Deconstruction and figurative language: An analysis of the way language works

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Abstract

Far from discussing whether deconstruction is obscure, dogmatic or a problematic approach, the aim of this article is to demonstrate that the use of figurative language constitutes a clear example of the deconstructive processes undertaken in the processes of meaning-making. When people try to express and share their ideas and feelings about their world, language acquires more meanings than the literal ones. Firstly, a brief historical background on the development and interests of linguistics is provided to evidence the structural view upon which studies and conceptions about language have been based on. Also, a theoretical juxtaposition between structuralism and deconstruction is developed in order to establish the impact they have in the way language works through the use of figurative language. Then, an analysis –in terms of deconstruction- of some of the most common literary figures (metaphor, simile, personification, paradox, hyperbole, metonymy, synecdoche, allegory and idiom) is provided. Finally, it is concluded that using figurative language represents an act of deconstructing conventional meaning. Literal meaning is destroyed to generate different significations to words and to the world.

Resumen

Deconstrucción y figuras literarias: Un análisis de la forma en que trabaja la lengua

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El presente artículo tiene como objetivo principal demostrar que las figuras literarias, que tan frecuentemente usamos para expresar nuestras ideas, constituyen un ejemplo claro de la forma deconstrucionista como utilizamos la lengua para comunicarnos y para crear significados. Inicialmente, se realiza una revisión básica sobre el desarrollo histórico de la lingüística in términos de los intereses de varias disciplinas relacionadas con ésta y sus visiones de la naturaleza de la lengua. Además, se desarrolla una contraposición teórica entre los postulados del estructuralismo y la deconstrucción para establecer el impacto que estas teorías han tenido en la concepción de la forma como la lengua funciona. Seguidamente, se analizan y relacionan los principios deconstruccionistas con respecto a la naturaleza y uso de las figuras literarias. Finalmente, se concluye que el uso de figuras literarias representa un claro ejemplo de reconstrucción, debido a que el significado convencional de las palabras se destruye a partir de las múltiples y diferentes significaciones que las personas asignan a éstas.
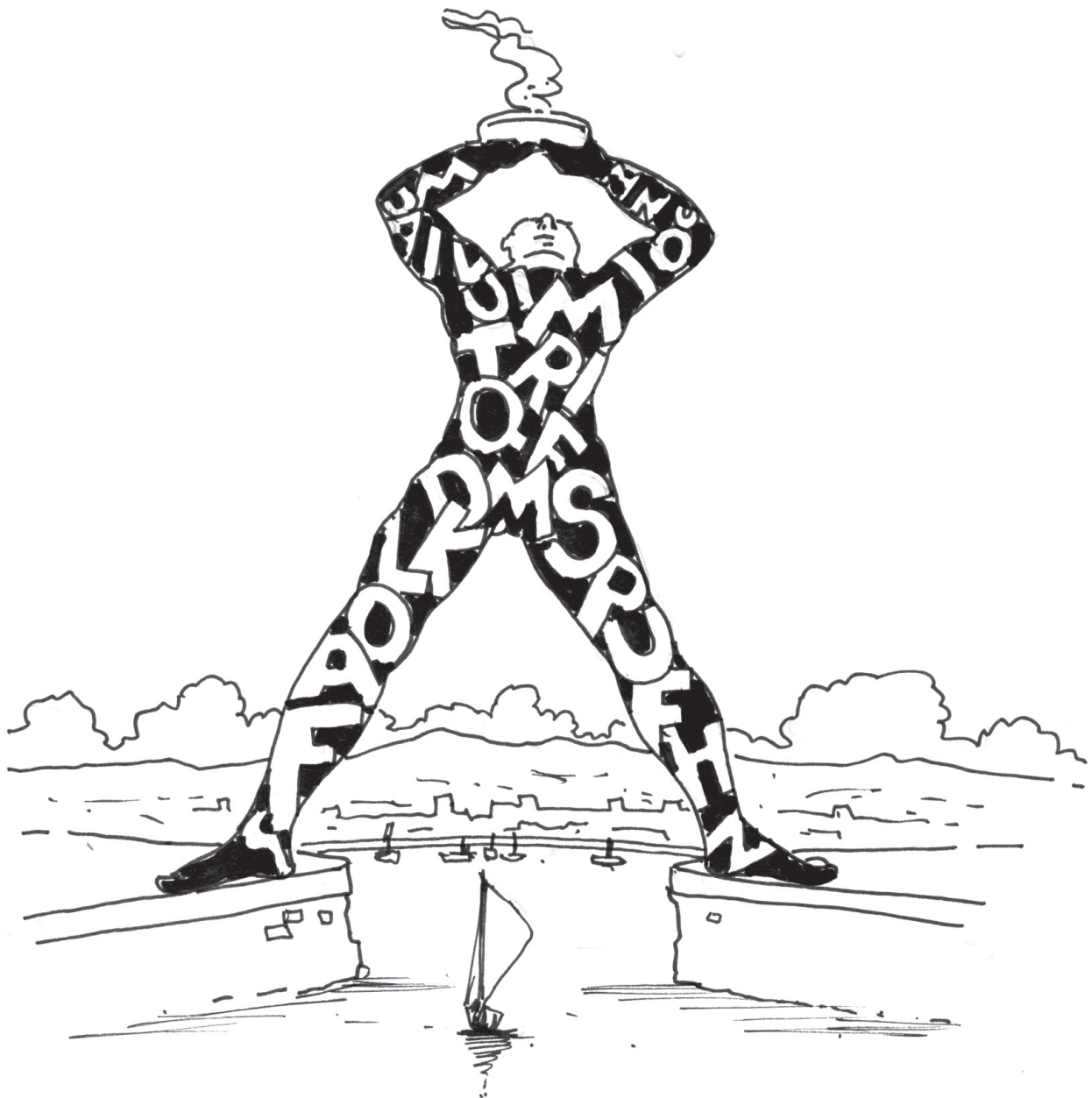
INTRODUCTION: A GENERAL LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND

The study and perception of language have been eclipsed by the different principles linguistics and other disciples have developed and proposed. Throughout the time, there have been many attempts to explain the complex processes undertaken in the constitution, creation, function and use of language. In this regard, Joan Bybee ponders that

Since language is such a complex phenomenon, it has been necessary to narrow the field of study to make it manageable. Thus we commonly separate phonology from syntax, synchrony from diachrony, child language from adult language, and so on, constantly bearing in mind that interactions exist that will eventually have to be taken into account. We then go to formulate theories for these domains –a theory for syntax,

a theory for phonology, a theory for language acquisition-knowing all the while that the ultimate goal is to encompass all these subfields in one theory of language. (2001: 1)

Even though the development of the linguistic field has been marked by different trends and interests, the main general corpus conception about language has been maintained. Language has been considered an organic composition; that is, a systematic construct. Most of language studies have implicitly or explicitly assumed that the construction and use of language operate in structural terms. Because the configuration of language has not traditionally questioned, the interests of linguists have been oriented to study the apparent structural components of language: semantic, semiotics, phonology, phonetics, grammar, syntax, and so on. All these components of language explain linguistic processes following the theoretical precepts of their disciplines but taking for granted the organized structural nature of language. The frameworks of these disciples are organized under the common sense assumption of language as a structure. By presupposing that language implies an organization of different elements, terms such as essence, truth, reason and origin have been used to venerate logocentric worldviews.

In this sense, it is necessary to develop critical analyses that could open the field of linguistics to some other possibilities about the chaotic constitution and use of language. The assumptions related to the structural language-organization need to be enriched with other perspectives about language functioning and usage as those proposed by deconstruction; a view that could include and ex-

pand some other language properties like arbitrariness, différance, duality, tension, discreteness and socio-cultural constitution in the study of language. Rather than thinking of language as an organized structural system, language has a social constitution that makes of it a very complex phenomenon. As Joan Bybee states *"language use includes not just the processing of language, but all the social and international uses to which language is put"* (2001: 2). The historical development of linguistics has emphasized the functioning and characteristics of language following the notions of derivation and essence –mostly- which has supported a logocentric position about the world.

Since the eighteenth century, linguistics has been marked by the study of grammar. A lot of work was done under the systematical approach proposed by Panini. Arturo Agüero states that the Panini's grammar was based on a deep and detailed study of the grammatical components of language which main concern was *"to analyze words in terms of their parts (root, theme, heritage). Such study was sometimes emphasized on everything related to the formation of roots"* (1997: 11) Author's translation. The Panini's meticulous work was developed as a model in the field of linguistic studies. The result of such grammatical view of language set the bases for comparative analysis *"working as a point of reference … it proposed along with the Sanskrit knowledge the birth of the real linguistics"* (Agüero 1977: 12) Author's translation.

Other approaches to study language were related to the "spirit" of speaking communities. In this regard, Wilhelm von Humboldt is considered one of the main

pioneers. He thought that *"the inner form of language (innere Sprachform) is a fundamental component of the human spirit and every language form, then, can be considered as a way to characterize speaking groups"* (Leroy 1976: 52). Author's translation. In other words, language is the manifestation of the human spirit. Far from developing a different position about the composition of language, Humboldt's ideas had strong repercussions on politics which justified racist theories. The premises concerning the grammatical systematization of language were never questioned; that is why, Humboldt "*was interested in the structural differences among languages"* (Leroy 1976: 53) Author's translation.

By the year 1870, the development of linguistics took a different direction. This field

Abandon[ed] the romantic conceptions about the purity of the "primitive" language and rejecting to do genetic analysis of the grammatical forms; it is proposed that comparative grammar does not deal with the confrontation of languages under an original idealized system. Instead, it is a procedure that can be used to reconstruct the history of languages belonging to the same family." (Leroy 1976: 57) Author's translation

This new linguistic perception was called neogrammar. August Scheleicher's work present the first scientific attempts to reconstruct a genealogic tree among Indo-European languages; that is, the first theoretical formulations about the evolution of language. Neogrammarians insisted that language was a collective product with a common root. They *"main-*

tain the interest on the formal aspects of language, the formal and material structure of words …; they consider that a meticulous study of the actual condition of language –from a static perspective- lead to the development of a dynamic (historical) linguistics" (Salvat ed. 1973: 49) Author's translation.

Neogrammarians were strongly concerned with the analysis and proclamation of phonetic laws. The main emphasis of this group was to study the evolution and transformation of language-communities in order to provide comparatists with a set of phonetic rules. The comparative studies carried out under those laws provided a uniformed view of language. But little by little, the reliability of neogrammarian studies was questioned because *"the exceptions to the 'rule', the abnormalities - in prediction- justified the lack of accuracy, the disdain about uniformity and the over-exaggerated use of rules"* (Leroy 1976: 58-59) Author's translation.

During the late nineteenth century, other important disciplines emerged as innovative ways to study language. Semantics was one of those new approaches. Michel Bréal was one of the first scholars coining this term. He declared that *"linguists had mainly demonstrated their great shrewdness to study the body and form of words. However, the rules governing the transformation of senses, the selection of new expressions, the birth and death of expression were still in shadows. Like phonetics and morphology, the aspects related to meaning deserved also a name: Semantics"* (In Leroy 1976: 66) Author's translation. According to George Yule,

> *Semantics is the study of the meaning of words, phrases and sentences. In semantic analysis, there is always an attempt to focus on what the words conventionally mean, rather than on what a speaker might want words to mean on a particular occasion. This technical approach to meaning emphasizes the objective and the general. It avoids the subjective and the local. Linguistic semantics deals with the conventional meaning conveyed by the use of words and sentences of a language.* (1996: 114)

This discipline was more interested in characterizing conceptual meaning than in developing analytic accounts of rules or of the overall structure of words. Semantics helped to establish the differences between syntactic and meaningful constructions. In other words, it clarified that one thing was to have syntactically correct linguistic structures, and another, to construct semantically good constructions.

But semantics also operates under the principles of order and the systematization of the essential components of the meaning conveyed by the literal use of a word. Semantics proposes that the problems of signification are caused by the construction of "inappropriate lexical relationships; that is, words are not used according to what they denote and connote in a conventional system of meaning. When words do not convey their conceptual meaning, communicative "abnormalities" are produced. For instance, in the sentence "*the dog is a good cook*", the oddness of the sentence derives from a transgression of the semantic roles words conventionally fulfill. The role of the agent, the entity performing the action -in this case the *dog*- and the role of the theme

–entity affected by the action: *cook*- do not match their corresponding semantic features. In semantic terms, a *dog* is an animate entity that does not possess human like characteristics as a *cook* does. Then the roles the agent and the theme accomplish in this sentence are conventional incorrect; there is no lexical relationship between a *dog* and a *cook*.

In the first decade of the 1900s, the study of language triggered a reformation in the orientation and aim of linguistic works. Considered the father of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure established a difference between the structure of a speaking community language –langue- and the individual's actual speech –parole- declaring that *"the proper study of linguistics is the system (langue), not the individual utterances of its speakers (parole)"* (Bressler 1999: 92). Even though Saussure did not abandon the diachronic perspective of language –examination related to phonetic changes in Indo-European languages-, he emphasized the synchronism which approaches the constitution and historical development of language in terms of the way it operates. The operability of language did not relay on the mimetic theory of language structure but on signs composed by two parts: signifier and signified. This new perspective developed the science called semiotics where meaning *"can be studied systematically, in terms of both how this meaning occurs and the structures that allow it to operate"* (Bressler 1999: 93). In other words, Saussurean linguistics re-organized the configuration of other disciplines and proposals such as phonetics, grammar and semantics through the re-articulation of their roles in the construction of meaning.

The twentieth century inherited the premises of structuralism. According to Joan Bybee,

Early in the twentieth century, a proposal was to distinguish the shared knowledge that a community of speakers has from the actual uses to which that knowledge is put (de Saussure 1916). May researchers then focused their attention on the structure of that shared knowledge (called 'langue' by Saussure and 'competence' by Chomsky 1965) and paid little attention to language use in real time. The focus on competence, or the structure of language, turned out to be extremely productive. Structuralism provided linguists with a work-shop of analytic tools for breaking down the continuous speech stream into units, and these units into features; structuralism postulated to different levels of grammar, organizing language and the people who study it into fields –phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. (2001: 1-2)

The structural views of language as well as the aspects associated to its organization, constitution and systematization are legacies in most of recent theories about language. Language is still perceived from a logocentric perspective where meaning is the result of an organic production.

Consequently, most of the studies about language and the production of meaning have been done under the –or at least most- premises of structuralism. Usually, the aspects that represent a "non-standard" or "formal" use of language – as it has been mostly assumed the study of figurative language- are perceived as *variations* of the *norm*. Violating

the structural self-enclosed systems of rules that –according to structuralism- compose language generate an arbitrariness shared by a group of speakers who has mastered the structure of *langue*. That is to say, arbitrary relationships between the signifier and the signified are comprehensible because langue is a system that incorporates individual speech which components are based on differences. Those differences constitute conventional points of references among individuals who shared a social background. Hence the study of figurative language should be patterned –according to structural views- under the rules of langue as if it were langue an inner unified whole, and the individual with his/her irregular parole, just an element within langue.

But it is precisely such condition of arbitrariness and difference what generates a philosophical and epistemological conflict in the conception of language as a well-ruled and organized structure. The nature of figurative language evidences the exceptions to the rules when conceiving the use of language as a matter of having arranged structures, individual utterances, sounds and signs. At this point, the deconstruction theory can help to enrich linguistic studies by providing different perceptions about the way language works, and then, the way people construct –or deconstruct- meaning. To have a less complex notion about the contribution of the deconstructionist proposal, it becomes necessary to clarify the basic linguistic premises about the functioning and nature of language according to structuralism and deconstruction.

STRUCTURALISM AND DECONSTRUCTION:

JUXTAPOSED VISIONS OF LANGUAGE

Rather than considering words as symbols that mirror the world in a liner way, Ferdinand de Saussure asserted that language is primarily determined by its own internal organization. Saussurean linguistics proposes that language is composed by a serious of building blocks (such as morphemes, graphemes, phonemes, signs, signifiers, signified) that permit people to talk about the world. According to Saussure, each sign (signifier) has a specific and unique sound-image as well as an equivalent graphic form that creates its specific and unique meaning (signified). Consequently, society, culture, reality, language, life and so on, are aspects governed by the rules and codes of predefined systems. From this perspective, structuralism views language as a matter of rules and structures that, when "correctly" arranged, provide meaning. Under the structuralist premises, morphology, syntax, grammar, phonetics, phonology and semiotics organize language to effectively convey meaning. Then, the process of communication is a well-organized system

However, the Saussurean theory remains a linear relationship between the signified and the signifier. Its theoretical principles state that the parole –individual speech- is always governed by langue. Hence any parole is going to be determined by a specific language system. As a result, people need to follow a standard linguistic model to convey meaning. That is why, meaning is conventional.

On the other hand, authors such as Jacques Derrida challenged the Saussurean notions about the way language works. This French philosopher mostly developed a post-

structuralist theory that questions the conception of truth and reality, the reading of arts, and the ways in which meanings are created.

For deconstruction, meaning-making processes are considered dynamic constructs. Meaning cannot be a stable convention –as it is proposed by structuralism- because people constantly recreate significance through social interaction. Therefore, meaning-making is a chaotic process where no word can have an essential significance. In other words,

> there is no concept which is not embroiled in an open-ended play of signification, shot through with the traces and fragments of other ideas. It is just that, out of this play of signifiers, certain meanings are elevated by social ideologies to a privileged position, or made the centres around which other meanings are forced to turn. (Eagleton 1983: 131)

Deconstructive premises mainly deal with the idea of de-centering logocentric standards of meaning, beauty, correctness, truth and reality. This theory rejects the notion that everything has an essence, a basic structure that operates within a pre-established system. It is not that deconstruction denies the existence of the structures but their stability as if they were conventions. From a deconstructive view, structures are moveable, temporal and conditional to historical events that work in terms of change and differentiation.

Deconstruction has been associated to a poststructuralist trend. As a philosophical movement, postmodernism constantly questions all kind of traditional conceptions about any human production and thinking. Contrarily to modernity, common sense assumptions are not accepted as universal truths. As Charles Bressler explains,

> [p]ostmodernist thinkers rejected modernity's representation of discourse (the map) and replace it with the collage. Unlike the fixed, objective nature of a map, a collage's meaning is always changing. Whereas the viewer of a map relies on and obtains meaning and direction from the map itself, the viewer of a collage actually participates in the production of meaning. And unlike a map, which allows one interpretation of reality, a collage permits many possible meanings, for the viewer can simply juxtapose a variety of combinations of images, thereby constantly changing the meaning of the collage. Each viewer, then, creates his or her own subjective picture of reality. (1993: 118)

In other words, poststructuralist theories -such as deconstruction- definitely demolish the logocentric idea that has dominated all human behavior and interaction –especially in Western cultures-. Deconstruction does not proclaim the traditional notions of order, organization, and unity upon which many people have built their perception about the world. In this sense, Jacques Derrida ponders that *"the function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure –one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure- but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the free-play of the structure"* (1993: 224). In a great sense, it is to say, that the signified losses its unquestionable power in order to accept that there are many significations outside the structure.

The application of deconstruction to discourse analysis rejects the belief that language is fully representative and capable of producing a fixed meaning and interpretation. Because deconstruction states that there is no essence, no correctness and no completeness, it can not be possible to find an organic meaning in language. According to Derrida,

> it was probably necessary to begin thought in the form of a being-present, that the center had no natural locus, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinitive number of sigh-substitutions came into play. This moment was that in which language invaded the universal problematic; that is which, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse –provided we can argue on this word- that is to say, when everything became a system where the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside the system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification ad infinitum. (1993: 228)

Rather than considering language as a whole that carries a main and central significance, deconstruction points out that there is no meaning but many. Bressler explains that

> [t]here is no such point of reference, for there is no ultimate truth or inherently unifying element in the universe and thus no ultimate reality
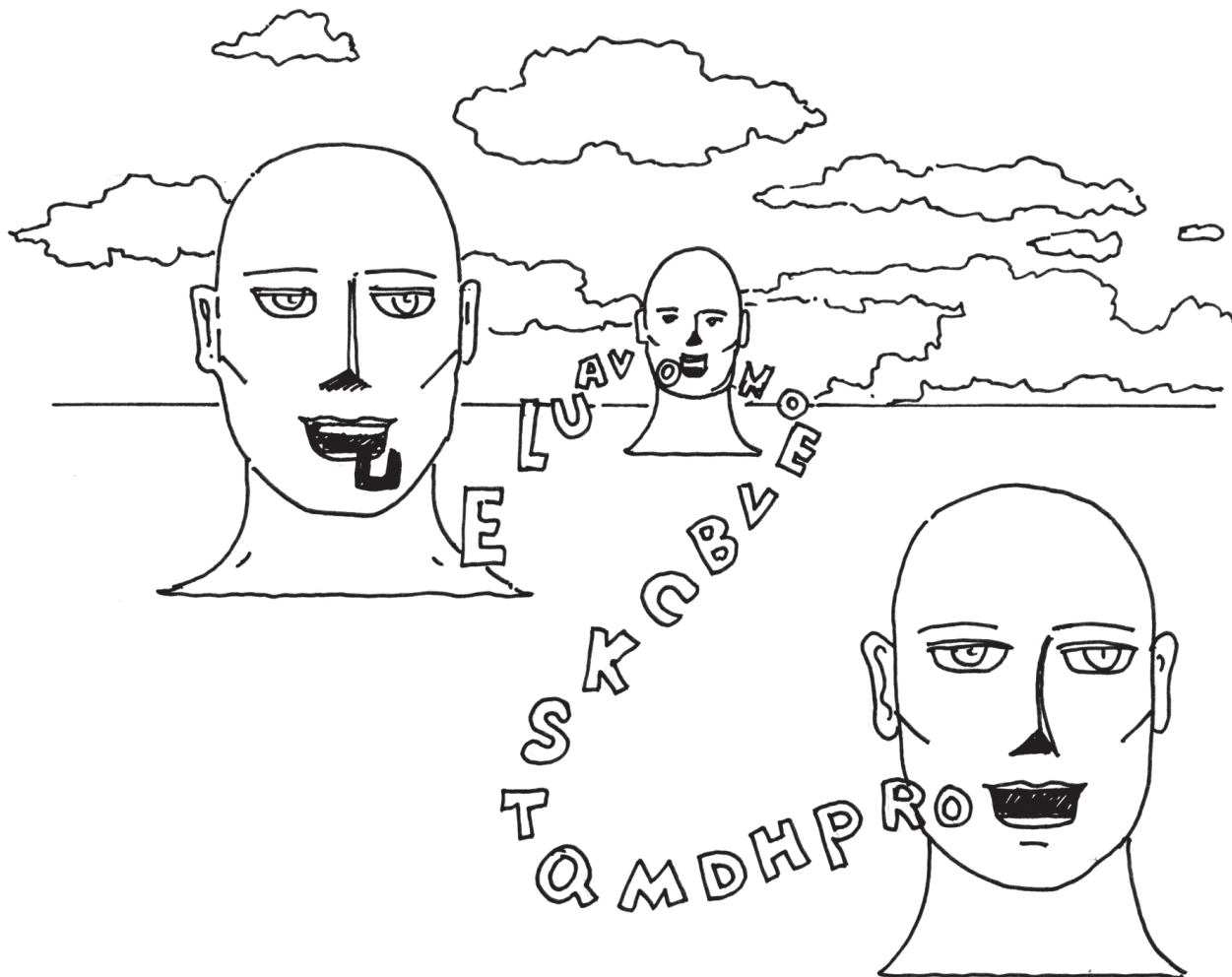
[…], all that is left is differ-ence. […] Reality becomes a human construct that is shaped by each individual's dominant social group. There is no center and no one objective reality, but as many realities as there are people. Each person's interpretation of reality is necessarily different. (1999: 119)

The obvious appeal of this view emphasizes on the empowerment of the speaker, listener, reader and/or writer as well as the recognition of the influences social and cultural backgrounds play in discourse. Individuals are allowed to give many different interpretations to what they listen and/or read. In other words, each person develops a kind of personalized deconstructive interpretation of the conventional signification assigned to words. In a first instance, this is a way to oppose the static transcendental signified of Western philosophy.

At this point, the Western metaphysical assumption of centers is subverted by a deconstructive view that wants to demonstrate the instability upon which any concept is grounded. Western thinking is based on the belief that people establish their relationships with others in a kind of a self-sufficient "inner world"; this is what Derrida calls the logocentric view. In Bressler's words, logocentricism is *"[t]he belief that there is an ultimate reality or center of truth that can serve as the basis for all our thoughts and actions"* (1999: 124). Logocentrism presupposes that existence is a matter of being present. Evidently, Western philosophy can be considered as the "metaphysics of presence," the obsession of the scientific method. According to this view, something exists if –and only if- its presence can be proved in terms of science.

Some of the main repercussions of logecentric views deal with the construction of hierarchies. Jonathan Culler states that

> [e]ach of these concepts, all of which involve a notion of presence, has figured in philosophical attempts to describe what is fundamental and has been treated as a centering, grouping force or principle. In oppositions such as meaning/form, soul/body, intuition/ expression, literal/metaphorical, nature/empirical, serious/ nonserious, the superior term belongs to the logos and the higher presence; the inferior term marks a fall. Logocentrism thus assumes the priority of the first term and conceives the second in relation to it, as a complication, a negation, a manifestation, or a disruption of the first. (1989: 93)

Opposites, then, are manifestations of pre-established relations of power. In other words, opposites constitute ladders held to organize the world through language. Such hierarchical relationships are what deconstruction tries to revert. Even though deconstruction accepts that hierarchal binary oppositions exist, it questions the superiority assigned to privileged conceptions. Deconstruction assumes that meaning is a provisional construct involved in a dynamic process of changes and differences.

While structuralism treats binary oppositions as stable constructs, deconstruction uses them to show the lack of stability they have. In this sense, deconstruction states that differences precede the location of meaning in an act of displacement. When speaking, listening, reading and writing, there is a constant movement that destroys and recreates form and meaning

where the structural organization of opposites is disrupted. This also implies a deconstruction of the metaphysical premise of presence. As Jonathan Culler remarks,

> [h]ere the issue has been the hierarchical opposition presence/absence. A deconstruction would involve the demonstration that for presence to function as it is said to, it must have the qualities that supposedly belong to its opposite, absence. Thus, instead of defining absence in terms of presence, as its negation, we can treat "presence" as the effect of a generalized absence or, […] of difference. (1989: 95)

Therefore, meaning depends on absence and opposites. These arbitrary but referential supplementations (instable relationships carried out among the elements of binary oppositions), no longer delimit meaning to a single and unique significance. Definitive meaning cannot exist because supplementations are never the same. They depend on the way people interact, on their contexts, cultural backgrounds and their moral codes because it is impossible to think of human beings –and their activities- as something without diversity. As Derrida explains,

> the play of differences involves syntheses and referrals that prevent there from being at any moment or in any way a simple element that is present in and of itself and refers only to itself. Whether in written or in spoken discourse, no element can function as a sign without relating to another element which itself is not simply present. This linkage means that each "element" –phoneme or grapheme- is

> constituted with reference to the trace in it of the other elements of the sequence or system. This linkage, this weaving, is the text, which is produced only through the transformation of another text. Nothing, either in the elements or in the system, is anywhere simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces. (in Culler 1989: 99)

In other words, by differing, things become themselves and not other things instead. When becoming a different thing, absence is necessary to create meaning. Therefore, differences precede the location of meaning by undertaking a process of displacement. This movable act happens because no one can completely master the context in which people interact; "to codify context can always be grafted onto the context it sought to describe, yielding a new context which escapes the previous formulation. Attempts to describe the limits always make possible a displacement of those limits […]." (Culler 1989: 124)

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE: A DECONSTRUCTIVE VIEW OF LANGUAGE AND THE WORLD

Deconstruction has transcended the empirical speculation to be able to develop more accurately theoretical perspectives about the way(s) meaning is conveyed in very complex uses of language. It can help to understand and explain the way language works as well as the way people express their ideas, emotions, attitudes and inquiries about their surroundings. In this sense, the use of figurative language constitutes a clear example to illustrate the deconstructive

processes in which individuals are involved when using language.

Whenever a person describes something by terms of another; that is, comparing it with something else, figurative language is employed. At this point, literary figures –by nature- destroy conventional linguistic systems. Every figurative expression deconstructs itself to go beyond the literal meaning of words in order to provide new effects or insights of an idea, feeling or a subject. As deconstruction proposes, the use and constant re-creation of figurative language is a never ending process of re-stating meaning out of conventions. This way of saying something and meaning another is possible because words in literal expressions connote what they mean according to a dictionary definition, while words of everyday usage –as it happens in figurative speech- express additional layers of meaning to connotations. Thus, the inherent flexibility of language as a deconstructive act permits many possible meanings for the apparent unified literal ones.

Deconstruction argues that significations are never present but absent as it happens in figurative language. One cannot focus on the conventional meaning to decode figurative language; instead, people destroy such conventions to convey meaning. To put it in other words, the "essence" of what is intended to be said through any literary figure is outside its systemic structure. There is no possible meaning that the signifier can confer to its apparent equivalent signified.

Any form of figurative language –metaphors, personifications, paradoxes, similes, synecdoches, antitheses, hyperboles, metonymies, allegories and idioms among oth-

ers- works deconstructively to re-create meaning when writing a poem, a play, a story, or when taking place in a conversation, speech, and/or lecture. This is to say people perceive the world as if it were a metaphorical expression. So language becomes a metaphorical means rather than a system to refer to the world.

Using figurative language depends on people's backgrounds because it is necessary to share internal cognitive, affective and social frameworks to interpret the world. Social and cultural environments are made up of experiences that create memories of all the possible meanings that might be available to apply to words according to particular contexts. This set of memories will give prominence to the most common or literal meaning, but also suggests that individuals share a background that makes possible the condition of iterability proposed by Derrida.

When using figurative language, individuals can trace repetitions among the elements involved in a figurative expression but attributing different meanings to each element. In this process, the condition of repeatability belongs to every figurative form. It is this condition what destroys the logocentric ideal of the self-presence concept; and at the same time, it shows some of the possible combinations of meaning-relationships any individual can make. As Jonathan Culler declares "*[e]xploring the iterability of language, its ability to function in new contexts with the new force, a treatise on textual grafting would attempt to classify various ways of inserting one discourse in another or intervening in the discourse one is interpreting*" (1989: 135). This is what happens when developing figurative speech. To explore the possible insertions of

meaning-relationships in discourses is to consider the indeterminacy in which repeatability provokes meaning through the distortion of conventional conceptualizations. To clarify such position, a more detailed analysis of figurative language is needed.

a) The case of Metaphors and Similes

When analyzing the deconstructive nature of figurative language, metaphors become clear points of reference. They are implied analogies that identify one object with another and ascribe to the first one more qualities or characteristics of the second referential element. They constitute a symbolic, semantic and pragmatic "substitution" –a kind of displacement in terms of deconstruction- of concepts or things. A metaphor exists in the way its conventional meaning is absent. For instance, in the expression *his life is an enormous desert*, a metaphorical analogy is made between two elements –life and desert- essentially and conceptually different. Then, meaning is conveyed through *différance* rather than by transcendental signified.

Displacement also occurs when using similes. People can relate one thing to another by associating the characteristics or conditions that are not ascribed in conventional ways. In the case of similes, people use them to make comparisons by using the expressions like, as and such as to associate the characteristics and essences of one thing to describe another.

b) Personifications

From a structuralist perspective, a personification is the act of representing an idea, thing or being as having human characteristics or

attributions. Meaning is conveyed by establishing conventional co-relations among the elements involved in a personification. On the other hand, deconstruction would argue that assigning the qualities "of" a person to a non human entity; e.g. animal, object, emotion or idea generates a clear disruption of hierarchies where the human centralized vision of the world manifests the impossible exclusivity of the so called "human" condition. Then, there is a de-centralization of the human position in the world. In this sense, a personification is a kind of metaphorical expression that deconstructs the logocentric characteristics assigned specifically –and as a unique aspect of– to human beings to displace the hierarchical position people have assumed over other species and things.

When people use expressions such as *I have a friendly dog* or *the sunset knocks insistently my door*, the logic of the structure cannot provide a significant norm because words mean far from their conventional connotations and denotations. It is the reversal of the meaningful structures of the sentence what re-creates meaning. The adjective –friendly- and the verb –knock- which are words conventionally attributed only to human beings, re-configures the world order and the human position in that space. In this case, the elements associated to the
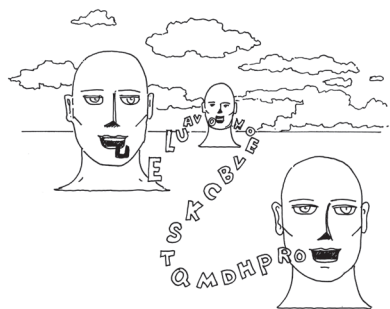
nature and conception of friendship –such as behavior, certain values and social interaction- are consciously or unconsciously de-centering the human superiority in order to expand the conditions of friendliness and knocking to other species or things. The appropriation of the "human" condition is an act of subversion against the conventional systems developed by the Western thinking. In a personification, what is considered exclusively human like loses such state to become a characteristic *of* the non-human.

c) Paradoxes and Antitheses

Paradoxes and antitheses are particularly associated to a crucial phenomenon developed by deconstructionists: contradiction. At first, these literary figures seem to contradict themselves as if they were referring to something illogical. However, that contradiction is only an illusion caused by the Western metaphysical view of the world. That is to say, that the supposedly contradictory point developed in a paradox and in an antithesis relies on the idea of static binary oppositions.

Paradoxes and antithesis destroy the static and unidirectional conception of structuralist binary oppositions. Instead of the "nonsense" construction, a contradiction becomes an important element to create meaning. To get the meaning(s) of the statement *a little girl is powerful and dangerous* requires a deconstruction of the words girl, little, powerful and dangerous. By convention, the word *girl* refers to a female whose age is not fully grown. *Little* can mean weak or small in size while the word *powerful* refers to the capability and ability of having the control of a thing or someone. In the case of the word *danger-*

ous, it is related to the condition of threat, being able to menace stability. However, this structural analysis only justifies the perception of contradiction from which the concept of paradoxes have being coined and assumed. The apparent contradiction of the words *little girl* against *powerful* and *dangerous* juxtaposes their semantic connotations to make possible the understanding of the statement.

In a paradox as well as in an antithesis tension is developed; a key element deconstruction considers in the generation of meaning. Then, what seems to be a mismatched in meaning becomes the source of significance demonstrating that meaning is not created structurally but by deconstructing the structure. Paradoxes and antitheses use opposites to mean something else than the mere antagonism stated. At this point, meaning is absent from the structure.

d) Synecdoches

According to X.J. Kennedy and Dona Gioia, a synecdoche is defined as *"a part for the whole. This is a way of perceiving and thinking as well as speaking, in its commonest form, it singles out some part of a thing as important enough to stand for the whole thing"* (2002: 47). Using a part of something to stand for the whole thing creates a decentralization of the transcendental signifier and signified. The inferior becomes the privileged. Contrarily to the hierarchal arrangement of things in which the world has been traditionally organized, synecdoches cause a chaos of the structure where transcendental signifiers cannot provide the source of meaning. In fact, a synecdoche also tears down hegemonies by reversing the positions of the parts that compose them. This is what occurs when using

the expression *he is a brain.* The human body as well as its potentiality is reduced to one of its constitutive parts: the brain. In this synecdoche, meaning does not rely on the wholeness that constitutes an element but on a part of it. What becomes more important is the part instead of the complete composition to which that part belongs. In other words, the part –in this case the brain- does not become into something because it is an element of a complete organized system but because it has the capacity to stand by itself for the whole system.

The process of signification activated in a synecdoche implies a re-construction of a world that is primarily affected by the particular contexts and interactions among individuals. Therefore, the apparent uniformity and uniqueness of the signifiers and signifies are destroyed to express –out of conventions- the way people interpret their realities and world; the way language works. The process of reinterpreting parts and whole systems constitutes a deconstructionist act of displacement that challenges the proposed stability of conventions in the structural organization and operability of language.

e) Hyperboles

In the case of hyperboles, they refer to an over emphasis of an aspect of something. In other words, hyperboles are exaggerations in which the excessive expansion of a meaningful aspect is what permits the creation of significance. For instance, the hyperboles "*we have talked about it a thousand times, I had a day of 48 hours, I could eat an elephant*" are composed by deliberate overstatements not intended to be assumed literally. Even when the dramatic

effect could represent an impossible act, the "lies or irrationalities" they express are indeed the manifestations of meaning. Instead of having language working under conventional parameters, hyperboles force individuals to decode –decenter- those conventional structures of significance to convey meaning.

Hierarchical structures are again subverted. The institutionalized structures of signification are used as binary oppositions permitting "the impossible" –in conventional terms- to become reality. As Jacques Derrida states

> *What a deconstructionist point of view tries to demonstrate is that since conventions, the institutions and the consensus are stabilizations …, stabilizations are essentially unstable and chaotic. Then, it becomes necessary to stabilize because stabilizations are not neutral. Due to there is instability, stabilization becomes necessary. Even when chaos and instability are essential, they are also the worst people have to face with the provisional laws, conventions, rules, politics and hegemonies. At the same time, chaos and instability constitute a possibility of change, a possibility to de-stabilize.* Author's translation (1998: 162-163)

By nature, hyperboles de-stabilize the pre-established systems of signification. This process of de-stabilization is what makes possible meaning, and not the convention.

f) Metonymy

Stating that "*someone drunk the whole bottle*"; even though, the bottle is still materially present is

to use language in metonymical ways. According to Mark Jarman, metonymy is "*a figure of speech which is characterized by the substitution of a term naming an object closely associated with the word in mind for the word itself*" (2006). When people say things like "*she is the big name of the company*", the phrase *big name* is used to stand for greater concept or group than the one it refers in synchronic terms.

g) Idioms and allegories

Idioms and allegories are composed by a group of words, whose signification considered as a whole, differs from the conventional meanings of each word thought in isolation. As a deconstructionist could argue, no meaning is conceived in a structure but in a socio-cultural environment. In the case of idioms and allegories, sharing a cognitive, semantic, pragmatic, and cultural background is imperative to understand their significance. In other words, "*meaning is context-bound, but context is boundless*" (Culler, 1989: 123). That is why, understanding the expression "*money talks in every business*" –an idiom composed by a personification- requires that individuals go far from literal interpretations. *Money* is not an animate human subject; therefore, money does not have the required essence of life to be able to perform the mentioned action –talking-. People can immediately understand that a literal interpretation is worthless.

The same process of signification and interpretation operates when using allegories. Both idioms and allegories are especially contextual productions that generate specific associations of meaning –in the case of idioms- and that disrupt the location of space and time –in the case of allegories-.

Again, there is a deconstruction of the Western metaphysical thinking.

CONCLUSIONS

Linguistic studies have been triggered by different interests about the constitution, function, evolution and use of language. That is why disciplines like grammar, neogrammar, syntax, semantics, semiotics, phonology, phonetics and others have been used to approach language from multiple perspectives. However, they all have assumed that the nature of language is structurally articulated in an organic form; that meanings are coined into conventions and conventions are logocentric. The main theory in charge of articulating such ideas was structuralism. Even nowadays, the linguistic field is strongly influenced by the Saussurean linguistic view about meaning-making processes.

In this sense, deconstruction offers a different perspective about the way language works and meaning is conveyed because it denies the hierarchical linear process traditionally grounded in language. Deconstruction is certainly based on a subversive philosophical approach that provides a very different conception of the world from that one developed by the structuralist perspective. Even though some authors question the validity and reliability of deconstructionist analysis, the nature and use of figurative speech evidence that there is more than conventional and organic relations when referring to meaning-making processes.

Figurative language shows that meaning is created by the destruction of conventional connotations (structures). In doing so, language becomes more than a system structurally organized. The ways peo-

ple understand and use figurative language represent a clear proof that deconstruction is necessary to conceive the world. To mean something, individuals certainly need a platform of signification, but such situation does not mean that stability is needed to convey meaning. Instead, the chaos of the structure is what allows meaning to be.

Any figurative form is –in itself- a deconstruction of the Western conception of truth and reality. Despite the controversies deconstruction has provoked among linguists, philosophers and literary critics, every figurative expression demonstrates that the process of communication is determined –in many cases- by absence, chaos, indeterminacy, displacement and iterability. The use of similes, metaphors, synecdoches, personifications, antitheses, paradoxes, hyperboles, metonymies, allegories, idioms among others, constitutes one of the clearest examples where individuals deconstructs the conventional world to mean something. This deconstructionist process re-configures people's position in the world as well as the structural Western relations of significance. As deconstruction proposes, figurative language displaces the traditional locus of meaning that traditionally characterizes the essences of being and objects.

Therefore, every figurative form embodies a desconctructive act where *"what gets called literal meaning is only a plausible default in minimally specified contexts"* (Fauconnier and Turner 2002: 69). To put it in other words, the notion of the literal meaning is destroyed. Instead, there is a play of binary oppositions where the absence of the literal meaning permits the meaning-making process to take place. Then, the idea of "literal

meaning" plays any privileged role because it is not an essential part in the construction of meaning but a referential construct to decenter its hierarchical significance.

Finally, it has been very common to characterize literal as the antonym of figurative as if the two concepts were part of a kind of binary static opposition. However, deconstruction proposes binary oppositions as movable, diffusive and unstable relations. Rather than denoting polarized centers of significance, binary oppositions become processes of re-configuring meaning. Figurative language is an example of such complex reconstruction because the meaning goes beyond their unified and essential convention. This situation makes possible the recognition of diversity and multiple interpretations in a logocentric linguistic world. When people start to decode –deconstruct- the incoming messages of figurative language, meaning begins to rely on something absent, something that is not literal. But it does not mean that becoming not literal refers to becoming antonymous. Instead, binary operations constitute relations of supplementations.

Even though, the process of interpretation and communication takes place in reference to a system, this system is not necessarily a unique and stable organization of the structure because it is not its systematic form what shapes and conveys meaning but the displacement of the convention. Meaning, then, destroys the logocentric ideal of the self-presence concept demonstrating the different possibilities of meaning-relationships a person can recreate out of the standardized linguistic processes. Referring to something by means of another creates a gap that can be only de-coded by the individu-

als who shared local backgrounds of references, interactions and interpretations because substitution –displacement- is created in a context where the referred object is absent. At this outstanding point, context acquires a special role. Readers, listeners, speakers and writers are likely to create meaning from what they read, hear and say if they share a socio-cultural context. Aspects like social activities, the organization of communities as well as the role of institutions shape rituals, traditions, values, worldviews, moral codes, behaviors -and so on- into backgrounds of knowledge. People need to identify themselves with that context because it functions as a decodifying-agent of their practices. Figurative language is, then, a means to express the deconfication of the socio-cultural contexts individuals shared. That is why definitive meaning cannot be possible due to there are no definitive interpretations of contexts.

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