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# Two versions of continental holism

## Derrida and structuralism

**Abstract** The difficulty to pin down the philosophical content of structuralism depends on the fact that it operates on an implicit metaphysics; such a metaphysics can be best unfolded by examining Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist critique of it. The essay argues that both structuralism and Derrida's critique rely on holistic premises. From an initial externalist definition of structure, structuralism's metaphysics emerges as a kind of 'immanent' holism, similar to the one pursued, in the contemporary analytic panorama, by Donald Davidson. By contrast, Derrida's deconstructionist critique appears engaged in a 'quasi-transcendental' version of holism, which the author analyzes in connection with Martin Heidegger's notion of *Verwindung,* or twisted overcoming.

**Key words** deconstruction · difference · genealogy · holism · internalism/externalism · structuralism · *Verwindung*

The magnitude of the effect of structuralism on Continental philosophy has never been the object of dispute. Everyone recognizes that structuralism, between the late 1950s and early 1960s, literally revolutionized the French scene, which until then had been dominated by phenomenological, existentialist and Marxist orientations. But as one tries to pin down the set of structuralist assumptions responsible for such an effect the picture becomes quite confused,[1] particularly because, whenever put under philosophical pressure, the historical classification of structuralism tends to give way to that of poststructuralism.[2] I wish to suggest that structuralism historically operated within an implicit

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metaphysics which poststructuralism brought into light. Such a metaphysics, I shall suggest, has a holistic structure.

From the mid- to the late 1960s, Jacques Derrida is the poststructuralist who undertakes the challenge of articulating the metaphysical implications of structuralism.[3] The term 'implications' is crucial here. Structuralism, as narrowly defined, never rendered explicit the metaphysical framework upon which it relied; Derrida's work on structuralism is one of unfolding what is implicated, or folded together. Derrida's relation to structuralism cannot be properly explained in terms of either continuity or discontinuity, inside or outside, which is what most Derrida scholars as well as structuralist critics attempt to do.[4] In my reading, it needs to be conceived as a process of internal, and yet twisted, filiation, of the sort that Heidegger named *Verwindung*, or twisted overcoming.[5] This is a key-concept in Heidegger's critique of the rationalist set of positions he sees at the core of the Western metaphysical lineage. Particularly in his later writings, Heidegger does not declare these positions to be false but questions their conditions of possibility, aiming at turning them against themselves. Derrida's critical appropriation of structuralism seems to me to follow the same strategy, in that it does not simply declare the structuralist position to be false but, taking a quasi-transcendental standpoint, activates it against itself. Unpacking this Derridean *Verwindung* offers the opportunity to retrieve both the implicit philosophical content of structuralism and Derrida's complex relationship to it.

How can Derrida's twisted overcoming of structuralism be best described?

(1) It may be described in terms of *two distinct kinds of holism* which structuralism and deconstruction seem committed to. While deconstruction inherits from structuralism a holistic approach to language, it twists around its commitment to the 'principle of immanence'; namely, the belief in functioning 'linguistic states'[6] as the necessary condition for the existence of a structured and intelligible totality. I shall distinguish between this kind of 'immanent' holism, proper to the structuralists, and a 'quasi-transcendental'[7] type of holism, with which I want to characterize Derrida's twisted overcoming of structuralism. Derrida's kind of holism is quasi-transcendental insofar as its conception of a structured totality does not depend on functioning states but rather is the sufficient condition for the very idea of totality.

(2) It may be described at the level of *two different justifications of what a structure is and does for a language*. In line with its commitment to an immanent kind of holism, structuralism defends an externalist justification, where I take externalism to indicate, in barren terms, that meaning depends on factors external to the mind. For structuralism, crucial amongst such factors is social usage.[8] The structuralists call

structure the explanatory model for the relations binding together a specific set of *existing* linguistic states, such as those constituting a natural language or a culture. Structure is therefore descriptive of an occurrence that is external to the individual mind. This externalist element is indispensable for the kind of comparativist strategy at the heart of the structuralist method, particularly in the versions promulgated by Derrida's two main interlocutors: Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss.

By contrast, in line with his own version of quasi-transcendental holism, Derrida deconstructs the externalism characterizing the structuralist understanding of structure, for the first time exposing the concept of structure in its ontological implications. In so doing, Derrida shifts from the pragmatic plane, where structure is the explanatory model for an already existing set of relations, to a plane that I define as genealogical because, in it, structure is defined in terms of its conditions of historical emergence in Western thought. Friedrich Nietzsche was the first to name this type of conditions 'genealogical'. While I define structuralism's justification of structure as externalistic, Derrida seems to me to pursue a genealogical justification.

## The structuralist assemblage

The two subjects of my analysis are clearly heterogeneous: Derrida is a physical person and the author of a number of texts. By contrast, structuralism is the name for a specific approach in the human sciences. This raises questions of definition both at the level of what structuralism means and of the authors who came to be associated with it. But even considered against the backdrop of generality that all labels invoke, structuralism is especially elusive. Its interdisciplinary nature, spanning linguistics and music, literature and anthropology, certainly accounts for part of this elusiveness; an additional factor is structuralism's long historical deployment, ranging from the publication of Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* in 1916 up until 1966, the *annus mirabilis* of structural linguistics.[9]

This is why I suggest treating structuralism as an assemblage, which is the tag for a work of art composed of heterogeneous materials and objects, combined to evoke a totality that is left to the spectator to figure out. However, I am aware that I have deliberately chosen a specific structuralist vocabulary as *lingua franca* for generalized structuralism. Even though it is mostly agreed that Saussure is the matrix of structuralist discourse, it is a fact that he used the word 'structure' only three times in his *Course in General Linguistics*, the transcription of his lectures given at the University of Geneva from 1907 to 1915. He much preferred the word 'system', which instead appears 138 times in the space of roughly

300 pages.[10] The notion of 'structure' came to the fore with later linguists from the Prague and Copenhagen Schools, Roman Jakobson and Louis Hjelmslev, who, between the 1930s and the 1940s, projected structuralism as a founding program for linguistics. It was not until the mid- to late 1950s that structuralism evolved into a total semiological program exceeding the boundaries of linguistics and spilling over into other human sciences. Since the objective of this essay is to define Derrida's *Verwindung* of structuralism's holistic metaphysics, I shall limit myself to the structuralists who are central to Derrida's work. When I say that the structuralist conception of structure relies on externalist premises I shall thus refer to Saussure and Lévi-Strauss who are the structuralists closest to Derrida.

## The externalist character of 'langue'

If we understand a sign in the boldest sense, as something that allows us to infer the presence or existence of something else, language for Saussure is a semiotic system and linguistics is a semiological sort of inquiry insofar as it studies language as a system of signs. According to Saussure, language involves two dimensions: a systematic dimension that he calls *langue*, and the dimension of utterance that he calls *parole*, literally meaning 'word' but often translated as 'speech'. Even though *langue* and *parole* are a functional pair, the former conceptually precedes the latter in the following sense: that the total linguistic system is not reducible to the sum of all the actual and possible utterances. Saussure takes it that the speaker of a language needs to have the internalized *langue*, the system of language, before she or he can produce any utterances, that is, before she or he can speak. If this were not the case, words or sentences would be more the barking of a dog than a signifying unit.

Moreover, such a system is not spelled out in terms of rules with a positive, normative content but is construed like an informational system around the notion of 'value', which Saussure declares to be the simple formal difference between what is uttered and what is not. Language's signifying mechanism can be explained as the selection of one linguistic item against all other possible items of that system.[11] However, even if Saussure seems to put it in exclusively negative terms, it is precisely because whatever is selected does not signify atomistically but only in contrast to what has not been selected, that Saussure's ultimate model of explanation is relationality and not negativity.[12]

If *langue*, or any linguistic system, is a purely relational one, argues Saussure, *langue* needs to precede *parole*. In other words: the condition of possibility of meaningful utterance relies on the apprehension of the linguistic system as a whole, which is in turn produced by social use.

This is the basis of Saussure's externalism. From Saussure, the structuralist tradition inherits the view that language is a social institution 'in various respects distinct from political, juridical and other institutions'. Its specificity lies in the fact that language 'is a system of signs expressing ideas. . . . It is therefore possible to conceive of a science *which studies the role of signs as part of social life.*' [13] The role of signs is determined by their taking part in social life. Social practice is that from which signs draw their functioning and their meaning. *Langue* is the linguistic interface of what for Saussure is absolutely primitive: the structure of human exchange.

In his account of *langue*, Saussure leaves the question of reference to a few fleeting remarks. The crucial one seems to be that, insofar as the individual word's ability to signify depends on its position in the network of relations that constitutes the linguistic system, *langue* is a dimension in which words do not yet point. One could try to fill in Saussure's puzzling open-endedness on this issue in several ways. One could advance the hypothesis that it is Saussure's orientation as a linguist – which brought him to oppose fiercely any historical perspective on the formation and evolution of languages – that is responsible for his elusiveness on reference. Or one could imagine, given Saussure's radical type of holism, the embracing of the position that reference is a theoretical notion causally determined by the linguistic system as a whole.[14] Or, given the great emphasis he puts on the justification of language as a social institution, there are good reasons to suspect that Saussure left reference aside simply because he considered it the necessary condition for a natural language to exist. In this case, his would be a natural explication of language's role as a social institution: in order for human exchange to happen, words need to refer to something external and shared, namely, the world.

## Saussure's immanent holism

The differential theorem – the idea of a system regulated by pure formal differences – enters into how Saussure conceives of the sign. As is true for language in general, for the sign too the systematic dimension is distinguished from the dimension of utterance. Saussure calls the systematic dimension 'signified' and the dimension of utterance 'signifier'. The signifier, or the acoustic image, is, according to Saussure, the phonetic 'substance' of an expression, whereas the signified is the conceptual correlative of the sign. While the signifier is described as having material substance – its sound – the concept does not have a positive content but is what all the other concepts in a language are not. Signifieds, or concepts, writes Saussure, 'are purely differential and defined not by their

positive content, but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are not.'[15] So defined, concepts are boundaries demarcating holes that, in and of themselves, are empty.

However, despite their phonic materiality, even signifiers are inscribed in the system of differentiation, that is, relationality, because each phoneme is identified in terms of the difference from all others. As Saussure warns, 'the important thing in the word is not the sound alone but the phonic differences that make it possible to distinguish this word from all others'.[16] Signifiers and signified alike are 'effects' of difference. All expressions, in Saussure's account, both at the level of signifiers and of signifieds, signify only as the result of their interdependence within the system of language as a whole. Meaning, or signification, is not atomistically conceived as a discrete free-standing unit but emerges by difference from the total linguistic system.[17]

As Saussure sets virtually no restrictions to his differential theorem, he implies that all the expressions in a language have meaning only as the result of their role within the structure of language *as a whole*. This position, which could be the target of a number of objections in today's panorama, testifies to Saussure's very radical version of holism.[18]

What is relevant to my argument is that Saussure's holistic approach to language leads the structuralist tradition in Continental philosophy to view meaning in a non-atomistic way. Saussure's demand for a global connection between the expressions of a language as the condition for signification, brings with it the requirement that meaning is not atomistically produced in discrete units, binding individual expressions and the non-linguistic world, but is viewed as a systematic function occurring within the linguistic totality.[19]

For Saussure, signification is the result of the interconnection between expressions in a language, whether taken as signifiers or signifieds. The fundamental relation is not between expression and reference but between expression and expression. This meets the basic holistic requirement that the meaning of an expression corresponds to its role in a language.[20] Holism remains an on-going feature of structuralist thinking for four decades. Derrida's twisting of the externalist foundation of the structuralist legacy does not erase it but simply dislocates it by asking the question of the conditions of possibility of a structured whole in terms of its genealogical foundations.

## Derrida's genealogical 'Verwindung'

Saussure's externalist conception of the linguistic system provides the coalescence of the structuralist assemblage. Derrida identifies it clearly

when he depicts structural consciousness as 'a reflection of the accomplished, the constituted, the *constructed*; historical, eschatological, and crepuscular by its very situation. Within the structure there is not only form, relation, and configuration. There is also interdependency and a totality which is always concrete.'[21] Structure is envisaged by structuralism as a concrete totality, on the one hand constructed by intersubjective exchange, on the other, aimed at communication. Whether it be the phonetic system of Indo-European languages or the oral culture of Brazilian tribes that is being described, their structure is taken to be constituted and constructed externally to individual minds.

As I indicated earlier, the intersubjective nature of this construction is a crucial point for Saussure, who erects on it the distinction between synchronic and diachronic, destined to remain one of the most defining conceptual pairs in the structuralist lineage. For the structuralists any particular constructed totality, precisely due to the fact that it is being constructed throughout time, can be better understood from outside its individual evolution and constitution through time than from within it. The systematic set of relations that formally describe the functioning of a language or a culture cannot be assessed diachronically, that is, explained through the evolutionary model, but need to be looked at synchronically, which means that they need to be taken in their simultaneity rather than development. This emphasis on synchrony enables structuralism to become a comparativist method, whereby each individual structure emerges by contrast from other structures. Having set aside temporality and historicity as privileged dimensions, structuralism commits itself to synchrony in the attempt to reach a description of languages and cultures as immanent systems of relations rather than the effects of historical causes.

The emphasis on synchrony over diachrony – the condition for structuralism's immanent holism – is an interesting departure point from which to examine Derrida's quasi-transcendental twist, since it involves the assignment of new meaning to these terms.

The precedence of the synchronic over the diachronic reflects the attempt to capture a descriptive standpoint on linguistic and cultural phenomena which 20th-century structuralists felt missing entirely from the historicist approach, based on the reverse precedence of the diachronic over the synchronic. Because of its debt to the mentalistic approach to the philosophy of history opened up by Hegel, who looked at history as the expression of a collective Mind, or *Geist*, the historicist description of a linguistic or cultural system depended entirely on this system's internal evolution and constitution through time. By contrast, the emphasis on synchrony allows one to map out a plurality of forces that are themselves constitutive of history, despite not being themselves historical *stricto sensu*.[22]

The precedence of synchrony over diachrony causes structuralism to de-center the constitutive role of the human subject, assumed as the ultimate metaphysical and social agent. Structuralism's synchronic perspective produces a 'horizontal slicing' of history, which opens the possibility of looking at consciousness as itself inscribed in a network of relations. Such relations determine the specific modalities in which self-reflection is conducted within individual minds. Structuralism's emphasis on synchrony is thus the immediate antecedent to the kind of radical dissemination of the rationalist disembodied ego pursued by deconstruction.[23]

Both structuralism and deconstruction involve thus a de-centering of the human subject which is reconstituted as a response to different synchronic relations, or forces. However, this common premise does not lead to the same conclusions. For the structuralists synchronic relations are the objects of empirical research to be conducted on comparativist grounds. For Derrida these same relations are studied in order to unveil the otherwise silent dynamics haunting any constructed totality. Deconstruction is a technique for the activation of the silent play constitutive of any discourse or text.

The divergence of scopes between structuralism and deconstruction is reflected by the different meaning attributed by each to the synchronic/diachronic pair. Derrida does not follow structuralism in its prioritizing of the synchronic over the diachronic, nor does he espouse 19th-century historicists in their prioritizing of the reverse. Rather than promoting the precedence of one term over the other, Derrida aims at an integration of the two perspectives based on the new genealogical meaning he assigns to the diachronic along the lines indicated by Heidegger. Derrida's quasi-transcendentalist twisting of the notion of structure occurs precisely on the grounds of the relationship between synchronic and diachronic and is largely influenced by Heidegger.

The structuralist requirement to look at a determinate set of conditions simultaneously, in order to establish the functional boundaries of a concrete totality, either linguistic or cultural, clearly relies on the methodological presupposition of totality itself. Derrida wants to question the structuralist reliance on totality by typifying it as the ideal, rather than the method, of the whole history of Western metaphysics. It is at this point that Derrida's ontologization of the structuralist understanding of structure, assumed as a synchronic and horizontal slicing of history, intersects the notion of 'metaphysics of presence'.

The metaphysics of presence is a central theme in Heidegger's later philosophy, where it appears interwoven with the definition of representationalist thinking. The history of Western ontology is, according to Heidegger, limited in its tools and scope by a representational model that consists in attributing to thought the function of re-presenting, or re-producing, a primitive 'presence', origin, or meaning.

This representationalist ideal, which Heidegger identifies historically with the notion of the metaphysics of presence, has roots in the Greek tradition, but reaches full expression only starting from the 17th century, as the definition of a primitive presence comes to be identified with the belief in the existence of an objective order, describable in the language of rationality.

Heidegger, as well as Derrida, questions both the possibility of representation as a transparent epistemological model and the accessibility, if not existence, of a primitive presence, origin, or meaning. Explaining the ontological features of structure in terms of the metaphysical ideal of presence lies at the core of Derrida's genealogical *Verwindung*, the kind of twisted overcoming of structuralism that brings him to embrace a new intersection of the synchronic and the diachronic.

For Derrida, structure is just another name for presence. Structure is taken to be constituted and constructed not externally to the individual mind, as is true for the structuralists, but rather genealogically, that is, internally to the history of the concept of presence.[24] Derrida's genealogical twisting brings about a new non-historicist use of the diachronic perspective which calls into question the externalism supported by the structuralists as well as the oppositional layout of the synchronic/diachronic pair.

Derrida's introduction of the new genealogical function of the diachronic emerges in several of the essays from the early 1960s.

> By orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form . . . a structure without any center represents the unthinkable itself. Nevertheless, the center also closes off the play which it opens up and makes possible. As center, it is the point at which the substitutions of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible. At the center, the permutation or the transformation of elements (which may of course be the structures within the structure) is forbidden. At least this permutation has always remained interdicted. . . . Thus it has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which, while governing the structure, escapes structurality. This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside it*.[25]

Derrida's general point here is that the notion of structure is unthinkable without some conception of the 'center', where by center he means a normative principle, or 'the structurality of the structure'. What is the structurality of the structure? By raising this question Derrida points his finger at the instability which he claims lies at the heart of structuralism. If 'structure' is to be recognized as a quasi-transcendental category in the Kantian sense, then structuralism left unanswered the question surrounding its conditions of possibility. If, by contrast, structure is to be

intended as the name for a specific normative strategy, it loses its synchronic availability and becomes the object of a genealogical type of inquiry. It was Nietzsche who, for the first time, defined these types of conditions – ontological, psychological, historical – as genealogical, identifying them as the motivations behind the choice of a specific normative strategy.

According to Derrida, what structuralism left unanswered – the metaphysical and epistemological status of the notion of structure – needs to be addressed. Structure is not a primitive of sorts; said in Derridean language, an invisible 'presence', origin or telos. It is instead a normative principle. In Derrida's mind, the tradition of Western metaphysics has made this a forbidden question in order not to face both the contingency of the structural principle and the permutable status of its constitutive elements. Such blindness, on the part of the metaphysical tradition, is indispensable, according to Derrida, to render foundations absolute.

Within this tradition, structuralism occupies a special role. While in 'classical thought' totality imposes a hierarchical order – ontological and axiological – it is a distinctive feature of structuralism to claim that the notion of structure is nothing but the permutation and transformation of the elements within a constructed whole. This is the side of structuralism that Derrida appreciates. However, in his reading, structuralism fails at another, more radical task: the acknowledgement of the contingency of the structural model itself. That is why structuralism lies at the very edge of the 'history of the concept of structure', a history constituted as 'a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center' which never recognized permutation as its condition of possibility. These determinations, which include 'all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence'.[26] The role of structuralism within this tradition is to have revealed the 'form' of Western discourse.

With particular reference to the work of Lévi-Strauss, Derrida discusses how structuralism has given a voice to classical thought's unfulfilled desire for a center in the constitution of structure. Structuralist ethnology, Derrida claims, has made explicit the impossibility of conceiving the center as a present-being, or a 'natural site', and opened up the possibility of referring to it as 'a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play'. It is in connection with the absence of the center conceived under the model of presence, or natural site, that 'everything became discourse . . . a system in which the central signified, the original or quasi-transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside of a system of differences'.[27]

Derrida acknowledges the emergence of the notion of 'discourse', which is central to deconstruction and the entire poststructuralist

constellation, as a structuralist conquest dating back to the very beginning of structuralist linguistics. For Saussure, any cultural form or belief system is a 'discourse' because it can be understood by analogy with the properties of language. Such properties are in turn determined by the structure of the linguistic sign, whose essential feature is to be holistic in the minimal sense of being signifying only as a result of its interrelation with all the other signs forming the totality of the system.

In order for different metaphysical frameworks to be operated as 'discourses', structuralism requires the precedence of synchrony over diachrony. As Napoleon's France and Caesar's Rome are not united under one and the same political system, they cannot enter into structural relationships in terms of their historical development but only if they are taken simultaneously or comparatively. Simultaneity is for Lévi-Strauss the condition for conducting empirical studies. As structuralism aims at describing structures in terms of their differences, it leaves the concept of structure itself intact.

Derrida's critique of structuralism revolves around the problematization of structure as primitive. By emphasizing the notion of structure as a neutral point of departure structuralism has taken a wrong turn. For Derrida, pursuing the Saussurian legacy is possible only on the condition of abandoning the concept of structure and taking up difference as primitive. It is difference and not structure that is embedded in the distinction between signifier and signified.

## Derrida's quasi-transcendental holism

Against Derrida, one might argue that Lévi-Strauss's anthropology, for example, relies as much on the notion of difference as it relies on the notion of structure. But Derrida does not deny that later structuralists appropriate from Saussure the formal value of difference. The problem, in his mind, is that difference is taken in its formal value rather than as a metaphysical category. In other words, structuralists reduce difference to a methodological tool to classify and taxonomize, overlooking its metaphysical content; instead, difference is rather the matrix of new metaphysical insight. In the ethnological and anthropological work of Lévi-Strauss such a formal value is retrievable in the undecidability between the natural and the cultural orders. For Lévi-Strauss, if nature is paired with anything universal and spontaneous in human behavior, and culture corresponds to anything normative and particular, there is at least one experience evading and problematizing this distinction: the prohibition of incest, which seems to be both a norm and a universal characteristic of human behavior.

According to Derrida's reading of Lévi-Strauss, this ambiguous

status of the incest-prohibition 'knot' has two outcomes: on the one hand, a positive evaluation of this difference which, far from representing an epistemological deficiency, becomes the very means of critical thinking; on the other hand, the identification of difference – undecidability and instability – as the irreducible feature of discourse and language. The irreducibility of difference is, in my view, the premise for the common holistic ground of both structuralism and deconstruction.

Structuralists and deconstructionists are holists insofar as they both take difference, within language or discourse, as primitive. Their holisms, nevertheless, have dissimilar configurations and scope. As a consequence of their externalist justification of structure, the structuralists use difference for the sake of empirical research, conceiving it as the ultimate descriptive feature of a concrete totality, interconnected and yet unique amongst all others. As a consequence of his genealogical justification of structure, Derrida uses difference in the active sense of differentiation, in order metaphysically to undo the idea of a concrete totality.

Derrida's critique of Lévi-Strauss reveals the contrast between two kinds of holism: immanent holism, stemming from the belief in concrete totalities and committed to describe them and understand them in their differential features; and quasi-transcendental holism, stemming from the disbelief in the very possibility of concrete totalities, and aimed at their deconstruction and destabilization.

For Lévi-Strauss, the ambiguous status of incest prohibition consists in its being both a norm, which would have us list it under the 'culture' set of community-produced stipulations, and an instinct universal to all human aggregates, in which case it would not be a norm. The encounter with such elusiveness – the absence of all natural categories – brings Lévi-Strauss to frame cultural anthropology as an empirical field where one needs to operate as a *bricoleur*, that is, somebody who is forced to use 'the means at hand' to search for imaginative synergies amongst heterogeneous materials. In opposition to the empirical character of the *bricoleur*'s job, endorsed by Lévi-Strauss, is the much more totalizing posture of the engineer, assumed as somebody who first builds the totality of her or his language and only subsequently arranges within it the elements that fit. The notion of *bricolage* reinforces the immanent character of structuralism's brand of holism.

Derrida's essay ends with a discussion of the notion of 'play', in the context of Lévi-Strauss's version of structuralism. Play is the name that Derrida gives to 'the new status of discourse',[28] opened up by Lévi-Strauss's project: a project that, in Derrida's eyes, has the merit of having laid bare the impossibility for the structural 'principle' to act as a definite 'presence'. The profoundly elusive nature of the incest-prohibition specimen has led Lévi-Strauss to conceiving such a principle as a non-locus, a function allowing an infinite number of sign-substitutions. Such

a principle cannot be a presence because it cannot be identified outside of a system of differences.

According to Derrida's analysis, Lévi-Strauss evaluates this elusiveness in two contrasting ways: with skepticism concerning the unmasterable vastness of the empirical field; and with a certain optimism, or playfulness, whenever he succeeds in looking at the inability to totalize as a potentially creative opportunity. This might be true at the level of Lévi-Strauss's nostalgic sentiments for the authenticity expressed by 'cold' cultures. And yet Derrida stretches considerably what he calls Lévi-Strauss's playfulness, in the attempt perhaps to elect Lévi-Strauss as an antecedent for his own deconstructionist position. The notion of playfulness describes much better Derrida's own deconstructionist attitude than Lévi-Strauss's call for *bricolage* as a way to make sense of the heterogeneity of existing cultural systems. Such a concept of playfulness is at the root of Derrida's quasi-transcendental holism. If totalization fails, Derrida writes, it is not because

> . . . the infiniteness of the field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field . . . excludes totalization. This field is in effect that of *play*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite . . . instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a center, which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions.[29]

Contrary to the skeptical stance, the playful one presumes the empirical field to be finite; the infinity would thus coincide with the potentially innumerable 'substitutions', that is, cultural codifications, that the lack or absence of an absolute structuring principle allows for.

Let us identify the skeptical stance with the structuralist point of view, and the playful stance with the deconstructionist point of view. For structuralism, 'the empirical field', which can be explained as the potentially infinite number of sentences that can be produced in a natural language, is infinite. Stated in a vocabulary which is not structuralism's own, structuralist theory would thus be an immanent version of holism in the sense that, on the premise of the infinite number of potential sentences in a natural language or culture, it is a theory that generates an infinity of theorems on the basis of the finite, immanent set of axioms, determined by the specific configuration of the language or the culture.

By contrast, Derrida's quasi-transcendental holism presents the metaphysical challenge of a linguistic system with a limited number of sentences and a potentially innumerable set of axioms. This is clearly not a natural language, whose existence is sedimented by use and communication, and which is present, though only by difference from all others, in its totality. Derrida's project is descriptive not of the workings of a linguistic structure as such but of the *conditions of possibility, or rather emergence, of structure in language*. That is why I have named

his brand of holism quasi-transcendental. In opposition to the principle of immanence, characterizing the structuralist legacy since the beginning, Derrida's strategy is not aimed at the understanding of linguistic structure as a concrete totality but at the identification of the fundamental aporia which he deems to haunt the concept of totality itself.

In Derrida's mind, the structuralist notion of structure relies on a totalizing principle, the structurality of structure, without recognizing its normativity. However, once its normativity is recognized, structuralism will not be left with the tools to compare discrete functional totalities but inevitably deconstruct its very condition of possibility as a method of empirical research. Derrida's critique of structuralism is that structuralism has understood all empirical instantiations of structure as constructed around a normative principle, except for the theoretical field demarcated by the concept of structure itself. That too, Derrida says, needs to be thought as contingent.

This explains why Derrida's metaphysical challenge entails thinking of a language with a finite number of sentences and a potentially infinite number of axioms. Like the structuralists, he starts from something constructed that he usually calls a text. However, instead of looking for the internal coherence of the text, he looks for what the text leaves out in order to hold together. Looking for the internal coherence of a text would mean to presume the axioms to be limited, that is, limited to the frame of operation of the text. But Derrida is *not* looking for that frame: he is looking for what makes the frame possible. In this sense, deconstruction is a dismantling and a dissemination of structure but also an inquiry into how structure is established.

Like structuralism, deconstruction manipulates, rearranges, assembles, combines textual discourses – literary, institutional, gender-produced, philosophical – precisely in the manner of *bricolage*. It treats texts as assemblages of *objets trouvés*, means at hand, to be understood as elements of a whole whose principle of totalization lies, so to speak, beyond it. The whole, or the structure, is always limited; what is unlimited is the number of sign-substitutions that can be made at the level of the structuring principle. Insofar as the structuring principle of any text is beyond it, each text is a supplementary structure, a structure that is not self-contained, in terms of its meaning, but 'leaking'. As the undecidability of the incest prohibition serves a comparativist purpose in Lévi-Strauss's anthropology, which is aimed at determining the specificity of each cultural systems by difference from others, deconstruction insists on the moments of fragility of a text to undermine the fragility of structure itself.

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## Notes

1    French critic Vincent Descombes argues that 'properly speaking there is no definable structuralist philosophy such as may be opposed, for example, to the phenomenological school' and that structuralism is 'only the name of a scientific method' (Descombes, 1980: 81). By 'scientific', I take Descombes to mean that structuralism systematically refused to acknowledge the specificity of the human sciences as contrasted to the natural sciences, a specificity that 19th-century historicism emphasized and which was, in turn, supported by structuralism's immediate antecedents on the French scene: phenomenology and existentialism. However, against Descombes, one could object that any scientific methodology harbors epistemological standpoints and that structuralism relies on a particular philosophy of language, based on the work of the turn-of-the-century Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Yet, Descombes' assertion does expose an important constant in almost six decades of structuralism: the generalized resistance against pushing the Saussurian framework beyond the boundaries of linguistics and semiology into philosophy.

2    The difficulty in describing the philosophical *côté* of structuralism is widely acknowledged; and yet the role of poststructuralism at this juncture is mostly ignored by critics who too often take structuralism's philosophical evanescence as a matter of fact. Let historian Eric Matthews's words be emblematic of the uncommitted type of description I am referring to: 'The late 50s and 60s saw a radical change in the character and style of French philosophy, which could justifiably be described as a revolution. The label usually associated with this revolution is "structuralism" . . . structuralism itself is a relatively well-defined name for a particular approach to the human sciences, but the strictly *philosophical* developments associated with the rise of that approach in France are much harder to pin down precisely' (Matthews, 1996: 135). A notable exception to this trend is to be found in Harland (1987), who explores the question of the philosophical content of structuralism by way of the continuing presence of the structuralist element in poststructuralism.

3    Derrida is certainly not the only French thinker to undertake such a challenge. A sustained attempt to clarify structuralism's philosophical premises is undertaken by Foucault (1969). Foucault's recasting of the philosophical agenda of structuralist linguistics is discussed in Davidson (1997: 1–17).

4    Most Derrida scholars as well as structuralist critics posit the relationship between Derrida and structuralism in either oppositional terms – continuity or discontinuity, inside or outside – or as a matter of degree: the idea that Derrida 'radicalizes' the structuralist standpoint is a rather common argument. Sometimes these two positions go together as in Dosse's chapter on 'Derrida or Ultrastructuralism' (1997: 17–32). Dosse defines Derrida's position as 'paradoxical for he was at the same time inside and outside the structuralist paradigm . . . But he might just as well have been considered to be the person who pushed the structuralist logic to its limits and toward an even more radical interrogation of all substantification or founding

essence, in the sense of eliminating the signified.' My sense is that both the oppositional and linear characterizations of the relationship between deconstruction and structuralism miss the complexity of the issue, which involves an internal process of transformation and distortion that, I think, can best be described by the Heideggerian notion of *Verwindung.*

5 Heidegger articulated the notion of twisted overcoming (*Verwindung*) in several of his later essays but more extensively in 'Die Satz der Identität' (1974). In it, *Verwindung* is indicated as analogous to *Überwindung*, 'overcoming', but free of any emphasis on the 'leaving-behind' that overcoming entails. *Verwindung* is the farthest overcoming from the dialectical notion of synthetic overcoming, *Aufhebung*, according to which the past is forever disactivated. In fact, *Verwindung* describes a kind of overcoming of the metaphysical tradition whereby the tradition is not disactivated at all, but rather activated against itself. Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo connects the Heideggerian notion of twisted overcoming with Nietzsche in order to produce 'a kind of thought that is oriented towards proximity rather than towards the origin or foundation'. This is an hermeneutical model of philosophical thinking that deconstructs rather than asserts, that unleashes the conditions of possibility of a text rather than trying to establish interpretation in terms of a determinate truth-value. See Vattimo (1988).

6 Saussure declared the aim of general synchronic linguistics to be that of establishing 'the facts which constitute any linguistic state'. A linguistic state is one that does not occupy 'a point in time, but a period of time of varying length, during which the sum total of changes occurring is minimal. It may be ten years, a generation, a century, or even longer' (Saussure, 1959: 101). Saussure's definition of a linguistic state seems comparable with Thomas Kuhn's notion of a scientific paradigm insofar as it represents a segment of time during which the linguistic system is presumed to remain stable and, therefore, can be studied in terms of its internal relations rather than its evolution and transformation. See Kuhn (1970). I chose 'immanence' for two reasons: (1) 'immanence' is a term widely present in the structuralist vocabulary, particularly in Lévi-Strauss, and it indicates the study of individual entities as immanent to, or conditioned by, a system of mutual relations rather than as self-contained essences; (2) the notion of 'immanence' highlights structuralism's strategy of addressing particular languages or cultural set-ups rather than, as is the case of Derrida's quasi-transcendental type of holism, addressing language and culture in general, that is, in terms of its conditions of possibility.

7 Some Derrideans would object against the presence of a transcendental dimension in Derrida's thought. However, I do believe that the contrast between the two kinds of holism supported by structuralism and Derrida can be best characterized with this traditional categorization. There is no doubt, in my mind, that Derrida's critique of structuralism entails a quasi-transcendental kind argument, regarding the conditions of possibility of structure. Rodolphe Gasché is the Derridean critic who has first addressed this issue. He locates a transcendental dimension at the heart of deconstruction itself. Deconstruction, in his view, is a 'quasi-transcendental' strategy by which Derrida systematically opens the quasi-transcendental

angle on a concept as a way to undermine its very justification. According to Gasché (1986: 317), Derrida's philosophy is a reflection on the conditions of possibility and impossibility of philosophy itself as a discursive enterprise, where discursive means philosophy understood as the 'thought of unity'. In Derrida's deconstruction, the universality of philosophy depends on this quasi-transcendental plane insofar as it is a plane that represents 'neither a priori structures of the subjective cognition of objects nor the structures of understanding of Being . . . instead of being situated within the traditional conceptual space that stretches from the pole of the finite to that of infinity, quasi-transcendentals are at the border of the space of organized contamination which they open up' (Gasché, 1986: 317). In other words, the quasi-transcendentality of Derrida's deconstruction would consist, for Gasché, in the attempt to reinscribe the logic of oppositional pairs — first and foremost the quasi-transcendental-empirical one — in yet another plane. As I hope to make clear later on in the paper, I interpret the specificity of Derrida's quasi-transcendental standpoint in a historical-genealogical sense.

8  Attributing to structuralism an externalist justification of structure forces me to revise two commonly-held critical views. First is the originality of poststructuralism's own externalism. Because of poststructuralism's emphasis on the historical, political and identity-related justifications, critics tend to ascribe to it a fundamentally externalist orientation. However, if my claim is true, namely that structuralism already expressed an externalist approach to structure, the discontinuity between structuralism and poststructuralism would be greatly reduced, together with poststructuralism's originality on this specific point. Second is structuralism's stronger 'metaphysical' affiliation as opposed to poststructuralist disentanglement from the 'metaphysical tradition'. It seems to me that current representations of structuralism are strongly shaped by poststructuralist critiques of it. Such critiques start from the presupposition that structuralism has an a-temporal, supra-historical, formalistic conception of structure. Such a conception amounts to a commitment to an internalist rather than an externalist justification of structure. If my reading of structuralism is viable, this poststructuralist critique would have to be substantially revised.

9  I owe this expression to Dosse who makes 1966 the highest point of diffusion and intensity of the structuralist debate. This was the year in which several classic texts of structuralism were published. The seminal work by Greimas (1966), whose highly formalistic approach was close to Hjelmslev and the other members of the Copenhagen Circle, epitomizes the attempt, popularized by Roland Barthes, to work out a general semiotics embracing all signifying systems. Together with André Martinet, Greimas is the most relevant French linguist of the postwar period. Also in 1966 Jacques Lacan published his *Ecrits*, which launched him on the international scene as the 'French Freud'. Tzvetan Todorov's *Théorie de la littérature* came out with a preface by the Russian master of structural linguistics, Roman Jakobson, and made the work of the Russian formalists known to the French public. The presence of two important figures in the structuralist galaxy, Gérard Genette and Georges Dumezil, left a mark with

the publication of *Figures* and *La religion romaine archaïque* respectively. As Dosse correctly points out, 1966 represents also a watershed between structuralism and poststructuralism, as it is the year in which Michel Foucault's *Les mots et le choses* came out as a huge success in terms of sales as well as critical acclaim. Finally, it is in 1966 that structuralism crosses the Atlantic for the first time as a distinctively French movement. All the major structuralists and some poststructuralists-to-be landed in Baltimore to participate in a symposium entitled 'The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man', hosted by the Humanities Center at Johns Hopkins University. This was the occasion at which Derrida delivered his essay on Lévi-Strauss and met Paul de Man, who in turn became a visible and active persona in the diffusion and elaboration of deconstruction in the Anglo-American world. For the acts of the symposium see the work edited by Macksey and Donato (1970). I wish to underline that before the Johns Hopkins symposium, which sealed the French appropriation of structuralism in the USA, several important meetings had taken place on American soil. Two of them contributed in essential ways to the development of the structuralist method: Lévi-Strauss's meeting with Jakobson at the New School for Social Research in New York during the war years and Martinet's teaching at Columbia University from 1947 to 1955, when he worked in close contact with Jakobson. Martinet's *Eléments de linguistique générale* (1967) contributed substantially to establish the kind of linguistics practiced by Jakobson and the Prague Circle in France.

10  Despite this objective difference in terminology, I shall assume – as most structuralist critics do, including Derrida himself – the fundamental compatibility between the notions of 'system' and 'structure'.

11  Saussure established his notion of a linguistic system on two fundamental principles: the diacritical principle, which I describe in terms of either difference or relationality, and the principle of arbitrariness, which pertains to the relation binding a signifier to a signified. In Saussure's analysis, there is no natural link between sound and concept but only a conventional one. The principle of arbitrariness is a main focus of Derrida's (1967a) discussion of Saussure.

12  Both linguistic and mental representations are, for Saussure, inscribed in a system of differences. Such a system is a set of mutually exclusive possibilities. As the speaker chooses one amongst them, she automatically chooses against all the others. The semantic force, or value, emerges thus as difference, contrast or relation between individual units. Fodor and Lepore, in their discussion of holism, underline the contrasting aspect of structuralism and suggest the association of linguistic structuralism with philosophical doctrines that, in their words, embrace a 'contrast' approach to meaning. Amongst these, they mention Gilbert Ryle's semantics. The only qualification they add is that 'unlike many other varieties of functional role semantics, 'contrast' theories of meaning suggest not only translational holism but also content holism; in particular, they entail that semantic properties can't be punctuate' (Fodor and Lepore, 1992: 239 n.).

13  Saussure (1959: 15).

14  This is completely speculative as Saussure's position on reference remains

mostly implicit within the transcription of his lessons constituting the *Course*. However, I find the parallel useful particularly because there is the risk, on the part of distracted readers, to interpret Saussure's emphasis on functional pairs – *langue/parole*, signifier/signified – as extensionally focused categorizations, such as the classical Fregean distinction between the sense (*Sinn*) and the reference (*Bedeutung*) of an expression. Along the lines indicated by Davidson, one could imagine Saussure rejecting Frege's ontology of senses and recasting the kind of word-entity correspondence presupposed by the Fregean and other approaches in terms of various holistic relations.

15  Saussure (1959: 117).

16  Saussure (1959: 118).

17  The epistemic tools in Saussure's hands seem to me derived directly from the Hegelian logic of determinate negation. For Hegel, meaning arises from the opposition between the particular (say, a specific predicate 'hot') and the universal ('non-hot'), such that the particular ('non non-hot') is the double negation of the universal. However, the presence of Hegelian logic and broadly defined Hegelian epistemic tools in Saussure's linguistics is, at this point, just an intuition that would need to be refined and further pursued. Harland (1987) discusses the influence of Hegel on both structuralism and poststructuralism to some degree of detail in the chapter entitled 'Metaphysical Philosophy'. The direct connection between Hegel and Saussure is particularly interesting because the reception of Saussure by the structuralist movement in the 1950s and 1960s happened in the context of the so-called Hegel Renaissance, which promoted a new existentialist reading of the young Hegel. The main actors on the Hegel Renaissance stage were Jean Hyppolite and Alexandre Kojève.

18  My characterization of Saussure's type of holism as 'radical' is meant exclusively to underline the virtual absence of restrictions that he puts on what I have called his 'differential theorem'. Concerning the objections to Saussure's radical version of holism, the two best sources for the reader are: (1) Peacocke's very comprehensive article entitled 'Holism' (1997), which presents the alternative between global and local holism; and (2) Fodor and Lepore (1992). Peacocke's article offers a classification of a different version of global holism as well as a set of objections to it. Both the classification of the different versions of global holism and the set of objections are distinct from, and yet complementary to, Fodor and Lepore's book. In terms of positions, Peacocke's definition of global holism encompasses what Fodor and Lepore call 'meaning' or semantic holism, to distinguish it from holism about confirmation, interpretation, or the individuation of functional properties. Fodor and Lepore further subdivide meaning holism into two species: content holism and translation holism. The notion of content holism springs from the claim that 'properties like *having content* are holistic in the sense that no expression in a language can have them unless many other (nonsynonymous) expressions in that language have them too. In effect, it's the doctrine that there can be no punctuate languages.' By contrast, translation holism 'is the claim that properties like *meaning the same as some formula or another of L* are holistic in the sense that nothing

can translate a formula of L unless it belongs to a language containing many (nonsynonymous) formulas that translate formulas in L' (Peacocke, 1997: 5–6). Structuralism's view of language, which Fodor and Lepore comment on just in a footnote to the chapter dedicated to Ned Block's conceptual role semantics, seems to embrace both kinds of holism: content and translation (Fodor and Lepore, 1992: n. 10).

19 The notion of semantic atomism I am referring to is anchored in the tradition of philosophical thinking that spans the British empiricists to Bertrand Russell and the Vienna Circle. This is the view that structuralism seems to oppose quite uncontroversially: the meaning of a sign is determined by its relation to entities in the non-linguistic world. On the contrary, the structuralists start from the general premise that the semantic properties of a sign are determined by its role in the total linguistic system.

20 To further specify what I mean by 'basic holistic requirement' would bring in the need to commit to a precise version of holism and engage in the critical appraisal of the complex taxonomies currently available. This would go beyond the comparative work which is the challenge of this paper: to show that it is possible and useful to apply, to a certain segment of the Continental philosophical tradition, a categorization (holism), produced in the last 40 years of debates in analytic Anglo-American philosophy. To this extent, I feel it is important to say not only that an ocean separates Saussure from the many late 20th-century global or meaning holists who populate the contemporary philosophical debate, but also that he was a linguist rather than a philosopher of language. Because of his background, Saussure's horizon is completely and uniquely determined by the model of natural languages in a very peculiar way. The kind of research for a theory of meaning adequate for natural languages conducted by late 20th-century holists, provides them with epistemic tools perfected by four decades of work on formal languages. Take the synergy between semantics and the formal theory of truth, central to contemporary holism of Davidsonian descent. This is a powerful synergy whereby the tradition of formal semantics has been put to use to produce a holistic theory of linguistic understanding which can then be applied to natural languages. Nothing of this sort, just at the level of logical equipment, is to be found in Saussure.

21 Derrida (1967a: 5).

22 The emphasis on synchrony launched by Saussure and pursued by the structuralist movement had a profound impact on French historiography. The de-centering of the mentalistic approach to history embedded in the historicist lineage, is behind the rise of a new historical methodology, known as the Annales School, which was never explicitly 'structuralist' but is inconceivable beyond the conceptual premises of structuralism. The Annales School takes its name from a journal entitled *Les Annales*, founded in 1929. Since 1956 it has been edited by the French historian Fernand Braudel who opened the doors of historiography to the typically structuralist emphasis on systemic constants rather than diachronic causal tales of origin or historical scope. The philosophical interest in the historiography of the Annales is in their attempt to find a third way between historicism and the reduction of historical research to quantitative parameters.

23 The first chapter of Derrida's on-going project of dissemination of 'mentalism' is his early deconstructionist critique of Husserl's quasi-transcendental ego, which he interprets as the latest and most subtle embodiment of the definition of consciousness in the Cartesian tradition (Derrida, 1967b).

24 I borrow the term 'genealogy' from Nietzsche, for whom it is the mark of an underlying continuity at the level of motives rather than properties: he calls it the 'motivating force' of beliefs. These beliefs are responsible, in turn, for the creation of values. For Nietzsche, values constitute the complex of subjective and intersubjective answers to the environment, construed both biologically and culturally. Genealogy is, thus, on the one hand, a subterranean kind of exploration into the origins of, or, even better, the motivations behind, contemporary cultural convictions; on the other, it entails the attempt to evaluate whether these convictions have a life-enhancing or a life-impoverishing effect. If a quasi-transcendental definition of value can be found at all in Nietzsche, it would correspond to the treatment he provides of the notion of 'life', which carries in it ideas of becoming, creativity, originality, self-affirmation, and self-overcoming. Although genealogy is a concept that is present throughout the arch of Nietzsche's work, I am using it in two quite specific ways: in its connection to the notion of life, and as a mode of historical understanding. At this peculiar junction, my reference is the second of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations* (1983). For the meaning of genealogy in Nietzsche, see the chapter entitled 'Genealogy, Interpretation, Text' in Schrift (1990); and 'Nietzsche and genealogy' in Geuss (1999).

25 Derrida (1967: 279).

26 ibid.

27 Derrida (1967: 280).

28 Derrida (1967: 286).

29 Derrida (1967: 288).

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