

## *Original Paper*

# Understanding Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play"

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### **Abstract**

*Deconstruction, a philosophical post-structural theory derived mainly from the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, has evoked a great controversial debate over the past few decades. Promoting a sophisticated philosophical view of literary criticism, deconstruction has always been a complicated topic to comprehend especially for students and novice researchers in the field of literary criticism. This article review paper attempts to present an explanation of the main notions of the theory by reviewing one of Derrida's most influencing articles on critical theory: "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences". The article which marked the birth of post-structuralism theory, was first delivered in 1966 at John Hopkins International Colloquium on "The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man". This seminal work of Derrida criticizes structuralism for the great importance given to centralism and binary oppositions for the sake of accessing meaning. It can be claimed that the article sums up his ideas on deconstruction which in fact attacks all notions of center, totality and origin. Deconstruction is perceived as a method of breaking down and analyzing text in an attempt to approach some new interpretations which might be totally different from any other previous ones.*

### **Keywords**

*Jacques Derrida, deconstruction, structuralism, post-structuralism, structure, sign, play, freeplay*

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), French philosopher, in his article entitled "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", questions the concept of structure which is key to structuralism which mainly provides for the idea that meaning is held in structures and derived from oppositions to other meanings. Being one of the most significant works of literary criticism, Derrida's article is considered the starting point of post-structuralism approach to literary criticism which does not reject but criticizes structuralism. As a post-structural theorist, Derrida questions the validity of structuralism

and refutes the idea that a structure is always fixed by the presence of a center. Moreover, he refuses the idea of centering which suggests that every structure must have a center and that it is the center that makes a structure called a structure, which accordingly questions the most important building blocks of thought such as big concepts as much important as God, science, origin, man, belief, etc. (Raman, 2014). Derrida claims that an “event”, by which he means a rupture, has occurred to the history of structure. He asserts that the concept of structure is too old and needs to be redefined. He argues that a structure cannot be a structure as long as it includes a center; elaborating that by giving the structure a center, this means referring it to a focal point or a fixed origin, which in his opinion, would limit the “freeplay of the structure; that is, the freeplay of its elements inside the total form. Derrida highlights the paradox by stating that imagining a structure lacking any center is unthinkable, adding that the center is the point at which substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible. In response to the contradiction raised by classical structuralists who say that the center is inside and outside the structure at the same time, Derrida comments that this means that it is at the core but not part of the “totality”, saying that thinking of the absence of the center or trying to decenter the center is a process that remains rotating in a closed circle because to decenter the center one has to use the concepts that come from the center which, at the end, gives it credit and validity (Mambrol, 2016).

Arguing that structuralism was an attack of metaphysics as well as science at the same time, Derrida critiques Levi Strauss, French anthropologist who brought structuralism into popularity, for using the same assumptions found in metaphysics and science in his own practice of structuralism. Given that, Derrida, prefers to treat the concept of centered structure as a freeplay of the substitutions of the center. To elaborate, Derrida argues that since a rupture has occurred to the structure itself, this allows for of a series of substitutions of center to compete for occupying the position of the center, as a linked chain of categories. Thus, the idea of the event which Derrida called a rupture occurs when the structurality of structure is perceived as repetition. Derrida claims that there is no center since the center has no natural fixed locus, but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions come into play. Derrida says that the center which gives the structure stability, unity and closure is perceived by structuralists as the origin which draws the attention to the notion of presence. Thus, the metaphysics of presence is evoked by the desire for a center which governs the structure. In terms of the relation between the signified and signifier, Derrida calls such a center the “transcendental signified” due to the fact that it is a signified that transcends all signifiers; that is, a meaning that transcends all signs. What Derrida really questions is how some critiques against tradition use the same assumptions used by that tradition. A short essay that was published online at Parallaxisview on March 30, 2020, and entitled “Unpacking Derrida’s “Structure, Sign, and Play”,’ explains that Derrida holds that criticism can never go outside of tradition because of the use of language. He states that language encompasses all the assumptions, therefore, when criticizing a certain thought or belief, the same language and assumptions are used. Thus, Derrida argues that the ultimate meaning is always differed, postponed and the final meaning can never be caught, allowing for the claim that there is no end to

meaning or interpretation. For such a belief, Derrida came up with the notion of “Differance” which provides for the thought that meanings become manipulated as they differ and defer in an unlimited process or infinite circle of signification which leads to infinite meanings without reaching an absolute signified, which deconstruct the myth of center, origin, or the transcendental signified. In other words, Derrida suggests that language is characterized by difference and deferral of meaning.

Moreover, Derrida claims that the language of the human sciences criticizes itself due to the notion of opposition where sometimes the concept of nature is comprehended as the opposite to law, art or culture. In this view, Derrida criticizes western metaphysics simply for being similar to structuralism in its tendency for seeking center and hierarchy of binary classifications of concepts such as the binary oppositions of speech versus writing, nature versus culture, male versus female and the like. Although Derrida basically attacks structuralism for embracing the concept of center, he is not calling for the abandonment of the idea of center, but rather he claims that it is constructed. He is against the binaries of structuralism because they, he believes, are mere constructions and do not necessarily represent the truth. Unlike structuralists who hold that meaning comes from binary opposition, Derrida claims that each pair of binary oppositions is equally important because each one has separate meaning. He elaborates the idea by saying that without the concept of the female, the concept of male can't be comprehended. Furthermore, he refutes the structuralist claim that speech is superior to writing by arguing that writing has the privilege of being powerful enough to take away the ambiguity of speech; and accordingly none of the pairs is superior to the other (Shafieyan, 2011). In addition, for the relation between nature and culture, structuralists perceive speech as natural and writing as cultural, hence, giving speech superiority over to writing. However, Derrida objects this idea by giving the example of incest prohibition which is seen in the eyes of structuralists as natural and cultural at the same time in the sense that it is constructed by culture. In this regards, Derrida argues that incest prohibition can belong both to nature and culture at the same time, which leads to the conclusion that one cannot claim that nature is superior to culture and accordingly that speech is superior to writing.

Derrida who is against the claim that a structure must have a center, and who, on the other hand, believes in the concept of the freeplay of structure, definitely does not believe in totalization which is perceived by structuralists as the finite limits of the order of discourse due to a finite number of centers, which means a finite structure, and accordingly a finite interpretation of human sciences. Therefore, Derrida defines totality as being sometimes useless, and sometimes impossible. Language to Derrida is a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite structure. This movement of the freeplay resulting from the infinite substitutions are allowed by the absence of a center or origin. Furthermore, Derrida opines that the significance given by structuralists to the internal originality of the structure neutralizes time and history. He defends his claim by exemplifying that the appearance of a new structure, of an original system, occurs by a rupture with its past, origin, and cause, bringing the idea that the origin of a new structure can only be imagined on the model of catastrophe. Given that, Derrida argues that there is tension of freeplay with history and with presence, claiming that freeplay is the

disruption of presence. In that sense, freeplay is then an interplay of absence and presence. For instance, freeplay means the ability for a new but limited interpretation to emerge from the interpretation of a structure; and at the same time it means the creation of a new different presence through repeating the same center and transforming it into a new different center. In other words, the law of substitutions creates the absence which allows the possibility for a limited interpretation to emerge; while, at the same time, the freeplay is the repetition of a central presence which is different and even has been transported into a new substitute. So, Derrida claims that there are centers which are present and centers which are absent. Centers that are present are vulnerable to absence with the passage of time due to some kind of rupture that may take place and accordingly make a center no center anymore. Therefore, Derrida used the word “play” to replace the “center” of the structure because of the idea that a center which links all substitutions cannot be a center forever and accordingly cannot hold one fixed meaning or one fixed interpretation permanently and does not allow new different interpretations. To Derrida, the word play has the sense of something that can be present and absent at the same time such as the concept of a ghost. Thus, Derrida presents two notions for the freeplay: the limited freeplay, possible but limited interpretations of the structure, and a broader freeplay which is absent and present at the same time resulting in the repetition and replacement of centers.

To conclude, Derrida presented a critique of the structuralism approach which is centered on the idea of the center as the core, the origin, or the arche of the structure within a substitutive system which allows the existence of totalities and accordingly limited or finite interpretations of the world and human sciences. Claiming that a structure is no longer a structure when it has a center because a center cannot be substituted and the idea of structure lies on the process of substitution in the first place, he came up with the notion of play and freeplay to argue that meanings, notions, concepts truth, and many others are not fixed because centers of structures are not. And, that it is only through freeplay that a center can be repeated and replaced to give birth to a new center with a new different meaning. Derrida has greatly influenced the field of literary criticism (Guney & Guney, 2008) especially after he came up with the post-structural theory of deconstruction which actually deconstructs structuralist thoughts of center, origin and totality and declares the nonexistence of final meaning, binary opposition and the absolute truth. Deconstruction then can be perceived as a theory and method that can be used for reading, analysis and interpretation where the rules of binary oppositions are not given that importance (Gough, 2008).

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