

**Duality of the Sign Deconstructed.**  
**On the Basis of the Works by Jacques Derrida**

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**Abstract:** This paper is an inquiry into some parts of the project of deconstruction by Jacques Derrida, who deconstructs but also and before all demystifies the traditional metaphysical language, language that is “larded with” dualistic concepts. The most spectacular dualisms in philosophy, which are taken into consideration by Derrida, are for instance: Plato’s theory of Ideas or Kantian Thing-In-Itself and its phenomena. All they belong to the tradition of logocentrism, which, with its consequences in the form of metaphysics of presence, appears in the writings by Derrida as the systematic desire for the transcendental signified; the final ground, the foundation of all signs. Derrida proposes something contrary to the dualisms of logocentrism: he treats the presentation of the thing itself as the re – presentation, as the image, as the double and in result he endorses the substitution of the presence and the simplicity of the intuitive evidence with the multiplication of meaning. In paper is examined also the line of argumentation where Derrida contradicts the main assumptions about the character of the sign made by Ferdinand de Saussure. The objective is to show how is it in Derrida’s writings that “the manifestation of the thing does not reveal a presence of this thing, but [that] it makes it another sign.”

**Keywords:** sign, dualism, logocentrism, deconstruction

The problem of a sign in the 20th century is presented and solved in many ways. One of the solution is developed by the kind of thinking named deconstruction. Duality of the sign that has its origins in the Greek tradition of thought is here strongly criticized. The protagonist of this criticism was modern thinker Jacques Derrida.

Jacques Derrida ([1972] 2010) is a writer who introduced very enigmatic style of writing into the discourse of contemporary philosophy. A reader not accustomed to such a complicated net of notions that elude classical conceptualizations and are formulated on the border between “explicable” and “not explicable” will be a little startled. However, Derrida ([1972] 2010, pp. 80-89) makes his moves along and over the broad and very well known area of philosophy which is based on the notion of logos – a notion introduced into it by Plato ([427–347] [1578] 2008). Tradition that places its foundation in logos is, after Derrida, called logocentrism: centering on the logos. The critical attitude toward this tradition indebted to Plato is named antilogocentrism. Derrida’s ([1967] 1997, pp. 157-158) approach to

discourse can be in some way compared to parasitizing on the original, logocentric notions and drawing their consequences till their very end, where, what previously appeared to be stable and grounded idea, turns out to be its own opposition. Following this way Derrida ([1967] 1997, pp. 141-165) shows the dissolution and the dissimulation of the classical notions. One of such notions is mentioned duality, which is also the criterion in the creation of such oppositions like inside and outside, distinctions like mind and body or thing and its appearance. All these, now commonly used descriptions, have their origins in the Platonian notion of logos.

This notion, logos, is best described with the help of Platonian's myths. Plato's myth of the cave is one which gave the shape of the ontology of Ideas and their semblances – phenomena to the presumptions originally intuitively expressed on the level of eschatology. The ground for the development of the history of the sign based on logos in the Western societies' culture was prepared by stating ontological oppositions and Jacques Derrida ([1967] 1997, p. 43) sees it as the origin of logocentrism. It is astounding – states Derrida ([1967] 1997, p. 43) – that this history very rarely submitted its language and linguistic presuppositions to critical reflection. It rather based on tacit assumptions inaugurated by Plato; everything must have its intelligible and unintelligible site, the same was with language.

Intelligible and unintelligible were categories invented by Plato ([427–347] [1578] 2008: 437) by the introduction into philosophy of the yardstick, the measurement of the validity, or truth, of the things. Whether something was the true identity, the true idea, the true existence and not only the fake one, the appearance, the semblance, was decided upon the consultation with the logos, the ratio, the knowing eye of the soul. In the scene described in *Phaedrus* Plato ([427–347] [1578] 2008, p. 437) depicts the souls, who, as the immortal ones, stand after the death on the border of the world and watch this, what belongs to the other world – the world of the highest Truth and Good. The thing that above all other things belongs to this other world is knowledge:

There (upon the outside of heaven) abides the very being with which true knowledge is concerned; the colourless, formless, intangible essence, visible only to mind, the pilot of the soul. The divine intelligence, being nurtured upon mind and pure knowledge (...) is capable of receiving the food proper to it (...) gazing upon truth (...). (Plato, [427–347] [1578] 2008, p. 437)

“The essence of knowledge visible only to mind” (Plato [427–347] [1578] 2008, p. 437) – is the metaphorical expression characteristic to all logocentric views, it expresses the conviction that somewhere exist some “essences,” some “ideas”. Derrida ([1972] 2010) in preface to *Dissemination* names other synonyms that have constituted the history of the most traditional attitude in philosophy based on the notion of logos. These terms are called: “meaning, essence, existence – whether

objective or subjective; form, i.e. appearance, content, substance, etc.; sensible presence or intelligible presence” (Derrida, [1972] 2010, p. 5) or other referents as “thing,” fundamental or totalizing principle, sometimes the term “outside.” These terms are called by Derrida ([1972] 2010, p. 5) “transcendental signified” which is the indicator of the existence of some “extra-text” – something what can be called after Immanuel Kant ([1781] 1999) the “thing-in-itself.” The term *logoi* was translated also as the arguments, tenets or postulates and contributed to the development of the Platonian dialectics. Dialectics appeared to be the most recognizable feature of the writings by Plato ([427–347] [1578] 2008), and *logos* became “the gate” through which Plato philosophy entered into the intelligible world of Ideas and *eidos*. However the *logos* quickly became the stable idea alone and it started to represent the stable, intelligible world of the highest Truths. This yardstick, the pattern or matrix for the appearance of the less “real” things in the world of semblances from now on indicated toward the only true reality; the Reality of Ideas, The Reality of undisturbed Presence.

Toward this Reality of undisturbed Presence is directed the whole deconstructionist, Derridian needle of criticism. Hence we have the division into logocentrism and deconstruction, which was introduced into the widespread discussion by Derrida. Generally speaking the logocentrism and deconstruction are two different answers to the question of being. However, they are also two different answers to the question of language.

The language in the times of Plato ([427–347] [1578] 2008) was burdened with another difficulty connected with the culture change that took place around the 5th century BC. Plato alone was the exemplary case as far as the written and un-written philosophy is concerned. The problem is best explained in *Phaedrus* by Plato ([427–347] [1578] 2008, pp. 417-475) alone, in the myth about writing, where the main characters are *Thamus* and the God of writing *Theuth*. *Theuth* “presents a *tekhnē* and a *pharmakon* to the king” (Derrida, [1972] 2010, p. 91). This *tekhnē* is the special tool which is to help people to remember everything, it is writing. Nevertheless, *Thamus*’ opinion about this tool is different, he finds it dangerous, because people using it start to forget instead of remember, it will not aid the memory, but it will be the cause of forgetfulness.

This kind of prejudice was exemplary for the time of breaking through with the era of oral stories and entering into the time of written knowledge, and was the indicator of the importance people still ascribed to spoken wisdom. At the beginning of logocentrism the voice had the primary significance, it was identified with the essence of the spoken, it was placed in the closest proximity to the *eidos* of thought, *pharmakon* was something that “substitutes the breathless sign for the living voice, claims to do without the father (who is both living and life-giving) of *logos*, and can no more answer for itself than a sculpture or inanimate painting” (Derrida, [1972] 2010, p. 95). Voice was found to be the first, the closest to the

truth of meaning. That is why the real knowledge was to be transferred with the help of voice. Assuming the division introduced by the structuralist Ferdinand de Saussure ([1916] 1959, p. 66), the division of the sign into the signifier (this what expresses something, the material sign) and signified (this what is expressed by something else, the sense, the concept), we have to admit with Derrida ([1967] 1997, p. 35) that: „The bond of the signified (concept or sense) to the phonic signifier would condition the natural relationship subordinating writing (visible image) to speech.” This situation happens because „the word is lived as the elementary and undecomposable unity of the signified and the voice, of the concept and a transparent substance of expression” (Derrida, [1967] 1997, p. 20). Written symbols were of the second importance, they could deceive, lie, because they were the doubling of the semblances of the ideas – so the sign is the doubling of the double, the double of the second level. “The voice, producer of the first symbols, has a relationship of essential and immediate proximity with the mind” (Derrida [1967] 1997, p. 11). This theory is based on the divisions made by de Saussure. Derrida ([1967] 1997) based his main work *Of Grammatology* on the criticism of this division into the signifier (signifiant) and the signified (signifié). De Saussure ([1916] 1959) captures linguistics as the study of speech alone, and emphasizes the role of voice and phonology in his researches. Derrida ([1967] 1997, [1967] 2009, [1972] 2010) states it quite contrary – he gives priority to the function of the written sign and writing in the differentiation of meaning in the thinking process. This differentiation of signs that structures the stream of thought, called the “differance” or the “trace,” plays the important role in his philosophy, but is based on de Saussure’s ([1916] 1959, p. XII) observation that “language is a self-contained system whose interdependent parts function and acquire value through their relationships to the whole.” Following the line of thought of De Saussure we would have to admit that writing is the doubling of the meaning, is the image only, something that, otherwise than the voice, is so far from the origin of truth. Derrida ([1967] 1997, p. 35) concludes here that writing was in debased condition from the beginning of its history: „writing, the letter, the sensible inscription, has always been considered by Western tradition as the body and matter external to the spirit, to breath, to speech, and to the logos.” Voice was identified with the sense, writing was only the sign, the reflection in the mirror that could introduce the mistake, the error. Plato’s and De Saussure’s assumptions gave privilege to the voice – phone on the condition of the proximity to this what it described. This, what was described, recalled, was, with the help of the voice, presented in the intuitive evidence, *hic et nunc*. There was no break, no difference between the sign of the voice, the breath and this what was recalled, the content. This what is recalled, in the voice, is given in the form of absolute presence, we can risk the formulation that this what was presented was the presence alone – the *eidos*, the essence. Derrida ([1967] 1997, p. 18) writes here that „the formal essence of the signified is presence.” Presence and visibility are also the key terms which lay foundation for

the Western metaphysics, however, their affinity with sound is soon veiled by the efficiency of the new “prop” to memory provided by writing.

Ferdinand de Saussure ([1916] 1959, p. 32) confirms that “detached from their graphic signs, sounds represent only vague notions, and the prop provided by writing, though deceptive, is still preferable.” Following this way the relation between voice and the image, symbol was inverted. Speech “deluded into believing itself completely alive (...) is not ‘capable of protecting or defending itself’ (...) except through expelling the other, especially its own other, throwing it outside and below, under the name of writing” (Derrida, [1967] 1997, p. 39).

The written language could be treated as a trap, because of the violence it exerted on the speech. De Saussure ([1916] 1959, p. 24) wrote: “[T]he spoken word is so intimately bound to its written image that the latter manages to usurp the main role.” For de Saussure the inversion of the relations between the speech and the written language took place because of the passion – the sin of the bodily element which reflects a passivity and sickness of the soul: “[T]o give in to the ‘prestige of the written form’ is (...) to give in to passion” (Derrida, [1967] 1997, p. 38). Derrida ([1967] 1997, p. 38) emphasizes here “the tyranny of writing,” “the perverse cult of the letter – image: sin of idolatry” and says that “the perversion of artifice engenders monsters” because it is “a deviation from nature” – the winning of the arbitrariness of the written sign over the natural essence of the spoken language. Also Jean-Jacques Rousseau ([1754] 1913, p. 24, cited in Derrida, [1967] 1997, p. 36) in *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* considers the question why more care is given to the image (writing) than to the object of writing, though writing is nothing else than “the representation of speech,” its “clothing” (Derrida [1967] 1997, p. 35). The violence of writing is asserted in Plato’s *Phaedrus*: “Phaedrus denounced writing as the intrusion of an artful technique, a forced entry of a totally original sort, an archetypal violence: eruption of the outside within the inside” (Derrida, [1967] 1997, p. 34). Another explanation of the gaining importance of the written form over the speech is that writers gave themselves to the easiness with which the letter allows itself to be grasped: “[T]he graphic form (image) of words strikes us as being something permanent and stable (...) Though it creates a purely fictitious unity, the superficial bond of writing is much easier to grasp than the natural bond” (Derrida, [1967] 1997, p. 35-36). However, the temptation of ease and idleness in writing is deceptive in the same way as the proximity of the sense to the sound was. Writing was debased because it doubled the distance between the sign and its referent. In writing we are given to the experience of the real detour of language. Nothing can be so mistaken about the nature of language as the faith in the voice as the closest to its truth. Writing is the visible proof that the origin is not only able to be given, but that there is no origin at all, that the origin is only in the constant demystification of the sign, in the following of its trace, its relation to the other sign. What is left is “an infinite

reference from one to the other, but no longer a source, a spring” (Derrida, [1967] 1997, p. 36).

In Derridian writing something important happens to the idea of writing. He recaptures its due importance, its original meaning – not thanks to the biggest proximation to it, to the deleting of the distance between the sign and its meaning, but, quite the contrary, he recaptures its meaning thanks to the expanding of the detour of the sign directing towards its goal. From now on “the sense of being is not a transcendental (...) signified, but a determined signifying trace, is to affirm that within the decisive concept of ontico-ontological difference, all is not to be thought at one go” (Derrida, [1967] 1997, p. 23). This means that to explain something in language there is a necessity to undergo the spacing and timing given in the possibility of language, the detour outlined with the help of signs is the only possible way to get the meaning of the being. Nevertheless, “being (also) is not (...) irreducible signified” (Derrida, [1967] 1997, p. 23) ready to be grasped and expressed. Here Derrida did not agree with Hans – Georg Gadamer, ([1960] 2004), and we can admit the value of the difference between the point of view of these two thinkers. Gadamer until his last writings tried to convince Derrida that they were talking about the same problem (Bertram, 2004, pp. 189-206). Derrida ([1967] 1997) contradicted to Gadamer the whole of his detour of the language that must be performed to find the primary originality and weight of writing and its primary „essence.” The sense of writing does not amount to the communication of some given content, some information, to dealing with the same „thing of the conversation” – as maintained Gadamer ([1960] 2004, p. 408). Derrida wanted to save originality of writing by indication towards the infinity of the relations between its signs. Writing does not treat about some „subject” and it does not disappear in the indicating toward it, writing is not a tool that can be used in approaching to the subject and then thrown away. It is not transparent, quite the contrary, the idea of writing is fulfilled whenever we try to follow the relations of its signs and to grasp the signified of these signs, however “[i]n this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable” (Derrida, [1967] 1997, p. 36). The idea of the sign is renewed whenever we follow the proliferation of its meanings which are always split in themselves – the desired signified is only the horizon toward which we can struggle, but what is left in our hands when we try to be closer to the sense, to the meaning, is only the other sign. The signified is given only in the forms of many signifiers, each of which accounts for one of the many facets of this hidden and never-approachable signified. Moreover, this signified is the illusion inasmuch as it is not fixed in one of the possible form of some signifier. That is why at the end of our consideration we can endorse with Derrida ([1967] 1997, p. 23) that “the difference between signified and signifier is nothing” because for human beings exist only signifiers, and the difference cannot absolutely be understood as originary, this is detour of the language only, with its derivative form in which the meaning of the being can be grasped by the receiver. We think here

about the meaning that is fulfilled in the spatio-temporal form of graphic inscription.

At the beginning of this essay the voice was identified with the essence of thought, then appeared writing, originally subordinated to the phone. The sign was its exteriorization and at the same time it reflected the division, which prefiguration was the Platonian myth of the cave; sign that consisted of the intelligible – the concept and the unintelligible – its material substance. What makes Derrida in his deconstruction is the restoration of the power of writing, the affirmation of its creative and multiplicative, however derivative, force, that constitutes its originality. Such writing, as the affirmation of the free play with its signifier, is compared to the conservative passivity and reassuring foundation of the sign taken as the place of retention of meaning, at the same time the only origin of the truth and the end of interpretation, the fundamental, the logos.

Converting to the introductory statement in the summary, we can advocate that the presentation of the meaning by the sign (though at the beginning of the history of philosophy it was the phonic sign) becomes its re-presentation, that the sign, though it is not dual anymore, splits in itself and it appears that what seemed previously to be the simplicity of its intuitive evidence is substituted with another sign. The simplicity, the “essence” had already “escaped” and we are again left with the representamen only. “Manifestation of the thing does not reveal a presence of this thing, but it makes it another sign” (Derrida, [1967] 1997, p. 49). At this moment we can feel embarrassed and claimed that this situation leads to the dissolution of communication. Derrida contends that we are in a trap, because we do not have anything to oppose to logocentric concept, what he proposes in *La dissémination* and *Marges de la philosophie* is “stubborn textual work,” “work that deals with the systems of oppositions” (Derrida, 1972, p. 393, cited in Banasiak, 2007, p. 112). Metaphysics made the division into the concept and its designate the rule for the thinking and communicating. Derrida ([1972] 2010, pp. 80-89) indicates the sources of such thinking and deconstructs them. He cannot propose the new language, but he can deconstruct the old one. Deconstruction by Derrida is the relentless struggle with the language of metaphysics.

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