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LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS IN POSTMODERN DISCOURSE

Ladislav DROZDÍK
Institute of Oriental and African Studies,
Slovak Academy of Sciences, Klemensova 19, 813 64 Bratislava, Slovakia

On the intellectual scene of the Saussurean structuralist heritage, linguistics was perceived as a powerful source of methodological inspiration and played a renovating role to a wide range of social sciences. As a result of subsequent development, with the advent of what came to be known as postmodernism, the basic tenets of the once inspiring structuralism have been challenged. The concentrated criticism of logocentrism is one of the most prominent characteristics of this development. The following short notes are mostly focused on Derrida's strategy adopted in this criticism.

Nietzsche's resounding proclamation of the end of philosophy[1] signals the entry to what has recently been known as postmodernity. His entrance into the discourse of modernity was perceived, by many of his followers, as a turning point in this process. Heidegger's critique of metaphysics, within the tradition of Nietzsche's thinking, aimed at undermining the Western rationalism (Habermas 2000:131). As a parallel intellectual development, the scholarly climate created by Saussurean structuralism invited several leading figures of very various scholarly orientation to intrude into the domain of linguistics. The special position of linguistics which sets it apart from all other disciplines seems to be further supported by the fact that its subject-matter simultaneously operates as a tool in the (self-)description. That amounts to saying that, for language, there is no metalanguage that not itself language.

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[1] Nietzsche's famous proclamation is suggestively resounding again and again in the postmodern discourse: Derrida's *The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing* (Chapter I, Part I of *Of Grammatology* 1997); Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992); Sim's *Derrida and the End of History.* Cambridge, Icon Books UK, 1999, etc.

Along with the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901–81) and Michel Foucault (1926-84), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–) is one of the central figures of the French 'high' structuralism. He was the first to show the fruitful applicability of structuralist methods outside the domain of linguistics and his numerous anthropological studies are considered classics of the structuralist approach (Stuart Sim, ed. 1999: 303). Lévi-Strauss's affiliation with Saussurean structuralism is plain and explicit:

"In the study of kinship problems (and, no doubt, the study of other problems as well), the anthropologist finds himself in a situation which formally resembles that of the structural linguist. Like phonemes, kinship terms are elements of meaning; like phonemes, they acquire meaning only if they are integrated into systems. 'Kinship systems,' like 'phonemic systems,' are built by the mind on the level of unconscious thought. Finally, the recurrence of kinship patterns . . . in scattered regions of the globe and in fundamentally different societies, leads us to believe that, in the case of kinship as well as linguistics, the observable phenomena result from the action of laws which are general and implicit" (1958: 39–41/1967: 31–32; in Derrida 1997: lvi).

In general, the credit of structural linguistics as a model discipline lies considerably high. Lévi-Strauss gives the following acknowledgement: "Structural linguistics will certainly play the same renovating role with respect to the social sciences that nuclear physics, for example, has played for the physical sciences" (Spivak, in: Derrida 1977: lvi).

Some decades later, this renewed interest in structuralist linguistics and the whole spectrum of its structuralist cognates adopted an opposite orientation and started operating counteractively. The advocates of this new orientation were stimulated by the common endeavour to gather further evidence for their sceptical attitude to the principles that have supported Western thought for the last few centuries. This wide cultural movement came to be known as postmodernism.

Postmodernity, associated with the latter increasingly influential cultural movement, is assumed to represent the Western cultural situation that follows the collapse of modernity as a cultural ethos. Modernity has generally been the source of inflated hopes in an ever progressing social progress, prosperity and well-being.[2] Postmodernity, on the contrary, may broadly be characterized as a growing awareness of the costs and burdens of modernity, as a state of growing scepticism about the inevitable march of progress or the necessity of a remorseless exploitation of natural resources in the name of this progress (Sim 1999: 340). Postmodernity is sometimes presented as a period without

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[2] Francis Fukuyama's programmingly postmodern message (1992) "that liberal democracy and consumer capitalism would soon have finally taken over the whole world, thus completing human history and bidding a last goodbye to the claims of any socialist or radical critique of the capitalist system" (Easthope, in: Sim 1999: 27), received an unexpectedly severe blow on September 11, 2001, and urgently calls for at least partial reformulation.

its own programme, working over the accumulated debits against one modernity, while experimenting with its roots to invent another. Accordingly, postmodernity comes not at the end, but at the beginning of modernity (ibid. 309). Postmodernity, for all its omnipresent pressure in very various forms (e.g. Green Movement), is a vague concept. According to Jean-François Lyotard, the modern and postmodern may alternate over time and the recent phase of postmodernity may be no more than a temporary state preceding the comeback of modernity (ibid. 340–341). Generally speaking, postmodernist thinkers are suspicious of most means of legitimation in the 20th century because of the always present threat of authoritarianism. Lyotard speaks of a crisis of legitimation. One can no longer rely on theories like Marxism (Lyotard's *grand narratives* or *metanarratives*) to solve all socio-political problems (Sim 1999: 303). Norris, one of the most devastating critics of postmodernism has launched a series of attacks on its principal ideas. In his writings (Norris 1990, 1992, 1993) he has advanced the claim "that postmodernism is a form of groundless relativism which has not just rejected the *rationalism* of Enlightenment thinking, but has in fact abandoned rational and critical thinking altogether..." (Sim 326).

Postmodern science may be viewed as a variety of scholarly discourses and movements, such as postcolonialism, postfeminism, posthumanism, postindustrialism, post-Marxism, poststructuralism, and others. Poststructuralism refers to a wide range of responses to the structuralist paradigm, especially that which dominated French thought in the middle of the 20th century (Derrida's *deconstruction,* Foucault's archeological and genealogical inquiries into *cultural history* or Luce Irigaray's *difference feminism*) (ibid. ix).

Most prominent figures of French structuralism begin their discourses with language. The psychoanalyst and philosopher Jacques Lacan whose work exerted considerable influence on poststructuralist and postmodernist thought is known by his frequently quoted statement that the *unconscious* is structured like a language, that "the unconscious works with the same tools as language, and that it only comes into existence because of language". Also the relation between *signifier* and *signified* is put into question. While, in Saussurean presentation, this relation is arbitrary, Lacan, like Derrida, challenge this straightforward relationship, since – argues Lacan – words may always refer to other words forming chains of signifiers without ever reaching a definite meaning (ibid. 300).

Postmodernism in linguistics may most conclusively be identified with the criticism of what is recently known as logocentrism or logocentricity. The assumption that words can unequivocally communicate meanings between the participants of communication is being discredited, perhaps most explicitly and most successfully by the deconstructionist strategy (or mode of reading) proposed by Jacques Derrida (1930–), one of the most prominent representatives of postmodern thought. Notwithstanding the fact that the foundations of Derrida's grammatology are derived from the structuralist phonetics, he sharply criticizes structuralism, problematizes the objective description and denies the possibility

of general laws of the Saussurean system (still in full force in Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, expert translator and interpreter of *Of Grammatology* (1967; English version 1997), one of the most influential of Derrida's works, gives the following shorthand definition of structuralism, as conceived by Jacques Derrida: "Structuralism is an attempt to isolate the general structures of human activity. Thus the structuralism I speak of is largely the study of literature, linguistics, anthropology, history, socio-economics and psychology. A structure is a unit composed of a few elements that are invariably found in the same relationship within the "activity" being described. The unit cannot be broken down into its single elements, for the unity of the structure is defined not so much by the substantive nature of the elements as by their relationship" (Derrida 1997: Spivak's preface to the English translation liv–lv).

The most operative tool used by Derrida in his strategy of deconstruction is, no doubt, the descriptive term *différance* (differing from *différence* only in its written form) that came to life as the author's neologism. The term was coined "to suggest how meaning is at once 'differential' and 'deferred', the product of restless play within language that cannot be fixed or pinned down for the purposes of conceptual definition" (Norris 1987: 14). Terms like *différance* whose play of sense prevents them from rejoining the 'logocentric' order of Western metaphysics are permanently 'under erasure' (*sous rature*), subject to dislocating textual force and devoid of any kind of semantic or conceptual stability (ibid. 16). The term *différance,* as an interchangeable term for *deconstruction* (Sim 1999: 229), is thus deliberately ambiguous and demonstrates that language is always indeterminate and that meaning is always undecidable (ibid.).

Not only the Derridean *différance* has no definite, assignable sense, the same applies to all other deconstructive key-terms, like *supplement, pharmakon, writing,* etc. (Norris 1987: 16). Plato's *pharmakon,* for instance, has two senses: (i) 'poison' and (ii) 'remedy' or 'cure', that could hardly come together in any single context. Nevertheless, according to Derrida, these two antithetical senses are everywhere co-present in Plato's text (*Phaedrus*) in spite of all attempts of the interested philologists and translators to choose one or the other according to the context. *Pharmakon,* with its double logic, occurs at exactly that part of Plato's text where writing is discussed. Writing is both *poison* (as a threat to the living presence of the spoken language) and *cure* (as an indispensable means for recording and transmitting that presence) (ibid. 37–38).

Grammatology is believed, by its founder, to be "a guide for the critique of metaphysics because it goes to the roots of phonetic writing, that is, of writing that copies the sounds of words and this is not only coextensive but also equiprimordial with metaphysical thought" (Derrida 1997: 10). Grammatology, then, is conceived as an operative element in challenging Western philosophy for giving precedence to (self-present) speech over writing. Derrida further ar-

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gues that "there is nothing outside the text" (*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*) and that language is open to endless interpretations that continually defer meaning (Sim 261).

In attempting to illustrate the relation of linguistics to grammatology, Derrida does it in terms of a rather curious verbal substitution of *grammatology* for *semiology* in the text of Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*: "I shall call it /grammatology/ . . . Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance. Linguistics is only a part of /that/ general science . . . ; the laws discovered by /grammatology/ will be applicable to linguistics" (Saussure 1931: 33; English version 1959: 16). In Derrida's opinion, this substitution will give to the theory of writing the scope needed to counter what he calls logocentric repression and the subordination to linguistics, it will liberate the semiological project from what remained governed by linguistics (Derrida 1997: 51).

On the intellectual scene of postmodernism Roland Barthes (1915–80) reverted the order of dependence, postulated by Saussure, by submitting semiology to linguistics: "From now on we must admit the possibility of reversing Saussure's proposition some day: linguistics is not a part, even if privileged, of the general science of signs, it is semiology that is a part of linguistics" (Communications, 4, 1964, p. 2).

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