

# DERRIDA AT THE MULTIPLEX: WHY DECONSTRUCTION DISCONCERTS THE PHILOSOPHICAL ESTABLISHMENT

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- **ABSTRACT:** Focusing largely on the debate in the philosophy of language between Searle and Derrida on the subject of speech act theory, this essay reveals a fundamental impasse between textualist (or deconstructive) and systematic (or philosophical) reading. It asserts that deconstruction's insistence on the irreducible heterogeneity and plurality of textual meaning renders it inassimilable within the more homogenizing systems of meaning that are dominant within the philosophical establishment. For Rajagopalan the legacy of deconstruction is constituted, at least in part, by this ongoing resistance to assimilation within the philosophical mainstream.
- **KEYWORDS:** Speech act theory. Performativity. Textualism. Searle. Heterology. Platonism.

The way in which the specter of deconstruction continues to haunt the philosophical establishment has been evident for quite some time in the hostility with which the work of Derrida is often met by philosophers. During an interview with Steven R. Postrel and Edward Feser (2000), for instance, John Searle was asked whether he thought that Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida (with both of whom the interviewee had had bitter altercations in the past) were “making bad arguments” or “just being misread”. Searle responded to the question in the following terms:

With Derrida, you can hardly misread him, because he's so obscure. Every time you say, “He says so and so,” he always says, “You misunderstood me.” But if you try to figure out the correct interpretation, then that's not so easy. I once said this to Michel Foucault, who was more hostile to Derrida even than I am, and Foucault said that Derrida practiced the method of *obscurantisme terroriste* (terrorizing obscurantism). We were speaking French. And I said, “What the

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hell do you mean by that?” And he said, “He writes so obscurely you can’t tell what he’s saying, that’s the obscurantism part, and then when you criticize him, he can always say, ‘You didn’t understand me; you’re an idiot.’ That’s the terrorism part.” And I liked that. So I wrote an article about Derrida. I asked Michel if it was OK if I quoted that passage, and he said yes.

Of all the possible ways one might begin to discuss this anecdote, the one sentence that particularly caught my attention was Searle’s apparently offhand remark that, “We were speaking French.” I began by wondering why Searle made a point of registering that at all. Given that the two interlocutors belonged to different nationalities and spoke two distinctly different languages, it must be obvious to anyone that their dialogue must have taken place in either of the two languages: English or French. That is to say, either of them must have had to speak the other’s language. But what difference would it have made if it had been one or the other, or, for all you know, a third one? Or, at the very least, why at all should Searle consider it so important to mention the fact that Foucault was speaking in French, not English? It dawned on me that it is perhaps a very useful point at which to start an inquiry into what makes the Berkeley philosopher and his French counterpart – this time, I have Derrida in mind, not Foucault – so radically and diametrically opposed to each other on almost every important question in philosophy, as the famous debate between the two in the pages of *Glyph* clearly demonstrated (DERRIDA, 1977a, 1977b; SEARLE, 1977).

It is worth spending some time parsing that sentence. Assuming that Searle did not introduce that sentence into his response just to flaunt his familiarity with and fluency in French, we are left with the only sensible alternative by way of a plausible explanation: Searle was anxious to press home the important point that his interlocutor, namely Michele Foucault, was at that time speaking his own mother-tongue and that the expression *obscurantisme terroriste* that Searle cited in his response was Foucault’s own, not a gloss or a paraphrase by Searle. The fact that the expression *obscurantisme terroriste* is unmistakably in French does mean something but should not be allowed to detract from the point just made. Searle was, it seems, anxious to drive home the point that it was a faithful reproduction of Foucault’s own words, *ipsis litteris*. In other words, in a face-to-face, one-on-one conversation Searle claims to have had with Foucault, there was no possibility he could have misheard the Frenchman speaking his own language, nor misinterpreted him (a possibility that is further ruled out by the latter’s gesture of granting the permission to quote him).

But then there is another and, as it turns out, a fundamentally more important and crucial aspect of Searle’s use of the expression attributed to Foucault that merits further exploration. Not only is it being claimed to be Foucault’s own and one made in Foucault’s own language or his mother-tongue, French, but there is the further

assumption that there can be no confusion whatever when one is speaking one's own *mother-tongue*. That's to say, when one is speaking one's own language, there can be no slip, as it were, between the cup and the lip, between what one wants, intends to say, and what one ends up saying (whether the same thing can happen when one is *listening to* someone else speaking their native language which happens to be different from one's own is a moot point, but never mind that for the time being). Now this is the kind of thing that often happens when one is speaking someone else's language. One ends up saying things that are not what one would have liked to say had one been in a position to "speak out" one's mind in an otherwise unrestrained manner. The foreign language acts in this case as a kind of, as it were, filter that retains some of the vital parts of the speaker's putative intentions and, sometimes, even distorts the final outcome irremediably. Now, all this is part of the conventional wisdom on what goes on when one speaks and also part of what Searle seems to be assuming as uncontroversial.

In one way, the bone of contention between John Searle and Jacques Derrida over the legacy of Austin (among other things) can be described as whether or not one is entitled to claim privileged access to someone else's *intended meanings* simply on the basis of having been with that person at the same time and same place as when he or she is supposed to have said certain things. In other words, can anyone be absolutely certain that they have stumbled upon the real person with his real intentions – and not, say, a *persona*? Searle would seem to be absolutely convinced that the answer must be in the affirmative: provided some (in his view) basic conditions are met. First and foremost is a question of physical proximity that can guarantee that the things said by that person can be within one's earshot. The fact that the person said those things in his or her own language would be another. (Once again, we will overlook for the moment the caveat about the receiving end mentioned earlier, so that our conversation doesn't get bogged down even before it gets started.)

It should come to us as no surprise that the exchange between Derrida and Searle that filled the pages of *Glyph* should continue to appear to the latter as having been an animated conversation between two deaf persons. However, Jonathan Culler (1981, p.16) has insisted that what went on there was "John Searle's *egregious misunderstanding* in his 'Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida'" (emphasis added). On his part, Searle is equally convinced that there was no misreading Derrida simply because it is simply impossible to read Derrida. At the very least, Searle continues to believe (or claims he does) that Derrida always is far too slippery and evasive for someone to pin any definite and unequivocal claim onto him: "Every time you say, 'He says so and so,' he always says, 'You misunderstood me.'" Searle might have just as well said "Well, he speaks a different language altogether." Because, if one considers it, that is what makes a language so decidedly different from one's own.

Two persons, each speaking a completely different and mutually incomprehensible language, are engaged in a conversation of sorts between the deaf. This means that what guarantees the sameness of the language is, in the final analysis, the possibility of real communication between the two sides and not the presence of any common linguistic core shared by the two (RAJAGOPALAN, 2001).

What this shows, in any case, is that Searle's observation that Foucault was speaking French when he made that remark about Derrida begins to sound at once revelatory of deep-seated assumptions about the whole business of meaning-making as well as, perhaps unbeknownst to Searle himself – or so it would seem – of a more profound, if contradictory, truism: Foucault's remark in French, with all its Parisian flavor and finesse, could not have been more English at its Anglo-Saxon best to Searle's ears. At least, we have Searle's own testimony that it was crystal-clear to *his* ears. And how else could Foucault have made it so clear to Searle than in the latter's own mother-tongue, the only one where he is presumably completely at home according to conventional wisdom? Once we come to terms with this peculiar situation, I think we can have a first approximation to or at least an interesting take on Derrida's description of deconstruction in *Memoires* as "*plus d'une langue – both more than one language and no more of a single language*" (DERRIDA, 1986, p.15).

So the transmission or transference of meaning is the same whether it takes place between languages or between two persons speaking the same language. As long as transference in some way, shape or form is believed to have taken place at all, it does not matter whether or not the two languages are deemed different. What Derrida's determination of deconstruction as "*plus d'une langage*" suggests is that we must let go of our long standing expectation that such transference must result in a stable, univocal meaning that can be easily grasped and circumscribed, since transference of meaning is always inevitably in excess of itself, always precisely *plus d'une langue*. It is the ultimate testimony to the inevitability that all reductive modalities of logic, which emerge in response to such linguistic excess, must remain constitutively inadequate to the idealized task they set for themselves (RAJAGOPALAN, 2005, 2009). It is this deconstructive axiom that Searle implicitly contests since he is anxious to make the point that there is no question whatsoever of his having *misread* Derrida (or Richard Rorty, for that matter).

The question of misreading simply doesn't arise, Searle would have added, because he was rigorously following the rule-book on reading. As far as Searle is concerned, reading is a process of excavating a text by delving deep down until one reaches its bedrock – meaning. In the process, language is something to be breached, passed through – on the way to the stable bedrock of its meaning. Had Foucault been speaking English at the time of the conversation that Searle refers

to, the chances of a misrepresentation would by all means have existed, but not so given the fact that he was speaking his own language. With misrepresentation at the source, things would have been hopelessly difficult (though not hopelessly beyond recovery of what Foucault had wanted to say; some careful probing would have clarified matters). But, to repeat the point, not when the words are taken from the very source of meaning. For Searle, that is where meaning is, as it were, glued to the very word mouthed by the speaker where there can be no mistaking it, no *misreading* what the speaker *meant to say*.

But Derrida would be quick to respond, what you read is a text, never meaning *ipsis*. In fact, all that one is confronted with – every time and all the time – is the text. *Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*, to quote his trademark claim. Derrida (1995) returns to this theme in his essay called “Khôra” wherein he draws attention to the importance of distinguishing between the “philosophy” of Plato and Plato’s “text”. It is needless to point out that Derrida’s observation would apply to anybody’s philosophy for that matter or any philosopher’s (or any one’s) views or opinion on anything whatsoever. It would, for instance, apply to Searle’s remark on Foucault’s opinion of Derrida cited at the beginning of this paper. But let us get back to what Derrida has to say apropos of Plato’s philosophy. He writes that “The philosophy of Plato is an abstraction and a simplification, while the *text* from which it has been excised is complex and heterogeneous, a multiplex of innumerable threads and layers” (DERRIDA, 1995, p.81). But what of the philosophy that has been handed down to us through the generations or what we have been used to calling Platonism? Isn’t there such a thing out there in the world? Derrida’s response to this question is that “Platonism [...] is one of the effects of the text signed by Plato, for a long time, and for necessary reasons, the dominant effect, but this effect is always turned back against the text” (DERRIDA, 1995, p.82). In an irony that speaks directly to philosophy’s ongoing frustration with deconstruction, Derrida insists here that the textual “multiplex of innumerable threads and layers” from which the abstraction of Platonism emerges is thus at odds with the latter’s own commitment to the values of ideality and univocity. And in its return to this multiplex, deconstructive reading threatens to lift the textual suppressions and repressions that have facilitated Platonism’s long ascendancy.

Commenting on the passage above from “Khôra”, John Caputo (1997, p.83) remarks that Derrida’s distinction between the *philosophy* of Plato and the *text* of the Greek philosopher “[...] parallels the dominant-reproductive and transgressive-productive readings of Plato.” Caputo’s timely intervention is a reminder that at no moment should we lose sight of the fact that we are not pitting Plato’s text against something other than a text, as the received wisdom would have it. When all is said and done, the only difference between the Platonic philosophy and the Platonic text turns out to be how we *read* each of them. Or, perhaps more importantly, how we

typically *react* to each of them. The reading that results in Platonic philosophy is the one authorized by custom as well as the weight of the Establishment that zealously guards that custom; whereas the one that looks to the text for a fresh reading is, in that very decision to take a fresh look at the text, going against the grain and, in so doing, transgressing against customary practices. But, even more significantly, the former is re-producing already established meanings while the latter is producing hitherto unnoticed meanings or meaning-potentialities whose very possibility of ever being discovered was concealed from us by the Establishment's tight control over our interpretive freedom. While the former toes the official line, the latter threatens to disrupt it.

That would explain the reluctance on the part of those speaking on behalf of the Philosophical Establishment even to admit that a "wayward" member from its own ranks can make any sense at all. "With Derrida, you can hardly misread him, because he's so obscure." Searle is saying that there can be no misreading of Derrida, because to concede it would be tantamount to admitting there is a proper way to read him. But his style is so opaque, so obscure. It goes against the very grain of philosophy – at least, Searle's way of conceiving of philosophy – according to which language should not be allowed to obstruct the smooth passage of meaning between minds. That is what makes philosophy so radically and uncompromisingly different from literature, he might have noted. That is why Rorty gives him the jitters every time he refers to philosophy as but a branch of literature.

As a matter of fact, there is no dearth of examples in the history of philosophy where those threatening to become its recalcitrant members have been reviled and dismissed for complicity with language and rhetoric. Nietzsche's name comes to mind immediately. With his self-confessed passion for language and his love of tropes and penchant for aphorisms, Nietzsche was an easy target for the philosophers of his time who, speaking on behalf of the Establishment, lost no time in mercilessly lambasting him and paying him a most vicious left-handed complement by extolling his fine command of the German language. More recently, J. L. Austin was subjected to a similar treatment whereby his masterpiece *How to Do Things with Words* was bowdlerized and sanitized of all its textual "excesses" in the form of light-hearted banter and touches of humor, giving way to the more austere and sober theory of speech acts, with John Searle himself as the chief architect and champion of the new theory (RAJAGOPALAN, 2000). Both Nietzsche and Austin bear unmistakable testimony to what the philosophical Establishment is capable of in dealing with potential dangers to its traditional ways of going about its business (RAJAGOPALAN, 1994).

With reference to the question of style in philosophy, Stanley Cavell (1991, p.1333) argues that

If professional philosophers were asked whether philosophizing demands anything we would think of as a style of writing, their answer, I guess, would waver because their philosophical motivation in writing is less to defend a style than to suppress style or to allow it in ornamental doses.

Philosophers are wont to disavow all allegations of having a style and claim that their writing is totally rid of style. Their texts are, in other words, claimed to be totally transparent, with pure signifieds on public display for the benefit of all and sundry. When Searle accuses Derrida of writing in a style that is “so obscure,” he is alleging that his French counterpart has broken the sacred covenant of philosophy, namely, the undertaking to expose one’s ideas in as transparent a fashion as possible. In effect, then, Searle is accusing Derrida of being anything but a philosopher.

Here we come to the most crucial question of all. Why is it that the Establishment gets upset whenever the name of Jacques Derrida is even mentioned? I think the answer is clear: his philosophy is so radically uncompromising that, in order to come to grips with it, one has to leave in suspension a good deal of the *opinion reçue* on matters relating to the very business of philosophy, how it has traditionally carved out a place for itself in opposition to literature, and how it has over the years built a reputation as a discourse that has divested itself of all traces of style.

Before we round off this discussion, a brief remark on the quote from the interview with Searle with which we embarked on the discussion. Searle’s remark to the effect that the question of misreading Derrida simply does not arise because, no matter how hard one tries, one cannot make sense of what he says is indicative of a categorical refusal to take Derrida in his own words, of a prior decision to *not even try* to understand him. As we have seen, not trying to understand what he has to say and brushing him aside as a serious interlocutor to contend with is a strategy long tried and tested in philosophy but, like the specter of Marx, of which Derrida (1994) has spoken at length and has spoken so poignantly, the specter of Derrida himself must – now that he is no longer physically present in our midst – haunt establishment philosophy for ever. That is the true afterlife of the Derridean enterprise of deconstruction. All that is left for us is to exclaim with Hamlet: “The time is out of joint: Oh cursed spite, / That ever [we were] born to set it right.” This is the real state of our debt and the true work of our mourning.

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- **RESUMO:** *Baseando-se em grande medida no debate, na filosofia da linguagem, entre Searle e Derrida, acerca da teoria dos atos de fala, o presente ensaio revela um impasse fundamental entre uma leitura textualista (ou desconstrutora) e uma sistemática (ou filosófica). O texto defende que a insistência da desconstrução na heterogeneidade irreduzível e na pluralidade dos sentidos textuais torna-a inassimilável pelos sistemas homogeneizadores de sentido que dominam o establishment filosófico. Para Rajagopalan, o legado da desconstrução é transmitido, ao menos em parte, por meio de uma resistência contínua à assimilação pelo mainstream filosófico.*
- **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Teoria dos atos de fala. Performatividade. Textualismo. Searle. Heterologia. Platonismo.*

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