

NOTES ON A POST-DERRIDEAN APPLIED LINGUISTICS

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Introduction

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida has exercised an enormous influence on French thought over the last twenty years, particularly with his technique of deconstruction, and more recently the influence has spread to English-speaking countries, in fields as diverse as literary theory, the study of popular culture, feminist theory, and the study of performance. One discipline that remains largely untouched by this Derridean 'wave' is linguistics; this is hardly surprising, since linguists (for the most part) believe in hard-edged categories, while Derrida's deconstructive technique is precisely an exploding of categories.

Linguists may have ignored Derrida, but he has not ignored them. In 'Linguistics and Grammatology'¹ and 'Semiology and Grammatology',² he examined the fundamentals of Saussurean linguistics; and in 'Signature, Event, Context'³ and 'Limited Inc abc ...'⁴ he undertook a similar survey of speech act theory. These four works constitute a valuable critique of idealising **langue/parole**, competence/performance linguistics and point the way forward to a post-Derridean 'linguistics of indeterminacy'.

But before we examine these works, I should explain what **deconstruction** is. One of Derrida's best known statements is that 'speech is writing', and Schleiffer⁵ shows that Derrida, by making this claim, has overturned a hierarchy: in the pair 'say/write', 'say' is the unmarked term ('Derrida says ...' may refer to a verbal or written pronouncement); but Derrida has in effect installed 'write' as the unmarked term (what Schleiffer calls the 'deconstructive term') in such a way that it 'resists and disorganizes the hierarchy'.

Derrida's claim that 'speech is writing' is, of course, fundamental to his deconstruction of Saussurean linguistics and speech act theory. At its crudest, the claim simply means that, since the concept of **sign** only became thinkable

with the advent of phonetic writing⁶, then all instituted signifiers, whether graphic (in the classical sense) or phonic, are "written" signifiers.⁷ The notion of signifiers as **graphemic** informs three 'quasi-concepts' that Derrida deploys in his critique of Saussure and Austin/Searle: **differance**, **spacing** and **iterability**.

Differance

The term **differance** is a neologism coined by Derrida and presumably based on the present participle **différant** (from **différer**), which in French means 'differing' and 'deferring'. It relates, of course, to Saussure's **principle of difference**:

Concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the systems. Their most precise characteristics is in being what the others are not.⁸

In linguistics, the principle of difference is usually thought of in terms of binary opposites (e.g. voiced/voiceless; + MALE/-MALE), or in terms of paradigms (e.g. all the grammatical items that can fill the determiner slot). But Derrida conceives of difference in a rather more complex way:

[...] the phonic element, the term, the plenitude that is called sensible, would not appear as such without the difference or opposition which gives them **form** [...] Here the appearing and functioning of difference presupposes an originary synthesis not preceded by any absolute simplicity. Such would be the originary trace. Without a retention in the minimal unit of temporal experience, without a trace retaining the other as other in the same, no difference would do its work and no meaning would appear. It is not the question of a constituted difference here, but rather, before all determination of the content, of the **pure** movement which produces difference. **The (pure) trace is differance** [...]

Differance is therefore the formation of form.⁹

Derrida then goes on to say that differance is also the 'being imprinted of the imprint', which is to say (following Saussure) that the sound image (i.e. phoneme) is 'the structure of the appearing of the sound', not the 'sound appearing' - it is 'what is **heard**, not the **sound** heard but the being-heard of the sound'.¹⁰

As I understand it, Derrida is making two very important points here. The first point is that every time we make a linguistic choice - say, in meaning - this choice carries within it the trace of meanings not chosen. And the second point is that every time we **hear** a sound or **apprehend** a meaning, what we are hearing and apprehending carries within it the trace of the not - heard, the not - apprehended (what Hjelmslev calls 'content purport'). It is because of this trace that meaning is not identical to itself and is always deferred.

What are the implications of differance for contemporary linguistics? The answer to this question is to be found in an interview with Julia Kristeva:

Differance is the systematic play of differences [...] The activity or productivity connoted by the **a** of **differance** refers to the generative movement in the play of differences. The latter are neither fallen from the sky nor inscribed once and for all in a closed system, a static structure that a synchronic and taxonomic operation could exhaust. Differences are the effects of transformations, and from this vantage the theme of **differance** is incompatible with the static, synchronic, taxonomic, ahistoric motifs in the concept of **structure**.¹¹

The answer is clear. Difference is incompatible - and these are only examples - with Jakobson's linguistic analysis of poetry and his distinctive feature phonology; with immediate constituent analysis; with transformational-generative grammar; with truth-conditional semantics; and with Searle's version of speech act theory. For each of these projects

version of speech act theory. For each of these projects is seeking to erect a 'closed system that a synchronic and taxonomic operation could exhaust'.

Spacing

The **langue/parole** dichotomy (and its Chomskyan counterpart competence/performance) is, of course, fundamental to modern linguistics. This dichotomy, as Saussure¹² makes clear, is based on the unconscious dichotomy: **langue** is 'passively assimilated' and 'never requires premeditation', while **parole** is 'wilful and intellectual'. But if 'speech is writing', then the unconscious/conscious dualism is negated by the **spacing** that is writing's most distinctive feature. Derrida's argument is woven around two Saussurean terms, 'passivity' and 'difference':

The relationship between passivity and difference cannot be distinguished from the relationship between the fundamental **unconsciousness** of language and the **spacing** (pause, blank, punctuation, interval in general, etc.) which constitutes the origin of signification.¹³

And what is the relationship between the unconsciousness of language and spacing? The answer is:

Spacing as writing is the becoming-absent and the becoming - unconscious of the subject [...]: the unconscious is nothing without this cadence and before the caesura.¹⁴

Derrida, in other words, is questioning the concept of **conscious speaking subject** which underlies the **langue/parole** and competence/performance dichotomies.¹⁵ This is made clear elsewhere, in 'Semiology and Grammatology':

spacing is temporization, the detour and postponement by means of which intuition, perception, consummation - in a word, the relationship to the present, the reference to a present reality, to a **being** - are always **deferred**. Deferred by virtue of the very principle of difference which

holds that an element functions or signifies [...] only by referring to another past or future element.¹⁶

The conscious speaking subject, then, is not so much a **presence** as a constant **becoming**, for, says Derrida:

the subject, and first of all the conscious and speaking subject, depends upon the system of differences, and the movement of **differance** [...] is constituted only in being divided from itself, in becoming space, in temporizing, in deferral.¹⁷

Derrida, thus, rejects the distinction unconscious/conscious, preferring to see the conscious speaking subject as constituted only by an endless cycle of becoming unconscious/becoming conscious - a cycle in which, by virtue of the principle of difference and the **trace** of the choices not made, any reference to a present reality is deferred and meaning is held in reserve. If we accept the validity of this argument, then the implication is clear: the **langue/parole** and competence/performance dichotomies, founded as they are on the unconscious/conscious, are totally **without foundation**.

Iterability

Closely related to **differance** and **spacing**, and to the claim that all signifiers are "written" signifiers, is the 'quasi-concept' of **iterability**, as put forward in Derrida's essay on speech acts:

[any element] of the signifying form is constituted only by its iterability, by the possibility of being repeated in the absence not only of its referent [...], but of a determined signified or current intention of signification, as of every present intention of communication. This structural possibility of being severed from its referent or signified (and therefore from communication and its context) seems to me to make of every mark, even if oral, a grapheme in general, that is [...] the non-present **remaining**.¹⁸ of a

differential mark cut off from its alleged "production" or origin.¹⁹

Iterability is the key to Derrida's deconstruction of speech acts. For Austin²⁰ **iterability** is the marked term: he regards speech acts as 'hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in a soliloquy'. But for Derrida, **iterability** is the unmarked 'deconstructive' term:

is not what Austin excludes as anomalous, exceptional, "non-serious", that is **citation** (on the stage, in a poem, or in a soliloquy), the determined modification of a general citationality - or rather, a general iterability without which there would not even be a "successful" performative?²¹

That is, as Derrida subsequently says, a speech act could not succeed unless it were 'identifiable as conforming to an iterable model'.²²

A basic tenet of speech act theory is that certain speech acts are felicitous only if the speaker intends to carry out the act to which he/she has committed him/herself. But iterability and speaker intention, says Derrida, are not compatible:

intention or attention, directed towards something iterable which in turn determines it as being iterable, will strive or tend in vain to actualize or fulfill itself, for it cannot, by virtue of its very structure, ever achieve this goal. In no case will it be fulfilled, actualized totally present to its object and to itself. It is divided and deported in advance by its iterability.²³

The relationship between iterability and intention is illustrated in an image of great interest to applied linguists:

the intention which animates utterance will never be completely present in itself and in its content. The iteration which structures it a priori introduces an essential dehiscence.²⁴

The term **dehiscence**, which is borrowed from botany, means "the bursting open of capsules, fruits, etc in order to discharge their mature contents". Derrida glosses it thus:

Dehiscence (like iterability) limits what it makes possible, while rendering its rigor and purity impossible. What is at work here is something like a law of undecidable contamination.²⁵

Finally, speech act theory - in the original Austinian version at least - frequently appeals to context as a means of disambiguating performative utterances. But, says Derrida, context can never be 'exhaustively determinable':

For a context to be exhaustively determinable [...] it at least would be necessary for the conscious intention to be totally present and actually transparent for itself and others.²⁶

And that, of course, is not the case.

Applied Linguistics After Derrida

What might be the characteristics of an **applied** linguistics after Derrida? (Notice that I stress **applied**: I am avoiding the question of whether there can be a postDerridean 'pure', **non-applied** linguistics.) I suggest a preliminary list of the three characteristics fundamental to a postDerridean applied linguistics:

1. a formal recognition of difference/**differance**;
2. a mechanism for "formalising" **dehiscence**; and
3. an orientation not toward product (which is conscious and intentional), but toward **process** (which is a becoming).

Obviously, such an applied linguistics does not at present exist. Yet we are not obliged to create it out of nothing, for the material is already at hand. Systemic - functional grammar, developed over the past 25 years by the British linguist M.A.K. Halliday and his associates, has, at least

in embryonic form, the three basic characteristics already mentioned.

It is not within the scope of this paper to do anything other than give a broad outline of systemic-functional grammar, and interested readers are invited to consult Halliday²⁷ and Kress²⁸ for more detailed treatment. But it is important to understand the meaning of **system** and **function**, for they are at the heart of what is 'Derridean' in Halliday's project. Firstly, a system is a set of choices in meaning: for example, a message can be encoded as a clause of 'doing', 'thinking', 'being' or 'saying' (the transitivity system); or as a statement, question, command or offer (the mood system). Secondly, function refers to the three main kinds of meaning, the metafunctions: experiential (the use of language to understand the environment) interpersonal (the use of language to act on others), and textual (the use of language to organise the message).

It is now possible to show that systemic - functional grammar carries within it at least the **trace** of difference. This passage certainly recalls Derrida's meditation on the sound-image as the 'being-heard of the sound':

adult use of language is such that [...] each utterance has to be multifunctional - while at the same time having an integrated structure. There must therefore be a level of organization of meaning [...] In Hjelmslevian terms, the 'content purport' has to be separated from, and organized into, a 'content substance' as a precondition of its encoding in 'content form'.

What we are calling the functions of language may be regarded as the generalized categories of 'content substance' that the adult use of language requires.²⁹

In Derridean terms, Halliday is saying that the 'content-image' is the 'being-apprehended of the content'. And this process is constantly occurring:

spoken language responds continually to the small but subtle changes in its

environment, both verbal and non-verbal, and in so doing exhibits a rich pattern of semantic [...] variation [...] The content of spoken language is in a constant state of flux, and the language has to be equally mobile and alert.³⁰

Thus, implies Halliday, 'content' does not become apprehended once and for all, but is in a constant state of becoming apprehended.

But this is only one aspect of differance - the other, perhaps more significant, aspect is embodied in the 'fruitful' term dehiscence, the law of undecidable contamination. There are two terms in systemic-functional grammar which together carry some of the force of dehiscence. The first of these is **indeterminacy**, here explained in terms of physics:

reality consists of meanings, and the fact that meanings are essentially indeterminate and unbounded is what gives rise to that strand in human thought [...] in which the emphasis is, on the dynamic, wavelike aspect of reality [...] The fact that aspects of reality can be digitalized and reduced to ordered operations on symbols is still consistent with the view of reality as meaning: certain aspects of meaning are also captured in this way. Pike (1976) expressed this property of the linguistic system [...] by viewing language as particle, wave and field; each of these perspectives reveals a different truth about it.³¹

Subsequently, Halliday elaborated on this: the kind of meaning that is expressed in a particle-like manner is experiential meaning (e.g. the processes, participants and circumstances of the transitivity system); the kind of meaning expressed as a 'field' - and recall that magnetism and electricity are fields - is inter-personal meaning (e.g. attitudes, comments, judgements); and the kind of meaning that forms a wave - like pattern of peaks and troughs is textual meaning (e.g. theme - the point of departure of the message - information focus and conjunctions).³² A brief illustration should clarify this very important hypothesis. First, particles of meaning:

1	He	slapped	me	on the back
	Actor	Material	Goal	Location

An 'environmental' phenomenon is described by discrete units.

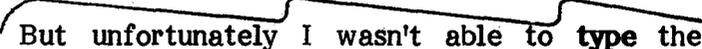
Now, the 'field' of meaning ENTHUSIASM:

2 I was (so) (thrilled) by your (lovely) present.

Here ENTHUSIASM is a 'force field' expressed by the submodifier 'so', the choice of 'thrilled', rather than (say) 'pleased', the attitudinal epithet 'lovely', choice of intonation (probably rising-falling on 'thrilled' and 'lovely', and gestural features (e.g. smile).

Finally, 'waves' of meaning:

3 But unfortunately I wasn't able to **type** the letter.



The essential elements in the organisation of the message ('But', 'I', '**type**') are, so to speak, the crests of a wave.

The relationship between indeterminacy and dehiscence should at this point be clear. If meanings were only particulate, there might well be no mismatch between speaker and addressee; but given that meanings are also field - and wave-like there **is** a mismatch, and the law of undecidable contamination is born. (Perceptive readers will now see why, in speaking of **formalising** dehiscence, I issued a warning in the form of **scare-marks**: any formalisation of fields and waves is necessarily rather fluid).

The second term with some of the force of dehiscence is **process**. Process is contrasted with **product**, and is used in two slightly different but related ways. The systemic-functional linguist Martin pairs process with **dynamic system**, and product (which he calls **text**) with **synoptic system**: an example of a synoptic system is transitivity or mood; an example of a dynamic system is Ventola's decision tree or flow chart for generating well formed schematic structures for services encounters.³³ In such a dynamic system, explains Martin,³⁴ a service encounter is 'viewed subjectively, in

the process of manifestation, full of interacting decisions, dependencies, choices and the like'. This view accords with Derrida's position on speaker intention and context³⁵ and with Halliday's theoretical stance (never, I think, put into practice) that context is 'constantly changing, each part serving in turn as environment for the next'.³⁶

Halliday himself uses process and product to make another distinction:

The process/product distinction is a relevant one for linguistics because it corresponds to that between our experience of speech and our experience of writing [...] A written text is presented to us as product [...] Spoken language on the other hand is presented to us as process [...] characterized by a continuous flow, without clear segments or boundaries.³⁷

The implications of this are explored in a recent essay, 'Language and the Order of Nature'. The point of departure for this essay is that in the age of quantum theory 'it is impossible to talk about quantum ideas in language as it was received' because 'natural language - based metalanguages' are 'too determinate and too rigid, too unable to accommodate complementarities'.³⁸

Now **complementarity** is a key concept in quantum theory, deriving from Einstein's original principle of **wave-particle duality**, which stated that particles such as electrons exhibit wave-like properties. So given that meanings too are wave-and-particle-like, natural language-based metalanguages should be able to accommodate complementarities. Why then can't they?

The answer, says Halliday, lies in the nature of written language. Written language, as he explains it, is characterised by nominalisation, in which a clause is transformed into a noun or noun phrase; so in written language 'the world is a world of things, rather than one of happening; of product rather than process; of being rather than becoming'.³⁹ The written mode 'anchors language to a shallower level of consciousness'⁴⁰; language is perceived as 'made of constituents-sentences-instead of the dependency patterns-clause complexes of the spoken mode'.⁴¹ Writing changes

the semiotic mode of language 'from the dynamic to the synoptic: from flow to stasis, from choreographic to crystalline, from syntactic intricacy to lexical density'. In short, writing 'deprives language of the power to intuit, to make indefinitely many connections in different directions at once, to explore (by tolerating them) contradictions, to represent experience as fluid and indeterminate'.⁴²

The dynamic and 'choreographic' nature of spoken language, and its ability to 'make indefinitely many connections' and to 'explore contradictions', are surely very close to dehiscence.

Conclusion

I can now sum up the characteristics of a post-Derridean applied linguistics in a more recognisably 'linguistic' form:

1. it must be based on the principle of semantic systems (i.e. systematic choices in meaning);
2. it must have a way of accommodating indeterminacy (i.e. it must recognise that meanings are not only particulate, but also field-and wave-like);
3. it must be able to 'formalise' the process-like nature of interactions; and
4. it must have a technique for probing the 'process' that is masked by the written 'product'.

But how can such an applied linguistics actually be **applied**? As an applied linguist specialising in English as a Second Language, I have two suggestions. The first, is that, as part of a communicative language course, students be taught **meaning-negotiation skills**. Here, students are presented with interactive situations in which not all contextual features are clear, and are sensitised to the linguistic, paralinguistic and non-verbal clues and techniques which may permit them to interpret and negotiate meaning.⁴³ The second suggestion concerns reading skills, and is based on the hypothesis that 'dense' expository writing may be more comprehensible if it is 'unpacked', that is, transformed from the 'crystalline' to the 'choreographic'. Here is a simple example from Halliday, in which

1. 'experimental emphasis becomes concentrated in testing the generalizations and consequences derived from these theories'

becomes:

1. 'we now start experimenting, mainly in order to test whether things happen regularly as we would expect if we were explaining in the right way'.⁴⁴

Such a procedure should enable students to re-interpret dense expository writing in the more 'natural' spoken mode.

The study of literature could also learn from this 'new' applied linguistics. An emphasis on meaning as choice and on the **trace** of meanings not chosen, on 'fields' and 'waves' of meaning, and on text as a process rather than a product - in short, on the dehiscence of the signifier - is clearly relevant to the interpretation of a literary text. Here, as in other areas of the humanities and social sciences, a post-Derridean applied linguistics has much to offer.

NOTES

1. See Derrida, J., **Of Grammatology**, Spivak, G.C. (trans.), Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976.
2. See Derrida, J., **Positions**, Bass, A. (trans.), Chicago: The University Press, 1981.
3. See Derrida, J., **Margins of Philosophy**, Bass, A. (trans.), Chicago: The University Press, 1982.
4. See Derrida, J., 'Limited Inc. abc ...!', Weber, S. (trans.), in **Glyph**, Vol. 2, 1977, pp. 162-254.
5. Schliffer, R., 'Deconstruction and Linguistic Analysis', in **College English**, Vol. 49, No. 4, 1987, pp. 381-395.
6. For a similar view, see Ong, W., **Orality and Literacy**, London: Methuen, 1982.
7. Derrida, J., **Of Grammatology**, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-44.
8. Saussure, F. de, **Course in General Linguistics**, Baskin, W. (trans.), London: Peter Owen, 1974, p. 117.

9. Derrida, J., **Of Grammatology**, *op. cit.*, p. 62.
10. **Ibid.**, p. 63.
11. Derrida, J., **Positions**, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
12. Saussure, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
13. Derrida, J., **Of Grammatology**, *op. cit.*, p. 68.
14. **Ibid.**, p. 69.
15. See Saussure, *op. cit.*, p. 14ff and Chomsky, N., **Language and Mind**, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972, pp. 115-116.
16. Derrida, J., **Positions**, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
17. **Ibid.**
18. In French **restance**, a neologism created by Derrida.
19. Derrida, J., **Margins of Philosophy**, *op. cit.*, p. 318.
20. Austin, J., **How to do Things with Words**, Oxford: The University Press, 1962, p. 22.
21. Derrida, J., **Margins of Philosophy**, *op. cit.*, p. 325.
22. **Ibid.**, p. 326.
23. Derrida, J., 'Limited Inc', *op. cit.*, p. 194.
24. Derrida, J., **Margins of Philosophy**, *op. cit.*, p. 326.
25. Derrida, J., 'Limited Inc.', *op. cit.*, p. 197.
26. Derrida, J., **Margins of Philosophy**, *op. cit.*, p. 327.
27. See his **Explorations in the Foundations of Language**, London: Edward Arnold, 1973; **Language as Social Semiotic**, London: Edward Arnold, 1973; and **An Introduction to Functional Grammar**, London: Edward Arnold, 1985.

28. Kress, G., **Halliday: Systems and Function in Language** Oxford: The University Press, 1976.
29. **Ibid.**, pp. 30-33.
30. Halliday, M.A.K., **An Introduction to Functional Grammar**, **op. cit.**, p. xxiv.
31. Halliday, M.A.K., **Language as Social Semiotic**, **op. cit.**, p. 139.
32. Halliday, M.A.K., **An Introduction to Functional Grammar**, **op. cit.**, p. 169.
33. See Martin, J.R., 'Process and Text: Two Aspects of Human Semiosis'. Paper presented at the 9th international Systemic Workshop, Toronto, Canada. Also in Benson, J.D., and Greaves, W.S., (eds.), **Systemic Perspectives on Discourse**, Norwood: N.J., Ablex, 1982, pp. 9-10; and Ventola, E., 'Orientation to Social Semiotics in Foreign Language Teaching', **Applied Linguistics**, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 275-286.
34. Martin, **op. cit.**, p. 11.
35. Derrida, **Margins of Philosophy**, **op. cit.**, pp. 326-327.
36. Halliday, **Language as Social Semiotic**, **op. cit.**, p. 130.
37. Halliday, **An Introduction to Functional Grammar**, **op. cit.**, p. xxiii.
38. Halliday, 'Language and the Order of Nature', in **The Linguistics of Writing**, Attridge, D., et al (eds.), Manchester: The University Press, 1987, p. 9.
39. **Ibid.**, p. 17.
40. **Ibid.**, p. 18.
41. **Ibid.**, pp. 18-19.
42. **Ibid.**, p. 19.

43. See Melrose, R., 'Discourse and Negotiation of Meaning in communicative Language Teaching' **International Review of Applied Linguistics**, (forthcoming).
44. Halliday, 'Language and the Order of Nature', **op. cit.**, p. 16.