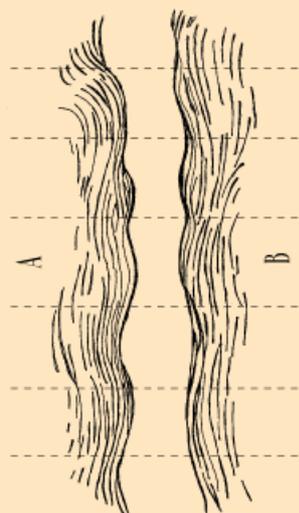


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## From the Arbitrariness of a Sign to the Trace of a Language

Noëlla Patricia Schüttel

ABSTRACT. Derrida donne souvent l'impression d'être un philosophe peu coopératif et et agressif. Il traite volontiers souvent de sujets négativistes, tels l'incompréhension, le désespoir et la crainte dont se nourrissent les langues, et qui rendent compte de la *différance* omniprésente entre les signes et ce qui est désigné par le signe. Ses œuvres sont intrinsèquement liées à l'impossibilité du sens et de la compréhension, mettant en valeur une *différance* insurmontable. De fait, il y a quelque chose d'irréductible et d'incompréhensible, non seulement entre des langues différentes, mais aussi au sein d'une même langue. Une analyse de ses positions philosophiques nous montre comment Derrida décompose l'attitude envers les langues, c'est-à-dire envers les termes du signe et ce qui est désigné par le signe. La décomposition et les ruptures qu'il propose lui donnent l'occasion de recomposer à sa façon ce qu'il vient de décomposer, s'appuyant alors sur d'autres penseurs tels Gadamer, Saussure, Freud et Austin. Il est utile de comprendre les liens de Derrida avec ces auteurs, afin de mieux saisir la pensée derridienne ; et par cette analyse, on examinera les raisons pour lesquelles Derrida se démarque d'eux. Il s'agira ainsi de mettre en lumière une attitude constructive (et non pas déconstructive) vis-à-vis des singularités de la langue.

### 1 Area of conflict: Need for Translation and Untranslatability

Due to the limitations of language, there is a need to be released from our limiting language. The critical human mind tries to free itself autonomously in order to do justice to the otherness of someone different. From Gadamer's hermeneutical point of view, language is not pre-structured, although human beings count as beings that grow up with language. Without a fixed system of language, we are able to think differently in order to understand the otherness of other thoughts. The "trying-to-understand-someone" and the consequential "putting-oneself-in-someone-else's-position", i.e. engaging with otherness through the possibility of adjusting our language schemes, constitutes the basis for an exchange of ideas. An exchange, which occurs in its own language, never does justice to the otherness of a conversation partner. Therefore, a fundamental component of a conversation (in order to understand the otherness of others) is an absolute commitment to translate appropriately and adequately the language of the other into its own language. Such processes of translation, even in one and the same language, help us to transform the *foreign* linguistic sense constructions into the other's own *unique* linguistic sense constructions, so that we can adapt our language to the otherness. But it must be remembered that every attempted translation runs the risk of randomly producing new settlements of sense constructions, because of prejudices. New settlements of sense constructions can completely miss intended meanings.

Gadamer, however, is convinced that the translation process in a conversation serves to harden the *unambiguousness* of a meaning. For Gadamer, this is the preferred way of saying what is meant. In every translation, a new design of meaning is included, but its new altered meaning must not be altered to such an extent that the translated or interpreted sense would be missed. The translated and interpreted sense should be transferred and transmitted, so that the meant sense becomes more understandable. A successful translation makes comprehensible what is said. The meaning should be made more familiar in an adaptable language.

By contrast, Derrida's position is different. According to him, a translational process never happens without a loss. Even in one and the same native language, a translation as interpretation never occurs loss-free. In contrast to Gadamer's view, where translation is needed and implicitly possible, Derrida's conception is based on the untranslatability of language par excellence. Every single attempt results in failure as language. The words could only develop, as it has always been quoted. In every use of a quotation, the quotation is inserted in a new context. This new context provokes newness and, accordingly, the otherness of the sense transmission. Every reproduction as quotation is, for Derrida, an iteration with considerable variation. A variable varies by definition so that, in any variation, part of the previous meaning of a given word gets lost. This specific part of the meaning of a given word has to be lost, as its context-driven meaning cannot use the lost part of its meaning. As such, the meaning of the given word fails to mean. The reason why Derrida believes in untranslatability is as follows: there is no fixed linguistic code for languages in general. Even within one national language, there is no fixed linguistic code to transmit meanings. A fixed linguistic code *could* be consulted for the conservation of meaning and sense. Yet, owing to a lack of linguistic determination, we have an improper understanding of sense and meaning, as well as lasting irreducible rests. These irreducible rests lead to translations that can never occur without losses.

In his text *Freud and the Scene of Writing*, Derrida explains that the difference between the sign and what is meant never specifies itself. An appropriate code is missing. Thereby, the translation from one language into another language (in one national language or in different national languages) never occurs loss-free. Both cases of translation contain and preserve irreducible rests of meanings (Jacques Derrida, 1967, p.320).

What counts for a national language applies also to every individual grammar. Individual grammar is meant to be the arbitrary and discrete use of grammar for every single person. To a certain degree, we are all using grammar very similarly, as we learned to do. We learnt it and are still learning grammar with its use in our social environment. However, to a certain extent, every expression demonstrates our own use of grammar, and awards every individual use of language with personal linguistic accents.

We therefore assert that there is a part of our language, which cannot refer to any grammar rules or social influences. This is the named part, which cannot be itemized through any code; it is called by Derrida the irreducible rest. This rest has to bear the entire burden of inexplicability. It is unconscious in a way that the idiomatic rest is not traceable any more. In other words, the un-traceable is carried by the unconscious mind. In this way, the significant material of a meaning produces ambiguity. It persists inconclusively over time until it receives, in a specific context, a possibility to generate significance (Jacques Derrida, 1967, p.320). Thus, it occurs that different significant materials represent a similar meaning, and yet we can no longer say that it is "significant". Why? "Significant" is a characteristic feature of a signification that needs to be *unique* for a meaning. As soon as there is more than one signification for a sign, it is no more "significant". It is inconclusive, as we can no more conclude to an explicit meaning of it. It is reasonable to define this as "ambiguity" and no longer as "signification".

Meeting the challenge of (Derrida uses the French word: *relever*) the unidentifiable rest of the unconscious mind might be understood in two ways. On the one hand, it stands for "to cancel" in the sense of removing, eliminating, replacing or dissipating a meaning. On the other hand, it is a byword for pick up, keep, save or preserve a meaning. The second meaning amounts to completing or fulfilling a meaning (Jacques Derrida, 1999, p.144). The completion and preservation of the signification of a sign includes the difficulty that the *Verbalkörper* (verbal body) of a language cannot be translated into another language. The words need to be retyped in new *Schriftkörper* (text bodies). A translation should really drop its *Schriftkörper* (text bodies) and typography (*Schriftbild*), and should transform or replace its signifiers in a way that the same signifier maintains its signification. Thus, the signifier would be determined independently from a signified, and would be present from its very beginning (Jacques Derrida, 1972, p.321). Yet, the signifiers (and that is the problem what Derrida illustrates) cannot be translated with the help of a fixed code, as they are exposed to a progressive process with a changing dynamic.

A talk depends on time, as it is a progressive power that changes the meaning of words. In Saussure's view, the signifiers are also not conceivable outside time. Saussurian signifiers are not ideal entities, as they change with and in time. That is, observation of language in time visualizes its expansion in time (Ferdinand de Saussure, 1997, p.137).

Saussure's theory of a signifier underlines that, as soon as we are observing a concrete language at various points of time, we will note that the different signifiers on different points of time are not identical with each other (Ferdinand de Saussure, 1997, p.139). On different points of time, we see a repeated signifier. We will perceive the said signifier as repetition, because we are able to re-identify it. Accordingly, this re-identification (as iteration) enables us to understand the signifier in question. But there is no repetition or iteration identical with itself. Each bit of iteration is a

variation. As well, every repetition is a variation of the indicated signifier. In a repetition, we perceive the signifier just in a variation, as it has already showed up in a similar fashion at another point in time. We must consider signifiers at different points of time. Hence, signifiers are indispensably subordinated to time. It is time that prevents the emergence of a universal code for our languages. Without time, we would be in a situation where we could always apply the same code for understanding and decoding the meanings. As a matter of fact, we cannot deny this dimension of time. Therefore, we are faced with many challenges due to "having no code - no *organon* of iteration"(Jacques Derrida, 1999, p.333) which could help us translate anything. Without a determined code, we live the impracticality of decoding signifiers whose meaning is in question. Derrida suggests that a signifier is not to be exhausted in its current presence; yet signifiers are offering themselves to time and for iteration. On different points of time, a signifier could even go beyond its meaning in current presence. While producing various meanings on different points of time, the used signifier always includes a not-present (absent) or unprecedented content. Simultaneously, the said signifier preserves an identical and previously present content of meaning, which has made it's re-identification possible. The new content or new part of the meaning of this signifier, which is present in its varied repetition, preserves a before-present content. Moreover, the meaning of the before-present content shines unconsciously through, so that the not-yet having been presented part of the meaning, or to put it another way, the till-now-never presented part of the signifier, remains in the unconscious. What remains in the unconscious cannot be significant for its meaning. Therefore, to recognize what remains in the unconscious of a certain part of a signifier (i.e. what cannot be meant by it) is as important as understanding what is meant by a certain signifier. Thus, a signifier expresses its meaning not only through what it means to mean, but also through what it does not mean to mean. A specific signifier preserves both what is meant and what is not meant through it, and with each bit of iteration, which is always a variation, it grows beyond itself. Growing beyond a signifier is achieved by losing and gaining parts of meanings, so that a signifier can fulfill the requirements of a certain situation. Only the property of a signifier enables the change of significance of a same sign. In new situations, in which a signifier appears, the unconscious is an irreducible rest. It is there, because we cannot make our unconscious conscious. In the unconscious, we can never become conscious about the difference in meaning of the same signifier, used in different situations. We cannot remember what is not conscious at a specific moment.

A sign, which is translated, has always an irreducible rest; that is, a rest in the unconscious. Unconscious rests can neither be affirmed nor negated. These rests (to speak in psychoanalytical terms) are repressed into the unconscious. Freud thought this interaction between negation and repression. In a special way, I want to discuss more precisely both mentioned terms of negation and repression, together with Derrida's concept of irreducible rests. As irreducible rests can never be attributable to

something, Derrida suggests that the unconscious has to carry the weight of the whole interpretation of signs (Jacques Derrida, 1972, p.320).

## 2 Freud against Unconsciousness

We saw that the varied repetition of a signifier in a certain (new) situation is not merely the denial of a certain aspect of this signifier, and no less a simple addition of a further aspect to this signifier. Thus, a simple denial, i.e. what is no more than a simple negation, can only be used when it is applied to a previous affirmation. Before negating something, it must have been affirmed once before.

If irreducible rests were negations (of certain meanings of a sign) in the unconscious, every negation would be a sort of affirmation of repressed meanings of a sign. After Freud's model, every taking-note of repressed meanings of a sign would be a cancellation of repression, but no acceptance of the repressed irreducible rests (Sigmund Freud, 1980, p.12). Due to cancellations of repression through negation, "being" appears in such negation solely in the form of "non-being". In such cases "what-is" would be represented by "what-is-not", and that would no more be a kind of repression "when repression is meant to be something unconscious" (Jacques Lacan, 1980, p. 193). In this regard, we would be conscious about "what-is" and "what-is-not", so that there would be nothing unconscious.

As an example, Sigmund Freud initially shows in his text about *Negation* that a psychoanalysand presents "what-is" to a psychoanalyst in the form of "what-is-not". For instance, Freud mentions the mother who appears in a dream, where the psychoanalyst thinks, whenever the psychoanalysand thinks that the psychoanalyst did not see the mother in the dream; consequently, it has to be the mother, which appeared in this dream.

Compared to Freud, Jean Hyppolite interprets this as follows: whenever someone says what he *is not*, be attentive; it is always what *it is*. As a result, "being" is expressed in or as "non-being". This is different from Freud's proposition, where negation is a way to attain cognizance of repressed things. In Freud's conception, the repression is abrogated through negation, but is certainly not accepted. In a negation of repression, "being" is represented in "non-being", but when repression means and includes Freud's "unconsciousness", this is no longer repression. When I say "what-is" by saying "what-is-not" I am *conscious* of the fact that I am saying "what-is" by "what-is-not", as the condition for negating something requires acceptance of "what-is-negated". Negation in this manner is made consciously and not unconsciously, since when someone negates something, one is aware of what someone is negating. Prior to this, a negation has to be accepted as "none-negation" (positive-form, de-negation), i.e. before someone's consciousness accepts the negation. Thus, "what-is-negated" (the positive form or the negation of the negation) has to be accepted. Therefore, in a negation, the repression fundamentally persists independently from a negation or de-negation because, in a negation, our

consciousness always includes the negation of a negation (positive-form, denegation). A so-called acceptance of the repression is therewith not combinable. The repression in a negated form persists as a negated repression (Jacques Lacan, 1980, 195). Someone can counter now that, in this negation of the repression, the repressed thing also had to be accepted before but, with the acceptance of a repression, the repression is not abrogated.

The bottom line is that, with a negation, someone always accepts the negation of the negation, which means that this occurs in consciousness as an intellectual affirmation, whereas, with the negation of a repression, someone would accept a repression, which cannot be so, as a repression always occurs in unconsciousness and not in consciousness. In conclusion, this analysis suggests that someone cannot find a negation in the unconscious, as unconsciousness cannot be affirmed and hereby cannot be negated. But, what is it changing with a negation of the repressed parts of a signifier? The repressed parts of a signifier and the negated repressed parts of a signifier cannot be the same.

That is why Lacan says that, in Freud's understanding of the unconscious, we are not finding a "no" (Jacques Lacan, 1980, p.200). Actually, due to the fact that the unconscious cannot be affirmed, it cannot be negated. A negation presupposes an affirmation. As unconscious things never appear in an affirmed way, we cannot apply negations to unconscious things. We would not know what we are negating, so that it seems obvious that we are only able to negate conscious and not unconscious things.

Another central motive of Freud's observation comes at the end of his text about *Negation*. Freud therein claims that "acceptance of unconscious things is expressed by the ego under a negative formula"(Sigmund Freud, 1980, p.15). The negative formula consists of adhering unconsciously to the unconscious. This unconsciousness is declined by our consciousness. By being rejected from the ego, the unconscious remains unconscious and cannot penetrate our consciousness. In using unconsciously our unconsciousness, we are sticking with our unconsciousness, so that repression will be preserved. Let us now complete or combine these thoughts about unconsciousness with Derrida's approach regarding the missing code for translation.

By means of Derrida's described unconscious memory traces it can be shown that thoughts and signs in a specific context are not rewritable with a unique code. For Derrida, there is "nowhere a present text in the form of an unconscious one" (Jacques Derrida, 1972, p.323), which could be translated or transmitted to the consciousness. Especially since unconscious things, as we described them by means of Freud's and Lacan's view, are unconscious. This means for us that we cannot find any meaning of the respective sign. If there were somewhere else a present (original) text or so-called linguistic characters, which could be used as ideal entities for translations, they would be part of our consciousness, and not part of our unconsciousness.

Let us note that there are two sides of unconscious moments of signs. On the one hand, unconscious moments are present as irreducible rests to which we cannot refer in every situation (just in some situations), as they are appearing in varied versions. On the other hand, signs have unconscious moments as persisting original without any original, videlicet as unconscious signs. Unconscious signs cannot refer to an anywhere present sign. Our used linguistic signifiers are consisting of archived and rewritten signifiers. A replicated (re-produced) signifier always lacks a supplement that would complete its meaning. Thus, there is a constant requirement for complements. Only these complements help us understand a certain meaning of a sign. They try to meet the requirements of specific situations, where repeated signifiers are used again and again with different meanings.

On the basis of the missing originals, i.e. of the missing original texts, the origin is absent. A sign is originally without origin. Always in retrospect, a sign tries to constitute a before-not-yet-present meaning. This meaning must be newly remembered, so that the psychological apparatus can serve itself from an appropriate meaning in a specific context. Our psychological apparatus reaches the limits of its capacity, when it tries to enable lossless translations. As mentioned above, it is impossible to become aware of unconscious things or parts of a signifier, since it is impossible to define the unconscious irreducible rests, as it is impossible to find anywhere an origin. Signifiers continue drawing their meaning by working themselves out. Incompleteness of signifiers is compensated by working themselves out. However, a signifier never corresponds with its inner meaning.

A signifier remains in a so-called *différance* (Jacques Derrida, 1972) between "what-is-said" and "what-is-meant" (by what-is-said). Given that "what-is-said" does not fully correspond with "what-is-meant" Derrida speaks of an impure relationship. *Différance* in Derrida's light is an impure relationship. Such an impure relationship always tries to come clean, but with its existence without origin, it is always demanding complements. Complements help to complete incompleteness. In taking responsibility for a complete meaning, a signifier remains something composed out of incomplete signifiers, and thus is untranslatable. It is all about an incomplete self-relation (of a sign) between "what-is-said" ("what-is-signed") and "what-is-meant". It is the ongoing fight to make the sign as a sign understood. The sign does not identify itself, since it is in an unconscious difference, where it currently remains not present as such. Never being present as a sign or as a meaning induces a certain impossibility to be deducible. Not to be deducible as a sign points out the impossibility of a complete meaning transfer. This effect is always going along with unconscious irreducible rests.

At this point, we hit the barrier of the incompleteness of our language. Such incompleteness offers a broad and fast variety of meanings, because of the sign's described ambiguity. At the same time, the same sign is swimming in an impossibility of transmitting complete meanings. A signifier always refers

ambiguously to a general meaning. Derrida and Saussure seem to be on the same page. After Saussure's view, "everything is generalization and anything except generalization"(Ferdinand de Saussure, 1997, p.24). Therefore, we only understand general meanings of linguistic characters. A specific meaning of linguistic characters is kept far away from us.

A very similar attitude is represented by Austin in its essay about *The Meaning of a Word*. He says that our language already is as an ideal language, since our general linguistic characters are missing its meaning (J. L. Austin, 1969, p.68). Hence, linguistic characters are after Austin's view always misrepresentations (J. L. Austin, 1969, p.68). Every repetition of a signifier slightly varies in its meaning from a prior meaning. Despite this, we are using the same signifiers for different meanings. Thus, we are expressing just something similar and not identical with the same sign. Austin is raising rightly the question: why are we giving the same name to different things, when we do not mean the same thing? (J. L. Austin, 1969, p.69) Our usually generalized linguistic characters are always used in applications in an extraordinary way. Especially, generalizations highlight confusion and not so much concrete semantic contents (meanings). Language and the associated signs, which are made up of irreducible and unconscious rests, are exposed to arbitrariness. As a result, signs cannot escape from arbitrariness in Austin's view.

Derrida does not speak directly of arbitrariness. He emphasizes, in his text about *From Des Tours de Babel*, a comparable connection between the Tower of Babel and our linguistic confusion(Jacques Derrida, 1997, p.119-121). In the biblical story concerning the Tower of Babel, the tower stands for confusion. The confusion is provoked by the missing stable foundation of the tower. There is no stable origin of this tower, so that the construction of this tower could not be finished. No stable foundation means the absence of completion of this project. The picture of an unfinished project (Tower of Babel) stands for linguistic confusion. Without origin, we will never have the possibility to understand someone completely. We state that the irreducible linguistic diversity does not only make it impossible to finish the Tower of Babel, but it also makes it impossible to understand each other fully. Confusion as linguistic confusion, in Derrida's mind, means a linguistic arbitrariness of signs and, finally, an untranslatability of language as such.

To conclude, I would like to underline that Derrida's contribution to this linguistic discussion about arbitrariness is not uncooperative, aggressive or a kind of negativistic rebellion. As it is known, his attitude is attributed to the philosophical movement of deconstruction. To see what deconstruction really means, we should look at movements of construction and reconstruction. Briefly, constructivists are seeing human beings as inventors (originators), while reconstructivists consider humans as discoverers (explorers). In contrast to these movements of construction and reconstruction, deconstruction considers human being as un-coverer.

Consequently, Derrida is uncovering the phenomena of linguistic meaning and understanding. It is an approach that is different, but not worse.

While deconstruction has been considered by many as an unsystematic methodology to solve philosophy's problems, recent research has uncovered the significant impact that criticism has in philosophy. The critical attitude has not ceased to be a hallmark of modern thinking. Philosophical thoughts live solely because critique is possible and only if critique can be expressed respectively. Thus, the production of philosophical thoughts and generation of knowledge has always been highly supported by different opinions and implicitly or explicitly expressed critique. Kant's "three critiques" or Derrida's critical work on serious and central philosophical texts underline the legitimacy of critique in philosophical thoughts. Critical thoughts do not take for granted the validity of certain common interpretations, so that they produce a wider range of alternative interpretations – with the aim of regenerating philosophical thoughts.

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