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Hector A. Torres

University of New Mexico

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Hector A. Torres
Hector A. Torres
Associate Professor
Department of English
University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87131
MLA 2003
San Diego, California

The Constitution of Data in Linguistic Theory: Writing

As a form of language, writing bears a troubled relation to linguistic theory. For reasons both historical and theoretical, contemporary linguistic theory has been reluctant to treat the phenomenon of writing as an object of study on par with spoken language. This essay explores this troubled relation between linguistic theory and written language through the grid of deconstruction or post-structuralism. Though short, this essay will require much wandering and wondering in pursuit not so much a hypothesis but a clarification of the question: what does it mean to say that writing is not just a simple secondary object of study of linguistics but the condition of possibility for the ideal objects of linguistic theory. Among the wanderings I hope first to clarify the empirical import of the question, provide some motivation for the deconstructive grid, and cross some disciplinary boundaries between linguistics and philosophy in order to clarify what I mean when I say that writing constitutes the data of linguistic theory not just simply records it.

Had writing as a form of physical activity working within determined cultural graphic systems of representation not been invented, would linguistic theory, or more generally, the Western epistemological tradition exist? I lead with this question to suggest that in the possible world in which the physical activity of writing and its corollary graphic systems have not been invented, scientific inquiry would not cease but move into or invent an oral tradition capable of safeguarding all apodictic knowledge of its objects of inquiry. Without the activity that coordinates the eye with a surface through the mediation of a stylus, linguistic theory would proceed along a radically different assembly of those empirical and ideal objects. Herein, I mean that the being of those

objects, their presentation as data that linguistic theory in this possible world seeks to explain would, would never traverse the question of re-presentation in writing. Such a possible world would still resemble our own empirical world in its scientific projects since both worlds would still be replete with language performances performed on a phonocentric stage. The difference of course is that in such a possible world linguistic theory would have no choice but to constitute its data upon this phonocentric stage as a logical and empirical necessity. It is as if to emulate this possible world that linguistic theory today founds itself, taking the instantiation of language in the phonic stream as what is most worthy of study. European and American structural linguistics in particular breaks with traditional and philological approaches to the study of particular languages, principally Indo-European though not exclusively. The break is deemed necessary for the constitution of a proper object of study for modern linguistic theory, Saussure's opening concern in the *Cours*. However, this historical break is fraught with both theoretical and empirical difficulties that more than a few linguists today are calling our attention to.

Geoffrey Sampson (1985) is among the linguists today who are working to close the gap in representation that writing has experienced in the constitution of data in linguistic theory. With great conviction, he states: "But writing is, at any rate, much more than an inessential frill on the margin of linguistic behaviour. It therefore seems high time for the discipline of linguistics to recognize that written language falls squarely within its domain" (*Writing Systems*, 15). The good intention notwithstanding, Sampson's call to restore writing to a position of dignity in the realm of linguistic theory fails to disentangle itself from certain 'metaphysical presuppositions' with respect to writing as a linguistic phenomenon. In other words, if Sampson admits written language into the definition of linguistic theory's object of study, it is not because he wants to reverse the ontological priority that linguistic theory assigns to speech over writing. "Spoken language is primary both phylogenetically and ontogenetically: that is, there were spoken languages long before there were written languages...and each individual child brought up in a literate community learns to speak and to understand spoken language before learning to read and write"(13). To the extent that Sampson leaves this relation of priority intact, he repeats a metaphysical presupposition that extends as far back as Plato and Aristotle. Plato's condemnation of writing is well-known in the realm of philosophy and not least because

of the performative contradiction the condemnation involves him in. Aristotle's view that the written sign are symbols of spoken language and the latter of "the affections of the soul" continues to be the dominating assumption of linguistic theory. The repetition of this presupposition even in a call to give equal representation to both speech and writing mistakes an observational statement for explanatory one. In effect, it holds to a naïve empiricist view of writing inasmuch as it takes as common sense this relation of priority. In other words, the observational statement takes for granted precisely what is in need of explanation. Rather than asking what makes both speech and writing equally possible, i.e., what makes both of them instances of the language faculty or a product of interacting cognitive systems, the argument about priority gathers its force from the ideology of common sense, since, what could be more plain than that speech comes first and writing second?

It is just this common sense understanding of writing that the post-structural philosopher Jacques Derrida disturbs in *Of Grammatology* when he raises the question of the relationship between linguistic theory and a science of writing: "Has grammatology, then, the right to expect from linguistics an essential assistance...On the contrary, does one not find efficaciously at work, in the very movement by which linguistics is instituted as a science, a metaphysical presupposition about the relationship between speech and writing?" (1976, 28) Derrida addresses these questions with an eye to the deconstruction of the metaphysical presupposition at work in linguistic theory. The outcome is not a simple reversal of the ontological priority that places speech before writing, but a generalization of the properties that define both linguistic media, or better yet, the neutralization of these properties. As the phonological model suggests, the resolution of the empirical differences between these two linguistic media forms not so much a genus as an archphoneme. As the phonological models suggests, the empirical differences of an opposition are not lost in the neutralization but retained as representations capable of triggering the contrast between speech and writing without assigning any ontological priority to the two instances of language. If one could say that deconstruction or post-structuralism has a cornerstone, the concept of neutralization would have to be one cornerstone. Deconstruction makes much of the fact that the neutralization of a relevant contrast does not destroy the opposition but goes into some kind of mental storage that is

not exactly linear or locatable. Neutralization provides a model for deconstruction precisely because the empirical contrast between segments is both retained and resolved into this non-linear, non-place of representation in which the concept of priority is not necessary. This non-place acts much as a blank sheet of paper upon which one would write with white ink, as the French philosopher and cultural critic Luce Irigaray might put it. The implications of this non-representational space for linguistic theory are myriad, among these being the one Derrida asserts when he states: "Before being its object, writing is the condition of the *épistémè*." (*Grammatology* 27) What does it mean to say that writing is the condition for Western scientific inquiry, linguistic or otherwise? I trace out three strata of meaning for this assertion.

One stratum makes this statement kin with the entire Western idealist tradition in philosophy. The transcendental critiques of Immanuel Kant provide a key point of reference inasmuch as these attempt to specify not only the limits of human cognition but also its new-found authority under the name of Enlightenment Reason. On the Kantian reading, the condition of possibility for cognition in general is precisely the postulation of a transcendental mental schemata that has to be in place in order for humans to do what they do best: categorize the world in terms of such analytic and synthetic categories as space, time, quantity, quality, relation, modality. The work of Paul Grice exemplifies the abiding character of these categories for all the various branches of linguistic theory, from phonology to discourse analysis and pragmatics. In *The Origin of Geometry*, Edmund Husserl stretches the epistemological problems of Western idealist philosophy backwards and forwards with results similar but not identical to Kant's. Derrida's introductory essay to Husserl's *The Origin of Geometry* spells out the relation of sameness and difference between Kant and Husserl on this question of the origin of geometry and its historiography. The first appearance of geometry along with every appearance thereafter confirms the *a priori* status of the postulates of geometry but simultaneously raises question about geometry's historicity. That is, where did geometry reside before being observed and catalogued by the first mathematicians? Both Kant and Husserl falter on this thoroughly historical question as both neutralize the question. Kant places mathematical knowledge within the sphere of the transcendental schemata belonging uniquely to human beings. This critical move is necessary if the question is to remain

with the realm of Enlightenment reason, which is to say within the subject already possessing the scripts of the transcendental schemata. Geometry originates at the moment that human beings transform empirical measurements of the earth into a deductive system—a collection of axioms, theorems, and postulates stored in the archives of human memory until empirical synthetic pressures bring to light their *a priori* analytic status. The logic testifying to this appearance of geometry is not as much in dispute as the fact that the condition for the appearance is not itself an empirical production but the condition for all empirical production minus the transcendental schemata, which in Kantian language are first analytic and only subsequently synthetic. The transcendental schemata remain free of history because Kant resolves the question of the origin of geometry into ideal mental representation located in human beings to be sure but independent of them. The radical independence of the Kantian cognitive categories from any specific individual means that geometry could have appeared to any subject instructed in the transcendental schemata. Their autonomy thus signifies more of a protohistory than an empirical history, which is to say that Kant's transcendental schemata are a form of writing, highly abstract to be sure, but nonetheless sharing important properties with its second cousin, the physical activity of coordinating eye, blank surface, and some form of stylus to produce graphic marks. The schemata bear all the traits of the complex coordination we narrowly call writing: spacing and linearity, selection and combination, iteration and the potential absence of a subject, and of course, erasure.

The phenomenology of Husserl also approaches the origin of geometry with an indifference to history equal to Kant's. Husserl differs from Kant on many points but not on the space wherein their neutralization of history opens up a space for geometry to reside without falling from heaven. Perhaps it is fair to say that Husserl is more attentive to the syntax accompanying the suspension of history to the extent that he insists geometry owes its *a priori* status to iteration. Geometry establishes its unique or singular appearance on the earth from the fact that its recursive mappings of form to function and back prove themselves in the living present again and again not to be hallucinations. This proof turns quickly enough into a living historical tradition whose present on-going iterations guarantee the original appearance of geometry but also neutralize any historical

approach to it in favor of its reduction to the essential structure of human consciousness. Husserl thus establishes the *a priori* status of geometry on a history that owes more to the axiomatics of spacing, linearity, singularity, iteration, residing human consciousness than to the search for empirical facts. From the standpoint of the Western idealist tradition then, to say that writing is a condition of possibility for scientific inquiry is to say that writing cannot be confined to the narrow activity of pressing stylus to blank surface but is more like an open syntactic function—indifferent to specific values and arguments for all its positions and operations—as Derrida puts it in *Of Grammatology*, the blank space of thought.

Another stratum of meaning pushes this statement further back towards a still more primordial site of origin. This reading trails the twin question of when and where language as speech first appears, and as such raises the global question of the evolution of language. In a sense, the global nature of the question of the evolution of language is another version of the Kantian transcendental schemata, another perspective on the question of what has to be in place for language to emerge on phylogenetic and ontogenetic dimensions. It is also a reminder that linguistic change on whatever level of grammatical description does not occur with any metaphysical interest or global teleology to speak of. Here again, we postulate a blank space upon which the selectional pressures of evolution work to make a species fit for its environment. Fitness in this scenario would favor the development, design, and permanent storage of what formalists call the language faculty and functionalist see as the product of interacting cognitive systems turning conceptual structures into grammaticizations. From either a formal or functionalist perspective, fitness for language implies the design features of transmissability, learnability, and probably prevarication. Derek Bikerton's argument for a bioprogram is one of the most salient uses of the metaphor of writing to explain the emergence of the design features of language. In its most popular version, the argument for a grammar gene also goes under the name of a language instinct. But even if one is not persuaded by the language instinct argument, the metaphor of writing continues to constitute the data of formal and functional linguistic theory, a pressure from which neither formalists nor functionalists are able to escape. Perhaps, there is no escape from the pressure that writing broadly conceived puts on writers because no history or science

would be possible without writing in the narrow physical sense, the third stratum of meaning one easily recognizes. And here too, human memory recalls the archive.

Roy Harris is among the linguists today attempting to go beyond the common sense opposition of writing and speech. The integrational linguistic theory Harris advocates is exceptional not only because it does not seek to derive writing from speech but also because it wears away at the attendant oppositions of mind and body, signified and signifier. In *Rethinking Writing* (2000), Harris formulates the work of de-sedimenting the opposition between speech and writing as a sort of prolegomena to any future work in linguistic theory. His critique of the opposition stretches from the classical statements of Plato and Aristotle to the founding names of linguistic theory in Europe and America. Like Derrida, Harris takes apart the Platonic argument that writing is a poor imitation of speech, poor in the same way that a portrait differs from its sitting subject, or worse yet, as poor as the dead imitating the living. In all, his exposition of the treatment that writing receives in the hands of Plato, Aristotle, Quintillian, Saussure, Hockett, and Bloomfield attests to the abiding attraction of the common sense view of writing that writing represents speech. I quote two passages for their encapsulation of the empirical and epistemological problem this view of writing generates for contemporary linguistic theory:

As soon as one begins to probe the traditional 'representation' story at all insistently, both terminological and conceptual embarrassments are revealed. For if language is what writing represents, then writing can hardly be at the same time language. *Unless we are being asked to accept that what writing represents is all language, including itself.* Yet we hear not only of 'written language' but of 'written languages'. How could there be any such thing(s) if writing is no more that representation? If language is by nature audible and ephemeral, how could anything which is neither phonetic nor transient be a form or variety of language? And how could it as Février claims, 'fix' the ephemeral flux of the spoken word? It is rather like maintaining in all seriousness that the meteorological chart fixes the weather...(*Rethinking Writing* 2000 186).

It is clear that if the traditional 'representational' account is to pass muster at all, it must be given a much more careful formulation than the muddled one which historians of writing are still evidently happy to perpetuate. Can this be done in such a way as to rescue the story from its own incoherences? (187)

My wanderings leave me with no direct response to this question. Moreover, considerations of time leave me owing you the audience a fuller account of how writing constitutes data rather than simply records it—a pressure at work within both formal or a functional linguistic theory. Such an account would show in a sustained way how the incoherences work their way into the scene of writing of both formal and functional linguists as they arrange, describe, and seek to explain the data. In lieu, let me offer an example of what I mean when I say that writing, now conceived as an induction from particulars to an abstract conception, constitutes the data of linguistics. I take the example from a text I used this semester to teach English syntax to seniors and graduate students at the University of New Mexico.

In *Understanding English Grammar: A Linguistic Approach* (1995, 2003), Ronald Wardhaugh provides the following typical ditransitive pattern:

- (A).
1. The woman gave a dollar to the man ~ gave (the man) a dollar
 2. He left the money to her ~ left (her) the money
 3. She made a sweater for him ~ made (him) a sweater
 4. He poured a drink for her ~ poured (her) a drink
 5. The girl told a story to me ~ told (me) (a story)
 6. They asked a lot of questions *to/for her ~ they asked (her) (a lot of questions)

In typical notational convention, the parenthesis signify optional deletion of the object phrase. In his description of this common syntactic, Wardhaugh contrasts the verbs that allow deletion of indirect but not direct object. The restriction on the deletion works straight forwardly with all the verbs that take *to* or *for* as case-assigners, which extends to the speech act verb *tell* but not *ask*. As a token, *ask* disturbs the paradigm both by not answering to the restriction on indirect object deletion as well by requiring a case-assigner that jumps the prototypical dative pattern semantically and structurally. Thus, on the one hand *ask* patterns like its speech act counterpart *tell* insofar as both allow deletion of both objects separately. It fails to pattern with structurally with *tell* however inasmuch as the constituent playing the thematic role of indirect object must be marked by something like a *possessive* case-assigner. In other words, even with respect to its nearest relative in speech act terms it does not behave like the dative pattern as it is

prototypically defined by the verb *give*, which must involve in its event structure the transfer of some object or favor to a human being who benefits from the transfer in some way. Further complications arise in the determination of *ask* as a ditransitive with semantic relatives in the family of dative when the constituent being named as indirect object can alternate with a clausal constituent that once patterns *tell*.

- (B). 1. I told him [that we were going]
 2. I asked him [who was coming]

In descriptive dispute here is not the ditransitive properties of *ask* but whether its two complements are parallel in form and function with *tell*. Substitution tests show up the near but not complete nonparallel syntactic structure:

- (C). 1. I told him [who was going] \approx I asked him [who was coming]
 2. I told him [that we were going] \neq *I asked [that we were coming]
 3. I told him [that we were going] \approx I asked him [whether we were going]

The disturbance the pattern exhibits here moves *ask* further away from the prototypical dative class. The distance grows when *advise* joins the speech act set of *tell* and *ask*.

- (E). 1. I advised them [where to go]/I advised them [to go]

To say that the distance grows between the prototypical dative category and the precise subcategorization of *ask* is to ask if ditransitivity is enough to categorize it with the semantics of the dative. If, as I am suggesting, it is not, then *ask* is being constituted as a dative category whether it wants to not.

Hector A. Torres, Associate Professor
Department of English
University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87131
MLA 2003
San Diego, California
Handout

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 - 5. The girl told a story to me ~ told (me) (a story)
 - 6. They asked a lot of questions *to/for her ~ they asked (her) (a lot of questions)
- (B).
 - 1. I told him [that we were going]
 - 2. I asked him [who was coming]
- (C).
 - 1. I told him [who was going] \approx I asked him [who was coming]
 - 2. I told him [that we were going] \neq *I asked [that we were coming]
 - 3. I told him [that we were going] \approx I asked him [whether we were going]
- (E).
 - 1. I advised them [where to go]/I advised them [to go]

To say that the distance grows between the prototypical dative category and the precise subcategorization of *ask* is to ask if ditransitivity is enough to categorize it with the semantics of the dative. If, as I am suggesting, it is not, then *ask* is being constituted as a dative category whether it wants to not.

PAGE

PAGE 11