Summary of Jacques Derrida “Linguistics & Grammatology”

Derrida lived from 1930 - 2004 and was a French philosopher and public intellectual. His book “De la Grammatology” upended thoughts on semiotics and literacy in his time. The book caught the attention of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who was a young and rising postcolonial scholar, that translated the book into English.

In “Linguistics & Grammatology”, Derrida provokes discourse offering contrasting views to Saussure’s points in linguistics that label the “inversion of the natural relationship between speech and writing” (p 135). Derrida looks at this relationship in terms of writing being “sensible matter and artificial exteriority: a ‘clothing.’” The question he uses to open discourse on his subject matter is, “has it ever been doubted that writing was the ‘clothing’ of speech?” By placing the “clothing” that Saussure has established on the unassuming behavior of speech, instead of writing as “clothing” of thought, Derrida opens a new way to study linguistics and grammar.

Taking from Plato’s “The Allegory of the Cave,” the concepts of imagery, meaning, words and the their association to an individual, resonate in Derrida’s writing. The men chained inside the cave were presented with shadows, which meant something to them, and they associated words with the images of shadows. When outside, the words having already been established with meaning, their speech would have the clothing of how they spoke in the cave. Whereas, someone from the outside having the same thought process, and the same speech, could communicate to them that the shadow was what cast the imagery, and not the source of the meaning.

Derrida introduces deconstruction as a method to examine the philosophy and literary merit in linguistics. He used it by organizing the oppositions in the text into hierarchical tensions. By doing so, he was not proving one as primary, but that there was no primary and there could not be one symbol without the other. With this, he commented that in language the meaning is determined on how one “plays,” or uses the symbols in that form. Much like an piano, or instrument, is “played” so does one “play” language to convey a message and illicit an association in the recipients mind. This phenomena in language and meaning was coined by Derrida as the term, “differance.”

Terms

**Exigency** - an urgent need or demand.

* The tacos gave him exigency for the closest bathroom.

**Ferdinand de Saussure** - 1857- 1913 : one major influence on 20th century semiotics and linguistics

**Jean Jacque Russeau** - 1712 - 1778 : known for his theories on “savages” being in an idealic state and civilization being naturally corrupt.

*Summary by G. James Mitchell*

Derrida, J. (1974). Linguistics and grammatology. (G. C. Spivak, Trans.). Substance, 4(10), 127-181. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/3683950