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**Social Theory and
Modern Sociology**

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Structuralism, post-structuralism and the production of culture

Structuralism, and post-structuralism also, are dead traditions of thought.¹ Notwithstanding the promise they held in the fresh bloom of youth, they have ultimately failed to generate the revolution in philosophical understanding and social theory which once was their pledge. In this discussion, I shall not so much seek to write their obituary as to indicate what they have bequeathed to us today in respect of intellectual possessions which still might be put to good use. For although they did not transform our intellectual universe in the manner which was often claimed, they nonetheless drew to our attention some problems of considerable and durable significance.

Of course, many have doubted that there ever was a coherent enough body of thought to be designated by the name 'structuralism', let alone the even vaguer appellation 'post-structuralism'.² After all, most of the leading figures ordinarily lumped under these labels have rejected these terms as applying meaningfully to their own endeavours. Saussure, commonly regarded as the founder of structuralist linguistics, barely uses the term 'structure' at all in his work.³ Lévi-Strauss at one time actively promoted the cause of both 'structural

¹ Delivered as lectures at the University of Melbourne, Australia, in August 1986.

² See W. G. Runciman: 'What is structuralism?' in *Sociology in its Place*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.

³ Ferdinand de Saussure: *Course in General Linguistics*. London: Fontana, 1974.

anthropology' and of 'structuralism' more generally, but has become more cautious in characterizing his approach in these ways over the latter part of his career. Barthes may have in his early writings drawn fairly heavily from Lévi-Strauss, but later on any such connections became quite remote. Foucault, Lacan, Althusser and Derrida diverge radically both from the main ideas of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss and from one another. The homogeneity needed to speak of a distinct tradition of thought might appear to be almost completely lacking.

But for all their diversity there are a number of themes that crop up in the works of all these authors. Moreover, with the exception of Saussure, all are French and have been involved in networks of mutual influence and contact. In using the terms 'structuralism' and 'post-structuralism' in what follows, I have in mind Saussure and Lévi-Strauss as belonging to the first category, with the others in the second. 'Post-structuralism' is admittedly a fairly loose label for a cluster of authors who, while reacting against some of the distinctive emphases of earlier structuralist thought, at the same time take over some of those very ideas in their own work. Thus while they handle these themes in diverse ways, the following can be said to be persistent, and definitive, characteristics of structuralism and post-structuralism: the thesis that linguistics, or more accurately, certain aspects of particular versions of linguistics, are of key importance to philosophy and social theory as a whole; an emphasis upon the relational nature of totalities, connected with the thesis of the arbitrary character of the sign, together with a stress upon the primacy of signifiers over what is signified; the de-centring of the subject; a peculiar concern with the nature of writing, and therefore with textual materials; and an interest in the character of temporality, as somehow constitutively involved with the nature of objects and events. There is not a single one of these themes which does not bear upon issues of importance for social theory today. Equally, however, there is not one in respect of which the views of any of the writers listed above could be said to be fully acceptable.

Problems of linguistics

Structuralism was of course originally a movement within linguistics, at the same time as it was an endeavour to demonstrate the significance of concepts and methods of linguistics for a wide variety of issues in the humanities and social sciences. Saussure's distinction between

langue and *parole* may justly be regarded as the key idea in structuralist linguistics. The distinction removes the study of 'language' from the sphere of the contingent and the contextual. As an overall structural form, language is to be separated from the multifarious uses to which particular speech acts may be put. *Parole* is what Saussure calls the 'executive side of language', while *langue* is 'a system of signs in which the only essential thing is the union of meanings and acoustic images'.⁴ Language is thus an idealized system, inferred from, but nevertheless independent of, the particular uses to which speech is put. The actual sound contents of language are in a way irrelevant to the analysis of *langue*, because the concern is with the formal relations between sounds, or marks, not with their actual substance. Although in Saussure a certain mentalism and reliance upon psychology remain, in principle linguistics becomes clearly separable from other disciplines concerned with the study of human activity. Phonemics becomes also cleanly differentiated from phonetics, the latter being of relatively marginal importance to the main core of linguistic analysis.

There is an inconsistency at the heart of Saussure's conception of *langue*. On the one hand language is regarded as ultimately a psychological phenomenon, organized in terms of mental properties. On the other — as Saussure's seeming indebtedness to Durkheim would indicate — language is a collective product, a system of social representations. As critics have pointed out, if language is essentially a psychological reality, signs are no longer arbitrary. Since the relations that constitute language would be patterned in terms of characteristics of mind, they would have a determinate form controlled by mental processes. 'Thus if language is looked at as a mental reality the sign is by no means arbitrary and its meaning is by no means defined by its relations with contemporaneous elements of the language.'⁵

Broadly speaking, most forms of structuralist linguistics have opted for the 'psychological' rather than the 'social' version of *langue*. It was by adopting this approach that Chomsky was able to effect a fusion of ideas drawn from Continental linguistics with notions taken from the 'behaviourist structuralism' of Bloomfield, Harris and others within linguistics in the United States. Bloomfield and Harris sought to separate linguistics completely from any kind of mentalism or

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Simon Clarke: *The Foundations of Structuralism*. Sussex: Harvester, 1981, p. 123.

psychology.⁶ For them the aim of linguistics is to analyse language as far as possible solely as sequences of regularized sounds. Attention is not to be concentrated upon the interpretative involvements of speakers with language-use. While this standpoint at first sight seems substantially distinct from Saussurian linguistics, and while indeed its leading advocates rejected the differentiation of *langue* from *parole*, there are certainly some underlying affinities, which Chomsky was able to bring out. Redefining the distinction of *langue* and *parole* as one of competence and performance, and dissociating himself in a radical way from the behaviourism of Bloomfield and Harris, Chomsky was able to reconnect a mentalistic basis for language with an elaborated model of formal linguistics. Given the differentiation which is made between competence and performance, Chomskyan linguistics necessarily accords a central significance to syntax.⁷ Its objective is not to explicate all utterances of the speakers within a particular language community, but only the syntactical structures of an idealized language speaker. Chomsky's theory reintroduces interpretation, because the identification of syntactical correctness depends upon what is deemed acceptable by language speakers. It also gives a certain priority to the creative components of language, in the sense that the competent speaker is able to generate an indefinite corpus of syntactically acceptable sentences. It is arguable that the Chomskyan competence/performance distinction is in major respects superior to the *langue/parole* differentiation, because Chomsky at least has a model of the linguistic agent. As Chomsky points out, criticizing Saussure, the latter treated *langue* mainly as a repository of 'word-like elements' and 'fixed phrases', contrasting it to the more flexible character of *parole*. What is missing is an account of the 'mediating term' between *langue* and *parole*. The agent is for Chomsky the locus of what he regards as the 'rule-governed creativity' of language as a system.⁸

Chomsky's transformational grammar is one approach influenced by some of the emphases of Saussure; another is the linguistics of the

⁶ M. Bloomfield: *Language*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1957; Z. Harris: *Methods in Structural Linguistics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.

⁷ See, for example, Noam Chomsky: *Language and Mind*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968.

⁸ Noam Chomsky: *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory*. The Hague: Mouton, 1964, p. 23.

Prague School, which via Jakobson was the main influence upon Lévi-Strauss. Broadly speaking one can say that the Prague group followed the 'social' conception of *langue* rather than the 'psychological' one. Whereas Chomsky's linguistics focuses upon the competence of the individual speaker, the linguistics of the Prague School concentrates above all upon language as a communicative medium. Thus semantics is not completely severed from syntactics, and the nature of *langue* expresses relations of meaning. As Trubetzkoy claims, linguistics should investigate 'which phonic differences are linked, in the language under consideration, with differences of meaning, how these differentiating elements or marks are related to one another, and according to what rules they combine to form words and phrases'.⁹ Stress upon the use of language as communication, combined with an emphasis on meaning, would seem to compromise the autonomous character of linguistics as specified by Saussure (and Chomsky). For it would appear that language would then have to be analysed in connection with the institutions of social life. Certainly the Prague linguists dissociated themselves from the inflexible distinction between *langue* and *parole* drawn by Saussure, and the associated division between the synchronic and the diachronic. In spite of this, the distinctive emphasis of the Prague group tended to be concentrated upon phonology, in reference to which the sound system of language can be studied without attention to the external connotations of meaning. Jakobson's early work in particular pursued the idea that a 'phonological revolution' (Lévi-Strauss's term) could be produced by analysing phonemes in terms of oppositions which are the constituent features of language as a whole. Although this was justified on methodological rather than epistemological grounds, the result was again to return linguistics to the study of the internal structures of *langue*.¹⁰

Lévi-Strauss and Barthes have each at various times seen the main basis for structuralism as consisting in the application of procedures of linguistics to other areas of analysis. Lévi-Strauss regards structuralist linguistics as both supplying modes of analysis that are applicable elsewhere and as providing substantive clues to the nature of human mind. In *The Elementary Structures* he explicitly compares his objectives with those of phonological linguistics, and adds that

⁹ N. Trubetzkoy: *Principles of Phonology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969, p. 12.

¹⁰ Roman Jakobson: *Word and Language*. The Hague: Mouton, 1971.

linguists and social scientists 'do not merely apply the same methods, but are studying the same thing'.¹¹ For structural linguistics allows us to discern what he later came to regard as 'fundamental and objective realities consisting of systems of relations which are the products of unconscious thought processes'.¹² As Culler points out, regarding linguistics as of central importance to structuralism generally carries several implications. First, linguistics seems to provide a rigour lacking elsewhere in the humanities and social sciences. Second, linguistics offers a number of basic concepts which seem to be capable of much wider application than that involved in the framework of their origin — *langue* and *parole* in particular, perhaps, but also the associated distinctions of the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic, signifier and signified, the idea of the arbitrary nature of the sign and so on. Third, linguistics appears to provide a series of general guidelines for the formulation of semiotic programmes. Such a notion was of course sketched out by Saussure and developed in some detail by Jakobson and others.

Because of the connections between structuralist linguistics and structuralism more generally, it is often held that structuralism has participated in the general 'linguistic turn' characteristic of modern philosophy and social theory. However, this is a specious conclusion, for reasons I shall go on immediately to indicate. On the one hand, the hopes that were pinned on linguistics for providing general models of procedure that could be applied very widely now quite plainly appear to be misplaced. On the other the 'linguistic turn', at least in its most valuable forms, does not involve an extension of ideas taken from the study of language to other aspects of human activity, but rather explores the intersection between language and the constitution of social practices. The relevant considerations here concern both the critique of structuralist linguistics as an approach to the analysis of language itself, and the critical appraisal of the importation of notions taken from this version of linguistics into other areas of the explication of human behaviour.

Many criticisms, of course, have been made of Saussure's version of linguistics — or at any rate, that portrayal of it which has come down to us through the medium of his students — including those offered

¹¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss: *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1969, p. 493.

¹² Claude Lévi-Strauss: *Structural Anthropology*. London: Allen Lane, 1968, p. 58.

cogently by Chomsky. There is no point in rehearsing these in any detail here. Most significant for the lines of argument to be developed later in this discussion are shortcomings shared by virtually all forms of structuralist linguistics, including that of Chomsky. These concern above all the isolation of language, or of certain features taken to be fundamental to the structure and properties of language, from the social environments of language use. Thus, while Chomsky recognizes, and even accentuates, the creative capabilities of human subjects, this creative quality is attributed to characteristics of human mind, not to conscious agents carrying on their day-to-day activities in the context of social institutions. As one observer puts it, 'the creative power of the subject has to be taken away as soon as it is acknowledged and given to a mechanism inscribed in the biological constitution of the mind'.¹³ Although it is in many ways the most developed and sophisticated form of structuralist linguistics, Chomsky's theory of language has proved essentially defective in respect of the understanding of quite elementary features of language. These defects do not centre so much upon the unsatisfactory nature of the division drawn between syntactics and semantics, as the identification of the core features of linguistic competence. In Chomsky's view, the idealized language speaker is able unconsciously to grasp rules making possible the production and understanding of any or all grammatical sentences in a language. But this is not really an appropriate model of competence. Someone who might in any given context produce any sentence at all, however syntactically correct it might be, would be treated as distinctly aberrant. Linguistic competence involves not only the syntactical mastery of sentences, but mastery of the circumstances in which particular types of sentence are appropriate. In Hymes's words: 'he or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner'.¹⁴ In other words, mastery of the language is inseparable from mastery of the variety of contexts in which language is used.

The works of authors as diverse as Wittgenstein and Garfinkel have made us aware of what this involves, both for understanding the nature of language and for grasping the character of social life. Knowing a language certainly means knowing syntactical rules but, equally importantly, to know a language is to acquire a range of

¹³ Clarke: *Foundations* p. 171.

¹⁴ D. H. Hymes: 'On communicative competence', in J. B. Pride and Janet Holmes: *Sociolinguistics*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, p. 277.

methodological devices, involved both with the production of utterances themselves and with the constitution and reconstitution of social life in the daily contexts of social activity.¹⁵ It is not just that to know a language is to know a form of life, or rather a multiplicity of interweaving forms of life; to know a form of life is to be able to deploy certain methodical strategies geared to indexical qualities of the contexts in which social practices are carried on. In this understanding of language, linguistics neither has the degree of self-sufficiency which Saussure, the Prague Group, Chomsky and others have claimed, nor does it make much sense to hold, as Lévi-Strauss has sometimes asserted, that social life is 'like a language'. Linguistics cannot provide a model for analysing either the nature of agency or of social institutions, because it is in a basic sense only explicable via an understanding of these. The 'linguistic turn' is in a sense a turn away from linguistics, conceived as an independently formed discipline, towards examining the mutual co-ordination of language and *praxis*.

The relational nature of totalities

In Saussure's doctrines, the relational character of *langue* is closely connected with the thesis of the arbitrary character of the sign, and with a stress upon the significance of signifiers as compared with the more traditional preoccupation with signifieds. It is often remarked that Saussure's differentiation of *langue* from *parole*, according priority to the former over the latter, reflects Durkheim's assertion that the qualities of social wholes are more than the sum of their parts. This is surely wrong, and underestimates the subtlety with which Saussure designates the systematic form of *langue*. In explicating *langue* as a system of differences, Saussure reformulates both the nature of what the 'whole' is and what its 'parts' are, indicating that each is only defined in terms of the other. To say that language is a system without positive terms, that is, formed through the differences recognized to exist between sounds or marks, shows that the 'parts' are only such in virtue of the self-same characteristics that compose the 'whole'. The insight is a fundamental one insofar as it demonstrates that the

¹⁵ Anthony Giddens: *The Constitution of Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press, chpt. 1.

linguistic totality does not 'exist' in the contexts of the use of language themselves. The totality is not 'present' in the instantiations which are its traces.

The tie between this view and the notion of the arbitrary character of the sign is easily specified. The assertion of the arbitrary nature of the sign can be read as a critique of object theories of meaning and of theories of ostensive reference. But this critique does not stem from the sorts of demonstration which Wittgenstein, Quine and other later philosophers were to make that the use of lexical items cannot be said to 'correspond' to objects or events in the world. Saussure's criticism is based wholly upon the idea of the constitution of *langue* through difference. Because a word only derives its meaning from the differences established between it and other words, words cannot mean their objects. Language is form, not substance, and is only able to generate meaning by the internal play of differences. This is therefore just as much the case with the relation between words — or sentences — and the mental states which might accompany them, as it is with the relation between words and external objects or events.

The emphasis upon the constitution of the totality through difference might appear to lead away from signifiers rather than towards them. For what matters is not whatever is used to signify, but only the differences that create the 'spacing' between them. However a concentration on the properties of signifiers in fact tends to flow rather readily from Saussure's views, because of the rejection that there is anything 'underneath' language which explains its character (apart from the vague presumption of some kind of innate mental qualities). While the actual substance comprising signifiers is unimportant, without the differences which sounds, marks or other material differentiations create, no meanings of any kind could exist. The programme of semiotics is hence certainly not just an adjunct to linguistics in the Saussurian formulation, but is necessarily coextensive with the exploration of *langue* itself.

The relational character of wholes, the arbitrary nature of the sign, and the notion of difference are concepts which run through structuralist and post-structuralist perspectives as a whole. At the same time they are the source of some of the main features which tend to separate the structuralist authors from their post-structuralist successors. Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss provide clear cases of the direct utilization of the Saussurian idea of the relational character of totalities. For the former, structuralism is defined in terms of the study of phenomena 'treated not as a mechanical agglomeration, but

as a structural whole'.¹⁶ Lévi-Strauss writes even more emphatically when he claims: 'authentic structuralism seeks . . . above all to grasp the intrinsic properties of certain kinds of order. The properties express nothing which would be external to them.'¹⁷ However, Jakobson's own criticisms of Saussure make it clear that the principle of the identification of relations through difference is separable from the assertion that *langue* is a clearly definable whole. The boundaries of the 'whole' that is Saussure's *langue*, or that is Chomsky's linguistic corpus known to a competent speaker, are exceedingly difficult to draw. It can therefore be argued that more important than the principle of the establishing of the coherence of the totality is the endeavour to examine the nature of difference itself. Within linguistics, Jakobson already established the beginning of such an endeavour in his attempt to focus upon the basic structuring properties of codes rather than on the parameters of these codes themselves.

Derrida's philosophy radicalizes this much further. His disavowal of the 'metaphysics of presence' derives directly from his treatment of the idea of difference as constitutive, not only of modes of signification, but of existence in general.¹⁸ Derrida will have nothing of the search for universal properties of mind, or indeed of any attempt to construct a systematic philosophy at all. In his discussion of Lévi-Strauss and structuralism in the social sciences, Derrida emphasizes the unrealizable character of Lévi-Strauss's programme, deriving this from contradictions supposedly immanent in Lévi-Strauss's own text: Lévi-Strauss's exploration of oral cultures is paradoxically itself a form of western 'logocentrism'. Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence is derived more or less directly from an exploration of the implications of the idea of difference — first of all as indicated by Saussure, and contrasted with notions of negation involved in the work of Hegel, Freud and others. Because of his distinction between *langue* and *parole*, Saussure was able to treat the idea of difference as involved with a 'virtual system' out of time. The transmutation of the Saussurian version of difference into Derrida's *différance* is made by introducing the temporal element. To differ is also to defer. If this is so, Derrida asks, how can anything, such as forms of signification, be considered as presences? Saussure's writings already contain the notion of the

¹⁶ Jakobson: *Word* . . . p. 711.

¹⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss: *L'homme nu*. Paris: Plon, 1971, pp. 561–2.

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida: *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976; *Writing and Difference*. London: Routledge, 1978.

'absent totality' which is language. In this idea of totality, however, there is still in Derrida's view a lingering nostalgia for presence. All signification operates through traces; memory traces in the brain, the fading of sounds as they are uttered, and the traces that writing leaves.

Derrida's reversal of the usual priority accorded to speaking over writing vigorously pursues a preoccupation with signifiers at the expense of the signified. This is also in some part derived from an immanent critique of Saussure. Speech, Derrida claims, seems to represent a moment in which form and meaning are present simultaneously. Once we see, however, as Saussure himself demonstrates, that this cannot be so, then we are led to question the presumption that speech is the most elemental expression of language. As I hear myself speak, it seems as though the words uttered are simply vehicles for my thoughts, consciousness being clothed in and given expression by language. Access to the inner contents of consciousness is regarded as the real basis of the meanings inherent in language, which writing can only hope indirectly to recapture. At key parts in his arguments about the structuring of language through difference, however, Saussure abandons sound units in favour of taking examples from writing. Thus for instance any particular letter of the alphabet, he points out, may be written in varying ways; all that matters is that it is distinct from other letters which potentially could be confused with it. Writing turns out in fact to be the best illustration of difference. The characteristics of absence and deferment involved in the nature of written texts indicate the conditions of signification in general. Speech 'personalizes' language by connecting it with the thoughts of the speaker. In fact language is essentially anonymous, being never the property of individual speakers and depending for its form upon its recursive properties. Of course, Derrida does not intend by this to accord a primacy to actual writing over instances of speech, which would make little sense, even if only for the reason that writing is in historical terms such a relatively recent development compared with the prevalence of oral cultures. Rather, language is a 'proto-writing' (*archi-écriture*), a process of the temporal spacing and repetition of signifying phenomena. Proto-writing, Derrida argues, 'is invoked by the themes of the arbitrariness of the sign and of difference', but it 'can never be recognised as the *object of science*'.¹⁹

¹⁹ In Jonathan Culler: 'Jacques Derrida', in John Sturrock: *Structuralism and Since*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

That is to say, it is not to be the object of investigation of a sort of non-logocentric linguistics.

The notion of the arbitrary character of the sign is responsible both for some of the strengths, but also of enduring weaknesses, that run through structuralist and post-structuralist traditions of thought. As formulated by Saussure, the doctrine of the arbitrary character of the sign itself has a fairly heavily arbitrary aspect to it. One can accept that the term 'arbitrary' is not a particularly happy one for the phenomenon at issue. That is to say, as Saussure himself fully accepted, the conventions involved in language-use are certainly not arbitrary in the sense that the language user is free to choose whatever utterances he or she might care to make. On the contrary, accepted usage has a strongly binding force. More important is that the thesis of the arbitrary nature of the sign is in the end rather obscure, especially in so far as it bears upon the nature of the signified rather than upon the signifier. If Saussure merely meant to claim that words have only a conventional connection with whatever objects they might be used to designate or refer to, it is so obvious as to be uninteresting. If — as quite often seems to be the case in Saussure's argument — the arbitrary nature of the sign is the same as the idea that language is constituted through difference, it is true that this has implications for the nature of meaning, but these implications are not pursued because the nature of signifieds is left largely unexplicated. Saussure evidently wished to claim that the meaning of a word is not the object to which that word might be used to refer, but since he nowhere analyses what reference actually is, this claim remains essentially unelucidated philosophically. The result is the confusion noted by Benveniste. As Benveniste observes: 'even though Saussure said that the idea of "sister" is not connected to the signifier s-ø-r (soeur), he was not thinking any less of the *reality of the notion*. When he spoke of the difference between b-ø-f (boeuf) and o-k-s (ox), he was referring in spite of himself to the fact that these two terms apply to the same *reality*. Here, then, is the *thing*, expressly excluded at first from the definition of the sign, now creeping into it by a detour . . .'.²⁰

Saussure's writings promoted a 'retreat into the code' which has ever after been characteristic both of structuralist and post-structuralist authors. That is to say, the discovery that the component elements of *langue* only have identity through their differentiation within the

²⁰ Emile Benveniste: 'The nature of the linguistic sign', in *Problems in General Linguistics*. Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971, p. 44.

overall system serves to drag language away from whatever connections of reference it might have with the object world. Structuralist and post-structuralist thought alike have consistently failed to generate an account of reference, and it is surely not by chance that these traditions of thought have concentrated their attention so much upon the internal organization of texts, in which the play of signifiers can be analysed as an inside affair.²¹ It is important to see that while the 'retreat into the code' was promoted by the Saussurian emphases, as these were modified and adapted by subsequent authors, this 'retreat' was never really established by philosophical argument. It derived from the assimilation of the doctrine of the arbitrary nature of the sign and that of the role of difference.

Derrida's writings are in some ways the most sophisticated outcome of the transition from structuralism to post-structuralism. Although Derrida's works seem on first contact to be quite alien to Anglo-Saxon eyes, there are some rather close affinities between them and views expressed by the later Wittgenstein. Derrida's disavowal of the 'metaphysics of presence' is by no means entirely dissimilar, either in its objectives or in its methods, from Wittgenstein's attempt to puncture the aspirations of metaphysics in *Philosophical Investigations*.²² For both authors the goals of metaphysics cannot simply be re-examined, or somehow brought up to date; they have to be 'deconstructed' rather than 'reconstructed' because they rest upon mistaken premises. In both cases it is suggested that this is because of a misapprehension about the nature of reality. There are no essences to be captured by appropriate linguistic formulations. Wittgenstein is as firm as Derrida that neither words nor sentences involve some sort of corresponding mental images which supply their meaning, any more than the objects or events in the external world to which words can be used to refer. While Wittgenstein would no doubt protest against Derrida's ambitious extension of the concept of writing, he would agree with the latter author that language is not to be interpreted in terms of the subjective meanings of individual agents. Wittgenstein's rejection of the private language argument is obviously not directly an analogue of Derrida's embrace of the idea of writing, but in both

²¹ See Anthony Giddens: *Central Problems in Social Theory*. London: Macmillan, 1979, chpt. 1 and following.

²² Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953.

instances language is necessarily an 'anonymous' production and thus in an important sense 'subject-less'.

Whether Wittgenstein would have had much regard for the idea of difference is, to say the least, debatable. Nonetheless, in his elaboration of the notion of language-games the 'spacing' of utterances and activities is plainly central. Both the recursive and the relational character of language are stressed. However it seems indisputable that the main lines of development of Wittgensteinian philosophy are more defensible than those worked out within post-structuralism. Rather than promoting a 'retreat into the code' Wittgenstein seeks to understand the relational character of signification in the context of social practices. His resolute preoccupation with ordinary language tends to inhibit a concern with poetics, art or literature. But there do not seem to be any distinctively logical barriers to extending Wittgenstein's ideas into these domains, while the account of language and meaning which can be generated from Wittgenstein's philosophy (or at least from certain basic notions contained within it) are more sophisticated than those available within structuralism and post-structuralism (a matter I shall develop further below).

The unsatisfactory character of the thesis of the arbitrary form of the sign, as diffused into structuralist and post-structuralist traditions, has radically impoverished the accounts of meaning such traditions have been able to offer. A preoccupation with signifiers at the expense of the signified is in large part an emphasis enforced by this circumstance. For Wittgenstein the meaning of lexical items is to be found in the intermeshing of language and practice, within the complex of language-games involved in forms of life. While no doubt this view, as formulated by Wittgenstein himself, leaves aside certain fundamental problems of meaning — in particular in what sense, if at all, the understanding of meaning implies a grasp of the truth-conditions of certain classes of assertions — it is surely a perspective of considerable fruitfulness.

The decentring of the subject

Although the phrase 'the decentring of the subject' has come to be peculiarly associated with structuralism and post-structuralism, the ideas involved derive from wider sources. As structuralist and post-structuralist authors themselves are fond of pointing out, psycho-analysis already showed the ego not to be master in its own home, its

characteristics only being uncovered via a detour through the unconscious. Although this was not the interpretation which Sartre made, Heidegger's writings from *Being and Time* onwards can be taken to assert the primacy of being over consciousness.²³ Moreover, there is more than a diffuse connection between Freud, Heidegger and Nietzsche. Indeed, of course, the writings of each of these authors tend to figure prominently in the work of those associated with post-structuralism. This having been said, it is evident that we can discern the origins of the notion of the 'decentred subject' in Saussure.

According to Saussure, language is a system of signs, constituted by differences, with an arbitrary relation to objects. If this includes objects in the external world, it also must embrace the characteristics of the producer of language — the speaker. Just as the meaning of 'tree' is not the object tree, so the meaning of terms that refer to human subjectivity, most particularly the 'I' of the thinking or acting subject, cannot be the states of consciousness of that subject. Like any other term in a language, 'I' is only constituted as a sign in virtue of its differences from 'you', 'we', 'they', etc. Since the 'I' has sense only in virtue of being an element in an 'anonymous' totality, there can be no question of according it some distinctive philosophical privilege. In Saussure this idea is not developed in a direct way; moreover Saussure's own views are somewhat confusing in the light of the persistence of a certain mentalism in his writings. It was therefore left to others to develop what Saussure left largely implicit, and they did not hesitate to do so; there is probably no theme which more persistently appears in the literature of structuralism and post-structuralism.

Lévi-Strauss has written less in the explicit way about the decentring of the subject than have most of his successors. Nonetheless in certain respects his writings have been the main mediating link between Saussure and criticisms of 'humanism' in post-structuralist philosophy. Referring to his analysis of myths, Lévi-Strauss observes in a celebrated statement that he claims to show 'not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact'; or again: 'myths signify the mind which evolves them by making use of the world of which it is itself a part'.²⁴ There is

²³ Martin Heidegger: *Being and Time*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978.

²⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss: *The Raw and the Cooked*. London: Cape, 1969, pp. 12 and 341.

no 'I think' in this characterization of human mind. The unconscious categories of mind are the constitutive backdrop against which sentiments of selfhood exist. Consciousness is made possible by structures-of mind not immediately available to it.

The decentering of the subject emerges in various guises in the post-structuralist literature. In Foucault's discussion of the beginnings and end of the 'age of man' it is primarily a set of historical observations about the development of Western philosophy and of Western culture as a whole. In Barthes, it is a series of claims about the nature of authors in relation to their texts. In Lacan, it is part of an attempt to rework the main concepts of psychoanalysis, giving of course especial attention to the idea that the unconscious exemplifies certain features of language. All these clearly share in common a critical attitude towards Cartesianism and to every philosophy (such as certain versions of phenomenology) which treats consciousness as a datum upon which the foundations of claims to knowledge may somehow be established. 'I think, therefore I am' is disqualified on a number of grounds. The 'I' is not immediately available to itself, deriving its identity as it does from its involvement in a system of signification. The 'I' is not the expression of some core of continuous selfhood that is its basis. The 'being' suggested in the 'I am' is not given via the capability of the subject to use the concept 'I'. What Lacan calls the 'discourse of the Other' is taken to be the source both of the capability of the subject to employ 'I' and the assertion of existence in 'I am'. As Lacan puts it: 'the Other is, therefore, the locus in which is constituted the I who speaks to him who hears, that which is said by the one being already the reply, the other deciding to hear it whether the one has or has not spoken.'²⁵

All the above authors agree upon the irrelevance of the author to the interpretation of texts. The writer is not a presence somehow to be uncovered behind the text. Just as the primacy accorded to the author is an historical expression of the individualism of the Age of Man, so the 'I' of the author is a grammatical form rather than a flesh-and-blood agent. Since the text is organized in terms of the internal play of signifiers, what its originator or originators intended to put into it is more or less irrelevant to our understanding of it. Authors are to be found everywhere in their texts and consequently nowhere; as Barthes puts it: 'a text is . . . a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of

²⁵ Jacques Lacan: *Écrits*. London: Tavistock, 1977, p. 453.

writings, none of them original, blend and clash.²⁶ Once more, of course, this is not a conclusion which is specifically the province of structuralism or post-structuralism. The view of the 'autonomy' of texts reached by Gadamer, drawing primarily upon Heidegger, is in some respects directly comparable with that reached within the French traditions of thought.²⁷ In neither case is it believed that the author has some kind of privileged relation to his or her text. Both textual analysis and literary criticism therefore must break in a clear-cut fashion with 'intentionalist' perspectives.

The theme of the decentring of the subject is without doubt one which must be taken seriously by anyone interested in modern philosophy or social theory. But while the basic perspective surely must be accepted, the particular mode in which it is elaborated within structuralism and post-structuralism remains defective. To reject the idea that consciousness, whether consciousness of self or the sensory registering of the external world, can provide a foundation for knowledge, is to participate in one of the major transitions in modern philosophy. Those forms of philosophy, and therefore modes of social analysis based on them, which presume an unmediated access to consciousness are by now thoroughly discredited. Since some schools of philosophical thought, most notably phenomenology, have been closely associated with such philosophical standpoints, the rejection of those standpoints unavoidably compromises those schools of thought also. But structuralist and post-structuralist accounts of the decentring of the subject are inevitably closely tied to the versions of language and the unconscious associated with structuralist linguistics and its influence. The detour needed to recover the 'I' is not only taken very largely through language, but is in addition filtered through a particular theory of language as well. If we regard language as situated in social practices, and if we reject the distinction between consciousness and the unconscious followed by the structuralist and post-structuralist authors, we reach a different conception of the human subject — as agent. Again, this is a theme I shall pursue in what follows later.

²⁶ Roland Barthes: 'The death of the author', in *Image-Music-Text*. Glasgow: Fontana, 1977, p. 146.

²⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Truth and Method*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1975.

Writing and the text

Comparing Wittgenstein and Derrida, it is worth considering why the latter gives such a fundamental priority to the theme of writing, whereas in the former a concern with the significance of writing is largely absent: Derrida's preoccupation with writing is closely connected with his rejection of the metaphysics of presence. In Derrida's words:

... 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 of system . . . Nothing, in either the elements or the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent.²⁸

Thus, in Derrida's view, it is mistaken to suppose that writing is a particular mode of giving expression to speech. Writing — in the extended sense which Derrida attributes to the term — expresses more clearly than does speech the relational nature of signification as constituted both in space and in time. We might more accurately speak of the timing and spacing of signification, rather than its 'occurrence' in a given context. There are similarities with what Wittgenstein has to say here, both in respect of the 'deconstruction' of metaphysical questions about time and space, and the mode in which it is suggested that time-space is constitutive of the identity of objects or events. In commenting critically upon St Augustine's reflections on the nature of time, Wittgenstein argues that the puzzles with which Augustine grappled are empty of content, because they rest upon the mistaken attribution of an essence to temporality. It is actually the 'grammar' of time that needs elucidating. Time has no essence, and there is no abstract formulation that can therefore convey its nature. We can only experience and observe temporality in the unfolding of events. It might be argued that Wittgenstein does not in fact take the next step, and like Derrida (and before him Heidegger) treat time-space as constitutive of events and objects. But I think in fact there is no other way of making sense of Wittgenstein's philosophy save by presuming this to be intrinsic to the analyses he develops.

²⁸ Jacques Derrida: *Positions*. London: Athlone, 1981, p. 92.

Wittgenstein's struggles with form — his disinclination to write in a narrative style, and the seemingly disorganized character of the *Philosophical Investigations* — have a definite affinity with Derrida's use of various sorts of graphic innovations. For both writers wish to give expression to views that are refractory to being 'described'. Both assert that it is not the presence of some sort of reality, physical or mental, which serves to anchor the meaningful components of systems of signification.

The limitations of Derrida's view of writing can be understood when we consider what is involved in his 'timing' and 'spacing'. 'Writing', as Derrida conceives of it, is a direct development out of the separation of the signifier from an external world of objects and events which was established by Saussure. Derrida participates in the 'retreat into the text', the universe of signifiers, characteristic of structuralist and post-structuralist traditions of thought as a whole. His 'text' is that of the play of differences intrinsic to signification as such. Although the notion of *différance* makes it possible for Derrida to comprehend temporality, his treatment of space is purely nominal. Or to put things another way, although he talks of 'timing' and 'spacing', to all intents and purposes these are the same. The 'extending' of writing is involved in the spacing of sounds or marks, but this is the very same phenomenon as their temporal differentiation. Wittgenstein's portrayal of the relational character of signification as expressed in the organization of social practices, however, does not involve the collapsing of time into space. Time-space enters into the structuring of signification not via the 'flat' dimension of writing — even conceptualized as proto-writing — but via the contextuality of social practices themselves. For a long while, philosophers influenced by Wittgenstein were misled by the idea that the meaning of words or utterances consists in their use. From this it might seem to follow that we simply substitute 'use' for the objects to which words were held to correspond in previous theories of meaning. But what is at issue is not 'use', but the process of *using* words and phrases in contexts of social conduct. Meaning is not constructed by the play of signifiers, but by the intersection of the production of signifiers with objects and events in the world, focused and organized via the acting individual. If this view is basically correct, as I hold it to be, the priority which Derrida gives to writing over speech has to be questioned. For speech — or rather talk — recovers a priority over other media of signification. Talk, carried on in day-to-day contexts of activity, is the fundamental 'carrier' of signification, because it operates

in saturated behavioural and conceptual contexts. Writing (in its more narrow conventional sense) has certain distinctive properties that can be explicated precisely only by contrasting them with the character of day-to-day talk. The constitution of meaning in such talk is the condition, moreover, of the signifying properties of writing and texts.

Derrida's emphasis upon writing informs a whole philosophy. But there are three other, more modest, senses in which a preoccupation with writing tends to be generated by structuralist and post-structuralist traditions. One concerns the connection of writing with power. In both Lévi-Strauss and Foucault, this theme is explored via the relation between orality and writing. Lévi-Strauss's structuralist method is supposed to apply only to oral cultures. Societies without writing are 'cold cultures' because they exist within a framework of reiterated tradition, passed on by example and by word of mouth. Civilizations presume the existence of writing, which is first and foremost a medium of administrative power, not simply a novel way of expressing what was previously formulated in speech. Writing not only generates 'history', it demands new modes of adjustment to both the social and material worlds. Society and nature become seen in terms of dynamism and transformation, no longer in terms of the saturation of the present by the past. In Lévi-Strauss's work, this theme is never developed in any detail, since he does not offer an analysis of civilizations. Rather, societies with writing form a backdrop against which the distinctive characteristics of oral cultures can more easily be pin-pointed.

In Foucault, a concern with the connections between writing, orality and power is more direct and more extensively spelled out. Foucault shows that the discourse of the social sciences and psychiatry does not simply form a set of theories and findings about a 'given' subject matter. On the contrary, the concepts and generalizations developed in these disciplines come to constitute new fields for the operation of power. Such fields of power are codified through and dependent upon writing. The keeping of written records — as for example, in the recording of the proceedings of law courts or of psychiatric case histories — is integral to the forms of disciplinary organization which Foucault seeks to analyse.

At the same time as, through the recording of events, writing 'makes history', those whose activities do not come to the attention of the record-keepers are excluded from 'history'. That is to say, while of course their activities comprise 'history' in the sense of the elapsing of events, neither their actions nor their ideas form part of that reflexive

appropriation of the past that is written history. Thus as Foucault points out in *I, Pierre Rivière*, the case record of the criminal or the vagrant is one of the few modes of entry that those not ordinarily written into history have of figuring in its field of discourse.²⁹

A second sense in which the theme of writing constantly recurs in structuralism and post-structuralism is simply in the guise of a fascination with texts generally. In formulating the outlines of a programme for semiology, Saussure initiated the possibility of a study of sign systems that goes well beyond textual materials. The call for the development of semiology was not ignored, and in many subsequent works we find developed the idea that any cultural difference can provide a means of signification. Yet although the idea of a unified discipline of semiology, or semiotics, has its advocates, on the whole it has to be said that the study of cultural signs remains a rather stunted enterprise. Those influenced by structuralism and post-structuralism continue to return to the text as their main preoccupation. It is surely not by chance that these traditions of thought have had more influence upon students of literature than in any other domain.

The absorption with texts symbolizes some of the greatest strengths, and at the same time the most consistent weaknesses, of structuralist and post-structuralist traditions. On the one hand, it has allowed authors within these traditions to develop analyses that have no rivals in Anglo-Saxon philosophy. The theory of the text is both made central to certain elementary philosophical issues and is elucidated through consideration of those issues. Apart from those within the relatively specialized field of literary criticism, English-speaking philosophers and social theorists have made very little contribution to such discussion. On the other hand, the overriding concern with texts reflects limitations in accounts of the nature of signification that can be traced from Saussure onwards. The thesis of the arbitrary character of the sign, as Saussure developed it, tends to elide the difference between texts which claim to deliver some veridical description of the world and those that are fictional. The positive value of such an elision is readily demonstrated, for example, in the subtle treatments which it makes possible of the use of figurative mechanisms in scientific texts. Its weaknesses are apparent in respect of the basic issue that has haunted these traditions: how to relate the text back to

²⁹ Michel Foucault: *I, Pierre Rivière . . . : a case of parricide in the 19th century*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978.

an exterior world. Not only have structuralist and post-structuralist traditions failed to generate satisfactory accounts of reference that would make sense of scientific achievements, they have become more or less completely cut off from the study of ordinary talk. Ordinary talk is precisely that 'medium of living in the world' in which reference and meaning interlace. I believe such to be the case, at least, and I think that pursuing this issue allows us to come to terms with some of the most deep-seated deficiencies of structuralism and post-structuralism.

A third sense in which these traditions of thought tend to produce a concern with writing is in respect of writing as an active process. The term 'writing' is ambiguous, since it can refer to what actually is recorded in a given medium, or to the actual process of bringing about that recording. In respect of the second of these meanings, writing has also come to take on a particular significance as the penning of books of imagination or invention. The 'writer', or literary author, tends to be accorded a special esteem in modern culture. In fastening upon the theme of the 'author', structuralists and post-structuralists have been able to make major contributions to our understanding of cultural production. Here obviously there is a major overlap with the more general theme of the decentring of the subject. The source of the 'creativity' displayed in texts is not to be discovered in the individual or individuals who wrote them. The text generates its own free play of signifiers, constantly open to appropriation and reappropriation by different generations of readers. Here there are interesting connections between structuralism, post-structuralism and the latter-day development of hermeneutics. In the work of Gadamer and others, as I have mentioned previously, we also find affirmed the autonomy of the text from its author and we find emphasized the multiplicity of readings that texts can generate. The processes of writing and reading become closely intertwined, with reading being the temporary stabilizing of the indefinite range of meanings generated by processes of writing. But again we find characteristic weaknesses here. Writing is sometimes portrayed as though texts wrote themselves; the relegation of the author to the role of a shadowy adjunct to writing is manifestly unsatisfactory. We might accept the significance of the theme of the decentring of the subject, and therefore the need to construct what an 'author' is. But we shall have no proper grasp of the process of writing unless we manage to recombine satisfactorily the elements that have been decentred. Structuralism and post-structuralism have in my view been unable to generate satisfactory accounts of human agency, in large part because of shortcomings already noted; and this weakness

reappears in the shape of the tendency to equate the production of texts with their inner 'productivity'.

History and temporality

In Saussure's writings, it might seem as though the theme of temporality is thoroughly repressed. For after all Saussure's greatest innovation was to treat *langue* as existing out of time. Whereas previous forms of linguistics had concentrated upon tracing changes in the usage of linguistic items, Saussure placed language as a system at the forefront of linguistic analysis. *Langue* does not exist in a time-space context; it is built up inferentially from the actual practices of language users. Of course, Saussure did recognize a differentiation between the synchronic study involved in the analysis of *langue* and the diachronic analysis involved in tracing out actual changes in linguistic usage. Whether or not Saussure himself intended to give priority to synchrony over diachrony, it is certainly true that much of the subsequent attraction of his writings has concerned the diagnosis of properties of *langue*. Paradoxically, however, it is just this emphasis which has tended to stimulate a recurrent concern with temporality within structuralist and post-structuralist thought.

Some of the issues involved here are brought out rather clearly in the work of Lévi-Strauss. The methodological repression of time involved in Saussure's conception of *langue* is translated by Lévi-Strauss, as it were, into the substantive repression of time involved in the codes organized through myth. Myths do not so much take temporality out of social life as provide for a particular mobilization of time separating it from what is later understood as 'history'. Lévi-Strauss's notion of reversible time is deliberately contrasted to the movement of time in history, where 'history' is understood as the linear charting of social change.³⁰ As Lévi-Strauss has effectively emphasized in his debate with Sartre, a preoccupation with history is not at all necessarily the same thing as a concern with time. The Marxian adage that 'human beings make history' actually expresses the dynamism of a particular culture rather than representing a portrayal of the past existence of humanity as a whole. Hot cultures

³⁰ Claude Lévi-Strauss: *The Savage Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966.

exist in dynamic interchange with their environment, and mobilize themselves internally in the pursuit of social transformation. Modern culture very substantially accelerates this dynamism. History for us therefore becomes the linear unfolding of dates, within which certain forms of change are mapped out. Oral cultures are genuinely 'pre-historic' when contrasted to such dynamism. For them, time is not mobilized as history. The writing of history is thus associated with that very historicity which separates hot cultures from their oral forerunners.

While Lévi-Strauss's conception of the structures of the human mind has often been criticized for being unhistorical, it might be more accurate to see him as seeking to provide a subtle and nuanced account of what history is in relation to temporality. Lévi-Strauss has sometimes even been said to be 'anti-historical', but this surely fails to discern the subtlety with which his discussion contrasts time and history. Structuralism, in its Lévi-Straussian form, has certainly not proved to be refractory to history, as some have claimed. Lévi-Strauss is effectively carrying out what Foucault was later to call an 'archaeology', digging below the historical consciousness of hot cultures to unearth the ground of temporality characterizing those forms of culture dominating human 'history'.

In Derrida, temporality of course appears as fundamental to the critique of the metaphysics of presence. To differ is also to defer, and time is regarded as inseparable from the nature of signification. The sliding of presence into absence becomes the very medium of understanding temporality. Here the concern is not so much with 'history', real or written, but with the understanding of being as becoming. Time is for Derrida bound up with the very nature of his appraisals of the limitations of structuralism as practiced by Lévi-Strauss. It is intrinsically part of the process whereby signification generates a play of meanings.³¹ In replacing, in Culler's phrase, the 'anguish of infinite regress by the pleasure of infinite creation' Derrida affirms the evanescence of processes of meaning; everything should be understood 'as an active movement; a process of demotivating, rather than the structure given once and for all'.³² I have already criticized this view, and not a great deal needs to be added to what was said previously. The tendency to reduce time to the spacing of

³¹ Jonathan Culler: 'Jacques Derrida', in John Sturrock: *Structuralism*

³² Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, p. 103.

signification effectively precludes a satisfactory treatment of the time-space relations within which the signifying practices occur.

Foucault writes as an historian, and it is in his work above all that the themes of temporality and structural analysis are explored. Foucault's critique of 'continuous history' is in his view closely related to the necessity of decentring the subject. Not only does history have no overall teleology, it is in an important sense not the result of the action of human subjects. Human beings do not make history, rather history makes human beings. That is to say, the nature of human subjectivity is formed in and through processes of historical development. Continuous history depends upon:

the certainty that time will dispense nothing without restoring it in a reconstituted unity; the promise that one day the subject — in the form of historical consciousness — will once again be able to appropriate, to bring back under its sway, all those things that are kept at a distance by difference, and find in them what might be called its abode.³³

Foucault's style of writing history therefore does not flow along with chronological time. Nor does it depend upon the narrative description of a sequence of events. Reading Foucault is an uncomfortable experience for those accustomed to more orthodox modes of writing history. Topics are not discussed in a temporal order and there are breaks in the description when the reader tends to expect continuity. Very little indication is given of whatever causal influences might be at work in the shifts or changes which Foucault analyses. Obscure though his epistemological reflections might often be, Foucault makes it clear enough that this historical style derives from a particular view both of time and of the historical nature of writing about history. The past is not an area of study formed by the secretion of time. If the elapsing of past time has any form at all, it is that of the interweaving of layers of epistemic organization, layers which need to be unearthed by means of 'archaeology'. There is more than an echo of Lévi-Strauss in Foucault's view that history is one form of knowledge among others — and of course, like other forms of knowledge, a mode of mobilizing power.

To have separated time from history, to have shown that there are properties of signification systems that exist outside time-space, and

³³ Michel Foucault: *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon, p. 12.

to have connected these with a re-examination of the nature of human subject — these are major achievements of structuralism and post-structuralism. But in these respects, as in the others previously discussed, the results are less than completely satisfying. Foucault's manner of writing history has a definite shock value. But in spite of his elaborate methodological discussions, the mode in which he practices history remains highly idiosyncratic. No real unification is achieved between the diagnosis of epistemes, as existing 'out of time', and the generative processes involved in historical organization and change. Having decentred the subject, Foucault is no more able to develop a cogent account of human agency than is managed by other writers in structuralist and post-structuralist traditions. That 'history has no subject' can readily be accepted. But Foucault's history tends to have no active subjects at all. It is history with the agency removed. The individuals who appear in Foucault's analyses seem impotent to determine their own destinies. Moreover, that reflexive appropriation of history basic to history in modern culture does not appear at the level of the agents themselves. The historian is a reflective being, aware of the influence of the writing of history upon the determination of the present. But this quality of self-understanding is seemingly not extended to historical agents themselves.

Signification, cultural production and writing

A theory of cultural production cannot be properly developed unless we possess an adequate account of the nature of human agents. In demanding a 'theory of the subject', in place of the presumption that subjectivity is the unmediated ground of experience, structuralism and post-structuralism have made a major contribution — albeit one which is not unique to these traditions of thought. But it is essential to insist upon the need for an interpretation of the agent, rather than the subject, and of agency rather than subjectivity alone. 'Subjects' are first and foremost agents. In explicating human agency, two elements need to be brought to the fore. One is what I have elsewhere called practical consciousness, the other is the contextuality of action. Structuralist thinking tends to operate in terms of a contrast between the conscious and the unconscious. For Lévi-Strauss and Lacan, the unconscious is the 'other face' of language. It is what cannot be said in words, but makes such saying possible. Now, we may agree that a

concept of the unconscious is necessary to provide a comprehensive account of why human agents act as they do. We may also accept that the relation between what can and what cannot be put into words is of elementary significance in human activity. However if, unlike structuralism and post-structuralism, we seek to grasp human life within frameworks of practical action, we reach a different view from that characteristic of these schools of thought. What cannot be put into words, as Wittgenstein proposes, is what has to be *done*. Human action does not unfold as the result of programmed impulses. Rather, human beings reflexively monitor what they do as an intrinsic part of what it is that they do. Such monitoring is ordinarily not expressed discursively. It is carried on on the level of practical consciousness. It is nonetheless extraordinarily elaborate, and is a chronic feature of even the most trivial of human activities.

In speaking of the contextuality of action, I mean to rework the differentiation between presence and absence. Human social life may be understood in terms of relations between individuals 'moving' in time-space, linking both action and context, and differing contexts, with one another. Contexts form 'settings' of action, the qualities of which agents routinely draw upon in the course of orienting what they do and what they say to one another.³⁴ Common awareness of these settings of action forms an anchoring element in the 'mutual knowledge' whereby agents make sense of what others say and do. Context should not be identified with what makes a particular segment of action idiosyncratic. Settings of action and interaction, distributed across time-space and reproduced in the 'reversible time' of day-to-day activities, are integral to the structured form which both social life and language possess.

In this view, signification is presumed to be saturated in the settings of practical action. The meanings engendered within language would not exist were it not for the situated, yet reproduced, nature of social practices. Timing and spacing are basic to the generation and sustaining of meaning, both in respect of the ordering of settings and in the reflexive use of such settings to formulate verbal interchange. Rather than 'speech', which sounds formal, we should refer here to 'talk'. Talk, the casual exchange of conversation in the settings of day-to-day social life, is the grounding of all the more elaborate and formalized aspects of language use — or so I want to argue here. Talk, as Garfinkel has done more than anyone else to show, operates via the

³⁴ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*, chpt. 1 and following.

indexicality of context and via the 'methodological devices' which agents use to produce a 'meaningful' social world.³⁵ Indexicality should not be identified with context-dependence. Such an identification was one of the main problems facing the early elaboration of ethnomethodological studies. Indexicality refers to the use of setting in order to produce context-freedom just as much as to the use of items specific to a particular time and place in the generation of meaning. The fact that meaning is produced and sustained via the use of methodological devices is fundamental to correcting the lapses of structuralism and post-structuralism. Meaning is not built into the codes or sets of differences associated with *langue*. The use of etcetera clauses, formulating, and other methodological devices, organizes meaning contextually. A competent language user has not merely mastered sets of syntactical and semantic rules, but the gamut of conventions involved in 'going on' in day-to-day contexts of social activity.

Cultural analysis focuses on the relation between discourse and what I shall henceforth call 'cultural objects'. By cultural objects, I mean artifacts which escape from contexts of presence, but which are distinct from objects generally in so far as they incorporate 'extended' forms of signification. Texts are the principal type of cultural object in this definition; however in modern times we have to add media of electronic communication. There are definite ways in which cultural objects contrast with the 'carrying' of language as talk. We can enumerate these characteristics as follows:

1) Cultural objects involve a distanciation of 'producer' from 'consumer'. This quality is shared with all material artifacts. All artifacts, not just cultural objects, involve a process of 'interpretation' in some part distinct from that implied in the monitoring of talk in contexts of co-presence. In ordinary talk, individuals routinely employ a diversity of aspects of setting in order to understand others and to 'gear' what they themselves say to such a process of understanding. The interpretation of cultural objects occurs without certain elements of the mutual knowledge involved in co-presence within a setting, and without the co-ordinated monitoring which co-present individuals carry on as part of ongoing talk.

³⁵ Harold Garfinkel: *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984.

2) As a consequence of this, the 'consumer' or receiver becomes more important than the producer in the interpretative process. In contexts of co-presence, the production and interpretation of speech acts tend to be closely intertwined, as part of the serial and participatory nature of conversation.

3) Cultural objects, as distinct from artefacts in general, involve the following characteristics:

- a) *A durable medium of transmission across contexts.* 'Medium' should be taken to refer both to the physical substance of the cultural object and to the means of its dissemination across different contexts.
- b) *A means of storage,* which in the case of cultural objects involves *encoding.* 'Storage' means here the leaving of traces whereby information can be 'rescued' from the evanescence of talk. Information cannot be stored as material resources can be stored. Information is stored — just as structuralist and post-structuralists say — as the specification of differences. 'Encoding' refers to the ordered properties of differences between traces.
- c) *A means of retrieval.* To retrieve information is to have a mastery of the forms of encoding it incorporates. Retrieval presumes a human agent who possesses certain skills e.g. literacy. It may also, at least in modern times, involve the use of mechanical devices without which access to the encoded material is unavailable.

The nature of cultural objects can only be understood in relation to talk. It is accepted by everyone that there is a close relation between culture, language and communication. According to the foregoing observations, this relation should be understood in terms of the basic role which talk, in contexts of practical action and co-presence, plays in the generation and sustaining of meaning. Language is a means of communication, but communication is not the 'objective' of talk. Rather talk expresses, and is expressed in, the variegated range of activities which it informs. The significance of cultural or informational objects is that they introduce new mediations between culture, language and communication. In talk, the agent and the setting are the means whereby culture is connected to communication. In contexts of practical action, communication through talk always has to be 'worked upon' by participants, although most of such 'work' is done

routinely as part of the process of reflexive monitoring in practical monitoring. Cultural objects break this symmetry. Since language as 'carried' by cultural objects is no longer talk, it loses its saturation in the referential properties which language-use has in the contexts of day-to-day action. As a visible or recoverable trace, separated from the immediacy of contexts of talk, the signifier becomes of peculiar significance. The preoccupation of structuralism and post-structuralism with writing and with the signifier at the expense of the signified can surely be traced to this. The differentiation of the signifier from practical contexts of action at the same time places a new premium upon communication, as a result of the greater effort at interpretation that is necessary. Communication is no longer more or less taken for granted as a result of the methodological processes involved in the sustaining of conversations. More defined and explicit hermeneutic tasks have to be undertaken in order to forge the communicative link between the cultural object and its interpreter. Given that this is so, it is not surprising that as a formal discipline hermeneutics arose from difficulties involved in the interpretation of texts. If a hermeneutic element has never been particularly pronounced in structuralism or post-structuralism, it is because signification has been primarily dealt with in terms of the internal organization of codes, or as the play of signifiers, rather than as the 'recovery of meaning'.

What is writing, and how far does writing itself contribute to the autonomy of texts? What relation if any, do authors' intentions in writing texts have to interpretation subsequently made of them? Should a 'theory of the text' essentially be a theory of reading? These are all questions that have to be confronted in the wake of the impact of structuralism and post-structuralism, which have at a minimum compelled us to look at them in a new way.

We cannot best explicate what language or signification are through writing. In this, Derrida is wrong. We should assert the priority not of speech, but of talk, over writing. But this should not lead us to suppose that writing is simply a 'representation' of talk. For reasons already mentioned, it cannot be so. Just as the invention of writing introduced something new into history, the production of texts involves qualities distinct from those carried within day-to-day talk. The origins of writing are certainly relevant to grasping its generic significance. Writing did not first of all emerge as a means of describing objects or events in the world. Writing was first of all purely a mode of recording — storage in its pure form. In the early agrarian states, writing was an administrative device, making possible the co-ordination of material

resources and human action across time and space. Writing was never therefore a 'translation' of the verbal into the visual. It signalled and expressed new modes of the co-ordination of activities in time-space. The earliest texts — lists, collations of items — have no author. That is to say, more important than the persons who produced them is who they were produced *for* and what uses were made of them.³⁶

This strongly suggests that writing diverges from talk not just in terms of the intrinsic characteristics of each, but in terms of the broader forms of social organization in which each is involved. Writing in a certain sense gives a primacy to 'spacing' over 'timing' absent in talk. This is surely more important than the simple fact that writing is visual and talk is auditory. Talk (contrary to Saussure's view) is sequential and serial, rather than linear. Writing has no temporal differentiation, although obviously such differentiation is involved in any process of the reading of a text. The spatial order of writing, on the other hand, since it is 'out of time', does not impose upon the reader the same constraints of sequencing which are involved in talk. That is to say, the reader need not follow a text straight through, can look at the end before the beginning and so on.

Once it proceeds beyond simple listing, writing opens itself out to 'art' in ways in which talk does not. Even the most trivial forms of day-to-day talk involve immense skill and presume a great deal of learning. Talk can become art in the sense in which particular forms of convention or contrivance may be employed to secure certain expressive or communicative ends. Story-telling, displays of wit, rhetoric and drama exist in all types of society. The 'success' of these verbal forms, however, is directly involved with their performance in contexts of co-presence. Conceived of as a process of production, rather than as of a given form, writing as art has rather different characteristics. Writing is not a performance to an audience. The skills of a writer do not depend upon his or her capability to employ the qualities available in contexts of co-presence to influence others in desired ways. Talk is necessarily an individualized production, moreover, in a manner in which writing is not. Speech has a serial character, because only one speaker can talk at any particular time in a given context of co-presence. In the case of writing, it is usually irrelevant to any of the terms in which the 'success' of a text might be

³⁶ Anthony Giddens: *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*. London: Macmillan, 1981, vol. I.

judged whether one individual or many were involved in its production. Texts of any length have to be produced across periods of time, which may be very prolonged. While 'work' goes into the construction of meaning in even the most casual of conversations, a text therefore tends to be a 'work' in a more protracted sense. It is a 'labour', in which discipline and originality may commingle in the fashioning of the spacing of writing.

Ordinary language is 'open' in an important sense. Most of the words and phrases used in everyday talk do not have precise lexical definitions. As Wittgenstein showed, ordinary language is not thereby necessarily vague or indefinite. What gives ordinary language its precision is its use in context. Settings of talk are used by participants to define the nature of what is said. The openness of writing is rather different — something which may be obscured by the fact that similar linguistic forms, e.g. metaphor and metonymy, may be used in both talk and in writing. The openness of writing derives from the 'suspension' of reference involved in it. We have to be careful to specify what this means. Writing can be, and is more often than not, used to refer to objects and events in the world. This is very obviously the case for example in respect of a list. The referential properties of writing do not depend — although they are always parasitic upon — the referential qualities of talk. Meaning and reference are ordinarily closely combined in talk, not because talk is in any way primarily oriented towards description, but because it is carried on and organized within practical contexts of action. That is to say, meaning is sustained via the constant connecting of talk with the modalities of day-to-day experience. The referential properties of writing cannot be connected with settings in this way. Consequently, even the most bluntly and coldly referential of statements can be read rhetorically or figuratively, and vice versa. As examples of Japanese *haiku* demonstrate, if demonstration is needed, a list may very readily be read as a poem.

All these considerations are relevant to the question of the autonomy of texts. The traditional issue of how far a text can be understood without reference to the intentions of its author is one which can be approached both in the light of these considerations and the account of agency indicated earlier. Agents, as Schutz puts it, have overall projects in terms of which the intentionality of their activities is organized.³⁷ The writing of a text may involve just such a project or

³⁷ Alfred Schutz: *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. London: Heinemann, 1972.

projects. That is to say, an author will have a certain range of objectives in mind in producing a given text. However, these are unlikely to be as relevant to the understanding of a text as to the process of reflexive monitoring involved in the labour that goes into the text's construction. A text, to repeat, is a 'work' in the sense in which it involves a chronic process of 'monitored' production. An 'author' is therefore neither an amalgam of intentions, nor a series of deposits or traces left in the text. Rather, the author is a producer working in specific settings of practical action.

This does not resolve the issue that has polarized discussion of the nature of texts, the question of how far there is a 'correct' interpretation of a text which can be fixed in relation to the intentions of its author. As against 'textual relativism', Hirsch and others have argued that the author's intention provides a basis for recovering the original meaning of a text. Now 'intention' here can only be understood as 'project', in Schutz's sense. We can easily see that the projects which lead an author to produce a text are likely to be only marginally relevant to anyone reading that text. Authors may choose to write a given text for a range of particular motives, to gain fame, to make money, for self-satisfaction and so on. Moreover, it does not make much sense to ask what a text as a whole 'means'. We are much more likely to ask what an author meant by a particular sentence or paragraph, or what arguments are threaded through a text, than we are to ask what a text as a whole means; this is entirely consonant with the way in which we deploy the phrase 'what did you mean?' in day-to-day talk. When we examine this type of question, as addressed to texts, it is fairly clear that nothing is being asked about the particular producer. If one were to ask, 'what did Marx mean by such-and-such a section of *Capital*?', Marx's characteristics as an individual are unlikely to be invoked. We could in most cases replace this query with the more anonymous question, 'What did the author mean?'. In ordinary talk, when we ask 'what did x mean by that?', probably we most usually mean 'what did he or she mean to accomplish by saying x?'. That is, we address the issue of the illocutionary force of what is said. But the question might also imply 'what did he or she mean to communicate?'. 'Meaning' in this sense involves, as Grice says, that the speaker 'intended the utterance x to produce an effect upon another or others by means of their recognising this to be his intention'.³⁸ 'Meaning' here equals

³⁸ H. P. Grice: 'Meaning', *Philosophical Review*, vol. 66, 1957. See also: 'Meaning revisited', in N. V. Smith: *Mutual Knowledge*. London: Academic Press, 1982.

communicative intent and it can be shown that such intent can be discerned only when participants in a given context of interaction share forms of mutual knowledge. In ordinary talk, communicative intent can be checked by direct interrogation and by reformulation on the part of the original speaker. There seems no reason to deny that we can interrogate a text in a parallel manner. That is to say, we can ask what was the communicative intent involved in a given section of a text. Where the author is unavailable, we can seek to answer such a question by investigating the forms of mutual knowledge implied in what the author wrote. This entails in turn that there are criteria for the accuracy of interpretations.

These criteria, and the types of material that must be known to confirm them, are complicated. They involve essentially enquiring into the settings of production of the text as a work. They mean knowing a good deal about the way in which the author set out to produce the text and the intellectual resources drawn upon in its production. But they also involve knowing about the audience to whom the text was primarily addressed. Skinner and others have quite rightly pointed to the significance of this, emphasis upon which does not in any way deny the inherent autonomy of texts.³⁹ Texts are written within various conventions of form, style and readership. 'How' the reader is to take the text is 'worked upon' by the author in its production.

Structuralist and post-structuralist discussions of the 'disappearance of the author' have been valuable in several respects. We are led to recognize that many texts do not have 'authors' in the sense in which most of the works discussed in modern literary criticism do. This is not just true of texts written in the pre-modern period — biblical texts, sagas, archives and so on. It is also true of the vast majority of texts which circulate in modern societies. Records, files, case histories, bills, and so on — these characteristically do not have authors, in the sense that they are not attributed to one individual, may indeed be the product of several hands, and no one thinks it worthwhile ordinarily to enquire into which specific individuals produced them. It is obvious enough that the conditions of their production as texts have to be grasped both in relation to characteristics shared with artefacts in general and in terms of features of writing previously discussed. All

³⁹ Quentin Skinner: 'Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas', *History and Theory*, vol. 8, 1969.

artefacts which have a durable character can become more or less completely separated both from the contexts of their initial production and from the projects of those who created them. All artifacts similarly may be put to purposes, or even be 'interpreted', in ways of which their producers may never have dreamed. All texts turn the openness of language away from the modes in which, in talk, closure and fixity are achieved. How open to multiple interpretations a text is probably has little to do with the intrinsic nature of the text itself. Here we have to make the transition to an account of the readings which texts may help engender. Most of the remarks made about understanding the production of texts in relation to the reflexive monitoring of action also apply to reading. No text is read in isolation; all reading occurs within frameworks of 'inter-textuality' as well as in settings involving drawing upon mutual knowledge. Several recent approaches, that only partly if at all derive from structuralism and post-structuralism, are promising in respect of developing accounts of reading. An example is Jauss's 'reception aesthetics'.⁴⁰ In this view, a reader approaches a text with a 'horizon of expectations' without which the text would make no sense. According to Jauss, understanding the relation between works and their readers involves answering several questions. We must know what readers understand of the particular genre within which the work is written. We have to know about the reader's knowledge of previous texts similar to the one in question. And we must have a sense of the differentiation between practical talk and poetic language, something likely to shift between different places and different cultural settings. Since all authors are also presumably readers, such discussion has to be closely integrated with explication of the production of texts.

Conclusion

I make no claim in this analysis to have covered all the significant themes raised by the traditions of structuralism and post-structuralism. There are many divergencies between the ideas of the authors to whom I have referred which I have simply ignored or glossed over. I

⁴⁰ Hans Robert Jauss: 'Literary history as a challenge to literary theory', in Ralph Cohen: *New Directions in Literary History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.

have sought to portray the contributions of structuralism and post-structuralism in broad strokes, in order to suggest some general questions which they raise for social theory today. No doubt the assertion that these traditions have proved incapable of handling the very issues they have brought to the fore is contentious. I hope, however, both to have justified this allegation and to have shown how some of those issues might be more satisfactorily analysed.