# Language and Difference: Heidegger, Saussure, and Derrida

# اللغة والأختلاف

**Mehdi H. Elaiwi**

Although the concept of difference is as old as the foundational concept of similarity, the modern (and contemporary) understanding of difference as a working notion that not only *differentiates*, but also approximates conflicting elements in an all encompassing system owes a great deal to the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). An idealist to the backbone, Hegel bequeathed to modern philosophy the postulation that the identity of an individual rests not in itself but in the relationship that individual's identity entertains with other members of society. In his classic *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel explains how humans come to consciousness (pivotal concept in Idealism) through a strenuous, albeit apparently intuitive, process which he calls "the dialectic" that he exemplifies in the famous Master-Slave dialectic.[1]

Hegel assumes that humans are not born with an independent, formative consciousness, but, on the contrary, they aspire to acquire self-consciousness when the self (which Hegel alternatively calls "being-for-self") is acknowledged and recognized by other fellows—an arduous, but imperative, dynamic that Hegel terms "being-for-others." Self-consciousness is attained only after the self undergoes painstaking "stages" involved in the system of human relationships, which is representative of the Hegelian dialectic. This all-encompassing, ever changing system holistically places the individual "self" in relation to other "selves" while itself remains in constant motion. Accordingly, meaning and truth are never determinately fixed because they are always in process since, says Hegel, "the action has a double significance not only because it is directed against itself as well as against the other, but also because it is indivisibly the action of one as well as of the other."[2]

## I

Twentieth-century thinkers were fascinated by the conceptual significance of difference. Much attention was placed on the relationship between this philosophical concept and the nature of language. In his much anthologized "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger says that art is "the setting-into-work of truth"[3] that originates in the very nature of art itself. He sees art as "a way in which truth comes into being"[4] in a twofold process that includes the "becoming" and "preserving" of truth. This truth, however, is self-contained, and is not the realization of an external element; "truth that discloses itself in the work," says Heidegger, "can never be proved or derived from what went before"[5]—a statement that anticipates Derrida's famous postulation that "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*." For Heidegger, language, just like the work of art, also originates in itself, and creates a "being" that finds expression in, with, and by it; "by naming beings for the first time," he insists, "[language] first brings beings to word and to appearance."[6]

Heidegger further develops this notion in his "Language" where he says that only speech "enables man to be the living being he is as man,"[7] and that although language is a naming process (a statement that Saussure would frown at), it fulfils more elaborate functions, because "the things named are called into their thinging."[8] In short, Heidegger believes that language bid things come to the world and vice versa in a mystical and concurrent way, since "the world and things do not subsist alongside one another. They penetrate each other."[9]

The process, however, is not clear-cut. Heidegger says that the "worlding" of the world and the "thinging" of the thing are bound together in an intrinsic, though *not* synthetical, relationship governed by *dif-ference*. This dif-ference is the "betweeness"

that mysteriously and somehow unidentifiably stands between the world and the thing, not in a physical (or even metaphysical) sense: "dif-ference carries out the world in its worlding, carries out things in their thinging … it carries them toward one another … it first determines world and things in their presence, i.e. in their being toward one another, whose unity it carries out."[10] It is with this dif-ference that language effects Being, which, to Heidegger, is the essence of human existence.

The Hegelian understanding that all human phenomena, throughout history, manifest and belong to a vibrant, all-encompassing system finds cavernous and thoughtful approbation in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. “Die Sprache spricht” [language speaks], says he, capitalizing on the fact that “language is the house of being,”[11] which is a major means human beings utilize in order to create new varieties of being and, in effect, new worlds. However, Heidegger believes that language operates in ways that are far from austere. The complexity of the operations of language derives greatly from the working mechanism of intralangauge differences and the communicative functions that language (sometimes, not always) fulfills. Endeavoring to understand these differences characteristic of human language, we should rely on “phenomenology’s focus on the contents of consciousness.”[12]

Nonetheless, language, for Heidegger, is not a substantial, but rather relational, system. “It is only the word at our disposal,” says he, “that endows the thing with Being.”[13] Only when a word is uttered, presence and being are conferred; and so when that very word is missing the remnant is the (antithetical) “no thing.” Enigmatically, albeit interestingly, Heidegger holds it that even when a word is missing and silence prevails, the essence of language endures and can undoubtedly be realized. Language still exists because it rudimentarily “consists of the articulation of the totality of differences, and thus more of the empty space between elements than of the sum of the elements themselves."[14]

The absence of these "elements" (that Saussure would later refer to as "signs") ascertains the existence and prominence of language. This might seem too paradoxical to accept, let alone understand. However, a more careful reading of Heidegger—especially his *On the Way to Language*—would vindicate his stance: when the label "no thing" is prescribed for, in our case, the apparent absence of a word (or indeed speech in general), then the "thing" (language) still exists. This is significantly relatable to the Heideggerian understanding of language as inclusive of what is said and what is unsaid—trial-blazing in a notion that would become decades later a main focus for the study of pragmatics. It is not man who speaks, but rather language (*die Sprache*) itself that speaks *through* man.

## II

So far, the notion of difference has been revitalized and incorporated in the discussion of being, consciousness, and—rather marginally—language. But the full significance of the concept as a working principle in language system has not been fully explored. The task was, it seems, left to de Saussure to undertake. However, in considering Ferdinand de Saussure's understanding of language as a system of "a series of differences," it would be helpful to take a look at his theory of the sign he virtually devised. To be sure, Saussure dismisses the ages-old philological understanding of language as a simple “naming process” which assumes that “ready-made ideas exist before words.”[15] In his view, a word is not a thing or a symbol that unequivocally corresponds to an external referent, but rather is a “sign” [*signe*] (“a two-sided psychological entity”[16]) that is itself composed of two parts: the signifier [*signifiant*] and the signified [*signifié*]. Those two sides of the sign are as inseparable as the “two sides of a sheet of paper”; they are concurrently part and parcel of the sign, the signifier being the “sound-image” or the mark, and the signified the “concept” that attends the sound-image.

Moreover, Saussure believes that the linguistic sign has two primordial features. First, “the linguistic sign is arbitrary,”[17] in the sense that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary—there is no natural bond between, say, the “concept” book and the “sound-image” /buk/ in English or /kĭtäb/ in Arabic. Nonetheless, arbitrariness, for Saussure, does not in any way imply that the choice of the signifier is haphazardly left to the user of language, but it means that this choice is “unmotivated, i.e. arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified.”[18] Indeed, Saussure reiterates in Chapter One of the *Course in General Linguistics* that “the individual does not have the power to change a sign in any way once it has become established in the linguistic community.”[19] The second elemental characteristic of the sign is that its signifier, being auditory, is of linear nature that is unfolded in time when it represents a span that is measurable in a single dimension.

Building on this conception of the sign, Saussure goes on to explain how the components of language acquire meaning (lexically, syntactically, etc.) not as a result of some connection between words and things, but of being elements in a system of relations. He reiterates that “in language there are only differences *without positive terms*.”[20] [Italics his]. However, Saussure is careful to point out that this statement is valid only if the two sides of the sign (i.e. the signifier and the signified) are regarded separately, because “when we consider the sign in its totality, we have something that is positive in its own class.”[21]

This is the core argument upon which he builds up his distinction between the linguistic signification and the linguistic value of the sign. The value of a word, for Saussure, originates from the language system, and so a word might have a certain signification or meaning, but its value is the result of its *difference* from other words in the system. For instance, the value of the signified “red” stems from the fact that it is not black, white, or green. In other words, the distinctive feature of the value (as opposed to signification) lies “in being what the others are not,”[22] because when the linguistic values are believed to correspond to concepts, then, says Saussure, “it is understood that the concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system."[23]

Difference also governs the relationships among the sound-images of language. In this respect Saussure makes his famous statement that the sign, when uttered, is not distinguished merely by its constituent sounds, because it is "the phonic differences that make it possible to distinguish this word from all others, for differences carry signification."[24] In this complex system of language, each sound acquires its value not in its individual signification (i.e. in isolation) but through its difference from other adjacent sounds in an utterance. In modern day linguistics we refer to these smallest phonetic units that convey a distinction in meaning as "phonemes" (for example, our recognition of a difference between the minimal pair *level* and *revel* indicates a phonemic distinction in English between /l/ and /r/).

## III

Jacques Derrida builds on both Heidegger and Saussure, among others. In his now classic paper "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (delivered in 1966 at Johns Hopkins University), Derrida puts into question the

assumptions of Western metaphysics that he contemptuously terms "logocentric" which in many ways depend on "the metaphysics of presence"—a phrase he adopts from Heidegger. Not only is Western culture logocentric, but it also is "phonocentric" (i.e. it gives primacy to speech over writing and privileges it as a model in analyzing discourse). We have a tendency to think of language (and everything else around us) as having a center around which it is built and structured. Derrida sets out to disrupt this understanding; he says that this "center" has been commended only because it supports "the determination of Being as *presence*,"[25] but the matter of fact is that this center, which is thought to regulate structure, itself "escapes structurality"[26] primarily because it is beyond the reach of the other elements of structure.

To further account for this, Derrida coins the term *différance*, which is basically derived from the French verb *différer* that means both "to differ" and "to defer." Consistent with his anti-logocentric approach, the difference in meaning between the temporal différance and the spatial différence can only be realized in writing, not in speech (both words are pronounced in French with a nasalized /n/). Every sign *spatially differs* from other signs in the system, and, at the same time, is *temporally deferred* in an "endless postponement of 'presence' "[27]. For Derrida, différance rules out the existence of any transcendental truth outside the sphere of writing; a claim that supports the notion embedded in one of his famous catchphrases "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*"[28] ("there is nothing outside the text").

Différance works simultaneously with "supplement"—a concept that Derrida develops, while criticizing Jean Jacques Rousseau's theory of language, to denote the adding of signification to a word because of an original lack in the signified, and so "it is not really superfluous but necessary for the word itself."[29] Accordingly, with

différance and supplement at play, the seeming meaning is "disseminated" as a result of a "self-effacing trace" that consists of the absent meanings that are differentiated with the elusively present one, resulting in an apparent impossibility to determine the meaning of an utterance; "the absence of a transcendental signified," says Derrida, "extends the domain and the play of signification indefinitely." [30] He adds:

> Always differing and deferring, the trace is never as it is in the presentation of itself. It erases itself in presenting itself, muffles itself in resonating. The annuciatory and reserved trace of this movement can always be disclosed in metaphysical discourse, and especially in the contemporary discourse which states, through the attempts to which we just referred (Neitzche, Freud, Lévinas), the closure of ontology, and especially through the Heideggerian text."[31]

Derrida, to be sure, did not stop there. In his colossal *Of Grammatology*, Derrida commends Saussure for initiating a new course in (French) philosophy that looked at the elemental units of language as signs, not self-ascertaining words. However, he was not completely satisfied with the relational system that Saussure illustrates—and indeed in his later writings he dissociates himself further from Saussure. While discussing the nature of writing (which he believes covers "the entire field of linguistic sign"[32]) in what he contemptuously calls the "Western metaphysics," Derrida opines that a sign could never be "presently" identified, even if we employ Saussure's negative generations, because the signifier is "always already" evasive. He says that "writing is not a sign, except if one says it of all signs, which would be more profoundly true"[33] and that all this falls into the domain of Derrida's yet another *portmanteau* "arche-writing."

In fact, arche-writing, which endeavors to justify the Derridean anti-Husserl conception of the probable and potential disparity between the (addresser's) intention and the (addressee's) reception, is itself a manifestation of the role of difference (and, in effect, différance) in shaping our understanding—or misunderstanding—of phenomena traditionally associated with the study of language typology. The difference of writing infects the very "self-presence of the voice"—Husserl's notion—because writing, unlike speech, "does not exist abstractly in the mind, or in airy soundwaves, but spatially in *solid black marks upon a white page*."[34] (Italics mine; in his phenomenal "White Mythology"—which he later published in *Margins of Philosophy*—Derrida gives a clearer account of the impact of “bleaching” and “whitening” language on the misconception of the whole field of Western metaphysics.)

Another significant and important point to bear in mind is Derrida’a relentless efforts to sever the signifier from the signified, and—with much greater emphasis laid on the signified—ascertain the centrifugal force of the latter that prevents it from attaining a transcendental stature, a notion that Derrida works hard to disrupt. “This deferral in the signifying chain is what causes meaning to flow from one signifier to another,” says William Haney, “always different yet always the same insofar as the same force of signification, responsible for the production of meaning flows between them.”[35]

We might indeed consider this a magnificent poststructural breakthrough, because while the alacritous structuralists tried to divide the text and the sign from the axiomatic referent, Derrida undoes the very “presence” of the sign. In fact, he treats his own différance as a maxim—apologies to Paul Grice— that is itself under the continuous danger of what he calls “erasure”[36] which, though a convoluted working principle, by far recants transcendentalism.

## IV

It is by now truism beyond any doubt that the concept of difference has had, as we mentioned earlier, a great impact upon contemporary linguistic, critical, and cultural theories and has sometimes conflated in ways that derail its original signification and defy any limitation—and this, after all, is one of the (de)merits of "difference" itself. Indeed, new schools (or, more accurately, modes) of literary criticism have emerged in great part building—and sometimes framing—on the notion of difference. For example, the feminist and queer theories rely heavily on the politics of difference, within the overall umbrella of identity politics. Postcolonial theory greatly invests in many difference-related issues, but addresses in greater concern—especially in the writings of Edward W. Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak—the question of the difference between the Self and the Other.

To be sure, these fields, diverse as they are, owe a great deal—in so much as their employment of difference is concerned—to Martin Heidegger who revived the working notion of difference, Ferdinand de Saussure who popularized it, and Jacques Derrida who in many ways institutionalized it.

## NOTES

1) The Master-Slave dialectic is sometimes translated into English as lord-bondsman dialectic—a translation that is more accurate, but less provocative. See G.H.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A.V. Miller, New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

2) Vincent B. Leitch (et. al.) eds., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001, p. 631.

3) Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York and London: Harper and Row, 1975, p. 70.

4) Ibid., 78

5) Ibid., 75

6) Ibid., 73

7) Ibid., 189

8) Ibid., 199

9) Ibid., 202

10) Ibid.

11) Vincent B. Leitch (et. al.) eds., ibid., p. 1119.

12) Ibid.

13) Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter Hertz and Joan Stambaugh, New York: Harper and Row, 1971, p. 169.

14) Giuseppe Stellardi, *Heidegger and Derrida on Philosophy and Metaphor*, New York: Humanity Books, 2000, p. 163.

15) Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics,* ed. Charles Bally, Albert Reidlinger, trans. Wade Baskin, New York: Philosophical Library, 1959, p. 66.

16) Ibid., 67

17) Ibid.

18) Ibid., 69

19) Ibid.

20) Ibid., 120

21) Ibid., 121

22) Ibid., 117

23) Ibid.

24) Ibid., 118

25) Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. 353.

26) Ibid., 352

27) Raman Selden, Peter Widdowson, Peter Brooker, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, 4th edition, London: Prentice Hall, 1997, p. 171.

28) Vincent B. Leitch (et. al.) eds., ibid., p.1825.

29) William S. Haney, “Jacques Derrida,” in *Encyclopedia of Literary Critics and Criticism*, Vol. 1, ed. Chris Murray, London and Chicago: Salem Press, 1999, p. 305.

30) Jacques Derrida, ibid., 280.

31) Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985, p. 23.

32) Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, p. 39.

33) Ibid., 43.

34) William S. Haney, ibid., 304.

35) Ibid., 305.

36) Jacques Derrida, “White Mythology,” in his *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985, p. 210.

## Abstract

The notion of difference has had a great impact on modern linguistic, critical, and cultural theories and practices. It has veered off the course of discussing meaning from the traditional essentialist stance into a relational account of meaning whereby the meaning of, say, a word is viewed as not intrinsically possessed but a result of the differential relations this particular word has with other words within the summative language system. “Difference” has taken the

side of the relational approach to meaning in the (still ongoing) intricate dichotomy between the relational and the referential views of language, rendering the study of linguistics—especially semantics—more complicated and, in effect, more intriguing and interesting.

The present paper purports to explore how three major twentieth-century theorists, namely Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), and Jacques Derrida (1930-2003), tackled the notion of difference. The emphasis here is laid upon the impacts and implications this notion has effected on linguistic theory and practice. The cultural, anthropological, and political nuances of difference remain, by and large, outside the scope of this paper.