How can Linguistic Meaning be Grounded – in a Deconstructionist Semiotics?

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Deconstruction is one of the more (in)famous theories in recent times. In this paper, I argue that the theory of deconstruction, proposed by Derrida in particular, should be read as a systematic and rigorous examination of key philosophical and semiotic notions, such as sign and meaning. The relevance of taking deconstructive critique seriously is explored with the point of departure in Derrida's argument that linguistic signs are characterized by repeatability. This view is situated against attempts to ground language in context, speaker intentions and truth conditions, showing how deconstruction challenges these attempts for not taking the repeatability of signs sufficiently into account. Instead, deconstructive semiotics radicalizes the idea that linguistic signs always involve differential structures that postpone the determination of meaning. While this might be read as a skeptical conclusion, I propose that it should be positively interpreted as a relevant contribution for the theoretical understanding of language, signs and meaning.

1. Introduction

One of the most controversial and influential theories in the humanities is that of deconstruction – today just as much a buzzword signaling an examination for calling out inadequacies as the name of a particular philosophical method. Restricted to the latter sense, deconstruction originates from the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (e.g. Derrida, 1973[1967]), whose ideas have been met with equal amounts of praise and scorn – to the extent that it is hard to think of another philosophical theory with such a bipolar reputation: on the one hand, immensely influential – even outside of academia – and on the other hand the target of heavy criticism for being "difficult" for its own sake. A case in point is Michel Foucault's alleged description of Derrida's philosophy as "terrorism of obscurantism" (see Searle, 1983). At the same time as it is cast in such negative light, Gasché provides the opposite characterization of deconstruction as a "well-ordered procedure, a step-by-step type of argumentation based on an acute awareness of level-distinctions, a marked thoroughness and regularity" (Gasché, 1987, pp. 3-4).

In this paper, the latter interpretation is endorsed by explicating Derrida's reading on fundamental issues concerning language and meaning. By spelling this out, I argue that the philosophical method of deconstruction not only presents relevant and important challenges for the study of language, but its critique also points to a positive contribution. Specifically, by directing our attention to less examined themes and questions, Derrida introduces fruitful concepts and ideas for studying language in its various manifestations. While there have been numerous attempts to interpret deconstruction to a vast plethora of different ends, such as literature (Culler, 1982), ethics (Critchley, 1992), technology (Stiegler, 1998[1994]), and politics (Butler, 1993), its relevance for questions traditionally pursued by scholars of language has been less investigated. This is somewhat surprising, given that Derrida's thought departs from classical questions concerning signs, meaning and language, and in this regard belongs to an intellectual tradition from Ancient Greek philosophy all the way up to the present day. Even though many of the influential interpretations and discussions of deconstruction do not focus on such questions (though, see Lawlor, 2002 for an eminent exception), I agree when Gashché (1987, p. 3-4) states that deconstruction should not be "construed as a license for arbitrary free play in flagrant disregard of all established rules of argumentation, traditional requirements of thought, and ethical standards binding upon the interpretative

community". On the contrary, I propose that Derrida's philosophy discloses important problems and issues that we face in the theoretical investigation of language.

Before we are underway, it should be stated right at the outset that Derrida is partly responsible for his reputation as a proponent for "anything goes". The reception of deconstruction can be explained by the performative aspect of Derrida's own texts, where the boundaries of academic language are constantly being pushed. In contrast to most other philosophers, his texts are not written in a style where terms and concepts are provided with clear and lucid definitions, but rather follows a radically different approach of frequently relying on puns, wordplays, deliberately shifting terminology and rhetorical devices in order to show – rather than state – arguments and philosophical viewpoints. With respect to this, my account will be somewhat simplified and at risk of glossing over intricate details in Derrida's thought. This omission of detail, and the aim to extract a theoretical core out of deconstruction is something Derrida would oppose in principle (see Bennington and Derrida, 1993[1991]); it is however necessary in the context of situating the deconstructive approach to language and signs against a few key issues in semiotics and philosophy of language.

In doing so, we turn primarily to a few select texts in Derrida's vast oeuvre for elucidating arguments and situating them against semiotic and philosophical concerns. I begin in Section 2 with a discussion of context as anchoring linguistic meaning. On one reading, Derrida could be seen to follow a radically contextualized account of linguistic meaning. I argue that this interpretation cannot find support in Derrida's own writing, and that one should rather read deconstruction as arguing for, on the one hand, the permanence of signs across different contexts and, on the other hand, the radical singularity of *any* specific context. Section 3 explores the relation between spoken and written language, where Derrida is counter-intuitively privileging the latter over the former. These terms have a technical meaning in deconstruction that should be recognized in order to better understand Derrida's approach to language. Section 4 traces a negative consequence of the deconstructive critique: language is without origin and without a firm basis outside of itself. I show this by exploring two different ways to ground language: either in speaker intentions or in truth. Based on what has been said in sections 2 and 3, both of these can be seen as insufficient – separately or taken together – as a basis for linguistic meaning. Section 5 brings together the discussion of the previous sections with emphasis on the related notions of *trace* and *différance*. These terms propose that linguistic signs break free from any determinate ground or attempt to arrest them. The paper concludes in Section 6 by highlighting the relevance of a deconstructive reading of language for semiotics and philosophy of language.

2. Can meaning be accounted for by context?

An oft-cited line in Derrida's *De la grammatologie* reads "there is nothing outside of the text" (Derrida, 1973[1967], p. 158; French original: "il n'y a pas de hors-texte"). This line is sometimes presented without taking the surrounding body of text into account, such as the translator's immediate clarification of "there is no outside-text". As a "slogan" for deconstruction, it has been read as suggesting that nothing exist apart from written words. In effect, this could easily lead to the position that meaning is devoid of any permanence beyond the particular "text" in which it occurred.[1] Phrased in a more conventional manner, we could read the position ascribed to Derrida as a form of "Humpty-Dumpty semantics" where meaning is completely up for grabs – or by the very least strongly

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[1] The notion of "text" is immediately connected to deconstruction. Exactly how it should be interpreted in this particular citation is a matter of debate and something we return to in the discussion of "writing" in Section 3. For the present discussion, we can safely read "text" widely as encompassing both linguistic material and the surrounding context.

determined by a context which would include variations in the surrounding linguistic material, the concrete situation in which the communication took place, and so on.

It is quite clear that many words – if not all – are polysemous to at least some degree and can express different senses dependent on when and how they are used. One examples used by Derrida (1982[1972]) is *communication* – a word that includes senses like 'transportation', 'mediated exchange between several parties', or 'the means for such exchange to occur.' Which one of the different senses is intended would then be decidable by recourse to context (in the sense specified above). On the basis of such an interpretation of the phrase "there is no outside-text", Derrida could be charged with advocating a completely contextually bound account of linguistic meaning. However, upon examining his claims more cautiously – in their context, as it were – instead, we find a strong opposition against signs as dependent on the context in which they appear, and therefore also an opposition to the view that any understanding of a particular sign would be completely underdetermined.

Derrida points out two problems with a contextual-based account: (1) a satisfying and theoretically viable notion of context is in principle problematic to attain, and (2) linguistic signs display a type of semiotic stability that goes beyond any specific context. With respect to the first point, he states that the notion of context is not a theoretically well-defined concept. As Derrida rhetorically asks, "are the prerequisites of a context ever absolutely determinable? […] Is there a rigorous and scientific concept of *context*?" (Derrida, 1982[1972], p. 310). That is, if the notion of context can help to handle for instance polysemous senses, then it must be possible to clearly phrase where one context begins and where it ends. In general, it must be possible to delimit the respects in which context disambiguates meaning. Otherwise, the concept of context would vary on a case-by-case basis, and would thereby also be sensitive to context. To the extent that there are contexts, Derrida only accepts their theoretical relevance if they are "absolutely illimitable". But if contexts are boundless, then a coherent notion is lacking and its theoretical validity is strongly constrained. To further explicate his argument, Derrida states that all linguistic signs have the potential to be cited. By virtue of always having the potential to be cited, they can break from every *determinable* context, including any specific contexts where they have been produced and received.

> Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written (in the usual sense of this opposition), in a small or large unit, can be *cited;* put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion. (Derrida, 1982[1972], p. 320)

Derrida is thus making the further claim that something like an originary context is not – vis-à-vis signs – privileged. A sign is not relegated by a specific context, but can break from it and institute new ones in a seemingly endless process. That is, the ability for signs to be cited illustrates that the same recurs but in a different situation.

This takes us to the second objection against meaning as bound by context: the permanence of signs across contexts. Even if the specific sense of a particular linguistic sign varies dependent on context, it is nevertheless to some degree stable across them. If a sign were completely contextually determined, then different instantiations would not even be recognizable as the recurrence of same sign.[2] Without the recognition of such semiotic stability, it would not even be possible to say that context interferes and decides which interpretation to favor. As noted above, and this is something we have reasons to

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[2] In his criticism, Derrida does not seem to make the distinction between the lack of a scientifically viable notion of context and the problem with considering context as disambiguating meaning. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for making me aware of this distinction.

return to later in much more detail, one could not cite.[3] To illustrate this point, I cite at length from Derrida:

> [I]t belongs to the sign to be legible, even if the moment of its production is irremediably lost, and even if I do not know what its alleged author-scriptor meant consciously and intentionally at the moment he wrote it, that is abandoned it to its essential drifting. Turning now to the semiotic and internal context, there is no less a force of breaking by virtue of its essential iterability; one can always lift a written syntagma from the interlocking chain in which it is caught or given without making it lose every possibility of functioning, if not every possibility of 'communicating,' precisely. (Derrida, 1982[1972], p. 316)

Derrida is here specifically concerned with the way *writing* – something that has a special place in his thinking (see Section 3) – communicates even in the absence of its context of production. The author can be long dead, the place of writing obliterated; in a word, the originary context can be long gone, but what has been written can still be received and interpreted at least to some degree. Now the same condition applies to the moment of writing: here the receiver is typically absent, but the writer still expects the text to be in principle interpretable. Were it not for this possibility of functioning in the author's absence, the act of writing would absolutely lose its worth and validity. Why send a message if it could not be comprehended at another time? In a sense, this is absolutely trivial: written material can and does function in the absence of its production context, and from any determinate act of reception. However, by emphasizing the principal detachment of linguistic signs from any empirically bound context, Derrida not only criticizes a contextually bound account, but also points to signs as being formally characterized by their possibility for repetition. As we shall see, this leads Derrida to challenge some deep-grained views about language and to propose a quite different theoretical outlook.

In the next section, we turn to the notion of writing and its connection to the repeatability of signs. But before doing so, I want to emphasize that the criticism of context does not entail an utter dismissal of its theoretical relevance. The formal property of a sign as always possible to extract from context will have the consequence that any *particular* context must be handled with the utmost care and given the most serious attention as unique and non-repeatable. Therefore, there is an inherent tension between the particular (say, an in every respect inimitable) event and the linguistic sign as repeatable, citable and possible to extract from any particular setting. But in order to even isolate the former, we might have to resort to the latter and have thereby in a sense already lost the distinctive individuality that made the event into what it is. Since I focus on formal and ontological questions in semiotics and philosophy of language, the interpretative elements in both the theory and practice of deconstruction is not the focal concern in what follows. But it should be kept in mind that the role of context in many ways is unavoidable due to Derrida's fascination for the relation between permanence and difference (see for instance Derrida, 1994[1993]), which in relation to context could be phrased as "meaning is bound by context, but context is boundless" (Culler, 1982, p. 123).

3. Speech and writing

At the end of the previous section, we started to engage with written language as displaying persistence beyond any determinate context – including the context of its inception. This potential of writing has a specific place in Derrida's thought, to the extent that the primacy of speech over writing is put into question. At first glance, this comes off

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[3] This is of course not to say that the *function* of citing is different from not citing. Derrida is aware of this difference, but as we shall see when discussing *iterability*, there is a sense in which one cannot principally safeguard the cited from the non-cited, the serious from the non-serious, and so forth.

as a completely nonsensical notion. The indices in favor of speech as more basic than writing are both reasonable and plentiful: speech is chronologically older than writing; there are cultures without written language, but no extant culture has writing without oral language; children learn to speak before they learn to write, and so on. Thus, it seems that oral language is an essential precondition for written language, which would suggest that questioning its privilege would be nothing but an empty gesture of unrestrained sophistry (cf. Searle 1983).

A brief glance at classical thought also provides ample support of the priority of speech over writing. For instance, Aristotle describes written signs as signifying spoken ones (*Poetics*). The latter is animated by the thought and intentions of the speaker, who in a direct face-to-face encounter can be held responsible for what he or she is saying. The former, by contrast, remains mute and dead unless animated by the intentions of a subject. A written sign is thus a copy or a derivate only needed when it is not possible to communicate by means of speech. Derrida finds that the primacy of speech is correlated with a systematic debasement of writing (see in particular Derrida, 1976[1967]). Among other things, written language differs from speech in that no one needs to be there to take responsibility for what is expressed, and it therefore bears the latent predisposition to misrepresent. Two examples of particular relevance to Derrida are Rousseau's verdict of written language as a sin in *Essay on the Origin of Languages* and Saussure's dismissal of written language as a "tyranny" as well as a "teratological case" (Saussure, 1966[1916], p. 31-32). The conclusion of Derrida's historical exposé is that speech has been heralded as the bearer of meaning, truth and reason, whereas writing is pushed down and treated as something not truly belonging to language proper.

One can of course have qualms with the diagnosis that speech has been prioritized over writing, and whether Derrida's interpretation is exaggerated (e.g., Searle, 1977, 1995; Kakoliris, 2015). It would in many ways be more familiar – in line with Saussure or Linell's (1982) notion of "written language bias in linguistics" – to criticize how written language has often been used as the model for linguistic and philosophical analyses of language. In contrast to written language's form of grammatically complete sentences, speech does not appear as neatly ordered, but rather includes interruptions, repetitions and speech errors. In part, this is, of course, because a written text does not reflect its production. A particular text would hardly be readable if it retained all the different typos and rewritings that occurred in the process of writing. When Derrida considers writing as debased, we can see this as turning attention to a tendency to impose a hierarchical division between speech and writing (a stance taken by Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Condillac, Rousseau, and Saussure to just mention a few). As an empirical claim about which comes first of speech and writing, it is of course a true claim that the former predates the latter. But this would be to misread what is at stake: the "written" component of all linguistic signs. Let us in the following unpack what this component might be.

After claiming that there is a hierarchy between speech and writing, Derrida moves on to distillate certain aspects of them. This leads to something of a reformulation of the terms speech and writing, which entails that writing is no longer equivalent to the marks made on a piece of paper, or those made on a keyboard or touchscreen. Contrary to the view that language is essentially based in speech, Derrida argues that all language – even speech – involves "a graphematic structure" (Derrida, 1982[1972], p. 327). We saw earlier that writing is not empirically determined by the presence of both the author and reader. Extrapolating from this, there is a sense in which linguistic signs have the characteristic of functioning in the absence of a determinate producer or receiver. To illustrate this, we can think that a number of people come up with a secret code only they can understand. In this way, they can communicate – whether they speak, write, gesture or wave flags does not really matter – and no one else can understand messages composed in this code. While this might be a secret code *in practice*, it does not entail

that it is secret *in principle*. Why is this so? Derrida argues that a code is not a code unless it is in general decipherable. In other words, something cannot convey a semiotic message unless being in principle intelligible to anyone.[4]

> The possibility of repeating, and therefore of identifying, marks is implied in every code, making of it a communicable, transmittable, decipherable grid that is iterable for a third party, and thus for and possible user in general. (Derrida, 1982[1972], p. 315)

The possibility of linguistic signs as always decipherable has profound consequences. What could perhaps be called the classical view sees speech as occurring in a concrete situation – in a *presence*, as Derrida would say. There is no speech that does not take place in such a situation, with the exception of recordings or broadcasts where the speaker and hearer need not be in the same physical presence. A text, by contrast, is for Derrida characterized by the potential of functioning without presupposing a determinate situation where it is read. There is no specific context in which the written mark ceases to be in principle identifiable. In this regard, written language has a relative permanence that spoken language lacks. I mentioned more recent technologies for transmitting and recording speech, such as radio and television a moment ago. Since these technologies allow for spoken language without parties being physically located together, Derrida would claim that they also unveil the "graphic" character of speech.

A second argument for writing as a basic representational mode is more straightforward. There are written notations not modeled on speech (i.e. in contrast to a writing system with phonetically based graphemes). One example is mathematics where the nomenclature and annotation arguably presupposes a certain graphic rather than auditory form (Derrida, 1976[1967]). This is not only a matter of requiring a mnemonic cognitive device for performing mathematical operations, but also an illustration of the point that mathematical representations cannot be conceived as representations derived from speech. Rather, mathematical representations require graphic rather than oral form.[5]

With these two arguments in mind, it is possible to move to the more general conclusion of writing (in the technical sense of Derrida) as more basic than speech. We have previously seen that signs are not determined by a specific context; rather, they are identifiable as the return of the same across different contexts. Thus, in principle, a sign can be repeated as the same across all contexts. This is what Derrida calls *iterability*, which means that a trait of the sign is the possibility to break out of any determinate context and from any determinate subject. The sign is "grafted" (Derrida, 1982[1972], p. 329): it does not belong to anyone or to any place. It is in this specific sense of iterability that writing is "prior" to speech. I put scare quotes around "prior" to indicate that it is not a matter of writing chronologically preceding speech, but rather a conceptual priority as the condition *even for speech*. That is, were it not for the iterability of linguistic signs there would not be any oral language either. In other words, traits that were thought to belong to written language and hence extrinsic to a postulated core of language, turn up to be indispensable for language to function in the first place.

This type of reversal of hierarchical divisions is a typical move within deconstructive thought. While this could be read as just an exercise in an unrestrained and unfruitful criticism, I find the motives to be much more earnest and thereby all the more important to consider. Derrida is calling attention to a form of instability and

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[4] Despite the fact that Derrida does not to my knowledge discuss the works of Wittgenstein, there is at least an analogy, or "parallel" (Garwer 1973) between his iterability and the "private language argument" from Wittgenstein (1953).

[5] This argument relies heavily on Husserl's description of ideality as requiring writing. Husserl (1970[1936]) notes that mathematical truths, like the Pythagorean theorem, cannot be bound to its originator. To be instituted as ideal, it must be embodied in a format that can survive independent of its originator or any concrete here and now.

undecidability engrained in the very texture of our conceptual weavings. On this view, distinctions are essential to philosophical and scientific thought, but they are never clear-cut. Following the structruralist idea of oppositions as integral to linguistic meaning, Derrida argues that even conceptual distinctions presuppose one another. There is no speech without writing just as there is no good without evil. Concepts do not only have a simple and clear meaning, but just as with speech and writing they also carry with them their "negative double". However, in contrast to the structuralist tendency to put notions in opposition to one another, and hence definable only in terms of the place within a system, Derrida objects that such oppositions are never pure and simple. If writing is part of speech, then it is not only a matter of two oppositional terms mutually defining each other, but also that the distinction itself is unstable. In contrast to many other thinkers, Derrida does not believe that this situation can be remedied by extracting an essential meaning or by going back to the indisputable cases where a certain concept can be applied. Rather, this inherent lack of stability is embraced as the starting point for the theoretical endeavor of deconstruction (see Derrida, 1976[1967]).

The fact that the colloquial words *speech* and *writing* are used for something as technical might be confusing, and two technical terms might have been preferred.[6] I do not want to dwell on this point, but this is a prime example of the performative aspect of deconstruction mentioned in Section 1. This withstanding, by showing that the priority of speech over writing can be flipped over, Derrida wants to suggest that language – even in spoken form – relies on a type of repeatability that breaks from the concrete here and now. Whether this should be phrased in terms of a matter of priority between speech and writing can be discussed, but to turn around the assumed conceptual priority of speech shows – rather than "tells" – that there is a sense in which the oppositions themselves are united and glued together. For Derrida, this means that binary differentiations with all they might entail (such as ordering them hierarchically), involve a "decision". We should not read this in the sense of a conscious and deliberate action, but rather as a decision "anterior to" conceptual and philosophical discourse. The decision has already been made for it, not by it. Derrida believes that the one strategy for detecting this is by embracing conceptual instability. Of course, it is not possible to become completely immune to the use of technical terms, as shown by for instance a notion like iterability, but one possible strategy is to take care for one's terminology and justify it in a way that is "never absolute and definitive" (Derrida, 1976[1967], p. 70). A clear indication of this is the deliberately changing terminology and the reluctance to provide lucid definitions. At the same time, this is of course a problem when interpreting and reading texts adhering to this principle: do two seemingly similar terms have the same or different meanings? In a sense, this deliberate ambiguity and the interpretative instability entailed is also a case of the performative aspects of deconstruction.

4. Truth and intentions: tracing two important consequences

As we have seen, Derrida states that signs break away from any determinate context, and can in this regard be characterized as a kind of "writing". This also means that the meaning of signs – whatever we take that to be – cannot be completely determined and controlled. This reading has two grave consequences, both of which challenge some deep-grained assumptions about language. The first consequence is that the intentions of the language-using subject are insufficient to account for the iterability of linguistic signs. To let us appreciate this consequence, Derrida uses the by-now familiar example of a written text, and how it is in some crucial respects independent of its author.

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[6] At times, Derrida makes an opposition by labelling writing in the colloquial sense as "vulgar" and the technical sense here discussed as "arche-writing" (e.g. Derrida, 1976[1967]).

> For the written to be the written, it must continue to 'act' and to be legible even if what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written, for what he seems to have signed, whether he is provisionally absent, or if he is dead, or if in general he does not support, with his absolutely current and present intention or attention, the plenitude of his meaning, of that very thing which seems to be written 'in his name.'[7] (Derrida, 1982[1972], p. 316)

If writing can "act" in this way, then no one in particular is truly responsible for the linguistic sign. No singularity or origin can be located which can secure what one means. This need not be as radical as it might sound. Coming from different directions and drawing different conclusions, philosophers such as Wittgenstein (1953) and Putnam (1975) both have argued that linguistic meaning is not (fully) accounted for in terms of what one intends to say. We must rely on the norms and rules imposed by language – whether we want it or not. Expanding on this line of thought, assuming that language can in principle function in the absence of anyone in particular, means that it can function without the originator of a particular linguistic message. The possibility of being communicable in such an absence has the further consequence that the intentions of a speaker or writer cannot fully account for the linguistic message. As we saw in the discussion of context in Section 2, what I want to say cannot completely control and determine the linguistic discourse, but the context can always be altered without entailing that the linguistic signs have ceased to be decipherable. What I say at a given here-and-now can be cited, paraphrased, and used to create new situations and new meanings without my direct involvement and outside my control. While this might be undesirable, the experience is likely to be familiar rather than alien. One can for instance verbally hurt someone without having the intention to do so. Or, what someone has said or written can be repeated and spread – think for instance about the tabloid press, or the more contemporary phenomenon of social media – in such a way that someone will be held accountable for something they did not mean to say, or perhaps did not say at all. Derrida makes an immediate connection between this non-intended aspect of language and the possibility of the same sign returning at another time.[8]

> [A]t the very moment when someone would like to say or to write [something], the very factor that will permit the mark (be it psychic, oral, graphic) to function beyond this moment – namely the possibility of its being repeated another time – breaches, divides, expropriates the 'ideal' plenitude or self-presence of intention, of meaning (to say) and, a fortiori, of all adequation between meaning and saying. (Derrida, 1988[1977], p. 61-62)

In saying or writing something, I cannot control how it will be transmitted and received at a future time. To the extent that a meaning is present to me when using linguistic signs, this cannot fully account for the reception of said signs. There will always be a "breach" or a "division" between the time of production and any possible time of reception, which is beyond the control of anyone – even the producer. If this is the case, then despite the clearest and most earnest of intentions, I cannot really be sure how a linguistic message will be received, and further transmitted. Given that the sign (or "mark" in the citation above) will continue to function beyond this moment of production, my intention can never control it. Derrida is here responding to Searle's criticism that "a meaningful sentence is just a standing possibility of the corresponding (intentional) speech act" (Searle, 1977, p. 202). For Derrida, however, my intention to say this and that does not characterize the structural feature of the linguistic sign as precisely iterable. The

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[7] Note that "writing" in this quotation should be understood in the technical sense described in Section 3.

[8] There is, of course, a world of difference between having said something and not having said it. I use this example to point to Derrida's insistence on the linguistic sign as functioning beyond the intention of the speaker. In this way, what I mean to say is clearly not in complete control of what is in effect communicated.

possibility for a sign to return at another time is therefore also a threat to the meaning one wants to communicate.

The view advocated by Derrida appeals to the Husserlian notion of a "crisis" (Husserl, 1970[1936]). Husserl states that the embodiment in some form of symbolic technology is what guarantees that the same meaning can be widely shared and communicated. But at the same time, that very process involves the latent risk of losing the very meaning it seeks to convey. Once a meaning can be virtually transmitted, one need not return to the original experiences that endowed the sign with sense in the first place. It is for this reason Derrida states that the crisis of Husserl has always been at work. That is, the condition for language to transmit anything at all is that the transmission of a univocal sense is always at the risk of becoming lost, or altered (even ever so slightly) along the way (cf. Derrida, 1978[1962]). It is like the game of Chinese whispers: it takes just one erroneous transmission for the word to lose the sense it was supposed to convey, or to gain additional senses. If there is always a state of crisis vis-à-vis the relation between signs and intentions, then this also applies retrospectively to the signs I am using here and now. I do not know exactly how they will be received, but neither am I in control of *my* reception of them. Even if the addressee's reception or the contexts of interpretation might in most practical situations be marginal and possible to control for, Derrida nevertheless states that if there is always a possibility for an intended meaning to become lost, then this needs to be taken into account. This insecurity is, of course, accentuated the larger the time scale gets, which is where the notion of writing really comes into play. Since Derrida considers writing as characteristic for any linguistically mediated discourse, he goes on to state that iterability

> … alters, contaminating parasitically what it identifies and enables to repeat 'itself'; it leaves us no choice but to mean (to say) something that is (already, always, also) other than what we mean (to say), to say something other than what we say and would have wanted to say, to understand something other than ... etc. (Derrida, 1988[1972], p. 62)

A consequence that can be read from Derrida's account is that the speaker's intention does not provide language with sufficient anchoring. Rather, it is but one anchor among many. An objection to this conclusion would be that the situations where it is marginalized are fringe cases deviating from what would be the normal case of linguistic communication. Typically, we know what we mean; we do not misunderstand one another; we do not customarily lie and deceive (e.g. Grice, 1975). This response would however fail to take into account what Derrida is pointing to. The movement between repetitions always involves the risk of conveying something that we might not have intended – a latent risk unavoidable for language to be communicable at all. Moreover, a deconstructive reading questions whether the reasons for imposing a theoretical division between the normal case and the deviation are theoretically justified. A general semiotic theory cannot, according to Derrida, merely dismiss different kinds of discourses as marginal cases and by extension demote them as less relevant. The deconstructive approach would prefer to understand why such distinctions are imposed and also to trace the consequences of avoiding them.

A second consequence of deconstruction is that linguistic meaning cannot be grounded in truthful propositions. Deliberately or not, language is used for other things than telling the truth: plays are staged, novels are written and stories of events that have not happened are told. In doing so, the same signs, constructions and linguistic devices are used as when speaking about something that has occurred "for real". The traditional way to deal with the difference between what – for lack of better terms – could be called fictive and factive/factual discourse has been to consider the former as dependent on or derivative from the latter. To deliberately lie requires that one can tell the truth, but not necessarily the reverse. Considering our discussion of speech and writing in Section 3,

Derrida's response might sound familiar: the prioritization of truthful and serious discourse, thereby in the first instance excluding non-serious discourse from an analysis of language is illegitimate (see in particular Derrida, 1982[1972], 1988[1977]). Irony, fiction, and lies – in short, anything that can be deemed as strictly not true – is part of what language can be used for. It is therefore not justified to omit the non-serious from a full account of language.

To view language as not prioritizing truthful use is of course controversial in several respects. It seems to suggest that the function of language cannot be limited in any way amenable for scientific scrutiny. A possible response would first of all question whether the objection is adequately phrased to counter Derrida's concern. At issue is not whether one can tell the truth or that words can be said to refer to this or that. There is always the possibility to mime or to feign the serious and truthful. The lie could not be possible unless it could in principle be mistaken for the truth, which means that there is a moment where the lie is virtually indistinguishable from the truth. Analogously, a deceitful promise is also a promise. The lie and the deceit rely on the same structure as the truth and the promise, and are therefore, in a sense, also part of a more general discourse.

> A corruption that is 'always possible' cannot be a mere extrinsic accident supervening on a structure that is original and pure, one that can be purged of what thus happens to it. The purportedly 'ideal' structure must necessarily be such that this corruption will be 'always possible.' This possibility constitutes part of the necessary traits of the purportedly ideal structure. The ('ideal') description of this structure should thus include, and not exclude, this possibility (Derrida, 1988[1977], p. 77)

The objection outlined above could continue by stating that getting the simple or more frequent cases right is a prerequisite for analyzing the more complicated and infrequent cases. After all, promises are hopefully kept more often than they are broken, and the truth is told more often than not. That is, to understand what a truthful statement or a promise is, we would do better to depart from the conditions of successfully promising something. Once this is sorted out, it is possible to detail the different ways in which one can fail to tell the truth or make a promise, such as having unfaithful intents, incapacities to do as promised, and so forth. Derrida responds by asking on what grounds these prioritizations are made.

> Once it is iterable, to be sure, a mark marked with a supposedly 'positive' value ('serious', 'literal', etc.) can be mimed, cited, transformed into an 'exercise' or into 'literature', even into a 'lie' – that is, it can be made to carry its other, its 'negative' double. But iterability is also, by the same token, the condition of the values said to be 'positive.' (Derrida, 1988[1977], p. 70)

As we can see in this citation, iterability harbours truth and falsity, literality and fictivity, and so forth. It is therefore in a sense prior to these distinctions, which suggests that the collocation of these distinctions belongs to a broader matrix couching both possibilities. To Derrida, this means an essential possibility of a latent potential for iterated re-inscriptions without necessarily having reference to meaning in the sense of truth and intention.[9] For instance Mulligan (2003) reads this as *undermining* the distinctions in question, and thereby rendering the effects of intentions eradicated. However, this is not the way I would read Derrida's reasoning. A more plausible reading is that the effects are

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[9] Derrida discusses – and rejects – that one can rule out "meaningless" iterations from the sphere of possibilities. In discussing Husserl's distinction between signs that are *wiedersinn* and *sinnlos*, Derrida (1982[1972]) remarks that even non-grammatical or semantically non-sensical expressions (examples from Husserl are *the green is where* and *abracadabra*, respectively) cannot be ruled out from the general inventory of possible iterations – at least, they are instances of the very agrammaticality and nonsensicality brought to attention.

part of a broader matrix, and that the distinctions that inform such effects can be philosophically investigated.

> I will not conclude from this that there is no relative specificity of the effects of consciousness, of the effects of speech (in opposition to writing in the traditional sense), that there is no effect of the performative, no effect of ordinary language, no effect of presence and of speech acts. It is simply that these effects do not exclude what is generally opposed to them, but on the contrary presuppose it in a dyssemetrical [dissymmetrical] fashion, as the general space of their possibility. (Derrida, 1982[1972], p. 326)

Even if Derrida is drawing these radical conclusions in principle, it is important to remember that speaker intentions and truth are not rendered obsolete. Rather, we should see this as calling attention to their, in comparison, limited role within a broader horizon of language. The conclusion is therefore that language has not a sufficiently stable ground in truth or in intentions. Since they impose and restrict the "general space of their possibility", and moreover locate the core of language outside of language, Derrida takes such essences to be insufficient and problematic. The next section looks closer at the endeavor to think through what such a "general space" would be like.

5. *Trace*: supplement and substitution

We have seen how Derrida reaches the conclusion that linguistic signs are characterized by iterability. With this, attention is called to the formal trait of iterability as challenging appeals to context, speaker intention or truth conditions as constitutive features of language. But if signs lack such features, is the conclusion that language is completely up for grabs and that nothing can be known for sure? While this might seem like the only outcome of such a critical reasoning, I do not read Derrida as content with such a definite and negative conclusion. As we have seen, establishing iterability as the formal trait of linguistic signs means that the same sign returns, but each repetition is to some extent new and unique. At stake is the relation between permanence and change, or between the unique and the repeatable (Derrida, 2002). Exactly how to interpret Derrida on this point has been a matter of debate among scholars of deconstructive thought (see for instance the radically different interpretations of Hägglund, 2008 and Caputo, 2008). Of specific relevance for the present discussion is how the unique and the repeatable involve what Derrida (1976[1967]) calls *trace*. In a deconstructive semiotics, trace is closely related to the possibility for the sign's repeatability, with all that it entails.

Each individual repetition of a sign could be seen to mark a return of the same. This *re*-turn means quite literally that time has passed between each repetition. We can think of this difference as involving alterations in the empirical conditions: another situation, someone else is producing the sign, and so forth. More formally, we could say that there is always a temporal difference between repetitions. A particular iteration occurs at a moment that can never be repeated; yet it is a repetition of the same iterable sign. Since iterability entails repetition over time, Derrida argues that temporal deferral is a key component. We can here recall the sense evoked by the word *trace*. Think of the traces left by an animal: it is the remainder of the no longer present animal. It marks a past presence: the track signals something no longer there, something whose material presence is gone. To be what it is, the trace must signal this past. At the same time, the trace calls attention to the future time to which we are always left out.[10] A trace like footsteps in the sand always risks effacement by the next wave. We can relate this to our discussion in Section 4 where we recapitulated Derrida's argument that the sign can always become altered and changed beyond anyone's control.

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[10] Please note that Derrida also evokes *trace* as a verb, with senses like 'to follow', 'to mark', or 'to make a path to elsewhere'.

The notion of trace plays a decisive role not only in a temporal sense, but its being is also determined by something different from itself. A sign is not only repeated over and over again, but its meaning is to a considerable extent dependent on what it is not. This is clearly inspired by Saussure's (1916) notion of *differentiation* as integral to the linguistic sign: a *house* is a house by not being a *mansion*, not being a *hut*, and so on. The sense of a specific sign is determined in opposition to other signs within the linguistic system. Extrapolating from the notions of differential relation within the linguistic system, Derrida proposes that there is a broader form of spacing [*espacement*] involved. As we have seen, a sign can always be extracted from a specific context, and is therefore both same and different on each use. But there is also another type of difference entailed by the relational character of linguistic signs. Somewhat similar to syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations in the structuralist tradition, the sign does not stand on its own, but is indebted to what it is not: to imperceptible differences. For Derrida, this means that a particular sign evokes other signs, and these other signs evoke other signs, and so forth in a principally endless chain without clear end or determination. One way to phrase this is that every sign contains traces of what it does not mean – a kind of non-meaning embedded within the texture of meaning. In other words, the possibility of meaning must *also* be the possibility of non-meaning. We should, however, remember that Derrida is not denying what we call meaning. In line with the deconstructionist "logic", the emphasis is on thinking something like meaning as part of a more general matrix that also comprises what it is not. Derrida summarizes spacing and what it entails in the following quotation.

> This force of rupture is tied to the spacing that constitutes the written sign: spacing which separates it from other elements of the internal contextual chain (the always open possibility of its disengagement and graft), but also from all forms of present reference (whether past or future in the modified form of the present that is past or to come), objective or subjective. This spacing is not the simple negativity of a lacuna but rather the emergence of the mark. (Derrida, 1976[1967], p. 8)

These temporal and spatial differences are inherent in what makes something a sign. A requirement of the sign is to be marked in advance by deferral and difference. In other words, to have the capacity to be iterated at another time implies that this was a formal precondition case *even on the first mention*. Since Derrida also uses the term *arche-writing* somewhat interchangeably with trace, we could read him as claiming that meaning has a proto-linguistic structure. One should however be cautious in reading this as a form of linguistic determinism where experience is permeated by language. On an alternative, and more plausible reading, terms like sameness and difference, absence and presence, unique and reproducible presuppose one another. For this interplay to be possible, the same must recur at another time in order to be identified as "the same". Derrida connects this possibility of a re-turn to the trace as a supplementary structure to the sign. This does not amount to just saying that difference and absence are necessary for thinking sameness and presence. Doing so would turn them into just another positive value – similar to how for instance Sartre (1956[1943]) conceives of nothingness. In contrast, trace is not yet another positive notion that can be integrated in the service of making a theory more complete. Rather, the moment Derrida grants the trace part of what makes the sign possible is also a moment that destabilizes the notion of the sign. In other words: the trace is a supplement to the sign that turns out to be indispensable.[11]

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[11] The supplement as conceptually indispensable for that which it supplements is a key movement within deconstructive criticism, where the hierarchization between concepts is inverted and hence called into question (see Derrida, 1976[1967]). The supplementary character of writing for speech discussed in Section 3 is perhaps one of the clearest operations of this "logic" in Derrida's works.

We could thus say that difference and absence are, in a seemingly paradoxical way, constitutive features for the emergence of sign. To capture that there is a dual form of difference – both temporal and spatial – Derrida plays on the French verb *différer*. This verb encompasses what could be considered both a spatial ('to differ', i.e. not identical and thus involving distance) and a temporal sense ('to defer', i.e. to indefinitely postpone). The derived noun *différence* ('difference') covers only the former spatial sense and not the latter temporal sense. To then account for both temporal deferral *and* spatial non-identity, Derrida coins the neologism *différance*. As can be seen, this is a deliberate misspelling of *différence*. In contrast to the existing French noun, *différance* is thereby intentionally polysemous between a spatial and temporal sense (Derrida, 1982[1968]). It fills an open slot (or absence) within the French language. This is meant to show the importance of writing: we are dealing with something that cannot be heard, but can only be made manifest in writing. The term is without a doubt one of the most central notions in Derrida's work, but also one that deliberately evades any simple definition or demarcation. Despite its importance, Derrida is often at pains in explaining what it is, even to the extent that his treatment often amounts to what *différance* is not, e.g. "*différance* is literally not a word or a concept" (Derrida, 1982[1968], p. 6). It seems to be much easier to show than tell what *différance* "is" within the context of a deconstructive reading.

As mentioned, there is a paradoxical character to *différance* implied by treating differences as originary reasons or causes. If they were indeed constitutive, it would follow that *différance* is similar to more classical philosophical concepts like Plato's *eidos*, *Deus* in the scholastic tradition or *Geist* in Hegelian dialectics. At the same time, however, *différance* cannot obviously be an originary concept. After all, what would it mean to say that deferral and differences are more originary than identities? By virtue of introducing differences into the thinking of the originary, the logic that regulates such constitutive concepts is put into question.

> [différance] renders the project of idealization possible without lending 'itself' to any pure, simple, and idealizable conceptualization. No process or project of idealization is possible without iterability, and yet iterability 'itself' cannot be idealized. For it comports an internal and impure limit that prevents it from being identified, synthesized, or reappropriated. (Derrida, 1988[1977], p. 71)

As Derrida states here, iterability is the condition for any ideality and hence indispensable for the possibility of any conceptual framework.[12] There are two different readings of this, which we could call *destructive* and *deconstructive*. The former states that if concepts are not immune from the differential structure of the trace, then the approach to find a ground, a cause or an origin has been shown to be impossible. A less nihilistic reading is deconstructive. It would differ from the destructive reading by emphasizing that the concepts have not lost their validity, but that they include, just as any other structure of reference, what they are not. The trace is, in a phrase dear to Derrida, "always already there". Derrida can thus claim that if that is indeed the case, then the very possibility of something like "origin" itself involves the "nonorigin".

From the iterability of the sign, Derrida extracts that differences are of decisive importance. It points to other signs which it is similar and opposed to. But it also points to other instances of the same sign at other moments. How can we make sense of differences as central and, in a sense, even essential? This component of a constitutive absence and difference within the sign is another way to see the *trace*. As a negative element of

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[12] As noted in footnote 5, the priority of iterability over ideality is an argument Derrida inherits from Husserl. In *Origin of geometry* (Husserl 1970[1936]), Husserl notes that ideal senses like mathematical truths are maintained by being inscribed in written form. While Husserl's analysis oscillates between ideality as presupposing iterability and vice versa, Derrida argues for the former interpretation.

difference, it is simultaneously within and outside of the sign, but nevertheless indispensable for the repeatability of signs.

6. Summary and conclusions

Derrida has been described as making "eccentric" and "superficial" claims, at best, and "bizzare" claims with "breathtaking implausibility", at worse (e.g. Searle, 1983). A testament to this reputation can be found in the open letter in NY Times protesting against Cambridge University granting an Honorary Doctorate to Derrida (Smith et al., 1992). The letter portrays Derrida as engaged in a style more akin to Dadaist literature than adhering to academic discourse: "where coherent assertions are being made at all, these are either false or trivial" (*ibid*.). In light of the numerous and loud critiques against deconstruction as intentionally obscure and, to the extent that something comprehensible is communicated, it amounts to nothing but uninteresting tautologies (Searle, 1977; Smith et al., 1992).

In his reading of Marx, Derrida reminds us that there is not a single uniform interpretation of Marx, but many readings that cannot be coalesced into homogenous coherence (Derrida, 1994[1993]). Likewise, there is not just one reading of Derrida. As we have seen, the argumentation explored in deconstruction challenges many fundamental philosophical and semiotic concerns, but I have tried to show that it still belongs to these traditions. This is very much in line with the conditions for a deconstructive critique as always working within the field it aims to deconstruct (see Derrida, 1976[1967]). The critique does not aim at totally annihilating and utterly destroying the possibility of scientific and philosophical discourse – such a nihilistic project would without a doubt be an easy target for deconstruction. It is rather concerned with something akin to a meta-philosophical project of exploring the limits and possibilities of thought and language. This is in part achieved by tracing the conditions (and radicalizing the effects) of, in this case, a quite mundane activity seemingly necessary for intellectual work: reading and writing.

While only scratching the surface of an immense philosophical project that goes way beyond Derrida's own work, I have in this paper situated deconstruction in relation to fundamental questions in semiotics and philosophy of language. This was achieved by exploring qualms with linguistic signs as attaining their meaning and function in context, truth or speaker intention. Derrida calls attention to this through the formal criterion of iterability. The indications of this can be found in examples such as citations, lies, misunderstandings and fiction. Deconstruction aims to show that treating these cases as exceptions entails the risk of losing them in a process of idealization. Much of Derrida's work is devoted to criticizing and showing the problems of making such idealizations, but it should be remembered that deconstruction never aims to replace what is being deconstructed (cf. Derrida, 1981[1972]). Just as there is a mutual interdependence between related notions (such as speech/writing), there is a similar type of polarity between theoretical endeavors. While *différance* aims to annul the logic of seeking a single regulative principle, its very condition of being presupposes that there is something deconstructible. Even in its most radical moments, deconstruction will always operate as a parasite on the body of any gesture that claims to have found *The* explanation, *The* truth or *The* reason. Of course, not all theoretical endeavors are explicitly concerned with wanting to find an incontestable core or essence, and Derrida's reading of the history as ideas might in this regard be exaggerated. Minimally however, deconstruction is a counterweight against totalizing claims, without thereby turning the philosophical enterprise impossible: "[deconstruction] merely de-limits a theorization that would seek to incorporate its object totally but can accomplish this only to a limited degree" (Derrida, 1988[1977], p. 71).

We can then say that despite all criticism, deconstruction is by the very least a systematic attempt to think through the notions of signs, language and meaning. It does so by always turning to the "other", to that which is excluded, secondary and derived. In doing so, a semiotics of deconstruction shows that these factors should not be ignored and that theories should not only look for the exemplary cases, but also include those on the fringe. Derrida's emphasis on the marginal in favor over the essential could thus be seen as not only a gesture of skeptical questioning, but driven by a deep desire to seek out the limits and possibilities of philosophical thought. A more positive contribution can thereby be found in how Derrida consistently turns to the borders and possibilities of language. By bringing attention to the conceptual instability of various distinctions, we are provided with means for not allowing thinking to stagnate into established patterns.

Acknowledgments

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