

# JACQUES DERRIDA - GRAMMATOLOGY, THE PROGRAMME OF A POSTMODERN SEMIOLOGY

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## Abstract

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) is one of the most important French philosophers who contributed to the introduction of the concept of postmodernism in the contemporary culture and knowledge. His name is linked to some concepts that have been used in the philosophical journalism, but also in that of the literary theories, especially within the American space, such as: *deconstruction, writing, trace, grammatology, spacing, difference, arch-writing, etc.* which we aim to present in the following pages.

**Keywords:** *postmodernism, philosophy, semiology, anthropology, structuralism.*

Following the path of F. de Saussure, D. Hume, Fr. Nietzsche, M. Heidegger, L. Wittgenstein, Derrida develops the theory of *deconstructionism*, which helps him highlight *the textual character* of philosophical writing. In this regard, many analysts of the French philosopher have shown that the ideas present in his papers are developed on the basis of a *literary thinking*, characteristic to *the style* and not on a discursive model belonging to classical philosophy. For example, the Cluj interpreter, Aurel Codoban, in the preface of the book *Exhibitions*, shows that, nowadays, Derrida approaches in his papers issues regarding the relationship between philosophy and non-philosophy, starting from a philosophical discourse of literary genre. Basically, if we analyse *Writing and difference, Voice and phenomenon*, as well as *About grammatology*, papers belonging to the French author, we notice a proximity with the rhetoric used in augmenting the literary theories. Following the paths of the French structuralists, Derrida develops his position towards the (linguistic) sign. The French poststructuralist is opposed to *the logocentrism* promoted by Plato and the continental metaphysics which states the idea that words have a clear meaning which facilitates peoples' communication. He supports the speech

which, according to the philosopher, has authentic meanings and communicates much better than writing, being closer to authentic thinking.

What the French philosopher accomplishes is basically a continuation of Heidegger's critical position on metaphysics. Therefore, if Heidegger situated *the place* of the human being in the language, as *the original place*, the French philosopher takes the critique of metaphysics even further, using some analysis of the theories of language. In fact, the philosopher's intentions are, on the one hand, to overcome Heidegger's teachings on *being, Dasein* and *language*, which express the metaphysics of the origin's final adventure and, on the other hand, to demonstrate that the linguistic structuralism does not miss the metaphysical determinations which embraces the whole history of European thinking, meaning *the phonocentrism*, which according to the French philosopher, is coextensive to logocentrism. In other words, for Derrida, speech equals writing. In this context, we can configure, right from the first lines, the so-called derridian programme, which is *the overcoming of metaphysics using the criticism of logocentrism* essentialised as phonocentrism (TROC, 2006).

A definition and also a criticism of logocentrism is achieved by the French philosopher in the opening pages of *About grammatology*, in which this concept is presented as describing a metaphysics of phonetic writing (of the alphabet, for example). Derrida harshly criticises this metaphysics suggested by the linguists of the previous century which raises at an important level the problem of language, more precisely of the *sing* language.

Stating that the thinking has to avoid metaphysics, Derrida criticises Saussure's

linguistic structuralism or Levi Strauss's anthropological one. Displaying his denial position of logocentrism within the philosophy of language, the French philosopher denies the existence of the speech-writing, mind-body, internal-external, good-evil, accident-essence, identity-difference, presence-absence, the space-bad, literally-figurative and masculine-feminine separations (BOTEZ, 2005). For example, Derrida shows that Saussure limits the writing systems to two, defined as representation systems of the oral language, no matter if they represent *words*, in a synthetically and global manner or if the *phonetically* represent constitutive sound elements of words. The philosopher argues that phonetic writing has as a functional principle referring to the upholding and protection of the language's internal protection system and that Saussure's limitation does not correspond to the scientific demands of the internal system. The latter is built as an epistemological exigency in general, by the possibility of phonetic writing and by the exteriority of *denotation* in relationship to the internal logic (DERRIDA, 2009). In *Writing and difference* Derrida clearly highlights the idea that the contemporary world is flooded by *the structuralist invasion* (which argues its methodologies and fundamentals on the basis of three concepts: of writing, of the history of metaphysics and of science). Under these conditions, despite all the differences, the universal reflection receives an impulse from *a restlessness regarding language*, a restlessness within the language itself. No matter our lack of knowledge, says Derrida, the question regarding the sign is within itself more or less different than a sign of time (a trend), and trying to reduce it only to that means causing *violence*, especially since this question – historical in a completely unordinary way – gets closer to the point in which the nature of the pure sign of language becomes uncertain, partial and unessential. The philosopher shows that the structuralist attitude and our position before the language or within the language do not only represent some moments in history but also a wonder, through language as an origin of history. Derrida notices that structuralism, as well as other systemic fundamental sciences, creates the illusion of technical freedom, and this only leads to the separation of the concepts, to the

fragmentation of the sign. This fragmentation characterises the strengths of our weaknesses, which comes from the fact that the lack of power separates, disengages and emancipates. According to Derrida, structuralism leads to the idea of technical freedom, even if it represents in itself the pure and simple conscience, perceived as a thinking of the past, of the fact. This conscience is catastrophic, destructive and *deconstructed*. "We perceive structure at the moment of *threat* (...) it can then be methodically threatened in order to be better perceived and not only in its ribs, but also in that secret point in which it is neither ascension nor ruin or instability. This operation is called *to preoccupy* or *to request*. (...) The structuralist preoccupations and requests, when they become methodical, only facilitate the illusion of the technical freedom. Indeed, they produce, within the register of the method, a preoccupation and a request of the being, a historical and metaphysical threat of the basements. Especially in the eras of historical *dislocation*, when we are driven out of *the place*, this structuralist passion develops for itself, which is, at the same time, a sort of experimental anger and a proliferative oversimplification" (DERRIDA, 1998).

We could say that Derrida develops a constructivism on structuralism, a situation that can be interpreted as poststructuralist or postmodernist. In an interview with Julia Kristeva (DERRIDA, 2001) the French philosopher explains the logocentric and ethnocentric limits of the models which influence present-day semiology, meaning the model of the sign and of its correlates: communication and structure. According to Derrida, because of these limitations one cannot think that one day we could attribute the concept of the sign to metaphysics, and if however this were to happen, than it would represent both an obstacle and a progress. In order to augment this theory, Derrida uses examples from Saussure, showing that he confronts, when talking about the sign, the system of the spoken language with the system of phonetic writing, as if this were the *telos* of writing. According to Derrida the sign concept has its own phonic substance, *the phonè* which represents the significant substance, which offers *the conscience* the most intimate relationship with the thought of the signified concept. In other

words, from this point of view, in relationship to the sassaorian thought, the voice represents the conscience in itself. The French philosopher wants to point out here that when he speaks, "he is conscious not only of the things he is thinking, but he also keeps his thinking closer or *the concept*, a significant which does not fall in the world that I understand closer to my own thinking or to *the concept*, a significant which does not fall in the world, that I understand as soon as I send it, which depends purely on my spontaneity" (DERRIDA, 2001).

This thing, as Derrida shows, creates confusions because, on the one side, the signifier and the signified seem to reunite and, on the other hand, the signifier seems to become transparent in order to let the concept (that he thinks) to present itself, as it really is. In other words, the exteriority of the signifier seems reduced. This experience, from the point of view of the French philosopher is a delusion which facilitated the organization of a structural era, which eventually highlighted *semiology*, whose concepts and presuppositions started from the time of Plato and Hegel and were brought into our days.

In order to get out of the structuralist sphere of presuppositions and prejudices, Derrida proposes a re-writing of the concepts that are used in semiology: "Exactly like the concept of sign - and therefore semiology - he (Derrida refers to the concept of *structure*) can both confirm and challenge the logocentric and ethnocentric certainties. We must not through these concepts away, and we don't even have the means to do it. Without doubt, within semiology, we have to transform the concept, move them, turn them against their presuppositions, re-write them in other ways, slowly modify their workground and therefore to come up with new configurations; I do not believe in the decisive break, in the oneness of an *epistemological break*" (DERRIDA, 2001).

We may now say that the plan in which Derrida's analysis take place there is a relationship between writing and speech, in other words a report between the graphical and the phonic substance. Derrida shows that in our era the linguistic scientificity is acknowledged due to *the virtues* of its phonic fundament, because phonology sends its scientific framework to linguistics, which, on her own turn, serves as an

epistemological model for all the human related sciences. Phonocentrism is coextensive to logocentrism in its different hypothesis: the presence of things in front of the sight as *eidos*, the presence as substance/essence/existence, the presence of the cogito, of conscience, of subjectivity, etc. but essentialised as logocentrism, which characterizes the era of metaphysics which is specific for disregarding writing. The criticism of phonocentrism is therefore used by the French philosopher with the purpose of presenting what *the spine* of the metaphysic era is. In other words, phonocentrism is that *layer of depth* where we use the language to order the remaining, the delay close to the world represented by metaphysics and within its era.

Summarizing the previously mentioned aspects, in this era, reading and writing, producing and interpreting signs are, in general, doomed to secundarity, being preceded by a truth or a significance which are previously constituted by logos and within its environment (TROC, 2006).

The stress for Derrida is on the spontaneity of speech. He highlights the hypothesis that we cannot admit a linguistics that can be general as far as it defines exterior and interior starting from some determined linguistic models as this cannot distinguish essence from fact. Writing is not an image, or figurative language, only if we reconsider nature, logic and the functioning of the image within the interior system from which we want to exclude it. "Writing is not a sign of the sign unless we state this, which will be more deeply true, in regard to all signs (...) What Saussure show without seeing, what he knew without *being able* to take into account, following the whole tradition of metaphysics, is the fact that a certain writing model imposed itself, but in a temporary manner (with all the principle infidelity, fact insufficiency and permanent usurpation that it is characterized by) as an instrument and as a representation technique of a language system." The language system associated with phonetic-alphabetic writing is the one in which the logocentric metaphysics appeared, which determines the sense of the being as presence. This logocentrism, this era of full speech has always put into parenthesis, *suspended*, and forever repressed, from some

essential reasons, any free reflection on the origin and the status of writing, any science of writing, any free reflection on the origin and the status of writing, any science of writing which was not *technology and the history of a technique*, joined to a mythology and to a metaphoric of natural writing" (DERRIDA, 2009).

This logocentrism is the one that generally limits the system of the language, it is the one that hindered Saussure and his followers to determine what they called "the integral and concrete object of linguistics." The philosopher's clear position – argued by some linguists (and it was obvious that this would happen), and on the other hand appreciated by them for the (re) opening or (re)writing of the field – is that generalized writing does not only represent the idea of a system which has to be invented, on the contrary, that spoken language is part of this writing, which the philosopher suggests, represents a change of the writing concept in itself, which *grammatology* only anticipates. We must state the fact that the philosopher does not argue the value of the phonological arguments, but he analyses the problem of writing or, more precisely, of rewriting. Therefore, trying to get rid of entocentrism, we only manage to delete the boundaries within the sphere of language legitimacy, and this is why we have to understand that we don't rehabilitate writing in its strict sense or rebuild the order of dependency when it is obvious. Derrida explains that we cannot object anything to the phonologism, as long as we preserve the present concepts of speech and writing which build the structure of his argumentation, "what we try to suggest is that the supposed deviations of writing, no matter how real or massive it turns out to be, can only be achieved under one condition: if the *initial, natural* language never had existed, and it should never have been untouched by writing, and it should have been a writing in itself. Arch-writing which we want to signal the necessity and to draft the concept of the new; and which we continue to name writing only because it communicates, in an essential manner with the vile concept of writing. This was able to impose itself from a historical point of view only because it dissimulated arch-writing, wishing for a speech which exiled the opposite and the double, and

which made everything possible to reduce its difference. If we persist in calling this difference writing it is because, in the labor of suppressing history, writing was, due to its own situation, aimed at signifying what was feared in this difference. It was the one that, in close proximity, threatened the desire of speech that attacked it, from the inside and from its beginnings. And the difference (...) cannot be perceived without any connection with the trace" (DERRIDA, 2009).

Further, the philosopher, analysing Husserl, will signal that a thought of the trace can neither be reduced to a transcendental phenomenology nor can it be separated from it. *The (pure) trace is the difference*, notes the philosopher. This does not depend on a sensible, audible or visible, phonic or graphic plenitude, but on the contrary, it represents its condition. Even if there *doesn't exist* or *there isn't a present-being*, the possibility of the shadow is anterior to everything that we call sign or concept. The difference allows, according to the French philosopher, the articulation of speech with writing, as well as it builds the metaphysical opposition between sensible and intelligible or between the signifier and signifies, expression and content, etc. In other words, the concept of *trace* receives its metaphysical reception as *a priori* right to any *physiological* matter on the nature of the enigma or *metaphysical* on the meaning of absolute presence, whose trace is offered, exactly in order to be deciphered: "*the trace is indeed the absolute origin of the meaning in general. Which is exactly the same as saying, once again, that there is no absolute origin to the meaning in general? The trace is the difference which opens the fact of appearing and the significance. Articulating alive on not alive in general, origin of every repetition, origin of ideality, it is neither ideal, nor real, or intelligible, or sensible, or transparent significance, or opaque energy, and no concept belonging to metaphysics can describe it. And, taking into account that it proves itself as being prior to the distinction between the regions of sensibility, meaning both in relationship with the sound and with light, does it have any sense to establish a natural hierarchy between the acoustic fingerprint, for example (here Derrida makes use of Saussure's distinction regarding the sign), and the visual (graphic) footprint?*" (DERRIDA, 2009).

From this point of view, concludes the French philosopher, the graphical image is not seen, and the acoustic images are not heard. The difference between the full unites of voice remains unheard and the difference between the body in writing is invisible. On the other hand, we can clearly state that *grammatology* (the concept that configures the whole deconstruction thought of Derrida) is configured as the only science of the future, a-temporal, non-chronologic, *virtual*, it is the science of deconstruction and of (re)writing the concepts. Derrida, in the interview *Implications*, with Henri Ronsboeuvre shows that *About grammatology* does not appear as a defense or illustration of grammatology (known in its classical meaning). It does not reinstate the writes for excellence and the determination of writing which Plato states that it was an orphan, opposed to the speech, as a legitimate son of *the logos*. But on the contrary, grammatology asks a question about the necessity of a science of writing, about its possibility conditions, about critical labor which could open its field and to eliminate epistemological obstacles, but at the same time it also asks a question regarding its scientific limits. According to the philosopher, these limits can be those of the classical notion of science, which plays its discourse and norms systematically related to metaphysics. According to Derrida, there is no such thing as a scientific semiotic labor which does not serve grammatology. This is why grammatology has to deconstruct everything that is connected to the concept and norms of scientificity, onto-theology, logocentrism and phonologism. "It is an immense and continuous labor which has to avoid transferring the classical project of science to the prescientific empiricism. This presupposes a sort of *double register* within the grammatological practice: it has to either go beyond positivism or metaphysical scientism and emphasized the aspect that in the effective labor of the science contributes to free themselves from metaphysical mortgages which weigh on its defining and movement, starting from its origin. We must follow and consolidate, which in the scientific practice, has always started to exceed the logocentric closure. Grammatology *joins and delimits science*; it has to make scientific norms work, in a free and rigorous manner, within its own writing; it also loosens the

boundary which closes the field of classical scientificity" (DERRIDA, 2001).

Derrida does not believe in the death of philosophy, of the history book, of the human, of God or of writing, as we generally meet in the supporters of Nietzsche's philosophy, but on the contrary he prefers to speak about a limit from which philosophy has become possible, it defined itself as a system of *episteme*, working within a system of fundamental constraints, conceptual oppositions, outside which it becomes impracticable. Therefore, Derrida's terminology directs us to the idea that *we write in two hands*, which marks a slip of the episteme to the point of their non-pertinence, of exhaustion, of closure. In other words, this writing *at two hands* is marked by the phenomenon of *deconstruction*. Deconstruction is a concept that, besides the fact that it is considered a label belonging to Derrida, it was and it still is associated with postmodernism, whose roots remain, as Ciprian Mihai points out, diverse and very little known. Moreover, the terminology has entered for more than two decades in the circuit of fashionable concepts. This trend regarding deconstruction tends to limit yourself to the appearances and the game of images, to the apology of thinking and the impact of the words, to making a show of strident and distinctive signs. In other words, deconstruction is aimed to represent a *rebellious attitude* without knowing very well where the law is (MIHAI, 2006).

But for Derrida to *deconstruct* philosophy means to think the structured genealogy of its concepts in the most faithful manner, the most interior but at the same time, as much as it is possible, from an in-outside unspeakable, to unnamed by it. Starting from the paper *Voice and phenomenon*, published when the philosopher turned 37, deconstruction appears more as a necessary, reformatory function, than as a youth whim. It appears, as the philosopher itself states, from a *feeling of sorry*, from a trouble, from a *personal wound* (on the ideal and assumed body of philosophy) whose straightening, deleting and "healing" were imposed as an *emergency*. Its program to correct the reforms and philosophical revolutions, *unfortunately* failed, which managed to accredit and to continue a *dangerous fake*, a fake break, and renewal of the types of discourse. In

other words, deconstruction appears as a *destruction* of tradition, as it was written in more on a number of times, and as a *light* of it. In this context, the Romanian translator of the paper *About grammatology*, Bogdan Ghiu highlights that deconstruction, for Derrida, represents a *resumption* and a *recurrence* of history of thinking from its critical points. The French philosopher *renews* the moments of *occultation*, *self-preservation*, of falling, into the economic-interested *cunnings* of reason, of release and ultimate and agonizing *cowardice*, to appropriate the courage of bold thoughts which tried to free the thinking, both ethical and logical. Deconstruction *repeats* the internal history of thinking (not just philosophical), being written not as a *campaign journal* of the impossible victories, highlighting with every example the actual fighting glory, *the heroic courage*, *inevitably blind*, of the ambitions and wills, of *the emancipation of thinking*" (DERRIDA, 2009).

On the other hand, another concept that has become the object of research on the work of the philosopher is that of *différance*. Regarding this concept one can say that it is a compound word formed from the noun *différance* from the family of the verb *différer* and a possible noun (which doesn't exist, but it could exist) from the family of the verb *différer*, this *différance* is "what makes the presentation of the being-present possible," is "the origin that is never given to the present" of what it is, with all its possible configurations. This *différance*, as Radu Toma points out in the preface of *Writing and difference*, which "is never presented," "which is reserved and is never exposed," leaves "traces" in which it is presented (DERRIDA, 1998). For Derrida no concept, no name and no signifier doesn't evade the rule according to which every concept receives two similar brands, one inside the deconstructed system, and the other one outside it, where it should have been reached on the occasion of a double reading, of a double writing and, in due time, of a double science. This double reading emphasizes the *difference* that the French philosopher describes: "the difference (*différance*) also designates, within the same problematic field, this war economy which establishes a relationship with the radical alterity or the absolute exteriority of what there is outside (*du dehors*) with a close, agnostic and hierarchical head of philosophical oppositions, of *different*s or

of *difference*. The economic movement of the trace – according to a report which states that no speculative dialects of *the same* and of *the other* could not dominate, for the pure fact that it remains a domination operation" (DERRIDA, 1997).

On the other hand, the multitude of precautions with which the French philosopher presents *the risk of the deconstruction activity* of European metaphysics, namely that of remaining a prisoner within the system that it pretends to challenge, seems to transform precaution in a rhetorical *topos* and to reveal the secret reverse of *risk* (the risk of a regression within the deconstructed system or of the system which is in course of deconstruction). According to Derrida, if we propose to deny this risk we will only confirm it, meaning to consider the signifier as a conventional circumstance of the concept and as a concession without any specific effect, as it is in our case, the name. Denial basically means affirming the autonomy of the meaning, the ideal purity of a theoretical and abstract history of the concept. While, on the other hand, explains the French philosopher, the claim to immediately free ourselves from the previous brands and to go through a rudimentary gesture into the exterior of classical oppositions means to forget that these oppositions did not represent a given system, but an asymmetric and hierarchized space, crossed by forces and acted in its enclosure by the exterior that it refused, interiorized as one of *its* moments. But deconstruction in itself represents a preliminary stage of an operation with a significance not yet explained, therefore as a preliminary stage, deconstruction means an *introduction into the abyss*: "...deconstruction presupposes a compulsory stage of *overturns*. Staying in overturn means to operate, of course, in the immanence of the system which must be destroyed. But keeping ourselves in it in order to *go further*, to be more radical or more thoughtful, to adopt an attitude of neutralizing indifference towards the classical oppositions would mean to set free the forces that effectively and historically dominate the field. If we can't take over the means to *intervene* within it, this would mean to confirm the established balance" (DERRIDA, 1997).

From here it results that for Derrida *the turnover* represents a *fundamental phase* in the economy of *deconstruction*. As a result, the first

effect of dissemination is that it can no longer dominate the values of responsibility or those of individuality, meaning that there no longer exists "a metaphysical-concept," there is no "metaphysical-name." According to Derrida, metaphysics is a sort of determination which cannot be opposed to a concept of textual labor and another concatenation. Those being said, "the development of this issues will therefore forbid the difference movement, as it was exposed in another context: a *productive* and conflict *movement* that neither identity can perceive, that cannot be sublimated, solved or calmed by the philosophical dialectics and which practically, historically or textual disorganizes, the opposition of the difference (the still distinction) of those that are different" (DERRIDA, 1997).

For Derrida, the difference appears that that event which establishes the game of differences that produce semantic effects, meaning the difference *disseminates* the differences. It has more than one *name*, such as *arch-writing*, *trace*, *etc.* and without longer being *origin*, it stays on the empty place of that *first* of metaphysics. Derrida also suggests that we don't have to credit the *metaphysical* concept of history, because it is the concept of history as a history of meaning, being produces, developed and achieved in a linear manner, in a straight or circular line. This is why, says the philosopher, *the closure of metaphysics* cannot take the form of a *line*, a form which philosophy acknowledges, in which it is acknowledged and, on the other hand, the closure of metaphysics is not a circle that delimits a homogenous field, homogenous within itself, and whose outside would therefore be homogenous. The limit, Derrida continues to explain, has the form of some distinctive fissures which mark all philosophical texts.

Analyzing Derrida's project on the deconstruction of metaphysics, grounded on the principles of grammatology, Aurel Codoban rightly notices that the intentions of the philosopher are shadowed by contradictions. Therefore, because grammatology postulates an archaic and plenary symbolic thinking together with a nonlinear arch-writing, which leaves the whole polysemy unaltered, it does not escape the limitations of the game by imposing a center that, according to the scientist from Cluj, is

unveiled by the *arché* expression. Besides that, grammatology does not escape the limitations of the game, because the deconstruction of metaphysics does not escape the history of metaphysics. In other words, the characteristic of our types, explains Codoban, is the descentration of the philosophical discourse as a result of the structuralist thinking of structure. "Derrida aims to claim the ontology of the significant surface using a philosophic discourse where subtitles have eroded the significances and the energies of the concept up to metaphors and metonymies, which are no longer understood restrictively, as figures of poetry, but extensively as axes of the order of language. Destructor of metaphysics, he remain a prisoner, without nostalgia and joy, of the end of the European philosophy, which, after playing the important cultural roles of the initiating discourse or of the absolute knowledge, it is complacent now with the strange beauty of a discursive game that outlines the literary text game of signs" (CODOBAN, 2005).

In the end, we add that Derrida's project of deconstruction has become, as very well Gabriel Troc notices, the main expression of the postculturalism, which defines postmodernism. Deconstruction is therefore opposed to the edifying system dimension of structuralism, and to any other type of augmented system on the basis of the concepts of metaphysics. Deconstruction questions the reducibility of the phenomena to the operations of the sign; it questions the idea that we can have complete control over our world, that we can judge and achieve a *general science* of the language or of thinking.

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