

Middle Ages," he writes, "a man was mad if his speech could not be said to form part of the common discourse of men. His words were considered null and void, without truth or significance, worthless as evidence."²⁵ Thus, by the unspoken rules of discourse, the words of some people carry no weight and are not to be credited as reliable. Prisoners, children, women, the insane—all are groups that have been silenced in some cultural settings. Unspoken rules govern many other aspects of discourse as well, such as the qualifications one must have to speak in certain contexts and the places from which discourse may originate.

Foucault also was interested in the role of institutions in framing rules governing what can be talked about, by whom, using what kind of language, and in which settings. The Church, for instance, often has had much to say about who may talk, what can be discussed, and how certain topics may be addressed. In sum, then, discourse and power are fused, though not in quite the same way that eloquence and power always had been recognized as related. For Foucault, when one's words carry significant meanings, one becomes an empowered participant in a society; when one's words are denied significant meaning one has no power.

Foucault was greatly interested in the relationship of discourse to power, believing that even our conception of what being human means is a product of the ways we talk about ourselves. He was, however, rather pessimistic about the potential for meaningful critique of sources of power. Critique of sources of power may result only in the establishment of another discursive system as predominant.

The possibilities and limitations of archaeology

As we have noted, Foucault selected the metaphor of archaeology to describe much of his investigative work aimed at discovering the discursive rules in place at various points in history. He was attracted to archaeology for a number of reasons, primarily because of its concern not with specific events but, instead, with general cultural trends. In its search for governing patterns and principles, archaeology accommodates contradictions and doesn't seek to avoid them like so many other disciplines. Rather than looking at change simply as a matter of sequence, archaeology asks how change has been possible. Finally, archaeology seeks to understand the totality of a culture rather than to account for minor manifestations of it.

Some of Foucault's critics have claimed that his detached, archaeological approach to historical analysis rendered him unwilling to judge one ethic of discourse and action as morally preferable to another. Thus, a follower of Foucault's critical work might be left unable to make decisive moral judgments and to act morally. Supporters of his, however, counter, "Like the pre-Platonic rhetoricians, Foucault uses language to articulate an understanding of our situation which moves us to action."²⁶ Indeed,

Herrick, J.A. (1997) *The History & Theory of Rhetoric: An Introduction to Contemporary Rhetoric III* 251
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Foucault's explorations of the relationships among language, rules of discourse, and the appropriation of power have informed a variety of critiques of contemporary social practices and much attendant action.

The feminist critique of ways of talking about women and their roles in society, which we will consider later in this chapter, has benefited from Foucault's insights. Similarly, his view of power and language could be applied fruitfully to the analysis of political practices, religious discourse, and the uses of the mass media to shape opinion. Foucault provides a wide range of possibilities to those who are interested in uses of discourse in shaping culture and distributing power.

JACQUES DERRIDA: TEXTS, MEANINGS, AND DECONSTRUCTION

Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher who was born in Algiers and studied at Harvard in the 1950s, has done more to influence literary studies and criticism than perhaps any other figure in the second half of the twentieth century.²⁷ His many books advance a wide-ranging and novel analysis of the hidden operations of language and discourse. Derrida held that language could not escape the built-in biases of the cultural history that produced it. "Now 'everyday language' is not innocent or neutral," he comments in an interview in the early 1970s. Derrida explains this charge about "everyday language":

It is the language of Western metaphysics, and it carries with it not only a considerable number of presuppositions of all types, but also presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics, which, although little attended to, are knotted into a system.²⁸

In his work, Derrida sought to reveal the underlying assumptions and irrationalities of the language of political discourse. To generalize about the goals of a writer of Derrida's scope, complexity, and difficulty would be dangerous. Nevertheless, I will venture to say that one goal of his writing was to enlighten his readers to the mechanisms by which language entraps and coerces us, to the concealed power within symbols to dictate thought.

Deconstruction of Texts

In many ways, Derrida's thinking represents a counterpoint to that of Jurgen Habermas (discussed in Chapter Nine) and, on a larger scale, a counterpoint to the Western, rational tradition in philosophy generally.²⁹ Habermas has been said to be completing the modernist project of establishing the supremacy of rationality, whereas Derrida sometimes is called postmodern in his tendency to undermine the foundations of Western

rationalism. Whereas Habermas looks to stabilize discourse by outlining conditions under which it can proceed rationally and with relative freedom from ideological coercion, Derrida looks to destabilize or "deconstruct" discourse by challenging traditional assumptions concerning language and meaning. His *work of destabilizing discourse by dissecting its underlying structures of meaning and implication* has been called **deconstruction**.

Unstable Meanings

Among the objects of Derrida's attention, then, was language itself.³⁰ Derrida did not see language simply as a system of signifying words. Rather, as James Aune notes, "Derrida saw language as a system of relations and oppositions whose elements must be defined in differential terms."³¹ Thus, Derrida's deconstruction of discourse involves a refusal to accept the "reality" of established social structures; unexamined, standardized meanings; and well-worn oppositions such as "mind and body," "form and content," and "nature and culture." Derrida argues that traditional notions such as "structure," "opposition," and "meaning" force stability on concepts that are fundamentally unstable and obscure the operations through which the *appearance* of stability is created. One of the goals of the deconstruction of discourse is to reveal "those blind-spots of argument" that result from rigid, unexamined meanings.³²

One of the operations of deconstruction is to identify the "oppositions" that give a text its meanings, to point out the places where terms or concepts are defined by contrast with something taken to be their opposite. When oppositions have been brought to light, a text sometimes is seen to be self-contradictory. Thus, "to deconstruct a discourse," writes Jonathan Culler, "is to show how it undermines the . . . oppositions on which it relies, by identifying in the text the rhetorical operations that produce the supposed ground of the argument, the key concept or premise."³³

In deconstructing the discourse or rhetoric of nuclear deterrence, a particular interest of Derrida's, he seeks to show the "logical incoherence" of the very concept. An apparently stable term such as "war" is understood or defined only in contrast to the assumed opposite, "peace." In a curious way, then, an argument for the possibility of war becomes dependent upon the opposite concept, peace. Moreover, Derrida sought to demonstrate, through deconstructive practices, how the entire argument for nuclear deterrence rested on an "elaborate fiction" of nuclear attack and defense.³⁴ The "rational" and deadly serious rhetoric of nuclear deterrence, then, is shown to be built upon unstable meanings and irrational assumptions.

James Aune suggests that the political ideology of Ronald Reagan also might stand as an example of what deconstruction reveals about the oppositions that define rhetorical texts. "Something as relatively straightforward

ward as the political ideology of Ronald Reagan does not exist in and of itself," writes Aune. "It consists of a set of rhetorical idioms (fierce nationalism, free-market capitalism, a Protestant view of family and work) which are defined only in relation to one another, and by that to which they are opposed."³⁵ If this is so, "there is a strange way in which someone like Reagan needs Communists, Democrats, and feminists to define himself. If they were to disappear, which is presumably the ultimate goal of his political practice, he would disappear, too."³⁶

Deconstruction

Both as a philosophy and as a critical method, deconstruction involves exposing the fundamental variability, what Derrida calls the "undecidability," of meanings.

Derrida, then, questions the very components of traditional argument that were so important to the writers in Chapter Nine: Perelman, Olbrechts-Tyteca, Toulmin, and Habermas. For Derrida, the foundations of argument—stable meanings, the appeal to reason, the unambiguous nature of principles such as "equality," and the reality of rigid oppositions such as "labor" versus "capital"—are the *effects* of rhetorical interactions rather than the objective foundations of arguments. Derrida asks us to consider the following questions:

What if the meaning of meaning . . . is infinite implication? . . . If its force is a certain pure and infinite equivocality, which gives signified meaning no respite, no rest, but engages it within its own economy to go on signifying and to differ/defer?³⁷

Perhaps Derrida is correct that meanings seldom are, if ever, fixed, and that constructing meanings involves an ongoing process of social negotiation. His insight suggests that language and discourse contain embedded structures that reveal the ways in which our thinking is directed by the very terms we use to communicate. Derrida's work of deconstruction has had a considerable impact on thinking about discourse, how it works, and the nature of meaning. Like the work of Foucault, it also provided critical tools for writers wishing to challenge the male-dominated status quo of Western society.

RICHARD WEAVER: RHETORIC AND THE PRESERVATION OF CULTURE

The tradition of rhetoric has stimulated the thinking of liberal and conservative theorists alike. The former, of which Foucault and Derrida are examples, see in the art the possibility for challenging the status quo, the latter the capacity for preserving and propagating cultural values. Among the latter is