with the subtleties of

¹³ *Lim*, p.116

¹⁴ There are certain similarities with the Marxist notion of the privileged standpoint of the proletariat.

¹⁵ *Lim*, p.44

¹⁶ Norris, *Derrida*, p. 19

¹⁷ Norris, *ibid*, p.109

detailed analysis and far exceeds the scope of a textual commentary¹⁸. Nevertheless, his method is undeniably based on textual work. In consistency with his positions, as we shall see, one cannot subtract the text from his argument and be left with a 'free' content, a 'transcendental signified'. Accordingly, in consistency with his positions, he would be cautious of the use of the word 'method' because of its metaphysical connotations¹⁹. He would argue that precisely because of the dependence of his texts on other texts, the tools are each time provided by them and are particular to them. However, as we shall show in this chapter, there is structural similarity between all of his readings. As he would phrase it, it is a 'sameness without identity'. Moreover, an identical structure does not imply an identical entity, unless both the entity is solely structural and the structural identity concerns all its levels. We can, therefore, claim that Derrida in all his readings performs not just the same, but a structurally identical move; and this fact does not reduce the uniqueness of each reading.

In the previous paragraphs of description of deconstructive reading, one cannot fail to observe a certain recurrent double structure: texts, simultaneously, expressly say and performatively show; consciously intend to say and unconsciously say; use and criticise other texts. These asymmetrical relational couples are governed by a kind of logic that differs from the 'all or nothing' logic, as we shall see.

In this chapter, we will further investigate deconstructive reading, in its semiotic and metaphysical aspects. We will first present two well-known and structurally important examples of deconstructive critique: its engagement with the topics of writing and difference. Then we will approach the general critique of metaphysics into which these two examples are placed, and which they are proved to

¹⁸ Norris, *Minding the Gap*, p.147

¹⁹ See, for example, *Nom*, p.32

determine, as well as the peculiar logic it introduces. Subsequently, we will investigate the way deconstruction affects structuralist semiotics, which appears to be a privileged object of deconstructive critique. Then, we proceed to show that there is a structural affinity between deconstruction and structuralist semiotics, and Hjelmslev's work in particular. We conclude to a view of deconstruction as a radical, limit case of structuralist semiotics.

4.2. *Écriture, différance* and their chain of displaced isomorphism

There is no doubt that deconstruction functions as a general critique of metaphysics; however, it is equally obvious that a theory of signification holds an important position in this critique – a structural position, as will be shown. As Derrida observes in *Positions*²⁰, all his first published books are intimately connected to each other: they all deal with the question of the sign and its centrality for Western metaphysics. It is in these texts that there are introduced the inter-related notions of '*écriture*' and '*différance*', which then re-appear in almost every Derridean text, in connection with several different philosophical argumentations. Nevertheless, their introduction happens in a context of critique of the philosophical positions regarding signification. As we shall see, they eventually substitute for the traditional philosophic terms about language and signification, which include the structuralist semiotic concepts of sign-function, semiosis and communication; they actually constitute a model of semiosis²¹. Furthermore, they provide the self-deconstructing structure of Western metaphysics.

Deconstruction, particularly as introduced in the books published in 1967, could be perceived as a 'grammatology', a theory or science of writing. It is

²⁰ In the interview of 1967 with Henri Ronse, Derrida explains the interrelation between *De la grammatologie*, *L'écriture et la différence* and *La voix et le phénomène*, all published in 1967, as well as his introduction to Husserl's *Origin of Geometry* of 1962, *Pos*, pp. 11-13 / *Pos Eng*, pp. 3-5

²¹ See sub-section 4.7

significant that the text which expressly supplies a ‘theoretical matrix’ of the deconstructive project bears that name²²: ‘grammatology’; as a matter of fact ‘of grammatology’. Very early in the text²³ Derrida explains why deconstruction cannot but be ‘about’ grammatology, why a grammatology ‘by itself’ cannot exist. The nucleus of this impossibility consists in the fact that ‘science’ and ‘theory’ are concepts belonging to the metaphysical system that writing puts into question. There is a certain contradiction in the notion of a science about the possibility of science, a theory about the possibility of theory, a philosophy about the possibility of philosophy. However, as Derrida expounds in ‘Tympan’, the introductory text of *Marges de la philosophie*, it is precisely this structural tension that defines philosophy: ‘*Its own limit* [has] not to remain foreign to it’²⁴. In this sense, deconstruction, this cautious and self-conscious grammatology, is philosophy *par excellence*.

The beginning of *De la grammatologie* includes a passage entitled ‘The Program’²⁵, meaning the program of this particular book. However, strangely, it could be considered as the program of the entire philosophical project of Derrida, right up to the end of his life. The deconstructive project, as this ‘Program’ and its subsequent ‘The Signifier and Truth’²⁶ explain, is constructed around a re-defined notion of writing. It demonstrates that the concept of writing is intimately connected to notions of mediation and exteriority, as well as having to do with the difference between the sensible and the intelligible; these characteristics are then shown to be the definitional basis of signification in general; finally, they are shown to be central for the

²² *Gram*, p.7 / *Gram Eng*, p.lxxxix

²³ *Gram*, pp. 12-14, 42-43 / *Gram Eng* pp. 3-4, 27

²⁴ *Mar*, p.i / *Mar Eng*, p.x

²⁵ *Gram*, pp.15-21 / *Gram Eng*, pp. 6-10

²⁶ *Gram*, pp.21-31 / *Gram Eng*, pp. 10-18

philosophical theories of knowledge and the entire construction of Western metaphysics.

Derrida observes that in many texts, philosophical and others²⁷, writing is devalued as opposed to speech. It appears as external to language; the signifier of a signifier and, therefore, as secondary to and dependent upon language. Moreover, it is understood as a transfer from material to material, from sound to visual mark, while the proper material of (natural) languages is sound. Derrida considers these presuppositions as deeply inscribed within Western metaphysics. From Plato to Rousseau and beyond, the moment of spoken utterance is idealized as the moment of language *par excellence*, where the intention of the addresser, the message and the uptake of the addressee coincide in the unique meaning; independent of any material support and in direct proximity to ‘thought’. In this context writing is seen as dead matter, a ‘parasite’, a ‘supplement’ at best.

However, the very same texts include elements that ill fit this position; elements which are then shown to be organised in a structure that contradicts the text’s express meaning. For example, a text condemning writing as evil may need metaphors of writing in order to define speech; or a text defining writing as secondary may be proved to attribute the same characteristics to language. The result is that the concept of writing is shown indispensable for the definition of its opposites, which were supposed independent and primary. What is more, writing is shown to be an actually more general notion than its opposites.

²⁷ Texts by Austin, Benveniste, Foucault, Freud, Hegel, Heidegger, Husserl, Levinas, Lévi-Strauss, Plato, Rousseau, Saussure and others

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For example, in ‘Signature événement contexte’²⁸, there are posed the following three ‘essential predicates in a minimal determination of the classical concept of writing’²⁹. Firstly, a written sign subsists beyond the presence of the empirical subject who produced it. Secondly, it carries a force of rupture from its context. This force of rupture is the structural possibility for a written sign to function, i.e. be meaningful, even if its initial context is irrevocably lost – including its addressor’s physical presence and intention, its intended addressee, its textual and situational, semiotic and extra-semiotic context. Thirdly, this structural force of rupture is connected to the ‘spacing’ that constitutes the written sign, which separates it from the all other elements of the contextual chain and from all forms of present referent. However, Derrida shows that all three predicates are appropriate to every kind of sign and communication. Every sign, in order to be a sign, is ‘iterable’, i.e. repeatable. Every sign, in order to be a sign, includes the structural possibility of disconnection from the other signs of the discourse in which it appears, from its intended signified, as well as from any referent whatsoever. Finally, a sign is constituted by its difference from other signs and the fact that it is not identified with its referent. Therefore, considering that the predicates which distinguish an object under investigation as writing are proved to characterise every sign, every sign is a kind of writing. In *De la grammatologie* appear some of the most memorable phrasings of this radical conclusion:

‘Signifier of a signifier’ describes ... the movement of language
If every sign refers to a sign, and if ‘sign of a sign’ signifies writing...
...language is not merely a sort of writing... but *a species of* writing.
...language is a possibility founded on the general possibility of writing.

²⁸ The text deconstructs the concept of communication in the *Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines* by Condillac, with references to Husserl and Austin. *Mar*, pp.365-393 / *Mar Eng*, pp.307-330 / *Lim*, pp.1-21

²⁹ *Mar*, p.377 / *Mar Eng*, p.317 / *Lim*, p.9

Writing thus *comprehends* language³⁰

The traditional definition of language largely depends on the distinction between sensible and intelligible. Writing is situated on the 'sensible' side of the bi-pole. It is often considered as more 'material' than speech, or at least as having a doubly mediated distance from the signified; while questions regarding materials are always prominent in a discussion about writing. Even from a very unmetaphysical point of view, at first glance, the most striking characteristic of a transfer from spoken language to writing is the change of material. The layman's question would be: it is all very well to demonstrate the generality of writing's properties, but isn't it true that when we read the written text it is the sound that we seek and not visual values? Derrida shows that this objection is ethnocentric, based on the assumption that writing, at least in its ideal form, is phonetic³¹. It considers all the other forms of writing, from Aztec pictographs to Egyptian hieroglyphics to Chinese ideographic characters, as more primitive stages of a hierarchy leading to European forms of phonetic writing. Contrary to that, Derrida observes that even European forms of writing are not purely phonetic and that

there is no purely phonetic writing (by reason of the necessary spacing of signs, punctuation, intervals, the differences indispensable for the functioning of graphemes, etc.)³²

Writing always functions like the rebus-puzzles, with an interplay of modes of expression. Derrida goes on to argue that all signification functions in a rebus-like way, similar to synaesthesia and Freud's description of the mechanism of dreams³³.

Summarising, the starting point for the deconstruction of the traditional relation of writing to speech is the observation that it structurally repeats the

³⁰ *Gram Eng*, pp. 7, 43, 52 / *Gram*, pp.16, 63, 75

³¹ *Gram*, pp. 117-121/ *Gram Eng*, pp. 79-81

³² *Pos Eng*, pp.25-26 / *Pos*, p. 37

³³ *Gram*, pp.131-142 / *Gram Eng*, pp. 87-93; *ED*, pp.293-340 / *WD*, pp. 248-291

traditional relation of the signifier to the signified. Every characteristic that is attributed to writing and considered its *proprium*, actually characterises signification in general. Writing is better suited than speech or language as model of signification because it exemplifies all its characteristics that metaphysics structurally represses. The conclusion is that, in a certain way, speech is a species of writing. This is not a question about a historical precedence of writing, in its narrower, empirical sense; it is about the logical priority of a redefined, extended notion of writing. It is not a question of denying the existence of empirical writing either. Deconstruction is about the structure, named 'writing' by a paleonymic technique, which constitutes the condition of possibility of signification in all its forms, including speech and writing. Writing in this new sense appears in other contexts, where there is no obvious relation to linguistic issues, precisely because it designates a structure, a function-structure.

The paleonymic neo-graphism '*différance*', with an 'a', appears in all the three books published in 1967³⁴ and then re-appears in many Derridean texts. An entire essay in the 1972 book *Marges de la philosophie* bears its name³⁵. *Différance* is intimately connected with the notion of the extended writing. It is intended to combine the function of signification as 'differing' and 'deferring'. It is the difference in space and time that makes possible the functioning of signification. Its silent 'a' exemplifies the meaningful difference between the written and the spoken signified; the fact that their relation is neither a one-to-one correspondence nor a one-way dependence. The conclusion is then extended to the relation between signifier and

³⁴ For example, *Gram*, pp.38, 92-95, 101, 128, 142 / *Gram Eng*, pp. 23, 62-66, 69, 86, 93; *ED*, pp. 238, 294-295, 302-303, 428 / *WD*, pp.161, 202, 247-249, 254-255, 370; *VPh*, pp.75-77, 92, 98, 111 / *SPh*, pp. 67-69, 82, 88, 99 [*SPh* does not retain consistently the difference between '*différence*' and '*différance*' that exists in the original text of *VPh*]

³⁵ 'La différence' in *Mar*, pp.1-29 / *Mar Eng*, pp.1-27 / *SPh*, pp.129-160. The essay was presented in a conference in 1968 and first published in the same year.

signified; and eventually, via numerous relays and express qualifications, to the relation between knowledge and reality.

The notion of '*différance*' is organised around Saussure's semiotic difference, combined with Heidegger's ontico-ontological difference and Freud's *Verspätung* (delaying). In the essay that bears its name, '*différance*' is also connected to Nietzsche's eternal return and Levinas' absolute alterity; as well as, by differentiation, to Hegel's dialectics and Heraclitus' *εν διαφέρον εαυτω* (*en diapheron eautō*, the one different to itself). Starting from a writing on writing, '*différance*' – which cannot be called a concept for reasons we have implied and will explain further – combines the three characteristics of iterability, force of rupture and spacing that are constitutive of the written mark and the sign in general. Derrida³⁶ traces the notion of a general difference as condition of possibility for signification to Saussure and his combined principles regarding the arbitrary and differential character of the sign; what we have called earlier 'the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness'. The semiotic difference, this difference 'without positive terms' which affects the sign in its totality, entails that no concept is present in itself:

Essentially and lawfully, every concept is inscribed in a chain or a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of *the systematic play of differences* [the Italics are mine].

[...] There is no presence before and outside semiological difference.³⁷

Therefore:

Such a play [...] is no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and a system in general.

[...] The difference of which Saussure speaks is itself, therefore, neither a concept nor a word among others. The same can be said, a fortiori, of *différance*.³⁸

³⁶ *Mar*, p.10-13 / *Mar Eng*, p.10-12

³⁷ *Mar Eng*, pp.11-12 / *Mar*, pp.11-12

³⁸ *ibid*

Keeping – as he says – ‘the schema if not the content’ of the Saussurean principle, Derrida designates as *différance* the movement that constitutes language, and every system of referral, as ‘a weave of differences’. In this weave of differences – as already noticed by structuralist semioticians – presence, truth and the subject become effects. This leads Derrida to the Heideggerian questioning of being³⁹ and the Freudian unconscious⁴⁰. These references are beyond the scope of our present investigation.

Différance, as we can see, is a structure; a function-structure such as the ones defined by structuralist semiotics. As a structure, it is neither sensible nor intelligible. Furthermore, it is intended to designate the structural relationship between the two; the structure which produces them, as distinguished and related in a particular way.

This *différance* is [...] not more sensible than intelligible [...] It permits the articulation of speech and writing – in the colloquial sense – as it founds the metaphysical opposition between the sensible and the intelligible, then between signifier and signified, expression and content, etc.⁴¹

[It is of] an order which no longer belongs to sensibility. But neither can it belong to intelligibility... an order that resists the opposition, founding of philosophy, between the sensible and the intelligible.⁴²

Furthermore, *différance*, as a structure, cannot ‘be’ in the full-fledged metaphysical sense of being; it has no essence: ‘[it] is not an essence, [...] it is not anything’⁴³. This

³⁹ ‘The onto-ontological difference and its ground (*Grund*) in the “transcendence of Dasein” [...] are not absolutely originary. *Différance* itself would be more ‘originary’, but one would no longer be able to call it “origin” or “ground”, those notions belonging essentially to the history of onto-theology’, *Gram Eng*, p.23 / *Gram*, p.38

‘*Différance*, the pre-opening of the ontic-ontological difference’, *WD*, p.248 / *ED*, p. 295

⁴⁰ ‘The putting into question of the authority of consciousness is first and always differential. The two apparently different values of *différance* are tied together in Freudian theory’, *Mar Eng*, p.18 / *Mar*, p.19

‘*Différance*, the pre-opening [...] of all the differences which furrow Freudian conceptuality’, *WD*, p.248 / *ED*, p. 295

‘[Freud] complies with a dual necessity: that of recognising *différance* at the origin, and at the same time that of crossing out the concept of *primariness* [...] in a paragraph on the “delaying” (*Verspätung*) of the secondary process’, *WD*, p.255 / *ED*, p.302

⁴¹ *Gram Eng*, pp.62-63 / *Gram*, p.92

⁴² *Mar Eng*, p.5 / *Mar*, p.5

⁴³ *WD*, p.255

is the case for every (relational) structure, but *différance* exemplifies it in an extreme form as (it is) the structure of the difference between essence and structure, the structure of structure.

Différance in its neo-graphism, makes use of the polysemy, termed ‘immediate and irreducible’⁴⁴, of the French verb ‘*différer*’, coming from the Latin verb ‘*differre*’. This has two senses⁴⁵: (a) to be not identical, be other, discernible; and (b) to put off until later, make a detour, delay. Derrida defines his neo-graphism as the combination of these two senses, or rather the condition of possibility of the difference and similarity between them. Structurally necessary for the two senses of the verb are notions of spatiality and temporality. *Différance* is the structure, spatial and temporal, that combines and differentiates them. As Derrida puts it, it is

temporalization and spacing, the becoming-time of space and the becoming-space of time, the ‘originary constitution’ of time and space⁴⁶

So, *différance* is not only an irreducibly spatio-temporal structure, it is moreover the structural relation between space and time.

This is a very particular kind of structure. *Différance* is not just difference; it is the difference between the same and other, between sameness and difference. Difference is a relational term, to start with. *Différance*, being the structure of difference, is a higher degree structure. Moreover, it is not just any structure of higher degree. It is the structure that makes structure possible. Being in a sense the ‘origin’ of structure, gives it a very problematical ‘fit’ with the notion of structure. In Derrida’s words:

Différance is [...] the formation of form.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ *Mar*, p.8, 19 / *Mar Eng*, pp.7-8, 18

⁴⁵ Unlike *differre*, the Greek term διαφέρειν has only the first sense and does not allow for this meaningful interplay. Derrida thinks that it may be significant that the term of the language considered as the mother-language of philosophy does not allow for this differential play.

⁴⁶ *Mar Eng*, p. 8 / *Mar*, p.8

CHAPTER 4: DECONSTRUCTIVE META-SEMIOTICS

The difference between the same and the other, which is not a difference or a relation among others⁴⁸

Différance with an ‘a’ and *écriture* in the extended sense are used interchangeably. They are both function-structures, they are completely relational and they are isomorphic to each other through and through; therefore, they are identical. We understand by now why the term ‘identical’ is difficult to use in this case: *écriture-différance* constitutes the condition of possibility for the differentiation between identity and difference, whereas the concept of ‘identity’ is interrelated to notions of essence and presence. Still, it is perfectly correct to call them structurally and functionally identical; and this explains why they can be used interchangeably.

However, there is a passage in *De la grammatologie* where Derrida makes a distinction between the two. He explains that this particular structure can be called *écriture* only within the context of Western metaphysics:

this unnameable movement of *difference-itself*, that I have strategically nicknamed [...] *différance*, could be called writing only within the *historical* closure, that is to say within the limits of science and philosophy⁴⁹

Indeed, one may observe that ‘difference’ is a functional-relational notion to begin with, while ‘writing’ is a descriptive one, despite its relational implications. Despite the fact that in its Derridean paleonymic-neologistic use ‘writing’ designates a completely relational function-structure, it is obvious that its paleonymic force would be lost outside the context of Western metaphysics. In other words, it would be meaningless to call this structure ‘writing’, in a context where writing was not perceived through such a structure. In this point, however, one should remember that deconstruction introduces an interrogation regarding the possibility of being exterior to (Western) metaphysics. In any case, all Derridean readings deconstruct texts

⁴⁷ *Gram Eng*, p.63

⁴⁸ *ibid*, p.93

⁴⁹ *Gram Eng*, p.93

belonging to Western metaphysics, so the two terms can be interchanged unproblematically.

Écriture-différance is first and foremost the condition of possibility, the constitutive structure of signification. We may also observe that the paleonymic etymology of the two notions points towards the structural function of *medium*, as *mediation* and *materialisation*; mediation and materialisation being the two facets of the metaphysics of semiosis, as we have discussed earlier. ‘Difference’, before the deconstructive textual game, corresponds to the relation between the two elements of a couple; whereas ‘writing’ corresponds to the ‘more material’, devalued second term of the oppositions ‘speech vs. writing’ and ‘language vs. writing’. After their paleonymic transformation, they both designate the completely relational function-structure that rules all the constitutive couples of signification, all of which are formed by analogy with the relation between the sensible and the intelligible. Eventually, *écriture-différance* substitutes for the terms ‘sign’, ‘signification’, ‘communication’ etc. Moreover, as it is a completely relational structure, it can be detached from the conceptual couples that were used for its formation⁵⁰.

Derrida invents many paleonymic neologisms apart from *écriture* and *différance*, such as *dissémination*, *espacement*, *gramme*, *hymen*, *khôra*, *pharmakon*, *supplement*, *trace*, *tympan*, etc, ‘that they are not entirely words or concepts’⁵¹. He refers to them as ‘motifs’⁵² or ‘undecidables’⁵³ or ‘unconceptual concepts’⁵⁴;

⁵⁰ This phrasing seems not to be consistent with the Derridean argument which questions, among other things, the possibility of such a detachment. What I mean, however, is not a detachment of form from content. The ‘detached’ structure is no less meaningful. What happens with higher degree structures is that they constitute a more general meaning under which many apparently different meanings can be grouped. This doesn’t make the different structures identical through and through. They all ‘say the same thing’ in a level and yet each of them ‘says’ something more and particular to it.

⁵¹ *Lim*, p.117

⁵² *ibid*

⁵³ *Diss*, p. 271; *Diss Eng*, p. 229-230; *Pos*, p.58-59 / *Pos Eng*, p.43

⁵⁴ *Lim*, p.118

Rodolphe Gasché and Marian Hobson call them ‘quasi-transcendentals’. Each of them is a spatio-temporal relational function-structure; and they are isomorphic to each other.

All of them take the same structural position and fulfil the same function. Each of them cannot fit a binary hierarchical conceptual opposition, yet without constituting a third term; it is the condition of possibility of the opposition; and it is conceived as ‘in between’ the couple of concepts that it renders possible and ‘outside’ the privileged pole.

I have called undecidables, that is, unities of simulacrum, ‘false’ verbal properties (nominal or semantic) that can no longer be included within philosophical binary opposition, but which, however, inhabit philosophical opposition, resisting and disorganising it, *without ever* constituting a third term, without ever leaving room for a solution in the form of speculative dialectics [...] Neither/nor, that is, simultaneously either/or⁵⁵

the structure and/or, between *and* and *or*.⁵⁶

What makes these terms able to function in such a way is their structure, precisely because of the identity of function and structure that the structuralists introduced. The undecidables’

undecidable value [...] always derives from their syntax, whether the latter is in a sense ‘internal’, articulating and combining under the same yoke [...] two incompatible meanings, or ‘external’, dependent on the code in which the word is made to function⁵⁷.

Therefore, an interesting observation regards the ‘conceptual etymology’ of these terms, i.e. what they meant before being re-situated and/or transformed into deconstructive key quasi-concepts. We could group them roughly into three groups: (a) devalued second terms, (b) intermediates, and (c) cases of transcendence. The first group is exemplified by *écriture*; the second by *différance*. The third kind of undecidables – such as *le don*, *le secret*, *la mort* – appear in certain Derridean

⁵⁵ *Pos*, pp. 58-59 / *Pos Eng*, p.43

⁵⁶ *Diss Eng*, p. 268 / *Diss*, pp. 319

⁵⁷ *Diss Eng*, p. 230 / *Diss*, pp.271

passages and texts with metaphysical resonances, which are of no interest for my thesis. In all cases, the concepts chosen are relational: ‘second to a first’, ‘between two’, ‘beyond’. When paleonymically transformed into undecidables, they combine and exceed all three types of relation.

However, Derrida insists that the undecidables cannot be considered synonymous⁵⁸. The reader must suspect the reason by now. On the one hand, each undecidable emerges from a different deconstructive reading, which cannot be subtracted from its conclusion; on the other, undecidables exceed the concepts of name and identity. Designating the spatio-temporal structure of differing and deferring, they cannot but resist any attempt to arrest meaning. Derrida conceives them as forming a chain of displacement, a moving structure of perpetual difference and deferral. This chain is open by definition⁵⁹.

We notice that one gets to all undecidables through the same reading technique – and the same, structurally, philosophical argument – which is structurally identical to their function-structure: a devalued concept constitutes the condition of possibility of its highly valued opposite and of the distinction between the two, and thus exceeds the economy of that distinction. We also observe that a function-structure which initially was examined in relation to a theory of signification is then extended to the entirety of Western metaphysics. We need to pursue these investigations further.

⁵⁸ For example, *Mar*, p. 13 / *Mar Eng*, p.12

⁵⁹ *Mar*, pp.12-13 / *Mar Eng*, p.12; *Pos* pp.23, 61 / *Pos Eng*, pp.14, 44; *Lim*, p. 155

4.3. Inside / outside: Western metaphysics and the logic of deconstruction

Derrida's 'stratégie générale, théorique et systématique, de la déconstruction philosophique'⁶⁰, is built around his technique of textual close-reading and on his view of semiosis; not least because of his questioning of distinctions such as content and form. His objective, however, is

the rigorous reading of metaphysics, wherever metaphysics normalizes Western discourse, and not only in the texts of the 'history of philosophy'⁶¹

For this purpose, he reads and compares texts from different disciplines apart from philosophy, such as linguistics and psychoanalysis, as well as literature and poetry.

Writing deconstructs Western⁶² metaphysics. The function-structure of signification determines the structure of the entire system of metaphysics. Understandably, a critique of metaphysics cannot but affect the theory of signification. In deconstruction, however, a certain inversion takes place. It is the destabilisation of the sign that allows the questioning of categorical orders⁶³, which leads the critique of metaphysics. The sign is not just an example of metaphysics but the basis of both metaphysics and its exposure to deconstructive critique.

In the previous sub-section, we have arrived to a certain spatio-temporal structure, shared by a chain of quasi-synonymous 'undecidables'. We have seen that the relationship between the members of this chain is one of displaced isomorphism, which certainly is not meant to imply any hierarchy. For this reason one may suppose that 'writing' is just one of the many names this essentially 'unnameable' structure takes, and – therefore – its connection to the theory of signification is accidental.

Derrida, however, is quite clear that

⁶⁰ *Pos*, p. 93 / *Pos Eng*, p.68

⁶¹ *Mar Eng*, pp.22-23 / *Mar*, p.23

⁶² In Derridean texts the determination of metaphysics as 'Western' is superfluous, for there is one and only one metaphysics, Western metaphysics. We will briefly refer to the issue later in this sub-section.

⁶³ We shall investigate it further in the following sub-sections.

the *problem of language* has never been simply one problem among others⁶⁴.

In this thesis we are trying to find out why. We are trying to understand the structural complicity between ontology and the theory of signification. We will see that, for Derrida, the very distinction between metaphysics and semiotics is formed on the structure of speech vs. writing. Nevertheless, the structural importance of the problem of signification does not entail – according to Derrida – that language in the empirical sense, such as the national languages, gains a priority over philosophy. Derrida develops a complicated argument against this position in ‘Le supplément de copule’⁶⁵. It is the structure of signification as condition of possibility of knowledge that interests Derrida, rather than the empirical linguistic structures. The distinction, however, is not so easy to maintain in the context of the Derridean project.

The intimate connection of metaphysics to signification appears at two levels: (a) the complicity between Western metaphysics and its theories of signification, and particularly their centrality to the over-all system; and as a result, (b) the way that the deconstruction of the theories of signification destabilises the system of metaphysics.

Derrida names ‘logocentrism’ the complex conceptual system which elevates speech and voice, as opposed to a devalued writing. He shows that logocentrism is connected to all metaphysical concepts; or rather that it is the mechanism that produces them. Significantly, *logos* (λόγος) in Greek means both speech and reason, and this relationship is accentuated in the neologism⁶⁶. Logocentrism is also called, with a certain displacement, ‘phonocentrism’, from the Greek ‘φωνή’ (phōne, i.e. voice). Logocentrism is ethnocentric, Eurocentric as a matter of fact, because it uses as model of writing the European phonetic systems and assigns to them a primacy

⁶⁴ *Gram Eng*, p.6 / *Gram*, p.15

⁶⁵ *Mar*, pp.209-246 / *Mar Eng*, p.175-205; we will return to this essay in the final chapter.

⁶⁶ Of course, ‘reason vs. speech’ is once again one of the constitutive oppositions of signification and, as such, deconstructed by the structure of extended writing.

over every other mode. In Western metaphysics, speech is conceived as the unity of sound and sense within the voice. As we have said earlier, the moment of the utterance is idealized as the moment of language *par excellence*, where the intention of the addresser, the message and the uptake of the addressee coincide in the meaning. This structure points to a meaning ‘unique, univocal, rigorously controllable, and transmittable’⁶⁷, independent of any material support, in proximity with ‘thought’; a transcendental meaning. Closely related to this is the notion of the subject who knows himself – in this context, the paradigmatic subject is male – through speaking and listening to himself, and in this way he asserts his existence. As we see, ‘phonocentrism merges with the historical determination of being as *presence*’⁶⁸, and its closely related signification of truth⁶⁹. Furthermore, there have always been two ways of defining ‘truth’⁷⁰: either as *alētheia*-unveiling or as *homoiōsis-adequatio*-correspondence; both correspond to theories of signification. Knowledge of truth and signification are moulded in the same matrix⁷¹. The voice is idealised as the moment of the absolute effacement of the signifier⁷², whereas truth, presence, essence, existence, subject are all conceived as transcendental signifieds. The effacement of the signifier by the transcendental signified is the metaphysical gesture *par excellence*. Therefore, Western metaphysics, the one and only metaphysics, is the implied metaphysics of phonetic writing⁷³.

We observe that the sign is a very peculiar concept, where all the metaphysical opposites meet, ‘the place where all contradictory characteristics

⁶⁷ *Lim*, p.1 / *Mar Eng*, p.309 / *Mar*, p.367

⁶⁸ *Gram Eng*, p. 12 / *Gram*, p.23

⁶⁹ *Gram Eng*, p.10 / *Gram*, p.21

⁷⁰ *Diss Eng*, p.205-206 / *Diss*, p.237

⁷¹ The most unmetaphysical of the theories of signification is admittedly structuralist semiotics, which falls out of the two traditional schemata; Derrida constructs his position on this (structuralist) basis, whereas he points out some lingering elements of the old definitions.

⁷² *Gram*, pp.33-34 / *Gram Eng*, p.20

⁷³ *Gram*, p.20 / *Gram Eng*, p.10

intersect'⁷⁴. It is the knot that holds the system together. Thus, when the sign – where all the opposites meet – is no longer stable, the entire system is mobilized. However, the sign carries already the possibility of destabilising itself and the system, precisely because it is the point where all the opposites meet, for the opposites should not meet. The structure of *écriture-différance* affects the relationship between the signifier and the signified. The difference between them is shown to be relational through and through, which entails the impossibility of a transcendental signified. As we have seen, the transcendental signified is the metaphysical gesture *par excellence*. Consequently, the difference between the signifier and the signified is the condition of possibility of the metaphysical system and the relativity of this difference is its condition of impossibility.

The crucial analytical observation before the catalytic introduction of *écriture-différance* is the dualistic structure of the metaphysical system of our culture. According to Derrida's reading, metaphysics is based on oppositional, hierarchical couples. Such couples are: 'speech/writing', 'signified/signifier', 'intelligible/sensible', 'inside/outside', 'being/non-being', 'self/other', 'subject/object', 'activity/passivity', 'spirit/matter', 'reason/madness', 'male/female', 'Greek/Jew' etc. All these couples play the same ordered game, re-enact the same structural relationship; i.e. they are isomorphic. Each is considered an insurmountable opposition, where the second term is devalued and the first is considered privileged. Even monistic philosophical positions, such as materialism, construct their arguments on a dualistic conceptual language of the same structure as described. Derrida observes, for example, that 'matter' in materialism designates a transcendental

⁷⁴ *Mar Eng*, p.79 / *Mar*, p.91

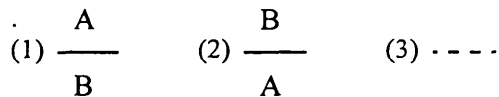
signified⁷⁵. Therefore, the Western metaphysical system is structured in a very specific way, and the hierarchical, oppositional structures are metaphysical; object of deconstruction is the metaphysical structure.

We have indicated the reasons why Derrida is reluctant to call deconstruction a technique or a method. However, the isomorphism of the metaphysical oppositions, as well as the displaced isomorphism of the chain of the undecidables, means that every deconstructive reading starts with the same structure and ends with another, but always the same, structure. I believe that one could describe deconstruction as a structural method proceeding through the following three steps⁷⁶: (1) Firstly, pairs of concepts are identified, one of which is usually more prominent and paradigmatic of the rest and on which the meaning of the text is based. Thus far, the method is similar to Greimas' semantic analysis. The relationship of the two elements that compose the pair is hierarchical; the second element is dependent, secondary, deficient in relation to the first. (2) Secondly, by a process of close reading, it is shown that the hierarchical relationship of the conceptual pair is actually inverted. The first term is necessarily associated with the second and, more than that, it depends on it. The claim is based on those 'aporetic' moments of the text, to which we referred earlier, which reveal the unintentional but necessary structure that supports its intentional or express meaning, while contradicting or subverting it. (3) The final step is the removal of the distinction between the two concepts of the pair. However, these three steps are not considered to constitute an evolutionary progress, among other reasons because of Derrida's particular arguments regarding temporality. They may be presented in a successive manner but they are supposed to be understood in a non-linear relation.

⁷⁵ *Pos*, pp.87-88 / *Pos Eng*, pp.64-65

⁷⁶ Christopher Norris and Rodolphe Gasché also give descriptions of deconstruction as a three-step process. See, for example, Norris, 'Deconstruction, Post-modernism and the visual arts' in *What is Deconstruction?*, (p.8); and Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*, p.171

This basically means that they are not to be understood as transcending each other; despite the obvious similarity to the Hegelian dialectical triad, they are not meant in this way. So, step one, despite being deconstructed is still considered necessary and is not annulled by the act of deconstruction⁷⁷, while steps two and three, the stages of deconstruction proper, are never fully ‘finished’. Step two, the ‘critical’ moment of inversion, is put into question by step three which suspends the very border between the opposed concepts. Step three is never carried right through because if it was it would lead to a new ‘metaphysical’ position, a new Hegelian ‘thesis’. This kind of co-existence of steps two and three, Derrida calls a ‘double register’. He particularly insists that one should never think of the second step as ‘surpassed’ as this would diminish the radicality of deconstruction⁷⁸.



[Figure 4.1. – deconstruction: a model]

Therefore, it is the chain of indecidables which,

itself [...] both spacious and mobile, gets caught in, but thereby disorganises, the whole ontological machine. It dislocates all oppositions⁷⁹

Deconstruction acts as ‘*mochlos*’⁸⁰ (μοχλός, lever) displacing the system of metaphysics. One observes the isomorphism between paleonymics, double reading, undecidables, the structure of signification and the (deconstructed) structure of metaphysics. The process and method of deconstruction, its concepts and tools, and its conclusion, all meet in the same structure of the three non-successive steps.

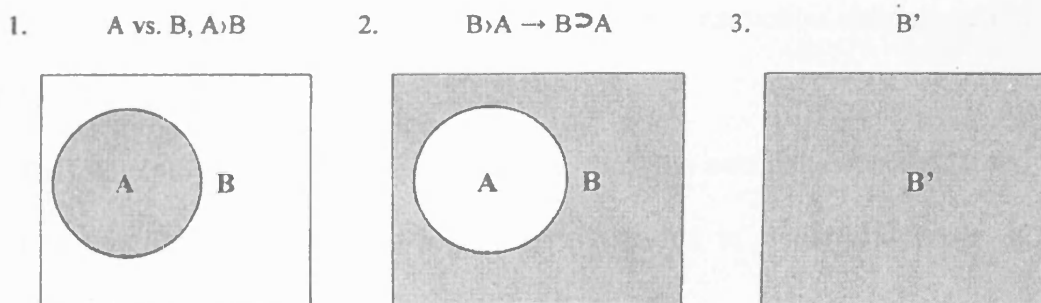
⁷⁷ ‘Any attempt to reverse [...] or escape it in one fell swoop by leaping out of it with both feet would only amount to an inevitable and immediate fall back into its system’, *Diss Eng*, p.217 / *Diss*, p.255

⁷⁸ *Pos*, pp.89-90 / *Pos Eng*, pp.66-67; and elsewhere.

⁷⁹ *Diss Eng*, p.244 / *Diss*, p.

⁸⁰ ‘*Mochlos* – ou le conflit des facultés’ (1980), in *Du droit à la philosophie*, 1990, pp.397-438 (pp.424,436)

Going back to the dual system of Western metaphysics, one wonders whether some couples are more paradigmatic from the others. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the entire problematic of signification is formed on the opposition 'intelligible/sensible', which indeed constitutes one of the foundational couples of Western metaphysics. I think, however, that the couple 'inside/outside' fills an even more important place, the most important place, because it constitutes the structural relationship on which the others rely. This structure is spatial. Actually, we could rephrase all three steps of deconstruction in spatial terms: (1) A is inside, B is outside of this inside. Their opposition is insurmountable: the outside is outside. A is self-sufficient, B is dependent to A. (2) A cannot be defined without B. B is the definitional borderline of A. Furthermore, the space of B includes the space of A. A is a sub-set of B. (3) B in its new revealed function, as more general than A and condition of possibility of their distinction, is re-named B'. Therefore, distinction between A and B cannot be absolute. In a sense, the opposition collapses. These three steps co-exist. They constitute a spatio-temporal structure, where the element of time cannot be reduced.



[Figure 4.2. – deconstruction: a spatial model]

We find that that this model makes better sense. It explains quite clearly why the devalued second is also the definitional borderline of the first and its super-set. In this

model, we can see that the paleonymic etymology of all the undecidables designates the term B, in its function either as ‘borderline’ or as ‘outside’: ‘in between’ or ‘outside’. As undecidables, B’s combine both functions as conditions of (im)possibility of the distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’: in between and/or outside the ‘inside/outside’ opposition.

Derrida is well aware that of all the couples of metaphysical oppositions it is

the opposition between inside and outside [that] must be accredited as the matrix of all possible opposition⁸¹

precisely because it constitutes the structural relationship on which the others rely.

The importance of topology in deconstruction is consistent with a theory which stresses relationships over essences, a structural theory. Moreover, deconstruction sets itself to examine signifying structures and, as we have seen, by definition in such structures topology is meaningful. The description of metaphysics and its deconstruction in purely topological terms reveals their underlying logics, which are irreducibly topological. As Derrida very clearly explains in *De la grammatologie*, the principle of classical ontology is that ‘the outside is outside’, whereas ‘the logic of supplementarity, which would have it that the outside be inside’⁸². Christopher Norris has extensively investigated the logical implications of deconstruction; deconstruction as a philosophy of logic.⁸³

The principle of Western metaphysics, i.e. that ‘the outside is outside’, is the logic of the excluded middle. This logic, from Aristotle to Boole and Frege, is

⁸¹ *Diss Eng*, p.106 / *Diss*, p.128; see also the successive sub-sections in *De la grammatologie* entitled ‘Le dehors et le dedans’ (The Outside and the Inside) and ‘Le dehors (est) dedans’ (The Outside (is) Inside).

⁸² *Gram Eng*, p.215 / *Gram*, p.308

⁸³ See, ‘Speech, Presence, Origins: from Hegel to Saussure’, in *Derrida*, pp.63-96 (pp.67-68, 91); ‘Supplementarity and Deviant Logics: Derrida *contra* Quine’ and ‘Excluded Middles: Quantum Theory and the Logic of Deconstruction’, in *Minding the Gap*, pp. 125-147, 148-171; ‘Derrida on Rousseau: Deconstruction as Philosophy of Logic’, in *Jacques Derrida*, pp. 70-124; ‘Deconstruction, Analysis and Deviant Logic: Derrida “At The Limits of Thought”’, in *Fiction, Philosophy and Literary Theory*, pp.9-34

interwoven with the linguistic form 'A is B'. Actually, it is the two forms 'A is A' and 'A is not non-A' that are its fundamental minimum principles. One can see how predication is interlinked with these principles. Derrida, citing Heidegger, reminds us that 'Western metaphysics [...] is produced as the domination of a linguistic form'⁸⁴. This logico-linguistic form is the matrix of all that Derrida calls 'onto-topological prejudices'⁸⁵. However, it is this same form that allows the distinction between concepts, categories, orders; it is the necessary condition for philosophising. Derrida accepts its necessity. His critique is not a rejection; and certainly not from any anti-philosophical point of view. As we have seen, Derrida is rigorous to the extreme, requiring the highest, the most absolute standards of logical consistency, in a logic of all or nothing. It is by following this logic to its limits that brings about its deconstruction. As he describes it in 'Afterword: Toward An Ethic of Discussion':

A concept determines itself only according to 'all or nothing'⁸⁶
[The logic of 'all or nothing'] must (and this 'must' translates the faithfulness of my love for philosophy) be sustained against all empirical confusion, to the point where the same demand of rigor requires the structure of that logic to be transformed and complicated⁸⁷

It is logic itself that leads to its deconstruction. Apart from the significant difference of philosophical style, Derrida's questioning of logic is very similar to Saul Kripke⁸⁸'s famous commentary on the difficulty of defining what it means to follow a rule, which boils down to the impossibility of defining the function of identity without already using it. The insurmountable problem is that logic, which functions as the ultimatum meta-language, is also a theory with its axioms and meta-linguistic rules, which – by definition – exceed it.

⁸⁴ *Gram Eng*, p.23 / *Gram*, p.37

⁸⁵ *Nom*, p.58

⁸⁶ *Lim*, p.116

⁸⁷ *Lim*, pp.122-123

⁸⁸ *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition*, 1982

So, Derrida follows the logic of Western metaphysics to its limits. The result is the strange ‘alogical logic’ of deconstruction.

[Deconstruction] takes into account the conditions of this classical and binary logic, but it no longer depends entirely upon it.

[Undecidables] must transform concepts, construct a different ‘logic’, a different ‘general theory’, perhaps even a discourse that, more powerful than this logic, will be able to account for it and reinscribe its possibility. This is what I try to do⁸⁹

The logic of deconstruction ‘would have it that outside be inside’; it is ‘a crisis of the versus’ and a blurring of the line between inside and outside. The supplement and the virus function as model structural (archi-)metaphors⁹⁰ for this logic. The virus, which lies in the definitional borderline between organic and inorganic, is a parasite which uses the genetic material of the organism it affects; an outside inside. The supplement, similarly, is both a superfluous addition and a necessary completion; an outside inside. This is the logic of supplementarity – and, precisely, ‘writing is the supplement par excellence’⁹¹. It is interesting to observe that the logic of supplementarity does not exceed only Boolean logic but it cannot be translated in the terms even of a deviant logic. For a logician, this is no logic at all. The reason must be Derrida’s effort to point towards the conditions of possibility of logic.

A last observation is that traditionally logic is considered non-spatial and non-temporal, by definition. However, Derrida shows that there is an inherent spatiality-topology in it. It is through this inherent spatiality that we are led to the logic of deconstruction. The realisation of the topology of the metaphysical opposition opens the way to comprehend that it is always already deconstructed. Simultaneously, the

⁸⁹ *Lim*, p.117

⁹⁰ The originarity of metaphoricity is one of the recurrent cases of deconstruction.

⁹¹ *Gram Eng*, p. 281 / *Gram*, p.398

logic of deconstruction introduces a novel spatiality too, the condition of possibility of any space and time and the difference between space and time; *khôra*⁹², *différance*.

This peculiar impossible topology has a paradigmatically problematic application in the super-set ‘Western metaphysics’. The question of the space of Western metaphysics is particularly pertinent because it is the field of application of deconstruction. It is the manifold in which all those structures and effects – metaphysical and deconstructed – take place; or rather the manifold that these structures constitute. Derrida has repeatedly addressed the impossibility of getting outside the text of Western metaphysics⁹³. He has also made it quite clear that ‘metaphysics’ is ‘Western metaphysics’ because the concept of ‘metaphysics’ belongs to the Western metaphysical discourse. There is no other metaphysics. This, however, is a Eurocentric position; it equals more or less in denying to non-Western thought many things, among which formal logic and scientific thought. I think that this may be one of the weakest points of the Derridean argument. It is actually revealing of the one serious problem inherent in the radical deconstructive critique: the fact that it elevates the object under critique to an insurmountable position of necessity – even if under deconstruction.

It always perplexed me that ‘Western metaphysics’ and ‘metaphysics’ end by becoming the same thing, and finally end in denoting the kind of thinking that makes possible the principle of non-contradiction. One should not forget that this kind of thinking, rational thinking *tout court*, has been the basis of all emancipation struggles and technological advancements. To claim that all this belongs solely to the West can hardly be pluralistic. What starts as an opening to the ‘other’, ends by denying this

⁹² See the text *Khôra*, 1993; as well as, *Nom*, p.58 and elsewhere. Derrida uses this Platonic term as undecidable.

⁹³ See for example, *Mar*, p.27 / *Mar Eng*, p.25

‘other’ certain human abilities. Actually, if one follows the Derridean argument about necessary impossibility, this ‘other’ comes close to annulment⁹⁴. So, the necessary impossible condition of being ‘Western’ ends by denoting the human condition. It shouldn’t come as a surprise that this position is perceived as paternalistic and imperialistic by non-Westerners. Exactly this point was made by Dr Li Victor, a Chinese researcher, whom I heard in a conference⁹⁵ arguing that all this critique of Eurocentricism was very Eurocentric. He then went on to propose as a remedy that we should forget Europe; which rather unsettled me⁹⁶. The proposition is somehow rough and certainly not in the Derridean ‘spirit’ but illuminates a lot of the delicately camouflaged political issues arising from the discourse regarding ‘Eurocentricism’. Considering philosophical thought as Eurocentric by definition is more imperialist than considering the so-called European philosophy as belonging to humanity.

Facing the Derridean description and critique of Western metaphysics, I was inclined to ask several questions; for example: For whom is it impossible to escape Western metaphysics? If Asia and Africa have been the margins – with all the deconstructive force of the term – of Europe, what has Europe been for Asia and Africa? Do we really think that there are not metaphysical and philosophical systems outside Europe? And what are those kinds of thought without borderlines and

⁹⁴ Derrida was very conscious himself of this structure in his critique of Levinas, *ED*, pp.117-228 / *WD*, pp.97-192; yet, he doesn’t investigate the question regarding the non-Westerners, possibly because he starts from an internal point of view of Western metaphysics. This is apparent in the ‘Letter to A Japanese Friend’, for example. He explains why ‘deconstruction’ cannot be univocally and unproblematically translated into languages other than French; however, all the languages that he mentions are Indo-European. He does not address the problem of Japanese being a non-Western language. What makes particular interesting Derrida’s ‘internal’ point of view are his own biographical details: an Algerian Jewish writer who claims to speak only French; ‘je reste obstinément monolingue [...] Je lis l’allemand, je peux enseigner en anglais, mais mon attachement à la langue française est absolu’ ‘Du mot à la vie : un dialogue entre Jacques Derrida et Hélène Cixous’, *magazine littéraire*, No 430, April 2004, pp.22-29 (p.25). He exemplifies the topical structure of *différance*.

⁹⁵ *Following Derrida: Legacies*, organized by the journal *Mosaic*, Winnipeg, Canada, October 2006

⁹⁶ It seems to me that the point is to remember the others than to forget Europe. It would be terrible to forget both the gifts and terrors of Europe – such as democracy and Enlightenment, colonisation and the Holocaust. I just think that Europe belongs to the world, rather than being the world.

margins, so completely outside our categorical distinctions? And, by the way, why is Western metaphysics contemporary, i.e. it can be traced from the past until this moment, whereas every example of the thought of the 'other' is situated somewhere in the past, such as Confucius, the Koran etc? We cannot even start to answer these questions in the frame of my thesis. We will just note that, whereas the Derridean discourse can offer no answers to them, it has been very helpful in revealing their complexity.

Western metaphysics and philosophy has always included a notion of simultaneity and universality, of 'getting out of time and place', as a structure if not as a premise. Moreover, Western philosophy has always included a critique of Western philosophy, an element of self-reference, combined with a desire to 'have the last word', to end philosophy by giving it its final correct formulation. I think that in a certain way Derrida fits this tradition, precisely as all the past 'destructors' do: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Freud, and Marx; and structuralism too.

Summarising this sub-section, we have seen that the Derridean project relies on the close interconnection between metaphysics and semiotics. As Western metaphysics is basically a theory of representation, epistemology becomes identical to a theory of signification. The constitutive relation of signification – 'signifier vs. signified', 'sensible vs. intelligible' – determines, rather than being determined by, the other metaphysical oppositions. On this matrix, all metaphysical couples repeat the same structural relation between an outside and an inside, where the outside is proved as the definitional super-set of the inside. The unexpected primacy of semiotics over epistemology, as well as metaphysics, is explained by this same structure. The relations 'signification vs. knowledge', 'knowledge vs. metaphysics', 'signification vs. metaphysics' all repeat the relation 'signifier vs. signified' – and as

we have seen, the undervalued term is proved the condition of possibility of the supposedly primary one.

Structuralist semiotics has been historically the first theory to treat semiotics as radically prior to epistemology. It is also the source of Derrida's theory of signification, which acts as a filter for his epistemology and critique of metaphysics. Therefore, its deconstruction is particularly significant for the entire deconstructive project.

4.4. Deconstruction of structuralist semiotics

Preliminarily, I should note that Derrida conceives of structuralism in a slightly different way than our approach of chapter 3, both because he takes into account a general 'structuralist' ambience that was dominant when he started writing, which was not necessarily consistent with received structuralist theoretical texts, and because structuralist semiotics has since incorporated elements of his critique and my presentation is unavoidably engrafted with it. In this sub-section, I present Derrida's deconstructive critique of structuralist semiotics as organised around the interrelated notions of sign, writing and structure; and then some more general issues regarding the 'philosophical style' of the movement, as well as its inscription in general structuralism. Along with this, I make a few short comments regarding possible counter arguments.

Derrida assigns two different roles to structuralist semiotics⁹⁷, as he puts it in his interview of 1968 with Julia Kristeva⁹⁸: one critical and one metaphysical; as we

⁹⁷ He actually calls it 'semiology of the Saussurean type', *Pos Eng*, p.18 / *Pos*, p.28. This, on the one hand, is a generic term, designating all that I have defined earlier as 'structuralist semiotics', which includes both Jakobson's and Hjelmslev's schools of semiotics. On the other, however, it allows him to differentiate it from the work of subsequent semioticians, such as Jakobson's and Hjelmslev's. Derrida is making a point in showing that Saussure is more radical than some of his followers, such as Jakobson and Barthes, whereas he is less consistent than some others, mainly Hjelmslev.

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shall see, the former is the source of his own project and the latter an exemplary object of deconstruction. The metaphysical role of structuralist semiotics concerns its inscription into Western metaphysics, by the means of its continuing use of the concept of the sign. Its critical role concerns its radical redefinition of the semiotic, which constitutes the basis for the deconstruction of the sign and its metaphysics, the one and only metaphysics. Structuralist semiotics is simultaneously the culmination of the metaphysics of the sign – ‘inflation of the sign itself, absolute inflation, inflation itself’⁹⁹ – and a radical rupture with it. Structuralist semiotics is, in a way, the limit case of Western metaphysics, and as such provides an ideal vantage-point for its deconstruction.

In the highly illuminating interview with Kristeva, Derrida explains that the crux of structuralist semiotics’ inscription into Western metaphysics is its continuing use of the concept of the sign, in spite of its radical redefinition. He argues that no concept can be used in a completely novel way.

One necessarily assumes, in a non-critical way, at least some of the implications inscribed in its system. [...] ‘[E]veryday language’ is not innocent or neutral. It is the language of Western metaphysics, and it carries with it [...] presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics.¹⁰⁰

These presuppositions he summarises as the following four: the differentiation between the signifier and the signified, the privileging of speech, the importance of the phonic (vocal) substance and psychologism. All of these positions have been refuted by structuralist semiotics since its beginning, since Saussure, and it is in structuralist semiotics that Derrida finds the tools for their – and every – deconstruction. Unlike other texts which are explicitly metaphysical and in which Derrida reveals their latent auto-deconstructive structure, structuralist texts are

⁹⁸ ‘Sémiologie et grammatologie’ in *Pos*, pp.25-50 / *Pos Eng*, pp. 15-36

⁹⁹ *Gram Eng*, p.6 / *Gram*, p.15

¹⁰⁰ *Pos Eng*, p.19 / *Pos*, p.29

explicitly counter-metaphysical, in a way very close to Derrida's project. It is a second, mostly unconscious level which is proved to be still metaphysical and then this is deconstructed using tools from the explicit level of meaning. This inversion alone is sufficient to show the exceptional and privileged position of structuralist semiotics for the deconstructive project.

Cours de linguistique générale is not a unified and consistent text. We have seen how all texts are necessarily inconsistent; however, because of its editorial history, *CLG* exemplifies the nature of every text in a very direct and striking way. The courses were spread over a long period of time in which the concepts were progressively formed; they were addressed to a student audience and presented progressively for educational reasons, possibly also simplified for the same reasons; and the material of the courses was never revised by Saussure, who would apply the (would-be) unifying intension of an author¹⁰¹. The result is a book which is self-contradictory even by lower standards of consistency than Derrida's.

As we have seen, the most radical novelty introduced in *CLG* is the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness, which, along with the vision of a new science of signs, became the starting point of structuralist semiotics. The passages of *CLG* organised around this novelty are the canonical reference for every structuralist semiotician. Nevertheless, there are several other passages of different degrees of inconsistency with the radical principle and its implications; these passages – when identified as such – have been treated by the structuralists with attitudes ranging from slight embarrassment to complete disregard. Moreover, structuralist semiotics has been a new field, having to make its own way; thus, it always shows different degrees

¹⁰¹ The function of an editor is by custom different from that of the writer, despite the fact that the two roles always mingle with each other; editors are invested with less authoritative power. Therefore, *CLG* as a book was not ever subjected to any strong authoritative unifying force.

of consistency regarding its own principles, mirroring in a way the contradictions of *CLG*. Accordingly, there are two levels in which Derrida is ‘oppos[ing] Saussure to himself’¹⁰²: on the one hand, he deconstructs the passages that don’t live up to the radicality of the Saussurean novelty; on the other, he shows that even the radical passages carry with them a metaphysical residue. This latter critique is, I think, more important. Up to the point of deconstructing the non-radical passages, Derrida is perfectly inscribed into the structuralist semiotic tradition of progressive self-improvement; turning the structuralist radicality upon itself, however, brings it up against its limits and shows its inherent insurmountable contradictions. This really affects structuralist semiotics as a project.

The concept of the sign constitutes, according to Derrida, simultaneously a progress and an impediment to the deconstruction of metaphysics¹⁰³. His argument is that structuralist semiotics exemplifies this double function as it completely empties the concept of all its metaphysical content, and yet still continues to use it, becoming in this way imprisoned in its metaphysical implications; for the concept of sign, even thus emptied, still carries the imprint of the subtracted premises.

The structure that ties the concept of sign to metaphysics is the following: The concept of sign is insolubly connected with the division between signified and signifier. This distinction, on the one hand, relies on the difference between the sensible and the intelligible, which organises Western metaphysics. On the other, in order for this distinction to be possible, it is necessary that it imply the reference to a transcendental signified¹⁰⁴, which is the metaphysical element *par excellence*. It is a

¹⁰² *Gram*, p.77 / *Gram Eng*, p.52

¹⁰³ *Pos*, p. 27 / *Pos Eng*, p.17

¹⁰⁴ ‘The semiological [...] “science” cannot hold the difference between signifier and signified – the very idea of the sign [...] without retaining [...] the reference to a signified able to “take place” in its intelligibility’, *Gram Eng*, p.13 / *Gram*, p.25; and ‘There has to be a transcendental signified for the

circular structure in which the sign as the division between a signified and a signifier is simultaneously the product and the matrix of Western metaphysics¹⁰⁵. Structuralist semiotics puts at risk the metaphysical certainties by introducing a radically relational definition of the signifier and the signified, which no longer differ in kind. Yet, for Derrida, even their nominal use ties the user to their metaphysical background. This borderline position of Saussurean semiotics is acknowledged – for example – in the following passages from *De la grammatologie* [the Italics are mine]:

The sign always implies within itself the distinction between signifier and signified, *even if, as Saussure argues, they are distinguished simply as the two faces of one and the same leaf*¹⁰⁶

The difference between signified and signifier, *or at least the strange separation of their 'parallelism', and the exteriority, however extenuated, of one to the other [...] bring[s] with it all its metaphysico-theological roots*¹⁰⁷

Thus, according to Derrida, the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible forms all the oppositions of Western metaphysics, which allow delimitations and categorical distinctions:

The distinction of the sensible and the intelligible [...] with all that it controls, namely, metaphysics in its totality¹⁰⁸

The distinction between signifier and signifier, as one of the metaphysical distinctions, its paradigmatic one, is formed on this fundamental opposition.

The semiological [...] 'science' cannot hold the difference between signifier and signified – the very idea of the sign – without the difference between the sensible and the intelligible¹⁰⁹

The difference between the signifier and the signified has always reproduced the difference between the sensible and the intelligible¹¹⁰

Structuralist semiotics constitutes a drastic rupture with this tradition as, already in the Saussurean text, signifier and signified are defined as inseparable and of the same

difference between signifier and signified to be somewhere absolute and irreducible', *Gram Eng*, p.20 / *Gram*, p.33

¹⁰⁶ *Gram Eng*, p.11 / *Gram*, p.23

¹⁰⁷ *Gram Eng*, p.13 / *Gram*, p.24

¹⁰⁸ *Gram Eng*, p.13 / *Gram*, p.24

¹⁰⁹ *Gram Eng*, p.13 / *Gram*, p.25

¹¹⁰ *Pos Eng*, p.98 / *Pos*, p.29

– ‘psychological’ – nature. Hjelmslev makes these premises clearer, defining the sign-function as constituted by two completely interdependent and interchangeable planes, both of which are divided into form and substance. Moreover, the very concept of structure belongs to – or rather constitutes – an intermediate realm, where the sensible and the intelligible intermingle. One must also observe that the concept of sign, even in its traditional definition, carries an element of surpassing the intelligible/sensible division, despite its being determined by it: it is the point of co-existence of these apparently mutually exclusive opposites – in their many disguises we have already met, such signified and signifier, form and substance, content and form, content and expression etc. As Derrida reminds us in *L’écriture et la différence*, Lévi-Strauss ‘sought to transcend the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible by operating [...] at the level of the signs’¹¹¹. Nevertheless, Derrida insists that

the concept of the sign cannot in itself surpass this opposition between the sensible and the intelligible. The concept of the sign, in each of its aspects, has been determined by this opposition throughout the totality of its history. It has lived only on this opposition and its system¹¹²

But then again, it is precisely this generalised isomorphism that makes the displacement from one level of the system to another and the subsequent collapse of the distinctions possible; which possibility deconstruction unfailingly exploits.

The system of metaphysics needs the reference to a transcendental signified, a point escaping its generalised isomorphism, in order to stabilise itself.

A concept signified in and of itself, a concept simply present for thought, independent of a relationship to language, that is of a relationship to a system of signifiers¹¹³

A point in the system where the signifier can no longer be replaced by its signified, so no longer any signifier can¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, as cited in *WD*, p.355 / *ED*, p.412

¹¹² *WD*, p.355 / *ED*, p.412-413

¹¹³ *Pos Eng*, p.19 / *Pos*, p.30

¹¹⁴ *Gram Eng*, p. 266/*Gram*, p. 376

Correspondingly and paradigmatically, the distinction between signifier and signified depends on this stabilising element.

The semiological [...] “science” cannot hold the difference between signifier and signified – the very idea of the sign [...] without retaining [...] the reference to a signified able to ‘take place’ in its intelligibility, before its “fall”, before any expulsion into the exteriority of the sensible here below¹¹⁵

There has to be a transcendental signified for the difference between signifier and signified to be somewhere absolute and irreducible¹¹⁶

Structuralist semiotics, once again, does not allow the existence of a transcendental signified. As an immediate consequence of the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness, the signified does not exist independently of and previously to the semiotic articulation. What Derrida interprets as a latent reference to a transcendental signified by structuralist semiotics is its use of categorical distinctions. According to his argument, only the position of a transcendental signified would make possible categorical distinctions. It is what he names the ‘centre’ of a structure and, as we shall see later, he considers that structuralism, although emptying it of determinate content, still makes use of its function.

Derrida describes two ways of erasing the difference between the signified and the signifier: the first, the metaphysical way, is submitting the signifier to the signified; whereas the second, the critical way, is putting under interrogation the system that produces the difference as an effect¹¹⁷. Structuralist semiotics combines both. Derrida names its metaphysical aspect ‘psychologism’; its critical aspect is organised around the fundamental semiotic arbitrariness, as is the project of deconstruction. In order to avoid the danger of sliding from a critical to a metaphysical stand, one has to destabilise the opposition between signifier and

¹¹⁵ *Gram Eng*, p.13 / *Gram*, p.25

¹¹⁶ *Gram Eng*, p.20 / *Gram*, p.33

¹¹⁷ *ED*, p. 413 / *WD*, p.355

signified without ‘confusing [them] at every level, and in all simplicity’¹¹⁸. This is, our well-known by now, structure of deconstruction: steps two and three co-exist, the final collapse of distinctions is never enacted; a kind of destabilised duality must be retained in order to avoid the return to the metaphysics of the One.

As Derrida observes

the thematics of the sign have been for about a century the agonized labor of a tradition that professed to withdraw meaning, truth, presence, being, etc, from the movement of signification¹¹⁹

Structuralist semiotics is the culmination of this effort. As we have seen in the previous chapter, it constitutes a significant break with the tradition of metaphysical thought on the topic of signification. Derrida analyses this tradition at great length and his critique mostly coincides, even stems from, structuralist semiotics. Signification as representation¹²⁰ and as expression¹²¹ is refuted by the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness which prescribes that, in Derrida’s words, ‘there is no presence before the semiological difference’¹²². Similarly, the concept of the subject is much weakened; already in Saussure ‘*langue* is not a function of the speaking subject’¹²³.

What, according to Derrida, is still deeply inscribed in metaphysics is the concept of communication, which holds a central position in structuralist semiotic theory, substituting for the more metaphysically laden concepts of representation and expression. As he explains in ‘Signature Événement Contexte’¹²⁴, but also in ‘Limited

¹¹⁸ *Pos Eng*, p.20 / *Pos*, p.31

¹¹⁹ *Gram Eng*, p.14 / *Gram*, p.26

¹²⁰ *ED*, p.412 / *WD*, pp.354-355; *Mar*, pp.9-10 / *Mar Eng*, pp.9-10

¹²¹ *Pos*, p.32 / *Pos Eng*, p.22 ; *Lim*, p.66

¹²² *Mar Eng*, p.12 / *Mar*, p.12

¹²³ *CLG*, p.30, cited in *Mar*, p.16 / *Mar Eng*, p.15

¹²⁴ *Mar*, pp. 365-393 / *Mar Eng*, pp.307-330 / *Lim*, pp.1-21

Inc a b c'¹²⁵ and other texts, the concept of communication presupposes a unified and intentional meaning, and is inscribed in a vicious circle between the literal and metaphorical meaning of metaphoricity. The difference between denotation and connotation¹²⁶ and the possibility of disambiguation of polysemy¹²⁷, which are necessary for the definition of the concept of communication, already beg the question and rely strongly on a latent intentionality.

Derrida's deconstruction of the subject is more extreme, in a way more metaphysically oriented, than the position of structuralist semiotics. Semiotics has never extended the field of application of its claims beyond the semiotic realm; that is why the co-existence of real human subjects with the dissolution of the semiotic subject into an effect of *langue* does not really constitute a contradiction. The process of semiosis can be an exchange between intentional beings even if the communicated signification is not unique, univocal, fully transmissible and, most importantly, consciously controllable by its producer. Deconstruction, however, questions the relation between the semiotic and its beyond, and cannot afford this, or any, categorical distinction to be absolute. Therefore, the subject cannot have a transcendental existence, outside signification. If taken literally, Derrida's claims lead him to a view of signification as an empty, self-generating machine¹²⁸; this view is consonant with contemporary arguments regarding artificial intelligence and genetics. Nevertheless, this would have been a very un-Derridean gesture, because we have seen the difficulty of 'taking (anything) literally' (or not) in the context of his project and, particularly, because this would mean 'jumping with both feet' to the last step of

¹²⁵ *Lim*, pp.29-110

¹²⁶ See also the argument about metaphoricity in *De la grammatologie*

¹²⁷ See also 'La dissémination' and *Pos*, p.62 / *Pos Eng*, p.45

¹²⁸ See, for example, *Papier Machine: Le ruban de machine à écrire et autres réponses*, 2001

deconstruction. Norris gives an interpretation of the Derridean position which is very close to structuralism:

What is at issue is not the intentionality of language – the precondition of all understanding – but the belief that texts must always point back to their source in a moment of pure, self-authorised meaning [...] Language is intentional through and through, but not in the sense that its meaning either could or should be confined to what the author (supposedly) intended¹²⁹.

In any case, what would strike a structuralist semiotician as peculiar in the Derridean argument is that he cannot account for what signs are *for*; he cannot even pose the question. For the structuralist the answer would be, precisely, communication¹³⁰.

For Derrida, firstly, the concept of the sign organises the system of Western metaphysics and, as such, is indispensable to our thought. Secondly, as it carries the entire system with it, it imprisons our thought in metaphysics. Thirdly, being the key-joint of the system, it makes possible and even initiates its deconstruction.

From the outset, structuralist semioticians realised that the central concept of their science was ill matched with their object of investigation, though their concerns were less philosophical than Derrida's. As we have seen, already Saussure observes that the unit of signification may be smaller or larger than the word. Hjelmslev replaces the concept of sign with the concept of sign-function, which includes from a prefix to an entire semiotic-*langue*, and also covers any semiotic manifestation. By the mid-60's, structuralist semiotic theory – with or without the 'post' prefix – had turned its interest in the less studied parts of the semiotic phenomenon: the signifier, the syntagmatic relation, the process, the use and production of signification. All this was exemplified by the 'text'¹³¹ and 'writing', which took the place of 'language' as

¹²⁹ Derrida, p.113

¹³⁰ We have described in Chapter 3 the multiplicity of functions according Jakobson. However, communication constitutes the super-category under which all of them are classified.

¹³¹ We have seen in chapter 3 the use of 'text' by Hjelmslev. According to Eco, the post-structuralist use of the term was introduced by Christian Metz, *Theory of Semiotics*, p.57

the paradigmatic cases of signification. So, by the time Derrida published his first works:

Everything that for at least some twenty centuries tended toward and finally succeeded in being gathered under the name of language [was] beginning to let itself be transferred to, or at least summarized under, the name of writing¹³²

This tendency is exemplified by the studies of the *Tel Quel* group, with which Derrida was quite closely connected for some time. So we see that the idea that writing is the more generative term of which speech is just a species was much widespread at the time. What Derrida did was to explain this in philosophical terms; one may even say, in metaphysical terms. He observed that in the metaphysical discourse writing is defined in terms of sensibility and exteriority, and that the identification of the two provides the matrix-structure of Western metaphysics. He introduced the concept of 'transcendental signified' by opposition to all the traditional attributes of writing in order to designate the function shared by the privileged 'first' terms of all metaphysical oppositions.

Once again, structuralist semiotics provides the step between metaphysics and its deconstruction. That is why Derrida is particularly interested in Saussure's approach to writing. He considers it a 'privileged example', of which the peculiarity however 'does not interfere with the generality of [his] argument'¹³³. We have already described the structuralist semiotic approach to writing in chapter three. Now we will concentrate on how it is presented in *CLG* and its critique by Derrida, who brings into relief the text's contradiction between the radicality of the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness and a certain phonocentric prejudice.

Saussure is the first to claim that

¹³² *Gram Eng*, p.6 / *Gram*, p.16

¹³³ *Gram Eng*, p.29 / *Gram*, p.44

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The essential in language [*langue*]... has nothing to do with the phonic character of the linguistic sign¹³⁴.

This is, of course, an immediate consequence of his differential definition of the sign and the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness¹³⁵. Nevertheless, he defines writing as a system of signs distinct from (spoken) language whose ‘unique *raison d’ être*’ is to represent it¹³⁶. Here, he already uses the term ‘*langue*’ in a slippery way, as he clearly means ‘spoken language’, although this contradicts the more general definition of the term. The definition of writing as a second degree semiotic system¹³⁷ is not intended as pejorative; however, Derrida rightly observes that it includes hidden premises and unwanted implications¹³⁸. On the one hand, it is based on phonetic writing; so, it already assumes what it proves, by choosing as paradigmatic case the kind of writing that is most closely related to speech. This constitutes a sign both of phonocentrism and of ethnocentrism, Eurocentrism, as it is European writings that are mostly phonographic. Saussure’s preference of phonetic writing, which he deems more rational, is evident in his classification of the systems of writing¹³⁹. On the other hand, by designating writing as representation of speech, he re-introduces the concept of representation in the semiotic relation. The principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness dictates that the relation between signified and signifier is not one of representation; Saussure’s definition of writing contradicts it. If

¹³⁴ *CLG*, p.21

¹³⁵ Derrida describes it as a ‘principal affirmation’, *Gram Eng*, p.42 / *Gram*, p.63

¹³⁶ *CLG*, p.45

¹³⁷ Incidentally, this definition coincides with Hjelmslev’s definition of higher-degree semiotics; according to the first classification, it would be a meta-semiotic.

¹³⁸ *Gram*, p.46 / *Gram Eng*, p.30

¹³⁹ Saussure’s classification of the systems of writing is exceptionally short and uninspired; *CLG*, pp.47-48. It is limited into two categories: ideographic and phonetic writing, the latter divided into syllabic and alphabetic. Derrida comments on its burden of metaphysical assumptions, *Gram*, pp.49-50 / *Gram Eng*, pp.32-33.

it is a semiotic system, as Saussure clearly thinks¹⁴⁰, then it cannot be representation of anything¹⁴¹.

Saussure goes at great length to argue that the object of linguistics is spoken and not written language. One of the main assumptions that organize this contradictory current in *CLG* is that the way of communication that is natural to humankind is spoken language. There are many different issues that converge in the course of this argument and Derrida is very thorough in untangling them; among them, what is natural and what is artificial, what is arbitrary and what is not. We must not forget, however, that Saussure himself cautions us that

it is not proven that the function of language the way it is manifested when we speak is completely natural¹⁴²

What he really is arguing against is the customary predisposition of the linguists until his time to disregard spoken language as an object of study and limit their researches to written material. So he is actually arguing against a dominant *pro-writing* prejudice, which is as old as its devaluation. Derrida has not given much attention to this part of the Western metaphysical tradition, which expressly supports the primacy of writing. Saussure's struggle against an established attitude and his feeling of breaking new ground partially explains the passionate language used in this argument. Nevertheless, it remains the fact that his expressions concerning writing, if indeed they are his, are startlingly emotional compared to the rest of *CLG* and invested with negative evaluation; for example: 'unfortunate', 'illegitimate', 'tyranny', 'pathological', 'monstrosity', 'teratological', and the verbs 'usurp' and 'trick'. It is interesting to notice that one of the main accusations against writing concerns its

¹⁴⁰ *CLG*, pp.33, 45, 165

¹⁴¹ 'the arbitrariness of the sign... must forbid a radical distinction between the linguistic and the graphic sign', *Gram Eng*, p.44 / *Gram*, p.65

¹⁴² *CLG*, p. 25

discrepancies with spoken language¹⁴³; the very same characteristic that led Hjelmslev to classify writings as independent semiotic systems.

One of the things that Derrida was probably the first to pay attention to is how often Saussure uses the example of writing for the definition of other concepts¹⁴⁴. Derrida cannot but be particularly interested in the fact that ‘four demonstrating items, borrowing pattern and content from writing’¹⁴⁵ are used in the definition of linguistic value, which is the basis both of structuralist semiotics and the deconstructive project. Another interesting observation regards the length and position of the passages dedicated to writing¹⁴⁶; although at least the latter should rather be attributed to the editors than to Saussure. These observations locate *aporias*, moments of inconsistency which lead to the deconstruction of a hierarchical structure, as we have previously described the usual deconstructive process. The peculiarity of this case is that these are inconsistencies within an inconsistency.

Therefore, Saussure’s conception of writing is inscribed within the tradition of Western metaphysics and in contradiction with his general theory. Its leading thread is writing’s exteriority to (spoken) language, which Derrida by his critique shows to be structurally impossible¹⁴⁷. He shows that there is no way to draw a line where writing begins. His criticism concentrates on the implied phonocentrism of Saussure’s view of writing and how it is inconsistent with his general theory. He stresses the

¹⁴³ *CLG*, pp.47-54

¹⁴⁴ The example of writing is used in the definition of the acoustic image (p.32), of the semiotic system (p.33) and of linguistic value (pp.165-166); it is also used several times to clarify issues of phonology (e.g., pp.81-82).

¹⁴⁵ *Gram Eng*, p.52 / *Gram*, p.76

¹⁴⁶ There is reference to writing just before the famous passage predicting the birth of the science of signs (p.33); the chapter VI of the Introduction, entitled ‘The representation of language by writing’ (pp.44-54) precedes the chapter entitled ‘Phonology’ (pp.55-61); most of the chapter ‘Phonology’ is dedicated once again to writing (pp.56-61), whereas even the two pages that are not use five times terms derived from writing; finally, even in the appendix to the Introduction entitled ‘Principles of Phonology’ (pp.63-95), entire paragraphs deal with or refer to writing (pp.64-65, 77, 81-82, 91-95)

¹⁴⁷ *Gram*, pp.44-69 / *Gram Eng*, pp.29-47

importance of the reduction of phonic substance for Saussure, without which it would never be possible to maintain the difference between *langue* and *parole*¹⁴⁸. Elsewhere, however, he also argues that the reduction of substance leads him to metaphysics by another route, by the means of psychologism¹⁴⁹. Most of Saussure's followers are laden with the same prejudices; a notable exception, noticed by Derrida, is Hjelmslev.

I would add two observations. Firstly, Saussure's phonocentrism is less dependent on the metaphysics of presence than is usually the case with the texts that Derrida deconstructs. It is crucial that in the distinction *langue/parole*, Saussure gives primacy to *langue*. It is language, not speech, that he considers as his object of study, despite the latent premise of 'spoken' language. It can hardly be claimed that self-presence is central to his discourse as it is precisely the non-presentable structure that interests him. After all, he initiates the movement from linguistics to semiotics, away from languages and toward semiotic systems¹⁵⁰. It is precisely this privileging of structure that attracted the charge of psychologism, despite the fact that he perceived structure as something of both social and 'concrete'¹⁵¹ reality. The importance of spoken language for Saussure does not lie with *phone*, the voice, but rather with the definition of natural language. Secondly, Derrida himself is not completely free of this form of phonocentrism. All his complicated argument about writing and the interplay of semiotic substances never really includes other semiotic systems than

¹⁴⁸ *Gram*, p. 77 / *Gram Eng*, p. 53

¹⁴⁹ *Mar*, pp.87, 184 / *Mar Eng*, pp.76, 152

¹⁵⁰ Derrida noticed that and situated his own project in a continuation of this movement, as we shall see in the next sub-section. It is interesting to notice that Saussure uses the example of writing in order to explain the 'concreteness' of *langue*, *CLG*, p.32

¹⁵¹ I have explained earlier the use of the term 'psychological' by Saussure and his fear of the term 'abstract'

natural languages; his approaches to other semiotic systems rely strongly on lexical meaning¹⁵².

Langue brings us back to the concept of structure, which likewise does not escape from metaphysics, although in a way,

like all questions about language, [it] escapes the classical history of ideas which already supposes [its] possibility¹⁵³

The system of metaphysics is itself a structure and the metaphysical concept of structure doubles the structure of metaphysics. Most importantly, in order to speak of that structure, to recognise and criticise it and even deconstruct it, we already need some notion of structure, though not necessarily in its metaphysical definition. We have seen, however, how names have the habit of dragging with them unwanted presuppositions. Deconstruction, even to the degree that it is anti-structuralist, needs to be structural, a structural process of de-structuring¹⁵⁴.

In the text 'Force et signification'¹⁵⁵ Derrida is addressing the literary structuralism of his time and thereby issues about the concept of structure. He claims that in practice, if not in theory, structure had become the literary object itself, and this in a literal sense. He analyses the implications of the interplay between the literal and metaphorical sense of structure. Structure, he explains, literally means – or rather initially meant – a construction.

Only metaphorically was this *topographical* literality displaced in the direction of its [...] *topical* signification¹⁵⁶.

Obviously, the structuralist definition of structure is topical and has detached itself from its topographical past. Derrida argues, however, that by not acknowledging its

¹⁵² We will return to this later.

¹⁵³ WD, p.2 / ED, p.11; the claim is made for 'structuralism' but fits 'structure' too.

¹⁵⁴ See *Letter*; and Marian Hobson's comment: 'Does the *de* apply to *con*, or do they simultaneously gesture in different though not opposed directions?', in *Opening Lines*, p.16

¹⁵⁵ In *ED*, pp.9-49 / *WD*, pp.1-35

¹⁵⁶ *WD*, p.17 / *ED*, p.28

initially metaphorical origin, structuralists often fall back in practice onto the topographical sense of the concept¹⁵⁷. This practical fetishism of structure was often noticed and cautioned against by structuralists themselves and I don't think it really affects the structuralist definition of structure. A more interesting question is whether

the fact that language can determine things only by spatializing them suffice to explain that, in return, language must spatialize itself as soon as it designates and reflects upon itself¹⁵⁸

And the most interesting part of this interesting question regards the topical, rather than the topographical, sense of 'spatialization'.

Derrida argues that inherent in the concept of structure are notions of 'form, relation, configuration' but also of 'interdependence' and 'totality'¹⁵⁹. It is this 'totality' that one finds more difficult to trace in the completely relational definition of structuralist structure, although it is less difficult for one to feel in the ambience of the structuralist movement the 'totalitarian desire' that Derrida describes¹⁶⁰. In the milestone text 'La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines'¹⁶¹, Derrida deals with the rupture in the traditional definition of the structure that culminates in his own time – the 'event' as he calls it. He claims that traditionally the concept of structure involves a tension between its 'structurality' and the tendency to orient and immobilise it by giving it a centre:

The structurality of structure – although it has always been at work, has always been neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a centre or of referring it to a point of presence [...] The function of this centre was not only to

¹⁵⁷ 'as long as the metaphorical sense of the notion of the structure is not acknowledged *as such*, that is to say interrogated and even destroyed as concerns its figurative quality so that the nonspatiality or original spatiality designated by it may revive, one runs the risk, through a kind of sliding as unnoticed as it is *efficacious*, of confusing meaning with its geometric, morphological, or, in the best of cases, cinematic model', *WD*, p.18 / *ED*, p.29; a similar question is posed by Gaston Bachelard in *La poétique de l'espace*, 1957

¹⁵⁸ *WD*, p.18 / *ED*, p.28

¹⁵⁹ *WD*, p.3 / *ED*, p.12

¹⁶⁰ See, for example, *ED*, p.88 / *WD*, p.69

¹⁶¹ First presented in 1966; published in *ED*, pp.409-427 / *WD*, p.351-370

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orient, balance and organize [it] [...] but above all to [...] limit what we may call the *play* of the structure.¹⁶²

The centre is the point where the substitution of elements is forbidden; as such it escapes structurality, despite the fact that it controls the structure. Therefore, in its traditional definition the structure has a centre which is ‘paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it’¹⁶³. It is this centre with regard to the structure of Western metaphysics, which Derrida names ‘transcendental signified’. However, at some point in the history of ideas it became necessary to think

that there was no centre, that the centre [...] was not a fixed locus but a function [...] This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic¹⁶⁴

This process of decentralisation of structure Derrida traces through Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger to the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss. He argues, however, that structuralism needs to keep the empty space of centre despite its ontological non-value, which it does by its practice of methodological ‘*bricolage*’. He also argues for not choosing between the ordered game of structure and the possibility of free play, for trying ‘to conceive of their common ground and the *différance* of this irreducible difference’¹⁶⁵.

I think that one must stress that the structuralist definition of structure does *not* include a centre. I suppose that it wouldn’t forbid the possibility that a structure might have a centre, but it is not one of its definitional characteristics and it certainly does not apply to *langues*-semiotics as structures. Derrida’s sense of centre functions in a meta-theoretical level and translates, on the one hand, a certain staticness-stability and, on the other, a latent premise of autonomy. As regards the former point, it can be analysed into the common accusation of the staticness of structure and the

¹⁶² *WD*, p.352 / *ED*, p.409

¹⁶³ *ibid*

¹⁶⁴ *WD*, p.353-354 / *ED*, p.411

¹⁶⁵ *WD*, p.370 / *ED*, p.428

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more ‘structural’ observation regarding the possibility of distinctions. Structuralism is commonly accused of reducing historicity and generally the dimension of temporality, making it depend on and derive from the synchronic structure. We have already addressed this criticism in Chapter 3, and how it stems from a misunderstanding of the provisional and methodological choice of point of view that Saussure makes in *CLG*. The question of the possibility of holding any distinction goes ‘deeper’. Structuralist semioticians indeed make use of categorical distinctions and distinctions of order, despite their constantly cautioning us as regards their relativity; their models are clear-cut. If the possibility of such clarity is founded on the (even latent) existence of a centre, as Derrida argues, then – in this sense – structuralist structures are centred.

The other point leading to a conception of the structuralist structure as centred is the premise of autonomy included in its definition. We have already argued that ‘autonomy’ does not mean ‘closed-ness’. *Langues*-semiotics, at least, are not considered as closed systems. A certain notion of autonomy is implied by the fact that it is possible for an element not to belong in a structure. What we have here, however, is an unavoidable confusion between different orders of spatiality. As the elements of a completely relational structure are products of the structure alone, there should not be any uncertainty as to which structure they belong to. It would be wrong to imagine them wandering in a quasi-geometrical space uncertain as to whether they are part or not of a nearby construction. However, this definition becomes more complicated by the fact that semiotic elements can in a certain degree be detached from the systems that produced them, a function exemplified by their ‘material traces’, which is precisely Derrida’s point. As we have seen in chapter 3, it is practically impossible to draw the line between one semiotic and another, and Derrida extends the scope of this

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impossibility to the distinction between *kinds* of semiotics. The problem is that the practical impossibility also affects the theoretical level. As we have seen, there is no other way to distinguish one semiotic from another than by reference to its form. This form, apart from being structured as sign-function, a characteristic which is shared by all semiotic forms, can be only identified by reference to its particular structure. This particular structure is accessed through its particular manifestations, and so on. There is a communication between the levels of a semiotic, of which remains unaffected only the meta-structure of the semiotic, which is common to all semiotics, and cannot help us to differentiate between them. So, the result is that the entire realm of signification, i.e. human culture as a whole, forms one space, one hyper-structure. This structure may be of different degrees of density but it is still one. This structure, through its deconstructive solicitation, has a very indistinct borderline with the non-semiotic realm. The consequence is paradoxical and problematic. It is again related to the impossibility to imagine a space with no outside, combined with the empirical experience of its exterior¹⁶⁶. In any case, it is the desire of the possibility of distinguishing between structures that Derrida interprets as a desire for a centre.

In Derrida's texts, there is a constant displacement between structurality and the metaphysical concept of structure, as well as between structuralism as a meta-theoretical category and structuralism as the movement *strictu sensu*. We understand that this is consistent with his practice of questioning the categorical distinctions; however, it occasionally leads to confusions and misunderstandings, not entirely at his readers' fault. I have made clear, I hope, that the structural definition of structure differs significantly from the metaphysical concept and that if Derrida includes the former in the latter, it does it in a very particular, borderline way. I have also

¹⁶⁶ We will address the issue further in the final chapter. It combines many issues regarding spatiality.

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explained, in chapter 3, that the notion of structurality is included in the structuralist definition of structure, both as structural process and as structural cause. What necessarily exceeds the structuralist definition is the notion of a structural cause that opens the possibility of structure, the very difference between structure and non-structure. This is the structural function of Derrida's quasi-transcendental undecidables.

The opening of the structure is 'structural', that is, essential [...]: the *difference* between the (necessarily closed) minor structure and the structurality of an opening – such, perhaps, is the unlocatable site in which philosophy takes root¹⁶⁷
The secret place where it is neither construction nor ruin but lability¹⁶⁸

Regarding the term 'structuralism', we have also several delicate and unstable distinctions. There is the historical movement of semiotic structuralism¹⁶⁹, with post-structuralism considered sometimes as part of it and sometimes not. Then, there is structuralism as a meta-theoretical category¹⁷⁰; in this sense Kant is a structuralist, while Heidegger for example is not. This general structuralism borders on an even more general form of structuralism, which is probably a necessary attribute of human thought. As a necessary attribute of human thought, it includes two elements, corresponding to 'structurality' and 'minor structure', which are – respectively – the condition of possibility of thought in general and of holding specific distinctions in particular. Then, there are psychological attitudes that privilege or even fetishise elements of structure; an admiration for clarity and classification, for example, or for closed-ness and control. One understands that the interconnection between these different kinds of structuralism is complicated and multi-leveled. What Derrida

¹⁶⁷ *WD*, p. 194 / *ED*, p.230

¹⁶⁸ *WD*, pp.4-5 / *ED*, p.13; 'lability' is a term from biochemistry and designates the property of undergoing constant change or the object having this property.

¹⁶⁹ 'The structuralist invasion... an adventure of vision, a conversion of the way of putting questions to any object posed before us', *WD*, p.1 / *ED*, p.9

¹⁷⁰ 'A certain structuralism has always been philosophy's most spontaneous gesture', *WD*, p.200 / *ED*, p.237

describes as metaphysical structuralism comprises elements of the meta-theoretical category, certain related attitudes and desires, along with a specific definition of structure, all together forming an ideological system. This metaphysical structuralism is then generalised to the entirety of Western metaphysics. What we can, at least, assert is that the historical movement is not confined into metaphysical structuralism in the narrower sense; whereas it constitutes very much a borderline case of the generalised version.

Nevertheless, there are certain attributes of the historical movement, the one to which we refer in the context of this thesis as simply ‘structuralism’, which indeed are at odds with the deconstructive project, which Derrida ascribes to Western metaphysics and which are evident in structuralist semiotics. Structuralist semiotics is organised as a view from ‘the inside’ of the semiotic systems; almost every structuralist refers to this choice and it does not pass unnoticed by Derrida¹⁷¹. The distinction inside/outside is constantly used in order to construct definitions, although often expressly in a relative sense. At a less express level, Derrida reveals an ethnocentric, Eurocentric, ‘inside’ that is often implied. Expressly, structuralism is an opening to the other, particularly through the introduction of the fundamental relativity of semiotic systems. This had a very impressive practical application in the expansion of anthropological studies. Derrida, however, points out latent premises that contradict this break-through, organised – significantly – around the primacy of phonetic writing. Furthermore, structuralism is unashamedly progressivist; and this could be the main divergence between structuralist semiotics and deconstruction. Structuralism falls prey to ‘scientifism’, the admiration and desire for science, which we have described in Chapter 3. Derrida discusses this meta-psychological ‘myth of

¹⁷¹ *Gram*, p.51 / *Gram Eng*, pp.33-34

the engineer' at length. Moreover, he accuses structuralist semiotics of psychologism; particularly semiotics of the Saussurean kind, as he excludes Hjelmslev from this accusation. This is connected with a certain formalism and idealism, which, nevertheless, neither Hjelmslev nor Derrida himself can fully avoid. After all, 'all discourse involves [an] effect of idealism'¹⁷². Finally, structuralism and deconstruction are both theories that proclaim themselves anti-idealist and counter-metaphysical; though from a diametrically opposite point of view. Structuralism, like Marxism and psychoanalysis, aspires to science as a means to distance itself from metaphysics; deconstruction shows that scientifism and the effort to break completely with metaphysics are inescapably inscribed in metaphysics: metaphysics can very well be 'structuralist' or 'Marxist'¹⁷³.

4.5. Deconstruction (is) structuralist semiotics

The 'deconstruction of structuralist semiotics', i.e. the deconstructive critique of the theory of signification as described and practiced in the texts of semioticians belonging to the structuralist movement, can be read as bearing a second implication: that deconstruction is *of* structuralist semiotics, i.e. belongs to it. It must be apparent by now that the process of deconstructing structuralism has been very central in the self-definition of deconstruction and that the two projects share a great deal. In this sub-section, I concentrate on these common elements¹⁷⁴. As the title of the sub-section suggests¹⁷⁵, and Derrida makes quite clear, the relation of deconstruction to

¹⁷² *Lim*, p.94

¹⁷³ *Gram*, p.67 / *Gram Eng*, p.46

¹⁷⁴ We have met these common elements in previous sub-sections; that is why I mostly don't repeat the references. This sub-section mainly organises observations already made previously.

¹⁷⁵ My titles of this sub-section and its previous one keep a resonance of the titles of two sub-sections of *De la grammatologie* – 'The Outside and the Inside' and 'The Outside (is) Inside' – where the relationship between writing and the sign is presented.

structuralist semiotics redoubles the relation of writing to language, it is an inscribed exteriority.

As we have seen, Derrida in his interview with Julia Kristeva¹⁷⁶ acknowledges the critical role played by structuralist semiotics. He locates its crucial role in two innovations: the inseparable connection between the signified and the signifier; and the differential and formal character of the semiotic functioning, which led to the de-substantiation of both the signified content and the substance of expression. These topics are connected to the radical innovation that we have termed ‘principle of fundamental arbitrariness’. This is the axiom on which Derridean *différance* is based, and undoubtedly constitutes the most important link between deconstruction and structuralist semiotics. Apart from this, one observes many other similarities between the two projects, either because they share common roots or because of the immediate continuity between them, and particularly as results from their similar definition of the semiotic. From the tradition of Enlightenment, structuralism and deconstruction inherit the critical stance; whereas from the ambience of their times, they take the interest in language. Furthermore, they share the characteristic of being both descriptive models and methods of analysis. Moreover, deconstruction borrows from structuralist semiotics several of its analytical tools, as well as a structural(ist) conception of the system of Western metaphysics. Finally, they both face the *aporia* of the epistemological gap between the semiotic realm and a subject-independent world which is their Kantian inheritance.

The principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness is, I think, the most important contribution of structuralism to the history of ideas. Derrida bases his approach to signification on this principle and, precisely because of the centrality of

¹⁷⁶ *Pos*, pp.25-50 / *Pos Eng*, pp. 15-36

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the semiotic in his project, the principle ends up by determining it in its entirety. Without exaggeration, Derrida's entire project can be summarised as the demand for a generalised – and maximally consistent – application of this principle; whereas his multi-quasi-concept of *différance* relies strongly on it. The principle has several inter-related consequences for semiotics and epistemology. First is a topological conception of signification; this, on the one hand, bridges the division between the sensible and the intelligible and, on the other, de-essentialises meaning. In semiotics, as we have seen, this is interlinked to the unbreakable relation between the signifier and the signified, which no longer differ metaphysically, as well as to the concept of structure as transcending the difference between content and form. It also relates to the reducing of the authorial position into a function of the text. Moreover, signification can no longer be perceived in terms of expression or perception. Therefore, the status of reference is also influenced, which takes us to questions beyond the semiotic realm into epistemology. It is this connection that Derrida extends further in a quasi-transcendental gesture.

The anti-metaphysical stance that is based on and expressed by the de-essentialisation of meaning is structuralism's and deconstruction's common inheritance from the Enlightenment. It has been argued that the Enlightenment brings a double tradition: one of critique and one of optimistic self-confidence. Classical structuralism participates in both traditions, which are exemplified by its explicit scientism. Derrida has a more ambiguous relationship to them: his project is critical but not positive. In his later work, he argued in great length for the necessity of the Enlightenment and of reason as a promise of justice; as well as for his own belonging

to this tradition¹⁷⁷. Whether or not one accepts this promise as sufficient substitute for the positiveness of reason, one must acknowledge that deconstruction is a very radical critique, and as such it is inscribed in the tradition of the Enlightenment.

Another common topos of structuralism and deconstruction, because of the centrality they attribute to the semiotic, is their belonging to the ‘linguistic turn’ of the 20th century¹⁷⁸. Derrida’s affiliation to the linguistic turn is both wider and narrower than the movement of structuralism. On the one hand, the attention he gives to signification is mediated not only through structuralist semiotics but also through phenomenology; on the other, he participates in the latest phase of the structuralist movement, the post-structuralism of the *Tel Quel* group. However, what differentiates the structuralist semiotic approach to language from other approaches, which also privilege it, is that the primacy of the semiotic is founded on the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness. Immediate consequence of this principle is the position that our approach to the world is not only mediated but, in a sense, constituted by the semiotic. Derrida shares this premise, which attaches him to the structuralist lineage.

Moreover, both structuralist semiotics and deconstruction provide (or constitute) simultaneously a descriptive model of signification and a method for the study of phenomena of signification. This double function is inherent to the self-reflected nature of a theory about the semiotic and is intensified by the intermingling of subject and object that takes place in the semiotic structure. Derrida puts it in

¹⁷⁷ See, for example, the texts included in *Du droit à la philosophie*, 1990. Nevertheless, his argumentation did not persuade commentators like Slavoj Žižek, who found the messianic promise a weak substitute for reason.

¹⁷⁸ ‘This inflation of the sign “language” is the inflation of the sign itself, absolute inflation, inflation itself’, *Gram Eng*, p.6 / *Gram*, p.15

philosophical terms as the structural impossibility of maintaining the subject/object, activity/passivity distinction.

Furthermore, deconstruction borrows methodological tools from structuralist semiotics. I think that these can be roughly classified into two groups: on the one hand are the concepts and techniques that support and underlie the entire process of deconstruction; on the other are specific techniques that Derrida transforms for his own purposes. In the first category, that of tools of structural necessity for the deconstructive project, I would put the concepts of structure and isomorphism, as well as isotopy and Greimacian analysis. To the concept of structure, differential and signifying, we have referred extensively earlier. It is indispensable tool for Derrida's approach, which

[is] not concerned with comparing the content of doctrines, the wealth of positive knowledge; [it is] concerned, rather, with discerning the repetition or permanence, at a profound level of discourse, of certain fundamental schemes and of certain directive concepts.¹⁷⁹

In order to discern 'the repetition or permanence' of structures, indispensable is the concept of isomorphism. It is isomorphism that allows us to perceive the relation between the signifier and the signified as the matrix for all the oppositions of the system of Western metaphysics, and eventually reduce them to a single common structure; it is isomorphism too that allows the dislocation of one opposition to spread to the entire system; isomorphism, finally, allows the displacement between categories and orders. The case of isotopy is less straightforward. There is no doubt that that the first step of deconstruction is almost identical with a Greimacian analysis; what it is not certain is whether we have here a case of direct influence or a

¹⁷⁹ *Mar Eng*, p.153 / *Mar*, p.184

case of parallel inspiration of people moving in the same intellectual environment¹⁸⁰.

In the second category, of transformed semiotic concepts, one observes – for example – that the technique of ‘paleonymics’ is inspired by the structuralist ‘*bricolage*’ or that the deconstructive reading generalises what I have earlier called the structuralist habit of ‘terminological metonymy’.

As a result of the combination of the common basic axiom and common methodological techniques, Derrida’s conceptualisation of Western metaphysics is not simply structural but structuralist too. The first step of deconstruction is the translation of a text into the idiom of structuralism. It is significant, I think, that Derrida’s view of the object of deconstruction, i.e. of Western metaphysics, is structuralist through and through.

The final similarity between structuralist semiotics and deconstruction is, as I implied earlier, one of epistemology: as an immediate consequence of the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness, the access to the subject-independent world becomes problematic. I will call this problem ‘the epistemological gap’. The opening of this gap can be traced back to Immanuel Kant who conceived of phenomena as constituted by the human faculties and of ultimate (noumenal) reality as lying altogether beyond our epistemic grasp. Once again, the Kantian lineage reaches Derrida not only through structuralism but also through phenomenology; however, it is to structuralism that he owes the more radical premise according to which our knowledge-perception is constituted by the semiotic, which depends on the different semiotic communities, and not by the human faculties alone, which are at least

¹⁸⁰ The first three books by Derrida are published a year after Greimas’ *Sémantique structurale: recherche de méthode*; however, as parts from them were previously published, it is difficult to establish priority.

natural and common to all human beings. The world becomes a transcendental signified.

One may conceive of deconstruction as a radicalisation of structuralist semiotics. On the one hand, deconstruction's higher standard of consistency leads structuralist semiotics outside itself and reveals, more than accidental inconsistencies, its inherent *aporias*. On the other, deconstruction relies heavily on structuralist premises. Then, one should remember that, despite the complicated relativisation of these terms, the deconstructive project is mainly a philosophical theory, whereas structuralist semiotics is an applied theory of signification; the range of their interests and aims differs. It is precisely deconstruction's objective to address the epistemological limits of signification, which limits structuralist semiotics places beyond its field of study. It would be very unpractical, actually structurally impossible, to subject applied semiotics to Derrida's standards, as he very well knows:

I do not question, *on the level on which he says it*, the truth of *what Saussure says*¹⁸¹

Derrida does not question the empirical truth and effectiveness of structuralist semiotics; he just situates it in the space of its condition of possibility, which he calls *grammatology*. He would have it that structuralist semiotics is a species of *grammatology*. It depends on the point of view.

4.6. Between glossematics and grammatology

In several instances in our overview of the relationship of deconstruction to structuralist semiotics, we have noticed that Louis Hjelmslev and the school of

¹⁸¹ *Gram Eng*, p.39 / *Gram*, p.58

Copenhagen manage to escape the deconstructive critique. It seems that Hjelmslev's extremely high standard of consistency leads him to similar observations and conclusions to Derrida's, and therefore makes him his immediate precursor. Hjelmslev's consistency turns him into a paradigmatic and exceptional case in structuralist semiotics – paradigmatic because he follows the theory's principles, exceptional in actually carrying those principles though into practice. Therefore, what separates Derrida from Hjelmslev in particular specifies the fundamental difference between structuralism and deconstruction.

Derrida refers to Hjelmslev and his school in a few very dense pages in the first part of *De la grammatologie*¹⁸². The position of the passage is, I think, significant. It is situated in the chapter 'Linguistique et grammatologie' (Linguistics and Grammatology), in the second part of the sub-chapter 'Le dehors (est) dedans' (The Inside (is) Outside), just before the introduction of the quasi-concept of *différance*, which closes the sub-chapter. The first part of *De la grammatologie*, as we have said, encapsulates the theoretical matrix of the project of deconstruction. Hjelmslev takes his place in the chapter that describes the relationship between linguistics and grammatology, and particularly in the sub-chapter arguing that the 'outside (is) inside': grammatology (is) linguistics. The passage on Hjelmslev acts as a bridge between Saussure and *différance*, i.e. Derrida's own project. Actually, it is quite clear that Derrida considers Hjelmslev as the culmination of the lineage starting with Saussure, as he uses the expression 'from Saussure to Hjelmslev'¹⁸³ twice; once a few pages before the passage on Hjelmslev and once in closing it, just before introducing *différance*.

¹⁸² *Gram*, pp.78-91 / *Gram Eng*, pp.53-62; there also two isolated references of the name previous to the passage: *Gram*, pp.64, 73 / *Gram Eng*, pp.326, 50

¹⁸³ *Gram Eng*, pp.50, 62 / *Gram*, pp.73, 91

Hjelmslev appears when Derrida begins to argue for the liberation of the semiological project from linguistics, in the process of replacing semiology by grammatology¹⁸⁴. The first reference to his name is a footnote, where he figures as the exception to structuralist phonocentrism¹⁸⁵. The first reference to his name in the main text brackets him, even him, with the European tradition of binding semantics to linguistics¹⁸⁶. Then, he is brought forward as the exception to the phonocentric sub-current that underlies structuralist semiotics, against its principles, from the beginning. Derrida claims that,

reconsidering the order of dependence prescribed by Saussure, apparently inverting the relationship of the part to the whole, Barthes in fact carries out the profoundest intention of the *Course*.¹⁸⁷

Derrida uses the theoretical debate – between Hjelmslev and his school, on the one hand, and Jakobson and his¹⁸⁸, along with Martinet¹⁸⁹, on the other – about the possibility of the neutralisation of the phonic substance, in order to present his own position regarding the semiotic substance. Dealing with the rather passionate polemics against glossematics, he defends grammatology. He arrives at the conclusion that ‘Hjelmslev [...] undoubtedly drew the most rigorous conclusions’¹⁹⁰ from the radical principle of the *CLG* and that ‘undoubtedly the Copenhagen School thus frees a field of research’¹⁹¹, his own. The Copenhagen School is thus within Saussure’s heritage and also breaks with it:

Hjelmslev situates his concept of the *scheme* or *play* of language within Saussure’s heritage – of Saussure’s formalism and his theory of value.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁴ *Gram*, p.74 / *Gram Eng*, p.51

¹⁸⁵ *Gram*, pp.64 / *Gram Eng*, note p.43, p.326

¹⁸⁶ *Gram*, p.73 / *Gram Eng*, p.50

¹⁸⁷ *Gram Eng*, p.51 / *Gram*, p.75

¹⁸⁸ *Gram*, pp.64, 70 / *Gram Eng*, pp.326, 53-54

¹⁸⁹ *Gram*, pp. 80, 82 / *Gram Eng*, pp.327, 56

¹⁹⁰ *Gram Eng*, p.57 / *Gram*, p.83

¹⁹¹ *Gram Eng*, p.59 / *Gram*, p.86

¹⁹² *Gram Eng*, p.57 / *Gram*, p.84

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H.J.Uldall provides a remarkable formulation of the fact that glossematic criticism operates at the same time thanks to Saussure and against him; that, as I suggested above, the proper space of grammatology is at the same time opened and closed by *The Course in General Linguistics*. [He] show[s] that Saussure did not develop ‘all the theoretical consequences of his discovery’.¹⁹³

Derrida’s endeavour doubles the glossematic break with Saussurean phonocentrism. Then, however, deconstruction breaks with glossematics by questioning its scientism and its conditions of possibility¹⁹⁴. I will now organise a comparison between glossematics and deconstruction around eight points of convergence and two points of major divergence.

Firstly, as we have already explained, Hjelmslev’s definition of the semiotic not only breaks with the tradition of substitution, as Saussure already had done, but comes to consider it as a particular kind of function between two completely equivalent planes, the plane of content and the plane of expression, which are related by reciprocal implication. The transformation of the concepts of the signifier and the signified – necessarily metaphysical, as we have seen – into two completely symmetrical and ontologically indistinguishable planes of a function is obviously closer to the Derridean view of semiosis, both because of the interchangeability between them and the fact that their function extends beyond the closed concept of the sign. Then, each plane is divided into form and substance. The sign-function *per se* is the relation between the content-form and the expression-form, which excludes, as Derrida puts it, ‘not only the consideration of the substance of expression [...] but also that of the substance of content’¹⁹⁵. This detaches the semiotic from the ‘transcendental signified’. In Derrida’s words, it allows for the ‘play’ of language. As we have seen, in the Hjelmslevian stratification the terms ‘content’ and ‘expression’

¹⁹³ *Gram Eng*, p.58 / *Gram*, p.86

¹⁹⁴ *Gram*, pp.88-89 / *Gram Eng*, pp.60-61

¹⁹⁵ *Gram Eng*, p.57 / *Gram*, p.84

relinquish their metaphysical meaning of interiority vs. exteriority, and come to denote the two absolutely symmetrical elements of a function, whereas ‘form’ and ‘substance’ become relative terms. Therefore, the deconstructive solicitation of the metaphysical oppositions is less applicable to them. Actually, with regard to the two planes of the sign function, it wouldn’t be applicable at all, had it not been for the ‘terminological conservatism’ that ties them to metaphysics¹⁹⁶.

Secondly, by emptying the metaphysics of language, Hjelmslev becomes defendant of the autonomy of writing. Correspondingly, Derrida uses writing in order to question the metaphysics of language. Hjelmslev very explicitly and consistently refuses ontological primacy to voice, or sound in general; on which point he disagrees with many other prominent structural linguists and, obviously, agrees with Derrida. This is the result of his distinguishing form from substance, and making the semiotic a relation between forms. As the semiotic form is independent of semiotic substance, there is no point in considering the expression-substance as a definitional characteristic of language. Derrida would not agree to complete ‘independence’ but construe it as a possibility of detachment. Furthermore, for Hjelmslev, a written language is a semiotic equivalent to and usually independent from its spoken counterpart. The only case where a sonic substance and a graphic substance would manifest the same form would be if they denoted exactly the same formal relationships. Derrida, again, does not put the relationship between empirical writings and spoken languages in terms of independence but rather in terms of the impossibility of clear distinction, whereas his novel use of writing designates the condition of possibility of them all.

¹⁹⁶ *Gram*, p.89 / *Gram Eng*, p.328

Thirdly, Hjelmslev, just like Derrida, does not consider that there is any natural bond between speech and human communication. However, in some self-conscious passages, he does privilege natural languages, though their ‘naturalness’ has nothing to do with the phonic substance. Unexpectedly, Derrida shares this preference. It is not the expression-substance by which Hjelmslev tries to explain the specificity of natural languages, but the content-substance; and as there can be no difference in kind, he tries to make the distinction in formal terms. We have discussed at some length in Chapter 3 how this undermines both the symmetry between content-plane and expression-plane and the symmetry between natural languages and other semiotic systems. Derrida would not explicitly fall into the same contradiction, as the content-substance is the transcendental signified par excellence. However, most of his analyses deal with written texts, which are examples of natural languages, not with texts of other semiotic systems. When he does introduce other semiotic systems, he mostly views them through written texts that act metalinguistically on them. His difficulty with non-lexical meaning is particularly obvious in his unsuccessful collaboration with the architect Peter Eisenman¹⁹⁷. This difficulty is inscribed in the debate about whether there can be other than lexical meaning, which we addressed in chapter 3. Of course, Derrida has undermined the distinction between metalanguage and language-object; it just seems that when the language-object is a non-lexical semiotic system, metalanguage threatens to make it disappear. Hjelmslev’s theory is exceptional because it is formal enough to allow the study of different semiotic systems, such as painting or architecture, on equal terms. His inconsistent preference

¹⁹⁷ See Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman, *Chora L Works*. This collaboration was infested with two-ways misunderstandings. Derrida seemed incapable of imagining the possibility of deconstruction without the mediation of words, of which Eisenman is quite ingeniously able; whereas Eisenman mostly missed the delicacies of Derrida’s arguments.

to natural languages does not affect his stratification. In a paradoxical way, Derrida's project is more dependent to lexical meaning.

Fourthly, as must be obvious, a characteristic that Hjelmslev and Derrida share is the preoccupation with expression-substance and its disengagement from the traditional metaphysics of the material and the sensuous. Both agree in not attaching metaphysical attributes or values to any sensory function or any material. Hjelmslev, following the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness and its ultimate Kantian implications, attaches our articulations of the world to semiotic form; therefore he cannot maintain any 'objective' distinction of the media. Derrida's fundamental synaesthesia rules out both the distinction of media and of sensory functions. He even considers as metaphysical

an objectivist concept of the body proper and of the diversity of sensory functions (the 'five' senses considered as so many apparatuses at the disposition of the speaker or writer)¹⁹⁸

In Hjelmslev, an expression-substance is 'selected' by an expression-form, and therefore defined by it and not according to our senses. This means that there are at least as many expression-substances as expression-forms and that an expression-substance may use more than one sensory function. Two deconstructive objections arise. One is that the sense-classification may have been transferred from the level of semiotic expression-substance to that of extra-semiotic expression-substance and that of expression-purport. However, there is always the notion of the unknowable continuum where, finally, the two planes of the sign-function merge. The other objection is that if an expression-substance is defined by form, we need to assume that a form is rigorously defined. Derrida rejects this possibility as a result of the

¹⁹⁸ *Gram Eng*, p. 82 / *Gram*, p.123

absence of a transcendental signified. The impossibility of a stable system implies, then, the impossibility of distinguishing between expression-substances. We revert to the idea of a sensuous continuum.

Fifthly, both Hjelmslev and Derrida question the status of metalanguage and connotation. On the one hand, Derrida argues for the original metaphoricity of signification and the metaphysical roots of scientificity; and, therefore, the structural impossibility of rigorously distinguishing between literal and metaphorical meaning, between language-object and meta-language. On the other, Hjelmslev starts by conceptualising both as second-degree sign-functions: the connotative semiotic has an entire sign-function as its expression-plane, whereas a meta-semiotic has it as its content-plane. This structure includes the premise of an isomorphism between the different degrees of sign-functions, which opens the way for Derrida's questioning of the difference of degree. It also includes the isomorphism between the two types of higher-degree semiotics, which, combined with their equivalence, means that the two become indistinguishable, as Hjelmslev soon realised. He proceeded to give a new definition, where he distinguishes them according to scientificity. This, though, is not an immanent criterion, as glossematics demands of its definitions; it is a meta-theoretical one. Moreover, it is not acceptable by Derrida, who precisely classifies both scientism and the desire for the stability of structure as being complicit with the system of Western metaphysics.

Sixthly, Hjelmslev and Derrida share a certain mechanistic conception of signification. Glossematics has often subjected to this charge by semioticians of other

schools, whereas Derrida and other post-structuralists praise him for it¹⁹⁹. Glossematics focuses on the structure of signification, on the text, and is not interested in the function of communication, the message. Nowhere in its conceptual vocabulary does it make reference to intention. In the stratification, the symmetry between the content and expression planes, along with the neutralization of their metaphysical meaning, leads to a mechanistic view of semiosis. And when someone chooses to view semiosis as encoding rather than interpersonal communication, writing appears a better simile than speech. Derrida's definition of signification as writing stresses precisely the ability of the semiotic to be freed from both the intention of its author and its original context. This authorless text is in a way inhuman, or non-human at least, a 'productive and performative machine'²⁰⁰, in his words. Nevertheless, neither doubts the existence of real, empirical subjects; and the way they re-introduce them into the machine of signification distinguishes the two approaches. Hjelmslev does not question that the *raison d'être* of signification is for human beings to communicate; he simply chooses to investigate the phenomenon from another point of view. Derrida's deconstruction affects the borderlines of the semiotic realm and complicates the issue; distinctions such as human/non-human, culture/nature do not stand unquestioned, whereas any reference to an extra-semiotic certainty falls into the structure of transcendental signified. In any case, the possibilities opened by both glossematics and deconstruction have made them useful tools for the study of novel fields, such as artificial intelligence, genetics, virtual reality, multimedia and contemporary art.

¹⁹⁹ For example, Derrida twice in *Marges* acknowledges that Hjelmslev escapes both the phonocentrism and the psychologism of Saussure, *Mar*, pp.87, 184 / *Mar Eng* pp.76, 152. Deleuze and Guatari make a similar comment, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p.242

²⁰⁰ *Papier Machine*, p. 74.

Seventhly, the inter-related issues of formalism, idealism and the epistemological gap concern both glossematics and deconstruction, despite their insistent denials. The source of the *aporia* lies with the principle of semiotic arbitrariness and haunts structuralism in general; what makes it particularly apparent in their cases is precisely their rigorous consistency with that principle. On the one hand, Hjelmslev's stratification, with its repeated gesture of formalisation of substance, does not manage to give a solution to the problem of how one reaches the extra-semiotic; despite repetition, the form is projected by us and the purport remains unknowable. On the other hand, Derrida's destabilisation of the distinction between the semiotic and the extra-semiotic realm, instead of opening the semiotic to its beyond, threatens to enclose the extra-semiotic within the semiotic. Furthermore, both of them refer to Saussure's definition of language as consisting of differences without positive terms, conceive signification as a topical structure and propose model-structures for its description. It is difficult to conceive these structures in other than formal terms. Derrida considers Hjelmslev's exclusion of substance from the semiotic unit as an inevitable step towards idealism. Then, Hjelmslev would insist that 'separating and distinguishing is not the same thing'²⁰¹. Derrida argues that he himself avoids idealism by taking a step back before the division of substance and form. It remains, however, the fact that his theory appears to offer no way out of language.

Eighthly, an interesting similarity between glossematics and deconstruction is a certain underlying two-term matrix-structure, redoubled as four-term structure. Quite obviously, Hjelmslev's stratification is a four-term structure generated by two dyadic oppositions. What he did was to separate the duality 'content vs. expression'

²⁰¹ *Essais*, p. 59.

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from the duality ‘form vs. substance’, which up until then had been amalgamated in the traditional definition of the sign into the complex opposition ‘[signified = content + substance] vs. [signifier = expression + form]’. He then turned through 90° the axis of one duality and produced his four-term stratification of the semiotic. The ‘content vs. expression’ opposition is formed on the Platonic duality ‘*noumena* vs. *phenomena*’ and the ‘form vs. substance’ opposition on the Aristotelian duality ‘*morphe* vs. *hyle*’. Hjelmslev’s structural movement of separating and turning the axes duplicates Kant’s. The two couples ‘content vs. expression’ and ‘form vs. substance’ are not completely isomorphic, and their cross-section gives to the system stability, which allows for categorical and order distinctions. Derrida’s argument also shows a preference for the dyadic structure. We have already mentioned the ‘double reading’ and the ‘double writing’ of deconstruction. Derrida stresses the importance of the critical step of deconstruction, which would correspond to the Hegelian antithesis. The third step – of transcendence, sublimation or synthesis – can never be realised because this would lead to a new thesis, exactly as the Hegelian dialectic prescribes. Deconstruction is against the metaphysical dream of unity, the dominion of the one; it is also against the ‘trinitarian horizon’²⁰² of Hegelian dialectics and the symbolic order, which it interprets as a metaphysical desire for returning to the one. However, we observe that the system of metaphysics is also characterised by a repeated two-term structure. We need to distinguish the two. The characteristic of the metaphysical dual structure is that it is oriented and hierarchical: the second term depends on the first. This structure is a product of the desire to subordinate the second term to the one. In deconstruction, however, the structure of undecidables is a duality that cannot be controlled by the one. In *Dissemination*, Derrida argues that this can be

²⁰² *Diss*, p.35 / *Diss Eng*, p.20

conceived as the addition of ‘the more or less of a fourth term’²⁰³, the asymmetrical fourth which prevents the third term from synthesising the first two, ‘beyond the opposition between one and two’²⁰⁴. In very different ways, both in Hjeltmslev and Derrida, the four-term structure prevents significant distinctions from collapsing.

As we have seen, Hjeltmslev and Derrida share a high standard of conceptual rigor, precision and consistency, though they apply it differently. The interpretation of this ninth similarity leads us to their two main differences: scientificity and the transcendental question. Hjeltmslev’s scientism is considered metaphysical in a deconstructive context; Derrida’s quasi-transcendental point of view is considered metaphysical in a structuralist context.

Hjeltmslev is a fervent supporter of scientificity, which can be summarised in his methodological requirement of self-consistency, exhaustiveness, and simplicity²⁰⁵. It is this criterion that he uses in order to stabilise his system when it is threatened by its isomorphism. Derrida recognises here one of his transcendental signifieds. He deems the work of the Copenhagen School to be

plagued by a scientificist objectivism, that is to say by another unperceived or unconfessed metaphysics²⁰⁶.

This is the crucial difference between them, which emerged previously when we attempted to differentiate their very similar paths. Their programs, their metatheoretical attitudes are each the converse of the other. Hjeltmslev chooses stability, clarity, the system; Derrida chooses mobility, ambiguity, play. They both recognise the necessity of their other though; and again in different ways. Derrida considers the system as a species of play; Hjeltmslev considers play as another point

²⁰³ *Diss*, p.36 / *Diss Eng*, p.21

²⁰⁴ *Diss*, p.402 / *Diss Eng*, p.363

²⁰⁵ *Prol*, p.6

²⁰⁶ *Gram Eng*, p.61 / *Gram*, p.89

of view on the system. This difference has to do with their perception of the notion of the other in general. I wonder whether Hjelmslev's symmetry is more liberating than Derrida's respectful dissymmetry.

Derrida, in order to keep his own standard of consistency, needs to investigate the conditions of possibility of what he analyses, as well as of his own analysis. One needs to ask

the question of the transcendental origin of the system itself [...] and, correlatively, of the theoretical system that studies it²⁰⁷

This endeavour, however, cannot be part of Hjelmslev's system, because it exceeds the structuralist demand for immanence. This demand Derrida considers as a bind to metaphysics. As he says of arche-writing,

It would constitute not only the pattern uniting form to all substance, graphic or otherwise, but the movement of the *sign-function* linking a content to an expression [...] This theme could not have a place in Hjelmslev's system. // It is because arche-writing [...] cannot, as the condition of all linguistic systems, form part of the linguistic system itself and be situated as an object in its field. (Which does not mean it has a real field elsewhere, another assignable site.) Its concept could in no way enrich the scientific, positive, and "immanent" (in the Hjelmslevian sense) description of the system itself.²⁰⁸

For the symmetrically opposite reason, Hjelmslev would consider all transcendental questions as metaphysical. Derrida fends off the danger of falling back to metaphysics by his 'trace' technique, the paradoxical spatio-temporal structure of *différance*.

To see to it that the beyond does not return to the within is to recognize in the contortion the necessity of a pathway. The pathway must leave a track in the text. Without that track, abandoned to the simple content of its conclusions, the ultra-transcendental text will so closely resemble the precritical text as to be indistinguishable from it.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁷ *Gram Eng*, p.61 / *Gram*, p.89

²⁰⁸ *Gram Eng*, p.60 / *Gram*, p.88

²⁰⁹ *Gram Eng*, p.61 / *Gram*, p.90

Hjelmslev would probably consider this kind of logic metaphysical, similar to the semi-logic of language but not up to scientific standards; and the mirroring goes on *ad infinitum*.

In conclusion, we observe that the work of the Copenhagen School may be deployed in order to show the double relation of deconstruction to structuralist semiotics, to explain ‘grammatology’ and to show its difference from semiotics. What we have again is a step in between. If semiotics is a step toward the deconstruction of metaphysics, and structuralist semiotics a step toward the deconstruction of traditional semiotics, then glossematics is a step toward the deconstruction of structuralist semiotics; and deconstruction is itself just such a step.

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1. Introduction

The project of deconstruction can be seen as an expansion of the project of structuralist semiotics in two ways: on the one hand, it extends the applicability of its principles beyond the semiotic realm; on the other, it investigates its conditions of possibility. Thus, deconstruction is both a continuation and a critique of structuralist semiotics; Derrida states as much on several occasions. The result is that, to a significant extent, deconstruction develops *on* structuralist semiotics; it needs it both as its own foundation and as its exemplary object. Derrida indeed presents his ‘grammatology’ as a liberating transformation of structuralist semiology/semiotics:

The transformation of general semiology into grammatology, this latter executing a critical labor on everything within semiology, including the central concept of the sign¹

One may replace semiology by grammatology [...] [L]iberat[ing] the semiological project itself from [...] linguistics²

Liberat[ing] the future of a general grammatology of which linguistics-phonology would be only a dependent and circumscribed area³

In a significant passage, he paraphrases the famous passage from *CLG*:

I shall call it semiology...Since that science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance. Linguistics is only a part of that general science...; the laws discovered by semiology will be applicable to linguistics.⁴

He replaces the ‘semiology’ of the original with ‘grammatology’ [in square brackets

Derrida’s alterations]:

I shall call it [grammatology]... Since that science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance. Linguistics is only a part of that general science...; the laws discovered by [grammatology] will be applicable to linguistics.⁵

¹ *Mar Eng*, p.15 / *Mar*, p.16

² *Gram Eng*, p.51 / *Gram*, p.74

³ *Gram Eng*, p.30 / *Gram*, p.45

⁴ *CLG*, p.33

⁵ *Gram Eng*, p.51 / *Gram*, p.74

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I would add that an even more pointed alteration of this passage will involve replacing the ‘linguistics’ of the original with ‘semiotics / semiology’ {in hooked brackets my additional alterations}:

I shall call it [grammatology]... Since that science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance. {Semiology / semiotics} is only a part of that general science...; the laws discovered by [grammatology] will be applicable to {semiology / semiotics}.

The relation of deconstruction to structuralist semiotics redoubles the relation of writing to sign-function.

In the same way that the project of deconstruction can be described as a doubly extending transformation of structuralist semiotics, its argument supports a double connection of semiotics to metaphysics. There are two clearly different, though related, senses of ‘metaphysics’: on the one hand, it designates the area of philosophical investigation which exceeds our cognitive and perceptual limitations; on the other, it designates an ideological construction on or around the contents of this realm, which cannot but be illusory. What connects the two senses is the belief, Kantian in origin, that any claim about the metaphysical realm cannot have any cognitive warrant. It is in this second sense that the term ‘metaphysics’ is used by both Derrida and the structuralists. The critical tradition of Enlightenment thinking combines two movements: (1) the epistemic movement of attaining a knowledge of the world; (2) the critical movement of liberating ourselves from metaphysical illusions. It conceives them as indistinguishable; in our effort to know the world, we are getting rid of our illusions. However, at a second level, it opposes them to each other: the effort to achieve knowledge of the world itself plunges us back into metaphysical illusion. So our only way to knowledge is through the negative gesture of reducing the scale of our illusions and investigating our epistemic limits. Both

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structuralism and deconstruction partake of this Kantian, negative tradition. However, there is a difference. Derrida takes the antithesis of the two movements to its more radical extreme.

The concept and the theory of signification act as the intermediate step in both movements. With regard to knowledge, signification is our way to the world and of the world to us. With regard to metaphysical illusions, signification is both what binds us to them and what gives us a hope of liberation. Deconstruction duplicates this bridging structure, while drawing attention to its asymmetry; the other end of the bridge never reaches the other side.

Because of this doubly double relation of semiotics to metaphysics ‘the problem of language has never been simply one problem among others’⁶ and one could describe ‘modernity as linguistic science’⁷. In this context, structuralist semiotics is placed as the culmination of a tradition beginning with Kant and the Enlightenment; the last link to metaphysics and the last step toward an impossible beyond. And Hjelmslev’s glossematics is the last step of this last step. And deconstruction is the last step of this last step of this last step.

The conclusions of my thesis can be grouped in two interrelated constellations: (1) the ways deconstruction affects the structuralist definition of signification; and (2) its epistemological implications. Hjelmslev and the Copenhagen School have an exceptional position in this context. On the one hand, Derrida’s quasi-meta-theory of signification looks in some ways much like the Hjelmslevian stratification; put into motion and out of balance, flattened or multiplied *ad infinitum*.

⁶ *Gram Eng*, p.6 / *Gram*, p.15

⁷ *Mar Eng*, p. 136 / *Mar*, p.168

On the other, glossematics is probably the closest semiotics can get to posing the question of its limits, without exceeding the immanent point of view.

5.2. The ghost of semiotic structure

Deconstruction, like structuralist semiotics, proposes a theory of signification. Unlike it, however, it also poses questions about the conditions of possibility of signification and of constructing a theory about it. It can thus be called ‘meta-semiotics’. Nevertheless, as it seriously questions the possibility of meta-theory and of a transcendental viewpoint, we should qualify our characterisation as ‘quasi-meta-semiotics’. Its relation to the definition of signification follows the same structure of quasi-transcendence. This makes it difficult, or rather structurally impossible, to devise a deconstructive model of semiosis. A model of semiosis cannot include as its object its own condition of possibility; and a model is objectifying *per se*. However, what we can do is see how the deconstructive approach to signification affects the structuralist model and imagine the quasi-meta-model of *écriture/différance* in its impossible spatio-temporality. We will now summarise the ways in which the structuralist definitions of structure, of the semiotic and of semiotic structure are affected by deconstruction; and draw some concluding observations.

We have previously summarised the definition of the structuralist concept of structure into the following eight premises⁸: (a) structure is relational-functional; (b) it is topological, of a non-reducible spatio-temporality; (c) in it logic and topology are indistinguishable; (d) it is not immediately perceivable by the senses, (e) it is ‘generating’, both in the sense of generality and causality, (f) it comprises the different functions of structure-object, structure-law, structure-cause, structuredness,

⁸ See *Figure 3.8*.

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structurality, structuration; (g) it has a certain degree of autonomy; and (h) its ontological status remains suspended. As we have seen, Derrida's *différance*/structurality retains the six first premises almost unchanged. The first main difference concerns the premise of structure's autonomy. Derrida interprets it as the desire for a centre by which to arrest the free play of structurality. This desire inscribes the structuralist concept of structure into Western metaphysics, as it describes the desired structure and the structural desire of its system. The second difference concerns, once more, the deconstructive quasi-transcendence. *Différance*/structurality is the structural condition of possibility of structure. The notion of structure as condition of possibility is already included in the structuralist definition. However, the condition of possibility of the concept of structure, and of the difference between structure and non-structure, must necessarily exceed the concept. But then structure is a very peculiar concept; it is not a concept in the metaphysical sense as already defined by the structuralists. This explains the structuralists' hesitation to decide its ontological status. In deconstruction, the suspension becomes a position, an inherent premise of structurality; because structurality is also the condition of possibility of the ontological question.

We have seen that the definition of the semiotic, throughout the history of Western philosophy and linguistic science, is organised around two characteristics: (1) a relation between a sensible and an intelligible element; and (2) a movement of materialisation. These also correspond to the two senses of the 'medium': (1) middle and (2) element. Derrida shows that the traditional definition of writing, and its devaluation compared to speech, is based precisely on these two characteristics. Thus, what was thought as exterior and derived was shown not to differ from what was thought as interior and original; and exteriority and derivativeness were introduced in

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the definitional dualism of the semiotic. Derrida then uses this observation in order to question the definition of the semiotic itself. Before Derrida, structuralist semiotics had already de-essentialised the definition of the semiotic. What was left was a division, a duality of two completely relational terms which did not differ in anything but position. So, the semiotic was still defined as the relation between two terms, only the 'sensible vs. intelligible' division had been subtracted. The other characteristic of the semiotic, in the radically de-essentialised form of the articulation with an 'outside', was transferred to the borderline of the semiotic with substance and, then, with the extra-semiotic realm. In this reference to the stabilising, though inaccessible, presence of the extra-semiotic, Derrida diagnoses the residue of the metaphysical desire for a transcendental signified. This residue, along with theoretical inconsistencies and the burden of a 'terminological conventionalism', keeps structuralist semiotics bound to Western metaphysics.

In a completely de-essentialised manner, the semiotic is still defined in terms of mediation and exteriority; and writing as the mediation of a mediation and the exterior to an exterior. What is eventually revealed as the structural desire, disguised as certainty, of Western metaphysics – formed on the matrix of its definition of writing and the semiotic – is that the distinction be absolute, i.e. that the distinction between inside and outside be absolute, that the outside remain outside. Derrida, using writing as a lever, attacks this desired certainty: the outside is revealed as the condition of possibility of the inside, as well as of its distinction from the outside; the inside is but a species of the outside. This is the structure of *écriture/différance*. In this novel quasi-concept, the functions of the intermediate and the exterior are amalgamated in a peculiar kind of spatiality which allows for the outside to be inside.

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Thus the semiotic is the effect of *écriture/différance*. Then, again, in a sense, *écriture/différance* (is) the semiotic; because (essentially) and (structurally):

the sign (is) that ill-named (thing), the only one, that escapes the instituting question of philosophy: ‘what is?’⁹

Let us, then, summarise how deconstruction affects the structuralist conception of the semiotic structure. First of all, we have seen that the main axiom of deconstruction is based on no other than the main axiom of structuralist semiotics: the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness. What is different in the deconstructive deployment of the principle is the range of its applicability; or, rather, by its extremely consistent application, the principle is revealed to have more radical effects than structuralist semiotics had predicted. The most unexpected of them, for a structuralist, is the refutation of the excluded-middle logic which was supposed to constitute it. Structuralist semiotics introduced differentiability as the productive mechanism of semiotic terms; i.e. semiotic terms were the products of differences without positive terms. Derrida argues that the fact that the terms have no positive existence, and that the differences are relative through and through, makes them unstable. The borderline may be moved or removed at any time; it is mobile by definition. Therefore, the terms that are defined by it are not absolutely distinguishable from each other. This proposition becomes more radical when the applicability of the principle is shown to extend to the very division between the semiotic and its exterior, and then to all logical and categorical distinctions that were traditionally believed to be outside the semiotic realm.

In chapter three, we have classified the kinds of semiotic relations¹⁰. The way the general structural relations (A) are affected by deconstruction, we have covered in

⁹ *Gram Eng*, p.19 / *Gram*, p.31

¹⁰ See *Figure 3.7*

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relation to Derrida's notion of structurality. Let us review the way that the semiotic meta-structure (B) is affected. One cannot fail to observe that it is altogether formed on dual, although relative, distinctions. The effect of *écriture/différance* on it is that all these distinctions are questioned, which eventually affects the differences of order too.

The constitutive duality of the semiotics, the two completely equivalent and interdependent planes that retain, through terminological conventionalism, the names of 'content' and 'expression', 'signified' and 'signifier', are the first to be affected. The difference between them is never radical; in a sense, the difference between them is 'nothing'. As a result, and as already noticed by Hjelmslev, we cannot distinguish between connotation and meta-semiosis. Furthermore, as no distinction is stable and no connection essential, there is nothing to rigorously distinguish a first-degree from a higher-degree sign-function; which means that the distinctions between literal and metaphorical sense, as well as between theory and its object, cannot be conceptually rigorous.

There is a similar effect on the relation between form and substance. In glossematics, the relation of dependence between them, within the confines of the semiotic realm, was partially covered by the notion of the formation of substance, the constant 'invasion' of substance by form. What was suppressed was the inverse dependence, i.e. the 'invasion' of form by substance. The only cases in which classic structuralism recognises this inversion are exceptional (even pathological) cases – i.e. synaesthesia – and art. Derrida does not recognise exceptions; exceptions reveal structural possibilities. Therefore, synaesthesia and art become paradigmatic of the universal functioning of signification. Another characteristic of synaesthesia and art, as well as of rebus-games and the mechanism of dreams, is the communication

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between semiotic substances. Hjelmslev already opens the way for such a conclusion by detaching the distinction of semiotic substances from any objective criterion, such as the division of our sensory apparatuses or the division of the material of the world. A semiotic substance is 'selected' by and dependent solely on a semiotic form. Derrida, however, attributes the premise of the autonomy of structures to the desire for a centre, for a transcendental signified, and thus argues for the structural impossibility of drawing a line between one semiotic and another. Thus, it becomes impossible to distinguish between the substances that these forms 'select'. Furthermore, the destabilisation the 'form vs. substance' distinction spreads to the relation of the semiotic realm to the semiotic-independent world. This occurs because Hjelmslev conceptualises this relation through the concept of semiotic substance. The sign-function is anchored in the extra-semiotic in two ways: by means of the content-substance to that which it refers to; by means of the expression-substance to the material trace. Both are not cognisable in themselves, outside the semiotic articulation. Derrida considers the allusion to them both as evidence of the desire for the transcendental signified.

Similarly, one cannot absolutely distinguish between *langue* and *parole*, between system and process; which means that one cannot distinguish between the general and the particular, between cause and effect, between generative mechanism and generated object. Thus, one cannot absolutely distinguish between the condition of possibility and what it renders possible. This explains how *écriture/différance* can take the place of both the semiotic and its condition of possibility.

Then, structuralists conceive of the semiotic structure as being in constant evolution and change. They choose to study it from a synchronic point of view, without denying the possibility of studying it diachronically. Derrida, obviously, does

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not object to the idea that the semiotic structure is subject to change and movement. His disagreement concerns the manner of this movement. He construes the structuralist approach as an ordered game, or rather as an effort to subject the free play of signification to an order. According to his approach, the spatio-temporality of *écriture/différance* does not allow for a linear conception of time or the distinction between synchrony and diachrony.

Finally, as a result of deconstruction the distinctions ‘general vs. particular’ and ‘cause vs. effect’, as well as of the difference of order, the particular instantiation of the semiotic, i.e. the text, becomes the condition of possibility, the paradigm and the matrix of all signification. This position is in agreement with the post-structuralist privileging of the text as the locus of merging of *langue* and *parole*, the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic, the structural and the functional. And thus, we arrive at the famously paradoxical formulation:

*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte.*¹¹ (*There is nothing outside of the text.*¹²)

A few general remarks: Firstly, deconstruction is based on the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness. *Écriture* is introduced by a deconstructive labor on the concept of the sign, whereas *différance* is introduced by a deconstructive labor on the principle of differentiability and of the concept of structure. In the same way that the structuralist concepts of the semiotic and of structure are intimately connected, the deconstructive undecidables *écriture* and *différance* become indistinguishable. *Écriture/différance* is the condition of possibility of the semiotic, of structure and of the semiotic structure. Secondly, the destabilisation of categorical distinctions has a reciprocal implication with the destabilisation of epistemological orders. The leap between semiotics and metaphysics is accomplished precisely through this

¹¹ Gram, p.227

¹² Gram Eng, p.158

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questioning of the stability of the distinction between epistemological orders. *Écriture/différance* is the condition of possibility of the difference between semiotics and metaphysics.

Thirdly, the deconstructive conception of signification is mobile and multidimensional. However, this multidimensionality and constant mobility always threatens to flatten it. The constant movement between categories and orders also means the disappearance of any clear or rigorously specifiable difference between them. If this view was pressed to its final conclusion, which it is not, it would arrive at absolute non-difference. In order not to revert to metaphysics, it needs to keep a trace of the sign-function, like a ghost. This ghost of the sign-function (is) *écriture/différance*. Fourthly, this spatio-temporal multi-dimensionality – which allows for the simultaneous existence and non-existence of difference, for the different moments not to follow each other and for the outside to be inside – demands a new kind of spatio-temporality. This kind of spatio-temporality cannot be reduced to our conceptual and empirical perceptions of space and time; it constitutes their condition of possibility and of the distinction between them. This spacing of time and temporalisation of space (is) *écriture/différance*. Fifthly, like all other distinctions, the distinction between semiotic systems and between semiotic substances is relative, mobile and, in the last instance, non-existent. Thus, every effort to achieve an objective partitioning of the semiotic realm is bound to metaphysics. We should probably conceive it as a non-homogenous, ever-changing manifold.

Sixthly, the concept of condition of possibility is very important in order to understand Derrida's argument. For example, if *écriture/différance* is the condition of possibility of knowledge, then it cannot be an object of knowledge among others. As Christopher Norris explains,

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What Derrida is using [...] is the form of 'transcendental' reasoning which Kant first brought to bear upon the central problems of philosophy.[...] A 'transcendental' question takes the form: what exactly are the *presuppositions*...¹³

Unlike Kant, Derrida does not believe in a faculty like reason that would permit us to think the conditions of possibility of our thought, even without being able to cognise them. Reason (logos) is for him the transcendental signified *par excellence*. So every transcendental claim needs to be qualified. The trace of the process of deconstruction allows him this qualification, the non-reducibility of the trace, *écriture/différance*. Therefore, seventhly, deconstruction needs a minimum residue of the structure of the semiotic. Even before Derrida, structuralist semiotics had already de-essentialised signification, as a consequence of the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness. Derrida subtracts the names too and puts the empty structure in motion; a multiplying, relativising, endangering and, in fact, flattening motion. The final consequence of this motion would be the total disappearance of structure. This, however, would be a return to metaphysical self-presence, which was disrupted by the redoubling of representation. Derrida needs to keep a minimum of representational theory as a defence against this metaphysical return. He keeps a dual structure, emptied and relativised in the extreme, but always prevented from collapsing. He introduces the paradoxical notion of a representation without presence, a redoubling without origin¹⁴. This function can have no name, because names are among its effects. An unnamed function between two non-existing poles, this ghost of the semiotic structure, *écriture/différance*,

perhaps communicates, but certainly does not exist. Or barely.¹⁵

¹³ Derrida, p.94

¹⁴ 'Representation mingles with what it represents [...] In this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable', *Gram Eng*, p.36 / *Gram*, p.54-55

¹⁵ *Lim*, p.21 / *Mar Eng*, p.330 / *Mar*, p.393

5.3. From semiotics to metaphysics: the epistemological limits

Derrida thinks of the concept of the sign as both the matrix that organises the system of Western metaphysics and the lever for its deconstruction; as such, the semiotic becomes the necessary precondition for our thought.

The sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth¹⁶

But we cannot do without the concept of the sign, for we cannot give up this metaphysical complicity without also giving up the critique we are directing against this complicity¹⁷

The sign (is) that ill-named (thing), the only one, that escapes the instituting question of philosophy: ‘what is?’¹⁸

As we have seen, its double function as a medium is redoubled at the level of epistemology. Its traditional characteristics are at this level combined into the function of a bridge toward its outside, itself a part of the cognitive bridge toward the world. However, its radically novel definition, based on the fundamental semiotic arbitrariness, seems to open an insurmountable epistemological gap. I will organise the relevant epistemological questions around the two traditional structural functions of the semiotic: ‘in between’ and ‘outside’. So, which realms does the semiotic bridge? And how does it reach, if it does, the other (out) side?

In this discussion of ‘bridging’, we constantly slip between what in traditional philosophic discourse would be classified as three distinct issues – signification, cognition and perception – all of which are performing a bridging function, at least in a dualistic theory of knowledge. As Derrida accurately observes, all three depend on a matrix of inside vs. outside, where inside is the subject and outside is the world of things. Each of them is construed in terms of different degrees of dependence (or independence) of the subject. The exact relation between them depends on the particular philosophical theory one endorses. Up until Immanuel Kant’s three

¹⁶ Gram Eng, p.14 / Gram, p.25

¹⁷ *WD*, p.355 / *ED* p.413

¹⁸ *Gram Eng*, p.19 / *Gram*, p.31

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Critiques, the two banks on either side of this bridge were supposed to have some intimate relation, usually of similarity or analogy, determined by how things are. Kant inverts this relation; he introduces the idea that it is we who give form to our experience and who, by projecting forms onto the world, provide the conditions of possibility for our understanding. By this gesture he initiates what Derrida calls ‘the stratification and historical potentialisation of meaning’¹⁹. Signification, knowledge and perception become one-way bridges from the subject to the objects, while it is uncertain whether they will ever reach the other side. In the case of Kant, the problem was solved by an ultimate belief in God, as was the case with Descartes’ hypothesis of the evil spirit. However, for the philosophy of the 20th century, deprived of the transcendental warrant of divinity, Kant’s gesture opened a gap.

Thus, it was Kant who introduced the idea that we give form to a form-less continuum, which in turn inspired the structuralist principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness. However, Kant meant it to apply at the level of perception-cognition; the forms were provided by the faculties of the human mind, and thus shared by all human beings. Structuralism transferred the notion to the level of cognition-signification; the forms are now provided by the semiotic structure and thus dependent on a semiotic community, without any reference to human faculties. Deconstruction endorses this radicalisation of the Kantian gesture. In a traditional conceptual vocabulary, we would distinguish several different orders of questions, a multiple ‘stratification’. However, the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness subjects them all to the semiotic articulation.

Strictly speaking, structuralist semiotics does not study perception in the sense of sensory extra-semiotic experience. What it studies and where it applies its

¹⁹ WD, p.224 / ED, p.

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fundamental principle is the realm of signification. However, the way we form the world semiotically does not leave our perception unaffected. In order to see, for example, a chair as a chair, which means not only as an object on which one sits but also as an object distinguished from its environment, one needs to possess a concept for it, a sign to be precise. The question of recognition lies at the ‘lower threshold’ of semiosis as Umberto Eco calls it²⁰. Thus, the semiotic – through its articulation – constructs the given not only of cognition but even of perception. Structuralist semiotics consciously chooses an ‘immanent’ point of view concerning signification; therefore, it studies the world to the degree that it is semiotised, invested with meaning, and only with respect to its semiotisation. It doesn’t study the relation to the extra-semiotic. Nevertheless, classical structuralists are not only ontological realists, i.e. assuming the existence of a semiotic-independent reality, but also epistemological realists, at least in practice.

Deconstruction does address (quasi-)transcendental questions. While it is also based on the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness, its applicability extends to the very limits of the semiotic realm. This means that among the deconstructed oppositions and the relativised differences of order is the distinction between the semiotic and the extra-semiotic realm. In the same move, deconstruction opens the semiotic to its outside and encloses this outside in the semiotic. Realism in the Derridean discourse is reference to a transcendental signified, and as such deeply embedded in Western metaphysics. However, he does not by any means subscribe in the belief in the non-existence of the extra-textual or extra-semiotic, despite his most quoted dictum, on which is based many a nominalistic interpretation: *‘Il n’y a pas de*

²⁰ See, for example, *A Theory of Semiotics* and *Kant and the platypus*

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hors-texte'.²¹ It is ambiguous whether this formulation means that 'there is nothing in the world of which the existence does not depend on the text' or that 'there is nothing in the world on which the text does not depend'; so it may be not a statement about reality but about signification. It is the case, nevertheless, that *De grammatologie*, and even more his more experimental-performative texts, do provide arguments for an anti-realist interpretation. On the other hand, the text 'Le supplément de copule: La philosophie devant la linguistique'²² (The Supplement of the Copula: Philosophy before Linguistics) gives arguments for the opposite interpretation. In this uncharacteristic text, Derrida responds to Benveniste, who maintains that philosophical categories are of linguistic origin. Derrida disagrees, and argues for a primacy of philosophy over language; because the very distinction between language and philosophy is philosophical. He asserts the existence of a non-linguistic element of the copula, something which in a way is prior to language and languages. It seems that we have returned to the beginning. The supposed opening to the extra-semiotic is enacted by its quasi-transcendent condition of possibility. And, as we have already seen, as the distinction between the semiotic and its exterior is radically relativised, it must be prevented from collapsing by preserving a minimum notion of redoubling, a minimum of dualistic structure²³.

Summarising, structuralist semiotics, choosing an immanent point of view, investigates only its interior distinctions and borderlines. It perceives these distinctions as completely relative and de-essentialised, as a result of the principle of fundamental semiotic arbitrariness. It keeps as a stable borderline the distinction of its realm from the extra-semiotic. Its inherent *aporia* is the manner of the connection

²¹ *Gram*, p.227

²² *Mar*, p.209-246 / *Mar Eng*, p.175-205

²³ See also, Norris, *Derrida*, p.55

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between those clearly demarcated realms. Deconstruction chooses a quasi-transcendental point of view and, thus, opens its field of investigation to the external limits of semiotics, its conditions of possibility. *Différance*, the condition of possibility of the semiotic, and its distinction from the extra-semiotic realm, affects the stability of this distinction. In the peculiar spatiotemporal terms of deconstruction, the distinction is both upheld and withheld. This, however, does not resolve the *aporia* inherited from structuralism, if anything it intensifies it.

Structuralist semiotics has to reconcile two contradictory principles: the fundamental semiotic arbitrariness and epistemological realism, which correspond to the contradictory demands of the semiotic articulation and knowledge of the world. The best it can do is approach the question of articulation from the side of the semiotic. Hjelmslev provides the most consistent approach. He distinguishes the points of articulation into two, one from each of the planes of the sign-function; then, he proceeds to a multiplication of subdivisions and of the ‘semiotisation’ of substance, which ideally, in a way analogous to the mathematical limit would know the world without ever reaching it. For Derrida, this is the movement of a metaphysical desire.

The problem faced by deconstruction is put in different terms: the semiotic seems to have made the extra-semiotic disappear; there is no outside to the text.

Norris explains that

‘writing’, as Derrida employs the word [...], is *not* just synonymous with written or printed marks on a page. Nor is it opposed to a real world existing outside or beyond the text, at least in the sense that one might draw a clear demarcation between the two realms.²⁴

So to what is it opposed, if it is opposed to anything, and what happened to the real world? Here we face the difficulty of imagining a realm with no outside. However, if

²⁴ Derrida, pp.121-122

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we conceive *différance* as the manifold, the condition of possibility for everything, then indeed there is nothing outside it. The reason we should not conceive this assertion as enclosure in the semiotic is that *différance* exceeds the semiotic precisely by being its condition of possibility. The impossibility of distinguishing the semiotic from the extra-semiotic should mean that the extra-semiotic affects and invades the semiotic too. What is impossible is for us to conceive the extra-semiotic as anything else than affected by the semiotic, in any other way than through the semiotic, which amounts more or less to the structuralist semiotic position. The prohibition on posing the question, on even naming the distinction, does not in any way change our imprisonment. Derrida's unfinished gesture of transcendence is an open-ended bridge toward an inexistent destination.

Structuralist semiotics and deconstruction are trying to bridge the Kantian epistemological gap by a Kantian strategy. Kant proposed that we can gain a negative knowledge of what we can't reach by realising our own limits. In the case of structuralist semiotics, this means studying in the utmost detail the anchors of the semiotic to the extra-semiotic from the inside; as Hjelmslev did with his investigation of semiotic substance. In the case of Derrida, it means studying the conditions of possibility of the semiotic; a quasi-transcendence. Both endeavours are unfinished gestures; structurally unfinished. They are bridges whose other end never reaches the other side; and an open-ended bridge is a closed pathway.

Structuralist semiotics, in its effort to reach its outside, seems to ever expand its own realm. Deconstruction, by its movement of opening up the borderlines of the semiotic, finishes by enclosing the world. One wonders which attitude is less imperialistic. On one proposition they both agree: the epistemological limits of the semiotic are the epistemological limits *tout court*.

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