

**What if
Derrida
was wrong
about
Saussure?**



RUSSELL DAYLIGHT



30807762

What if Derrida was wrong about Saussure?

RUSSELL DAYLIGHT



EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY PRESS

© Russell Daylight, 2011

Edinburgh University Press Ltd
22 George Square, Edinburgh

www.euppublishing.com

Typeset in 10/12 Times New Roman
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire,
and printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7486 4197 0 (hardback)

The right of Russell Daylight
to be identified as author of this work
has been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Grateful acknowledgement is made for permission to reproduce material previously published elsewhere. Every effort has been made to trace the copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked, the publisher will be pleased to make the necessary arrangements at the first opportunity.

Acknowledgements

The author and publisher would like to thank the following, who have kindly given permission for the use of copyright material: Routledge, for the extracts from *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (1978), pp. xx, 157, 162, 166, 200, 202, 203, 209, 210, 213, 278, 279, 280, 281, 284, 292; Continuum, for the extracts from *Positions*, translated by Alan Bass (1981), by kind permission of Continuum International Publishing Group; Northwestern University Press, for the extracts from *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, translated by David B. Allison (1979), pp. xiv, xxxiv, xxxviii, 5, 15, 24, 27, 31, 42, 43, 45, 46, 47, 50, 51, 52, 61, 76, 77, 78, 80, 82, 84, 99, 130, 133; The Johns Hopkins University Press, for extracts from *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1997), pp. xxxix, 4, 7, 10, 11–12, 12–13, 13–14, 17, 18, 19, 20, 33, 34, 35, 38, 40, 41, 45, 47, 49, 50, 52–3, 57, 60, 62, 72, 73, 324, 329 © 1997 The Johns Hopkins University Press, and *Glyph I*, translated by Samuel Weber and Henry Sussman (1977), pp. 172–97 © 1977 The Johns Hopkins University Press; and Duckworth, for the extracts from the *Course in General Linguistics*, translated by Roy Harris (1983), by permission of Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd.

This work would not have been possible without the assistance and encouragement of Professor Jonathan Culler (Cornell) and Dr John O'Carroll (Charles Sturt). My warmest thanks also to Vicki Donald, Esmé Watson, Eliza Wright, Rebecca MacKenzie and all at Edinburgh University Press.

The labour of the last eight years, and any fruit it may bear, are dedicated to my wife, Tegan, and our children, Alice and Patrick.

Abbreviations and Textual Notes

For all of Derrida's works, I have cited individual essays where they appear in translated collections, such as 'Freud and the Scene of Writing' in *Writing and Difference*, and 'Semiology and Grammatology' in *Positions*. I have cited complete books only when they were originally published as a single volume, such as *Speech and Phenomena* and *Of Grammatology*. Citations of the essay 'Différance' are denoted 'Diff' for the Bass translation which appears in *Margins of Philosophy* and 'Diff (A)' for the Allison translation which appears in *Speech and Phenomena*. The Allison translation contains a preamble by Derrida which is not included in the Bass translation.

Aft	'Afterword: towards an ethic of discussion', trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman. <i>Limited Inc.</i>
Diff	'Différance', trans. Alan Bass. <i>Margins of Philosophy</i> .
Diff (A)	'Différance', trans. David Allison. <i>Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs</i> .
F&SW	'Freud and the Scene of Writing', trans. Alan Bass. <i>Writing and Difference</i> .
Glas	<i>Glas</i> , trans. John P. Leavey Jr. and Richard Rand.
GS&P	'"Genesis and Structure" and Phenomenology', trans. Alan Bass. <i>Writing and Difference</i> .
Imp	'Implications: interview with Henri Ronse', trans. Alan Bass. <i>Positions</i> .
Intro	<i>Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction</i> , trans. John P. Leavey.
LI	'Limited Inc a b c . . .', trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman. <i>Limited Inc.</i>
OG	<i>Of Grammatology</i> , trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.
S&G	'Semiology and Grammatology: Interview with Julia Kristeva', trans. Alan Bass. <i>Positions</i> .
S&P	<i>Speech and Phenomena</i> , trans. David Allison.
SEC	'Signature Event Context', trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman. <i>Limited Inc.</i>

SS&P 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', trans. Alan Bass. *Writing and Difference*.

I am using Harris's translation of the *Cours de linguistique générale* except where indicated. The citation (*Course*: 21/40) refers to text that appears on page 21 of Harris's translation and page 40 of the standard Payot edition of the *Cours*. It is important to note that Harris translates *signifiant* and *signifié* as 'signal' and 'signification', respectively. One understands Harris's gesture here as wishing to restore specificity to Saussure's terminology in an increasingly degraded field; however, it does not serve my purpose of making the languages of Derrida and Saussure engage, and so I have replaced these with 'signifier' and 'signified' in all citations of Harris's translation.

Cahiers *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure*.
Cours *Cours de linguistique générale*. Ed. Bally and Sechehaye.
Course *Course in General Linguistics*. Trans. Roy Harris.
Course (B) *Course in General Linguistics*. Trans. Wade Baskin.

For the same reason, it is important to note that I have made very little use of recently discovered manuscripts, or of various critical editions of the *Course*, or attempted to discover which statements in the *Course* can be attributed to Saussure and which to his students and editors. As Derrida asks:

Up to what point is Saussure responsible for the *Course* as it was edited and published after his death? It is not a new question. Need we specify that, here at least, we cannot consider it to be pertinent? Unless my project has been fundamentally misunderstood, it should be clear by now that, caring very little about Ferdinand de Saussure's very thought itself, I have interested myself in a text whose literality has played a well-known role since 1915, operating within a system of readings, influences, misunderstandings, borrowings, refutations, etc. (*OG*: 329)

Anachronism alone might be sufficient reason to reject the use of manuscripts published in 2002 against Derrida's 1967 reading of the *Cours*. But methodologically, too, if this investigation attempts to understand Derrida's engagement with 'Saussure', then it follows that it does not concern the intentions or the very thought of Ferdinand de Saussure; it concerns only the singularly influential text which was appropriated and transformed by Derrida.

Finally, for works where I have been unable to find an English translation, I have translated the text myself; these are indicated by 'my translation' appearing after the citation.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
<i>Abbreviations and Textual Notes</i>	vii
Introduction	1
1. Classical Semiology	19
2. The Originality of Saussure	33
3. The Concept of the Sign	50
4. Writing, Speech, and the Voice	63
5. The Sign as Representation	86
6. Linguistic Identity	108
7. The Sign and Time	130
8. The Horizon of Language	147
Conclusion	172
<i>List of Works by Derrida and Saussure</i>	187
<i>References</i>	189
<i>Index</i>	193

Introduction

On 21 October 1966, Jacques Derrida presented 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' to the *International Colloquium on Critical Languages and the Sciences of Man*, at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore. According to its organisers, the conference 'sought to explore the impact of contemporary "structuralist" thought on critical methods in humanistic and social studies' (Macksey and Donato 1972a: xv), and was 'the first time in the United States that structuralist thought had been considered as a cross-disciplinary phenomenon' (xvi). The invited speakers were drawn from the fields of 'anthropology, classical studies, comparative literature, linguistics, literary criticism, history, philosophy, psychoanalysis, semiology, and sociology' (xvii); among them were Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Tzvetan Todorov, and René Girard. The ambition of the conference was to identify the basic problems of the structuralist approach, such as 'the status of the subject', 'the general theory of signs and language systems', and 'synchronic (vs.) diachronic descriptions', with a view to determining 'the prospects for interdisciplinary co-operation' (xvi). In brief, the event was scripted as the launch of French structuralism in America.

By the time Richard Macksey had made his 'Concluding Remarks' to the conference, however, there was already a sense of uncertainty about structuralism's future; a future that had seemed so assured only four days before. In particular, Macksey observed that: 'The sessions have allowed us . . . to investigate contending interpretative models, and to consider such radical reappraisals of our assumptions as that advanced by M. Derrida on this final day' (Macksey 1972: 320). By 1971, with the publication of the English translations of the conference papers, the tone of engagement with structuralism had changed completely. Macksey and Donato were already able to casually assert that: 'The ancestral priority of Saussure's diacritical example and the insistent logocentricity of the initial structuralist enterprises hardly require comment' (Macksey and Donato 1972b: xi). Ironically, perhaps, Derrida's theme in his paper to the conference was the 'event' of structuralism: the moment when the 'structurality' of structure begins to be thought (SS&P: 280). The force of Derrida's 1966 paper was such that it simultaneously

announced the opening and closing of structuralism in the Anglophone world.

Derrida on Saussure

This book is an examination of Derrida's interpretation of Saussure. Between 1907 and 1911, Ferdinand de Saussure gave three series of lectures on the topic of general linguistics at the University of Geneva. These lectures arose from his dissatisfaction with the state of linguistics; as he wrote, 'there is not a single term used in linguistics which has any meaning for me' (*Cahiers* 21: 95). Although largely ignored for fifty years after its publication in 1916, the *Course in General Linguistics* became one of the most influential and divisive texts of twentieth-century humanities. And in the *Course's* ninety-five-year history, there was no more influential and divisive reading than that of Jacques Derrida. If Saussure's name is now synonymous with structuralism and Derrida's with post-structuralism, then one could argue that the movement from one to the other is the most important of twentieth-century theory. Derrida's engagement with structural linguistics brought into being the field of cultural studies and profoundly influenced every discipline of the humanities from anthropology to English.

Despite the importance of Derrida's critique of Saussure, it is not generally well understood. There has been surprisingly little written about it, and less still that treats the philosophies of Derrida and Saussure equally seriously. Derrida's reading of Saussure is frequently alluded to, approved of, or dismissed, but has not yet been comprehensively examined.¹ Indeed, there are considerable difficulties in trying to grasp exactly what Derrida wants from Saussure, and whether or not his interpretation stands up to scrutiny. The first difficulty is that the engagement is *fragmented*. In the early, linguistically oriented, texts of Derrida, the name Saussure appears fitfully: three lines in 'Freud and the Scene of Writing'; a footnote in *Speech and Phenomena*; five pages in 'Différance'; and a similar length response to Julia Kristeva's interview questions in 'Semiology and Grammatology'. Nowhere, not even in his well-known critique of 'phonocentrism' in *Of Grammatology*, is Derrida's reading of Saussure fully articulated. The second difficulty is that the engagement is *tangential*. Most of Derrida's interaction with Saussure takes place on the way towards a critique of another theorist, in essays on Husserl, Lévi-Strauss, Freud, and Austin. The third difficulty is that much of what is essential in the engagement between the two is *implicit*, unwritten. In both 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in which Derrida announces the 'event' of structuralism, and in *Speech and Phenomena*, in which Derrida brings 'the difference involved in signs' to bear against Husserl's 'essential distinctions', Saussure's name is conspicuously absent. And so Derrida's engagement with Saussure is fragmented, tangen-

tial, and implicit, and this is what makes it such an interesting challenge to gather together what Derrida wants with or does with the *Course in General Linguistics*. This introduction attempts to characterise that engagement. As will be seen, documenting Derrida's direct engagements, tangential engagements, parenthetical engagements, and even failures of engagement with Saussurean doctrine will also lay bare the questions and chapter structure of this book. The first thing to do is to discover exactly where the name 'Saussure' appears in the early and tightly intertextual texts of Derrida, in which questions of language and signs are predominant.

Speech and Phenomena

Let us begin at the beginning, with *Speech and Phenomena*, in which Derrida's first mention of Saussure takes aim at his supposed originality. In a chapter titled 'Meaning as Soliloquy', Derrida writes that in making the signifier a mental impression, rather than a physical sound, Saussure's 'sole originality' is to make the signifier internal, 'which is only to shift the problem without resolving it' (46–7). Even here, as a brief aside to a discussion of Husserl, Derrida's engagement with Saussure is framed around the question of originality. This framing is present throughout Derrida's engagement, as we shall see more clearly in Chapter 2. This issue of Saussure's originality is the first, and most pressing, question that I am pursuing: to what degree does Saussure adhere to or break from the presuppositions of Western thought that Derrida calls logocentrism?

Derrida's ambition in *Speech and Phenomena* is to show that Husserl reproduces certain essential motifs of Western metaphysics at the very moment that he claims to break free from them. In particular, Derrida's target is the theme of the self-present voice, or the internal voice of solitary mental life, that needs nothing from the world (such as language or a community of speakers) to understand itself. To this end, the above quoted passage is footnoted with an invitation to compare Husserl's *Logical Investigations* with the following passage from the *Course in General Linguistics*:

The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image. The latter is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses. The sound-image is sensory, and if I happen to call it 'material', it is only in that sense, and by way of opposing it to the other term of the association, the concept, which is generally more abstract. The psychological character of our sound-images becomes apparent when we observe our own speech. *Without moving our lips or tongue, we can talk to ourselves or recite mentally a selection of verse.* (*Course (B)*: 66, qtd in *S&P*: 46n, Derrida's italics)

This footnote opens up the terrain of Derrida's most sustained engagement with Saussure: the relationship between the Saussurean privilege of speech and the solitary, self-present voice which Derrida finds in Husserl; that is, the relationship between phonocentrism and logocentrism. In this regard, Derrida likens Saussure's opposition of signifier and signified to Husserl's opposition of expression and *Bedeutung* (*S&P*: 46), and will later draw a direct similarity when he defines phonic signs as "'acoustical images" in Saussure's sense, or the phenomenological voice' (76). An analysis of this relationship between Saussure and the phenomenological voice, or between phonocentrism and logocentrism, is one of the most important ambitions of this book.

Before leaving *Speech and Phenomena*, we ought to note that Derrida is using the words 'sign', 'signifier', and 'signified' in a way that seems more peculiarly Saussurean than his hitherto absence in Derrida's work would suggest. Roy Harris observes that:

Before Saussure is ever mentioned by name in *De la grammatologie*, Derrida is already discussing language and writing in Saussurean terms: *signe*, *signifiant*, *signifié*, *langue*, *parole*, etc. are straight away (16ff) assumed to belong to a vocabulary with which the reader is familiar and which therefore does not call for preliminary discussion or explanation. (Harris 2001: 172)

Less immediately noticeable, but perhaps even more profound, is that the rhetorical wedge that Derrida drives into the logic of the *Logical Investigations*, into Husserl's essential distinctions, is the principle of difference involved in signs. Derrida writes that: 'the prime intention' of *Speech and Phenomena* is to reintroduce 'the difference involved in "signs" at the core of what is "primordial"' (45–6n). For this reason, the relationship between this usage of 'signs' and 'difference', and the principle of semiological difference which can be considered original to Saussure, will also need to be made clear.

Of Grammatology

The relationship between Saussure and the self-present voice that we were alerted to in *Speech and Phenomena* is taken up in *Of Grammatology*. Indeed, part one of that book is by far Derrida's most sustained *explicit* engagement with Saussure (if it is understood that I will attempt to show how a work like *Speech and Phenomena* cannot do without him). Derrida's inquiry is directed to a certain history in the philosophy of language, in which priority is given to the spoken language as that which is closest to sense, to intuitive consciousness, and to truth. Derrida explores this relationship between the voice and the Divine *logos* as he finds it in Aristotle, in medieval theology, and in Saussure:

Between being and mind, things and feelings, there would be a relationship of translation or natural signification; between mind and logos, a relationship of conventional symbolization. And the *first* convention, which would relate immediately to the order of natural and universal signification, would be produced as spoken language. (*OG*: 11)

Derrida attempts to reveal, in contemporary philosophies claiming to break from classical approaches, the ongoing desire to preserve the priority of the voice as the most natural and intuitive relationship with truth, presence, and the word of God. This essential proximity between voice and mind is contrasted with the inessential and external quality of writing:

All signifiers, and first and foremost the written signifier, are derivative with regard to what would wed the voice indissolubly to the mind or to the thought of the signified sense, indeed to the thing itself (whether it is done in the Aristotelian manner that we have just indicated or in the manner of medieval theology, determining the *res* as a thing created from its *eidōs*, from its sense thought in the logos or in the infinite understanding of God). The written signifier is always technical and representative. It has no constitutive meaning . . . This notion remains therefore within the heritage of that logocentrism which is also a phono-centrism: absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning. (*OG*: 11–12)

If *Speech and Phenomena* includes an invitation to compare Saussure with Husserl, then *Of Grammatology* surely invites one to compare Saussure with Aristotle and the medieval theologians. Following the close textual analysis of *Speech and Phenomena*, the broad historical sweep of *Of Grammatology* is as unexpected as it is penetrating. Derrida's critique of Saussure comes at a time when the debate over Saussurean linguistics concerned only the exact natures of *langue* and *parole*, or of the mechanisms of language change, and produced ever-increasing abstraction and complexity in the units of language. Derrida's situation of Saussure within the epoch of classical metaphysics radically changed the way in which Saussure is read to this day. To contradict this reading of Saussure is to exhume a figure of Saussure which has not been seen for forty years. Such a contradiction can be performed as a *correction* of the Derridean reading, or as a *reinvigoration* of certain possibilities of thought that have been extinguished by Saussure's compression into the logocentric framework. Some of both will be attempted here.

The second chapter from *Of Grammatology*, 'Linguistics and Grammatology', consists of an engagement with Saussure which would be much more recognisable to the Prague and Copenhagen Schools of Linguistics. In contrast to the first chapter, which contains no citations of Saussure, 'Linguistics and Grammatology' musters its argument against

the text of the *Course* itself. Here, Derrida attempts to show how Saussure's own theorisation of the arbitrariness of the sign ought to forbid him from his pervasive and insistent privileging of speech over writing. Derrida asks: 'Why does a project of general linguistics, concerning the *internal system in general of language in general*, outline the limits of its field by excluding, as *exteriority in general*, a *particular* system of writing, however important it might be, even were it to be *in fact* universal?' (39). A thorough examination of the *Course* on this point is necessary. Why would Saussure maintain this privilege if it contradicted his organising principle of arbitrariness? What is the Saussurean relationship between speech, writing, and what Derrida calls the 'self-present voice', or the silent experience of meaning?

This question – of Saussure's privileging of speech over writing – is intricately interwoven with the question of Saussure's relative originality within the Aristotelian tradition which Derrida calls 'classical semiology' (Diff: 9). Derrida's suggestion of a 'classical semiology' continues and deepens the question of Saussurean terminology that was asked of *Speech and Phenomena*. Much more than merely assuming that the reader is familiar with these terms and with their position within the contemporary debates over language, Derrida, in *Of Grammatology*, appears to posit these terms as transcending a strictly Saussurean framework. Saussure would then be responsible only for naming or marking these elements which have organised the discourse around language throughout the Western tradition. Derrida writes that:

The idea of science and the idea of writing – therefore also of the science of writing – is meaningful for us only in terms of an origin and within a world to which a certain concept of the sign (later I shall call it *the* concept of sign) and a certain concept of the relationships between speech and writing, have *already* been assigned. (4)

Positioning Saussure within a tradition of privileging speech over writing is one thing; but believing that this tradition or epoch is governed by a particular concept of the sign in which signifier opposes signified is quite another. At the very least, Derrida's manoeuvre will allow us to recast this discussion of classical phonocentrism into the technical language of Saussurean semiology. If Saussure, in his elevation of speech over writing, reproduces the phonocentrism of classical metaphysics, then to what degree does Saussure also adopt its 'logocentrism', or the privilege of an interior, self-present voice?

'Structure, Sign, and Play'

Determining the order of reading Derrida's texts is made more complex by the almost simultaneous publication of *La Voix et le phénomène*, *De la grammatologie*, and the essay collection *L'Écriture et la différence* in 1967. Derrida

himself has suggested that *Writing and Difference* could be stapled into the middle of *Of Grammatology*, in which Derrida's analysis of the phonocentrism inherent in the concept of the sign would act as the preface to *Writing and Difference*, to which part two of *Of Grammatology* could be appended as the twelfth essay of the collection, as an extended work concerning Rousseau. On the other hand, he believes that just as easily:

one could insert *Of Grammatology* into the middle of *Writing and Difference*, since six of the texts in that work preceded – *de facto* and *de jure* – the publication in *Critique* (two years ago) of the articles that announced *Of Grammatology*; the last five texts, beginning with 'Freud and the Scene of Writing', are engaged in the grammatological opening. But things cannot be reconstituted so easily, as you may well imagine. (Imp: 4)

There are, however, threads of engagement with Saussure that can be followed from one text to another. The first of these threads leads from 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' (collected in *Writing and Difference*) to the interview with Julia Kristeva titled 'Semiology and Grammatology' (collected in *Positions*).

It is not easily reconciled that in an essay on Lévi-Strauss and the nature-culture opposition the first four pages of 'Structure, Sign, and Play' should be devoted to the concepts of structure and sign. Even more surprising in these pages is the conspicuous absence of Saussure's name. Derrida begins the essay by suggesting that: 'Perhaps something has occurred in the history of the concept of structure that could be called an "event"' (278). Derrida's position is that far from being an innovation of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the concept of structure, and what we call 'structuralism' itself, are as old as Western philosophy. However, the 'structurality' of structures and structuralism has always been governed, organised, and made coherent by a 'centre' which is both within the structure and outside of it:

The concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play . . . If this is so, the entire history of the concept of structure, before the rupture of which we are speaking, must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determinations of the center. (279)

This is the history of Western thought; the 'event' within this history, which Derrida calls a rupture, occurs when the structurality of structure had begun to be thought. From this point, it becomes possible to at least *imagine* a structure with no centre, with no point of certitude which escapes the play of

differences. Derrida phrases this as: ‘a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely’ (280).

Saussure’s position within this event of rupturing must be somewhat controversial, however, for when Derrida comes to answer the question of ‘Where and how does this decentering, this thinking the structurality of structure, occur?’ (280), he specifically names three writers and their events: the Nietzschean critique of metaphysics; the Freudian critique of self-presence; and the Heideggerian destruction of metaphysics, of onto-theology, of the determination of Being as presence (280). These three names are reprised at the conclusion to this preamble to ‘Structure, Sign, and Play’, and yet, when Derrida comes to illustrate his argument (that each of these attempts to think the structurality of structure falls back into the language and logic of the metaphysics they seek to contest), he chooses for his example the concept of sign:

as I suggested a moment ago, as soon as one seeks to demonstrate in this way that there is no transcendental or privileged signified and that the domain or play of signification henceforth has no limit, one must reject even the concept and word ‘sign’ itself – which is precisely what cannot be done. For the signification ‘sign’ has always been understood and determined, in its meaning, as sign-of, a signifier referring to a signified, a signifier different from its signified. If one erases the radical difference between signifier and signified, it is the word ‘signifier’ itself which must be abandoned as a metaphysical concept . . . The concept of the sign, in each of its aspects, has been determined by this opposition throughout the totality of its history. It has lived only on this opposition and its system. (281)

The ‘scandal’ that these pages ought to represent to the Saussurean reader cannot be underestimated. Derrida’s simultaneous appropriation of Saussurean terminology and distinct divergence from Saussurean doctrine is coupled to a steadfast refusal to acknowledge that Saussure is on the scene at all. The labour involved in making Derrida and Saussure engage directly here is not inconsiderable. But it must be attempted, for what ‘Structure, Sign, and Play’ does is to challenge the Saussurean reader to establish the opposite of what Derrida asserts: that the sign has not always been understood as a signifier referring to a signified; that the concept of the sign does not have a totalising history; and above all, that what is most essential in the Saussurean theory of the sign (in everything involved with synchronic structure) prevents one from speaking of concepts with histories at all. It is fortunate, therefore, that we have at least one piece of writing in which Derrida’s provocative way of speaking about the concept of the sign is directed towards Saussure specifically: the interview with Julia Kristeva titled ‘Semiology and Grammatology’.

‘Semiology and Grammatology’

Kristeva opens with this question, a question that my own inquiry could not do without:

Semiology today is constructed on the model of the sign and its correlates: *communication* and *structure*. What are the ‘logocentric’ and ethnocentric limits of these models, and how are they incapable of serving as the basis for a notation attempting to escape metaphysics? (S&G: 17)

Derrida provides an extended answer on communication, and a briefer answer on structure, each of which will be quoted almost in their entirety before the conclusion of my investigation. Derrida’s reply also helps to determine the structure of my own engagement with Derrida’s interpretation of Saussure, which begins with questions of communication before moving on to questions of structure.

Derrida begins his reply by speaking of ‘the concept of the sign’, as he did in ‘Structure, Sign, and Play’, as an event within the history of metaphysics:

supposing, which I do not believe, that someday it will be possible *simply* to escape metaphysics, the concept of the sign will have marked, in this sense, a simultaneous impediment and progress. For if the sign, by its root and its implications, is in all its aspects metaphysical, if it is in systematic solidarity with stoic and medieval theology, the work and the displacement to which it has been submitted – and of which it also, curiously, is the instrument – have had *delimiting* effects. For this work and displacement have permitted the critique of how the concept of the sign belongs to metaphysics, which represents a simultaneous *marking* and *loosening* of the limits of the system in which this concept was born and began to serve, and so thereby also represents, to a certain extent, an uprooting of the sign from its own soil. (S&G: 17)

Before moving on to consider how Derrida understands Saussure’s role in this history, it is worth pausing to reflect on the curious temporality of Derrida’s history of the concept of the sign. This concept appears on the scene as both the instrument of innovation and as the sediment of tradition. To follow Derrida’s history at all, it is necessary to imagine how the sign-as-innovation uproots the sign-as-tradition from its own soil. Derrida acknowledges the progress of the Saussurean event which helps to loosen Western metaphysics, but at the same time, shows how this event falls back into the language it seeks to contest. We start to glimpse here what is at stake in Derrida’s interpretation of Saussure. Answering the question of *whether or not* Saussure reproduces a concept of the sign which would be recognisable to classical or medieval semioticians is, no doubt, a necessary step. But any

such answer risks, as Kristeva suggests, utilising a notation – an entire logic and lexicon – which is incapable of escaping metaphysics. In short, while all of the resources of the *Course* must be exhausted in answering the metaphysical charges that Derrida lays against it, it must also be recognised that it is the very limits of the semiological discourse that Derrida is questioning. For the moment, though, it is enough to understand that Derrida sees Saussurean semiology as both loosening the tradition of metaphysics and confirming it.

It remains important, as a first step, to discover exactly which elements of Saussurean semiology Derrida understands to loosen or confirm metaphysics. Derrida writes that: ‘one could show that a semiology of the Saussurean type has had a double role. *On the one hand*, an absolutely decisive critical role . . .’ (18). In its critical role, the Saussurean sign marks, against the tradition, that the signifier is *inseparable* from the signified; that the two are of one and the same production. Furthermore, Derrida notes that the Saussurean sign *dematerialises* the expressive substance, by removing physical sound from its system. In these two gestures, ‘Saussure powerfully contributed to turning against the metaphysical tradition the concept of the sign that he borrowed from it’ (18). ‘And yet’, Derrida continues, ‘Saussure could not confirm this tradition in the extent to which he continued to use the concept of the sign’ (18–19). In the lengthy critique of the Saussurean concept of the sign that follows, Derrida will argue that by continuing to use the word and the concept ‘sign’, Saussure reproduces certain presuppositions of classical metaphysics. Derrida’s critique, in brief, and retaining his own numbering, is that:

1. The distinction between signifier and signified – which is the difference between the medieval *signans* and *signatum*, or the sensible and the intelligible – ‘inherently leaves open the possibility of thinking a *concept signified in and of itself*, a concept simply present for thought, independent of a relationship to language’ (19). Such a ‘transcendental signified’ (20) is present to the mind prior to the introduction of signifiers, and hence can be transported from one person to another, from one language to another, without loss. In making this point, Derrida interweaves various threads of his argument to date, namely: the reassuring value of the transcendental signified; the relationship between Saussurean and medieval semiology; the self-present voice; and the definition of ‘communication as transport’, which we will come to in a moment.
2. Although Saussure claims to dematerialise the phonic substance of language, he strictly privileges speech, and ‘speaks of the “natural link” between thought and voice, meaning and sound. He even speaks of “thought-sound”’ (21). This contradiction is the basis of Derrida’s chapter in *Of Grammatology*.
3. What is inherent in the phonocentrism of linguistics – the intimacy of voice to consciousness, and conversely, the exteriority of the signifier –