

## DANCE OF THE SIGNIFIERS<sup>1</sup>

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Aldous Huxley has suggested that we live in various universes, and that "these universes in which we live are members of one or other of two super-universes; the universe of direct experience and the universe of words." Between the universe of direct experience and us is this world of words, which is not as transparent, as we would like it to be. There is a need to take a closer look at this world of words since it unconsciously governs and conditions our responses to the outer world. The question is can we rely upon the word?

In this essay, I propose to treat Saussure as a point of reference. His seminal book on linguistics, which appeared at the beginning of the 20th century, dominated the intellectual climate of this century, particularly structuralist and post-structuralist thinking. According to Saussure, the sign refers to "the total resultant of the association of the signifier and what is signified." He holds that the link between the signifier and signified is arbitrary, that is to say, "the linguistic sign is arbitrary." Elaborating it, he adds an explanatory note:

There is no internal connection between the idea 'sister' and the French sequence of sound *s-o-r* which acts as its signal. The same idea might as well be represented by any other sequence of sounds. This is demonstrated by differences between languages, and even by the existence of different languages. The signification of 'ox' has as its signal *b-o-f* on one side of the frontier but *o-k-s* (Ochs) on the other side.

At this juncture, we may raise a couple of questions. What is really



arbitrary? Is it the linguistic sign? Or, is it the signification? This is a crucial point in the argument of Benveniste. He remarks: "But immediately afterwards he [Saussure] stated that the nature of the sign is arbitrary because it has not natural connection with the signified. It is clear that the argument is falsified by an unconscious and surreptitious recourse to a third term, which was not included in the initial definition. This term is the thing itself, the relity." Benveniste's objection must be properly understood. He is an admirer of Saussure. He knows that Saussure had scrupulously avoided the use of a referent in his definition. However, he could not avoid it in his explanation. The argument is that there is tacit notion of a referent present in Saussure's explanation. Benveniste therefore infers that there is "a contradiction between the way in which Saussure defined the linguistic sign and the fundamental nature attributed to it." This anomaly creeps in, he thinks, because Saussurean concept depends upon the system of thought which is in some measure rooted in the historical and relativist thought at the end of the nineteenth century. He writes: "The real problem is far more profound. It consists in discerning the inner structure of the phenomenon of which only the outward appearance is perceived, and in describing its relationship with the ensemble of manifestations on which it depends." Saussure seems to lay much stress on the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign but the emphasis is wide off the mark "since the essence of this definition is only to consider the relationship of the signifier and the signified." A detailed analysis of the mutability of the sign reveals that Saussure's argument regarding the arbitrary character of the sign is "true of signification, not of the sign."

The trouble with Saussure's argument is that he is apparently against "an externally imposed element," and yet, he seems to be "always thinking of the representation of the real object." It is this surreptitious presence of the third term that explains the contradiction in Saussure's idea of the sign. Benveniste suggests that Saussure should not have raised the question of arbitrariness because there was no need to raise it. As a systematic student of philosophy, Benveniste argues his approach quite methodically and logically. He suggests that the question of arbitrariness be kept wholly outside the domain of linguistics. He says:



...[T]he mind accepts only a sound form that incorporates a representation identifiable for it; if it does not, rejects it as unknown and foreign. The signifier and the signified, the mental representation and the sound image are thus in reality the two aspects of a single notion and together make up the ensemble as the embodiment and embodiment. The signifier is the phonic translation of a concept: the signified is the mental counterpart of the signifier. The consubstantiality of the signifier and the signified assures the structural unity of the linguistic sign.

It may seem that Benveniste is only trying to suggest an improvement in Saussure's definition of the linguistic sign. But this is not so. He does not reject Saussure's definition. However, by suggesting that the signifier and signified are together by necessity, he brings about a change in the level of discussion. Word does not remain outside. It becomes a part of us, and stays with us as a powerful tool in our exploration of the universe. In Benveniste's approach, language is both a constituent and a constitutive factor.

Two important aspects of this approach are: i) the linguistic sign is viewed as a unity and ii) the linguistic sign stands delinked from reality. Thus this sign can be used in a variety of situations and in a variety of ways. In a way, word is set aside from the surrounding physical reality. As a constituent and constitutive factor, it becomes something like an organ - a part of our self. Its basic function may be that of denotation, but it transcends this function, and performs a number of other functions. By the same token, language is also an integral part of me. As a constituent and a constitutive factor, it acts as a structured and structuring agency. It enables me to achieve some sort of order -- whether logical and aesthetic, and the way I use it reveals the kind of organisation that I have achieved.

Benveniste's critique of Saussure certainly raises the level of discussion. He understands Saussure well because he knows the difficulties involved in taking the stand that Saussure had taken. The merit of his approach is that his idea of sign combines the 'inner' and the 'outer'. In this approach, word is not directly related to the world outside. Since the signified is viewed as mental counterpart of the signifier, our idea of what is shaped by language. Benveniste thinks that "the consubstantiality of the signifier and the signified assures the structural unity of the linguistic



sign." But the problem is: 'can we really take for granted the "consubstantiality of the signifier and signified." In an ideal condition, this could be presumed had there been one-to-one relationship between the signifiers and the signifieds. But as we all know, this is not the case. In practice many acoustic images embody more than one concept. Moreover, the signifieds have a tendency to work as signifiers. Leave alone the question of mutability or immutability of the sign, even there is no fixed or stable relationship between the two in a given system.

Benveniste wants to save the linguistic sign from what may be called its inherent contradiction. but the way Derrida has deconstructed Saussure goes all the way to prove that there is no absolute foundation for language, and that, in the use of language, we are constantly faced with the problem of indeterminacy. Words are univocal and indeterminate. The gap between the signifier and what it points to is filled by the sign, or what may be called object in-absentia. The notion that the gap is filled in is only a mirage, always suggesting the possibility of reaching the object, but never realising it. The conclusion can be anything but nihilistic, there is no stability in the use of language: word is not supported by anything like a reality principle, and hence the chase for meaning is itself meaningless.

Now it will be agreed that this conclusion is not at all new. But this process of disintegrating, dismantling or deconstructing the systems that have been carefully built over the years is indeed new. The strategy underlying this language scepticism is really remarkable. Instead of providing a counter-argument, we challenge and contradict the very assumptions on which the argument is founded. The loaded metaphors are carefully selected and exploded from 'within' by following the deconstructive mode of logic. Usually the value of scepticism lies in that it can be used as a 'corrective' and in that it has been encouraged in the traditional set up. But here the language-scepticism goes far beyond this. It keeps us constantly aware of the underlying sense of void --an absence of an anchoring and anchored centre, and threatens all out bids to regulate, theorise, and systematise. The sheer brilliance of argument is such that Husserl, Saussure, Plato, Rousseau stand 'deconstructed' -- ripped off, as it were, their logocentric and phonocentric sheaths. All this has such a devastating effect on our way of thinking that we may at times feel shy (if not guilty) of the logocentric



and phonocentric tendencies ingrained in us. Actually there is no ground for any unconscious sense of guilt. Logocentricism and phonocentricism are the result of man's desire to find some 'centre' without which the phonetic and phonemic constructs will hold. Whatever way the language-sceptics argue, the fact remains that there are essentially two different - almost parallel -- ways of thinking.

In his critique of Saussure, Derrida seems to admire the former for his formulation that in language there are only differences, without positive terms." Herein Derrida finds a powerful critique of logocentricism. But the same logocentric tendencies in Saussure's own formulations become manifest in his definition of the linguistic sign. Regarding this, Jonathan Culler argues that "[T]he concept of the sign is so involved with the basic concepts of logocentricism that it would be difficult for Saussure to shift it even if he wishes to." Indeed this is the crux of the problem. From the point of view of deconstruction, theoretically, there is an unbridgeable gap between the signifiers and the signifieds. Indeed it seems impossible to move away from the signifiers to the signifieds. But in practice, the signifieds are not unapproachable, although they always seem to elude the grasp. The paradox inherent in this kind of situation is noted by almost everyone -- by Derrida as also by his commentators. Objections to the extreme positions taken by the deconstructionists are usually set aside by drawing a line of demarcation between the common-sense view of language and the more serious considerations of language. For instance, this is how Christopher Norris tries to gloss over the issue. He writes:

Scepticism in philosophy has always borne this ambiguous relation to the 'natural' or common sense attitude. Its proponents have never pretended that life could be conducted in a practical way if everyone acted consistently on sceptical assumptions. What would such 'consistency' amount to, if one denied the very basis of reason and logical coherence? This is not to deny that the sceptic's questions are trivial or totally misconceived. They are -- as I have tried to show with Derrida -- questions that present themselves compulsively as soon as one abandons the common-sense position. But language continues to communicate, as life goes on, despite all the problems thrown up by the sceptical thought.

This is not the kind of issue that can be treated lightly. In this case,



the kinds of questions that the sceptics have asked are so fundamental that our whole attitude to the problem of 'Knowing' gets affected. The question is not merely about what role does language play in our knowledge of the world. The question is: 'can language ever play the role that we have assigned to it?' 'Can language be ever relied upon?' It has been accepted almost by common consent that in actual situation language works. This basic assumption is questioned the moment we ask if it can really work in the absence of absolute foundation. Derrida's procedure is succinctly summarised by M. H. Abrams. He writes:

He agrees that it works, then asks, "But is it possible that it really works?"

He concludes that, lacking an ultimate ground, it is absolutely not possible that it works, hence its working is only a seeming -- that, in short, though text may be legible, they are not intelligible, or determinately significant.

Let us, therefore, see how language *actually* works. Let us begin with a passage from Derrida's writings:

We can extend to the system of signs in general what Saussure says about language: "The Linguistic system (*langue*) is necessary for speech events (*parole*) to be intelligible and produce their effects, but the latter are necessary for the system to establish itself..." There is a circle here, for if one distinguishes rigorously *langue* and *parole*, code and message, schema and usage, etc. and if one is to do justice to the two principles enunciated, one does not know where to begin and how something can in general begin, be it *langue* or *parole*. One must therefore recognize, prior to any dissociation of *langue* and *parole*, code and message and what goes with it, a systematic production of differences, the production of a system of differences -- a difference among whose effects one might later, by abstraction and for specific reasons, distinguish a linguistic of *langue* from a linguistic of *parole*.

Here I would like to draw the attention of my readers to the word which has apparently no place in our dictionaries: '*Difference*'. This is what creates a gap in the text -- the gap that may pose some problems in weaving the text. If a reader were really innocent, he would treat it as a spelling error, or a slip. But the fact that the word is printed in italics is a signal, a sort of forewarning, that it should be treated more seriously, especially in case of a writer who plays his game carefully, scrupulously and following the rules of the game in spirit. '*Difference*': Is it a sign? Sign of what? Or a signifier?



What then does it stand for? The reader may look for some other signs, which may point to this particular sign. Surely there are some indications, but all that is not enough to make sense. Can a dictionary explain? We know that there is no such signifier in the dictionary -- not at least, at this moment. This signifier, if it is to be called so, is poised to be differentiated, distinguished, waiting to point away to something other than itself, and not finding a way out, draws all our attention to itself, like a spot of coagulated blood in the texture of the text. But the text is not completely silent. We have the author's explanation of it: *differance*, he writes:

Is a structure and a movement that cannot be conceived on the basis of the opposition presence/absence. *Differance* is the systematic play of differences, of traces of differences, of the spacing [*espacement*] by which elements relate to one another. This spacing is the production, simultaneously active and passive (the *a* of *differance* indicates this indecision as regards activity and passivity, that which cannot yet be governed and organised by that opposition), of intervals without which the "full" terms could not signify, could not function.

Derrida's commentators further explain the idea. A close reading of their text would reveal that they are reading it as Derrida would like it to be read, equating, or rather approximating (perhaps, strangely enough) their reading with his, and moreover, writing with that self-confidence about what they mean. The point is that both the writer and his commentators are serious about it, and they know that their writing will be taken seriously. This is that well known Derridean strategy which combines the two senses -- conveyed by the two signifiers: 'differing' and 'deferring' -- by producing a new signifier 'differance': it is that which indicates and yet holds back something, and else refuses to indicate and yet reveals something, and it is that which we are encouraged to accept with the new sense which is really absent, while theoretically rejecting the very plausibility of arriving at any sense.

The general drift of Derrida's critique is directed towards emphasising the theoretical impossibility of making a sense, of reaching signifieds. But for all practical purposes, the *sense* has been conveyed, and the most curious thing is that the strategic substitution of 'e' to 'a' has been responsible for conveying this *intended* sense because this is how



the author of the text wants us to read the term '*differance*'. The theoretical stance is undercut by the practical considerations, which, in turn, suggest that language works.

The most curious thing is that Derrida himself knows it very well. He is keenly aware of the linguistic and academic conventions in the field of scholarship and wants to follow them scrupulously. He seems to take writing very seriously and further assumes and knows that his writing will be taken seriously by his readers, too. Even when he effects a change in spelling and produces a variant, he is quite sure that whatever may have caused him to produce the variant will be known and understood by his readers. If all this is true, neither Derrida nor his commentators can summarily dismiss the simple claim of their opponents that they should explain or account for the contradiction between the theoretical stance and practice. My simple claim is that Derrida and his commentators are absolutely certain that it is not impossible to produce a new signifier, the sense of which will be conveyed with a fair degree of confidence. No one rejects the right of the sceptic to disentangle, dismantle, and deconstruct the prevalent view or theory of language. The impeccable honesty, scientific rigor and exacting demand for consistency in Derridean logic are such that we should feel almost completely convinced about the utter futility of reaching signifieds through a chain of signifiers. At the same time, we know that, for all practical purposes, this is not true: we *do* reach signifieds. Again, at the theoretical level, Derrida shows that the logic implicit in the Saussurean mode of argument finally leads to a state of dissemination wherein "language reveals an anarchic and unpredictable level of functioning, subversive of all rigid proper meanings on the ordinary socially controlled level." And yet, the practice reveals that the "anarchic and unpredictable level of [its] functioning" can be very well managed and controlled by the author. Now in this situation, the sceptic cannot escape the responsibility of stating how the language works the way it works. It has worked in sciences: it has worked in literature. True that there is a difference between the common-sense view of language and the more serious consideration of language. The 'language' of which Saussure speaks is no other than this so-called common-sense view.

What is so remarkable about this deconstructive mode of logic and



strategy is that it allows Derrida to deconstruct Saussure without rejecting him. "I am very fond of everything I deconstruct in my own manner," says Derrida, "the texts that I want to read from the deconstructive point of view are the texts I like, with that impulse of identification which is indispensable for reading." What makes him dismantle the metaphysical and rhetorical structures is not "to reject or discard them but to reconstitute them in another way." This is also what distinguishes him from all other sceptics. In the Derridean canon, Saussure's position is as ambivalent and precarious as that of Rousseau, Husserl and others whom he has deconstructed: that is to say, neither accepted, nor rejected. Thus he accepts their terms and plays them against each other, revealing the problematic aspect of their internal relationship. Let us, therefore, once again, return to Saussure.

As a linguist, Saussure's strategy is well suited to his purpose. He knows what he is about. The phenomenon we call 'language' is indeed complex in terms of assumptions, attitudes and levels. It is a part of that reality with which it deals. It can also be used effectively as an escape route for running away from that reality. Saussure, therefore, seems to select the communicative aspect of language. It is interesting to see how he describes the language-behaviour. He seems to approach language methodically, objectively and scientifically. Like a scientist, he isolates that aspect of the complex phenomenon, which he can study systematically. Strictly speaking, it is not language but linguistics, which is systematic. No doubt, linguistics cannot become systematic unless there is something in language which enables the linguist to study it systematically. This is perhaps why Saussure makes a distinction between language, *la langue* and *la parole*. *La langue* is a human construct -- an aspect of the totality, which opens and assures the possibilities of a systematic study.

Saussure describes it as a system of signs where "there are only differences, without positive terms." Now this is only one way of defining it. The uniqueness of a thing can be defined in terms of the qualities/characteristics/attributes that it has, provided we can point out the elements or qualities that can be viewed as belonging to that thing and no other thing. We cannot talk about the linguistic items in absolute positive terms. We can distinguish and differentiate them, negatively, that is to say, in



terms of what they are not.

This way of talking about word, the linguistic sign, is not altogether new. Saussure inherited the legacy of Western Culture, but he had also known and acquired the insights of the eastern culture. A student of Sanskrit, it is not unlikely that he had known the differing views of *mīmāṃsakas*, *naiyāyikas* and the grammarians, the Buddhists and the Vedantins. The *mīmāṃsakas* preferred to define words in positive terms. But the Buddhist held a different view. They used the term *apohah*, which means distinction or difference of an object from all other objects, which are again different from it. They further held that words signify merely the distinction of things from others that they are not. Thus, the word 'cow' signifies that the entity we call 'cow' is distinguished from 'not-cow.' Commenting upon the second couplet (*karikā*) "*sākṣāt sanketitam...*" (*Kavyaprakasa*, Ch.II), Mammata incidentally refers to this view and summarily dismisses it as useless. It is interesting to note that Mammata's commentator quickly controverts the view, saying: "it is difficult to agree with Mammata here. The last two views [of the ancient *nāyayikas* and that of the Buddhists] have as much relevance as the first two. Whether you accept them or not is entirely different matter." Two aspects of the Buddhist view are relevant to our discussion: a) a word has two aspects - *vācya* (concept) and *vācaka* (sound-pattern), and b) difference or distinction is what matters when we consider a word. Sanskrit scholars specifically relate words to conventions (*sanketa*), but there is no clear-cut emphasis on what we call 'system.' The notion of 'system' or 'institution' seems to have an affinity with the nineteenth century thought. Saussure's originality as a thinker lies in that he combines the insights which were available to him in both the traditions. He treated language as a system of differences. Thus, as a linguist, he defines *la langue* as the object of his study: i.e. the linguistic system where there are only differences, without positive terms." Finally all the four terms -- *la langue*, *la parole*, *signifiant* and *signifie* -- get interlocked in such a way that the whole has an appearance of a closely-knit monolithic system, with well-defined programme. The aims, objectives and purpose of linguistic analysis are clear, the methods are properly outlined and the whole ensures positive results.



A specific letter in a language, the linguists argue, does not have significance; all the other letters in that language determine its significance in that language. 'A' is 'A' because it is not 'B' or 'C'.

We know this very well. But to be able to get distinguished or differentiated from all other letters in that language, this letter -- 'A' -- must have some 'content.' By content, I mean the way in which it is written or uttered. Its capacity to get itself differentiated from all other letters depends upon the physical content -- the letter itself -- the way it is written or drawn or uttered. For I cannot draw 'a' as अ and say that this is 'a' just because it can be distinguished and differentiated from all other letters in the English alphabet. That would be ridiculous. It will be argued that this 'new figure' does not have social sanction. That is right. The social sanction is given to the physical 'content' -- something that can be viewed positively. 'A' is a 'A' because it has some recognisable content in the English alphabet. This letter can be written in two ways -- 'A' and 'a'. Now, we can also say that 'A' is 'A' because it is not 'a', especially when we are using the written form. In oral communication, it is impossible to make such a distinction. 'A' is 'A' and not 'a' because it has some physical content, which becomes known to us in the written script. For a systematic production of differences as also for the production of a system of differences, the linguistic items need to have individual characteristics/traits/attributes. The strategic substitution of 'e' to 'a', introduced by Derrida, in order to distinguish 'différance' from 'difference' so as to have something of both -- 'difference' and 'deference' is possible only in the written form, and not in the oral form. To say that all that is important are differences and nothing else is only half-true. The uniqueness of the letter 'a' lies as much as in its content as in the logic of differentiation.

The importance of this argument would become clear if we extend the logic to encompass 'word'. Words are not mere empty spaces, they have a positive content, and this positive content is determined by the consubstantiality of both -- the sound and its significance. They are significant sounds. Remove the significance from the sound, and what we have is a noise. We must realise that 'nothing' connects 'nothing'. Significances are constructed, bit by bit, they are destroyed within no time. Deconstruction is not destruction, the annihilation of everything. If Derrida



uses the lever of deconstruction to show us the void beneath, it is perhaps not because he loves the 'void' but because he wants us to remember forever the thin line that divides light from darkness.

If deconstruction is a kind of 'reconstitution from within,' it is indeed welcom. However, this aspect of deconstruction was not forcefully foregrounded. Instead of restoring our faith in the Word, deconstruction, as a movement, has shaken our faith in the language -- the very foundation of all our structures of thought. Word is split from within. Consequently, we find ourselves in a precarious situation, merely watching the dance of signifiers, having no truck with the signifieds. One step more and we may find ourselves in world of utter chaos and confusion.

1. This paper was presented by Prof. J. B. Paranjape on 5th of November 2001 as a valedictory address of the 18th Annual Session of The Maharashtra Tattvajñāna Parishad held in Nagpur University, Nagpur. We requested Prof. Paranjape to work on this theme further by adding notes & references. Unfortunately he died recently leaving the paper without any emendations. We regret his untimely demise and pay our respects to him by publishing the paper in its original form. --- *Chief Editor.*