

since, as Nealon says, the *discipline* of deconstruction is dead, his essay is a much needed addition to a discussion that is struggling to live.

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To the Editor:

In "The Discipline of Deconstruction," Jeffrey T. Nealon discusses extensively the objections made to the deconstructionist doctrines of Jacques Derrida, but Nealon takes exclusively the point of view of literary theory. Aside from one passing reference to Saussure (1274), Nealon makes no mention of linguistics, or of the considerations based thereon that demonstrate the total untenability of the dogmas of deconstruction (Derridean or any other kind). I can only summarize those considerations briefly here.

First and most fundamental, Derrida's insistence on the primacy of writing over speech is wholly unfounded. On the contrary, the primary importance of speech is shown by four major aspects of human language: (1) the universality of speech in contrast to the relatively narrow diffusion of writing among human beings; (2) the length of time that human beings must have been speaking (many tens of thousands of years) in contrast to the few millennia (usually placed at six) since writing began to be used; (3) the ontogeny of language in individuals (the child learns to speak between one and three years of age, but never learns to write before four); and (4) the universal, but also almost universally neglected, fact that no reading or writing goes on without at least some speech activity taking place in the brain of the reader or writer, as demonstrated in experimental psychology with electrograms.

The defense that Derrida and others use *écriture* metaphorically, to mean any kind of semiotic marking, would be invalid. (In discussing Derrida, Walter Ong uses the term "semiotic marking" to refer to any visible or sensible indication, not only writing but also, say, animals' use of excreta to indicate possession of turf.) Metaphors always blur meaning, and there is never any excuse for using a metaphor to describe a phenomenon when more exact terms are available.

Derrida and other deconstructionists have badly misinterpreted the Saussurian notion of "l'arbitraire du signe." In the "vulgate" of Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* (i.e., the editions of 1916 and later), "the arbitrariness of the sign" does not refer to

a supposed "opacity" of the signifier and resultant inaccessibility of the signified. This arbitrariness is simply the absence of any inherent, necessary correlation between the structures of the *signifiant* and the *signifié*—as exemplified by the use of, say, English *dog*, French *chien*, German *Hund*, Russian *sobaka*, and so on, to refer to the same class of animal. This observation has been a truism ever since Plato, in the *Cratylus*, discussed whether meanings were originated "by nature" or "by convention."

The binary opposition of signifier and signified goes back through Saussure and Descartes to the medieval Modistae. It is, however, untenable, inasmuch as we must recognize (with Ogden and Richards and with Stephen Ullmann) not two but three aspects of meaning: the linguistic form, its sense, and its referent. This is because the essence of meaning lies in the correlative tie (C. F. Hockett's term) connecting sequences of sounds with the phenomena of the world we live in (phenomena that include, in a minor way, language itself). This correlation, the sense involved in a linguistic event, exists only in the "mind" (however we define that term) of each individual speaker and hence has to be recognized as distinct from both linguistic form and referent. It is nonsense to say that language refers only to itself, since virtually all normal human use thereof involves reference to relatively observable or deducible phenomena of our experience.

Yet, even though the sense of a linguistic form or construction exists only in individual speakers, it does not follow that any individual can "arbitrarily" decide what sense he or she will choose to give it, as does Humpty Dumpty in *Alice in Wonderland*, and expect others to accept that new sense. In ordinary human life, and in all but the least representative varieties of literature, the range of meaning of words and their combinations is kept within the limits of ordinary (even if inevitably approximative) comprehension by each speaker's need to communicate and collaborate with other members of the speech community. What Locke, Derrida, and others have forgotten is that language is a social, as well as an individual, phenomenon.

Sudden, unannounced use of a term in a meaning very different from that of normal speakers is semantic wrenching, as in Derrida's use of *écriture* for any kind of semiotic marking. (In as early a work as *De la grammaire*, for instance, Derrida uses *écriture* in this way from the beginning but informs the reader of the word's broadened reference only on page 65.) Similar drastic and needless shifts of reference are present in deconstructionists' use of, say, *inscrire* for

“insert [e.g., a semiotic mark]” or *réinscrire* for “re-instate.” These word shanghaiings are, mutatis mutandis, comparable to the paper-and-pencil manipulations and formula juggling of Chomskyan “linguistics.” They are good examples of Derridean *logomanganeia* ‘word juggling’ or ‘verbal sleight of hand’ and *logogoeteia* ‘intellectually meretricious verbal razzle-dazzle.’

Limitations of space have compelled me to omit even a small amount of exemplification and justification of my assertions (for which my two articles listed below must be consulted) and to forgo detailed references to other discussions. When both defenders and critics of deconstruction make any reference at all to linguistics, it is normally only to that of Saussure in the (not wholly reliable) *Cours*, usually reflecting an increasingly widespread *Vulgärsaussureanismus*. Saussure was not (as is often asserted) “the founder of modern linguistics,” nor is his work, as presented in the *Cours*, wholly unexceptionable. Very little, if any, mention is ever made of such fundamental works as William Dwight Whitney’s *The Life and Growth of Language* (1876); the three books all entitled *Language* of Edward Sapir (1921), Otto Jespersen (1922), and Leonard Bloomfield (1933); Kenneth L. Pike’s *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of Human Behavior* (1967); Charles F. Hockett’s *Man’s Place in Nature* (1973); and Walter J. Ong’s *Orality and Literacy* (1982). The only two criticisms of deconstruction from a linguistic point of view that have come to my attention are my own “Deconstructing Derrida on Language” (1985; reprinted in my *Linguistics and Pseudo-Linguistics*, Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1987, 116–22) and “Misconceptions of Language in Current Literary Theory” (*Fourteenth LACUS Forum*, ed. Sheila Embleton, Lake Bluff: LACUS, 1988, 269–77).

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Reply:

I thank Jonathan Culler, James M. Lang, Edward R. Heidt, Jonathan Hillman, and Robert A. Hall, Jr., for contributing to the “healthy dialogue” concerning my essay. As Heidt points out, it seems that deconstruction is alive and well, even after its death as a literary-critical dominant. I especially thank Hillman for pointing out several important precedents for my argument (I had the good fortune to study with John Sallis), and I can only second his recommendations.

In addition, he rightly points out that Norris’s later work takes up a critique much like the one that I follow in my essay. Indeed, Norris’s 1991 afterword to the second edition of *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* criticizes “the vulgar-deconstructionist view that ‘all concepts come down to metaphors in the end’” (143). Norris is, however, equally suspicious of his own earlier reading of Derrida on metaphor, admitting that it grew out of “a false—or very partial—reading of Derrida’s arguments in ‘White Mythology’ and elsewhere. For it is precisely his point in that essay that one has said nothing of interest on the topics of metaphor, writing, and philosophy if one takes it as read (whether on Nietzsche’s or Derrida’s authority) that all concepts are a species of disguised metaphor . . .” (151). The letter from Hall seemingly would be more fruitfully addressed to Derrida than to me, but both he and Hillman interestingly inflect Derrida’s reading of Saussure, and I thank them for their contributions.

The major concern over the essay seems to come from Culler and Lang. Certainly Culler is justifiably taken aback by my implication that he does not pay sufficient attention to Derrida’s texts. The debt that deconstructive discourse owes to Culler is enormous, and I regret that in an attempt to emphasize our differences, I occasionally adopt an unwarranted polemical tone. The debt that I owe to Culler is easily readable in the amount of Derrida’s text that I quote from Culler’s book, but this debt is not adequately acknowledged in the body of my essay. Likewise, the concern that I do not pay sufficient attention to Culler’s discussion of “displacement” or “reinscription” in *On Deconstruction* is a valid one. This is, however, *not* to agree that I have misrepresented Culler. I too welcome the chance to “set the record straight in *PMLA*.”

As Culler points out, *On Deconstruction* does argue for the centrality of deconstructive “reinscription” or “displacement” and against a reading of deconstruction as mere destruction; he writes, “[A]n opposition that is deconstructed is not destroyed or abandoned but reinscribed” (133). Culler likewise discusses the “double, aporetic logic” of deconstruction (109), wherein the first movement levels an opposition and the second reinscribes or displaces the opposition. For example, he writes, “Affirmations of equality will not disrupt the hierarchy. Only if it includes an inversion or reversal does a deconstruction have the chance of dislocating the hierarchical structure” (166). So at first blush it would seem that Culler and I read Derrida similarly—and, in some respects, we do; however, Culler’s notion of the displacement or reinscription of