Theoretical & Critical Perspectives

# Week 25 Deconstruction



Ceci n'est pas une pipe.

## Key Questions

- What is deconstruction? Where does it come from?

- How does deconstruction conceptualise language?

- How does deconstruction see literature and history?

- How does deconstruction compare to other theories?

- How do deconstructionists analyse a text?

## Defining Deconstruction

❖ Deconstruction as a theory and tool for critical analysis originates in 1960s and 1970s, forming part of a wider critical approach called "poststructuralism"

❖ Deconstruction part of several other critical theories considered on this module, including postcolonial, feminist, and gender theory

❖ Deconstruction chiefly concerned with something that lies at heart of and key to any critical approach: language

❖ Deconstruction interested in structures and workings of language itself; that is, in relationships and processes involved in our articulation and creation of the world around us

1. "deconstruction, n.: A method of critical analysis of philosophical and literary language that emphasises the internal workings of language and conceptual systems, the relational quality of meaning, and the assumptions implicit in forms of expression"

**'deconstruction, n.', *Concise Oxford English Dictionary***
**(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)**

2. "Deconstruction involves the close reading of texts in order to demonstrate that any given text has irreconcilably contradictory meanings, rather than being a unified, logical whole."

**Peter Beidler (ed.), 'Deconstruction', *The Turn of the Screw***
**(Boston: Bedford/ St Martin's, 2010), p.408**

❖ Central to these definitions: relationships between language, meaning, literature

❖ Language and meaning are key to most of the theories we've studied so far

❖ Deconstruction interested in structures and workings of language itself; that is, in relationships and processes involved in our articulation and creation of the world

❖ Structuralism, poststructuralism and deconstruction theorise these relationships (between language and meaning, as well as between language, meaning and literature)


## Questions

✳ What is the relationship between the word "pipe" and the "thing" it describes?

✳ Is this relationship different to that between the pipe image and a "real" pipe?

✳ Why do the Martians need their "Earth Book"?

✳ Why does it seem feasible to them that the telephone is a cow, a cat or chicken?

## Structuralism

❖ Structuralism concerned not so much with what things mean, but *how* they mean

❖ Structuralism = science designed to show all elements of human culture, incl. literature, are understandable as parts of a system of signs

❖ Posits that texts always have underlying structures

❖ Texts, according to structuralists, are self-sufficient, unified systems

❖ Like formalists, structuralists believe texts have identifiable "centres" of meaning

❖ Piece of literature is freestanding, self-contained and its definite meaning can be found in complex network of relations between its parts

❖ Critic's task is to decipher that meaning by deciphering a text's system and getting to its "centre" of meaning

❖ System of signs theorised by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913)
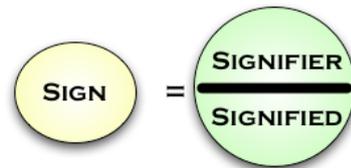


❖ Word = "sign" comprised of concept (signified) and sound (signifier)

❖ Relationship between signifier and signified is entirely arbitrary (hence the Martians' problems in assigning the signifier "telephone" to its signified

❖ Note that the ringing of the phone is also a signifier (just as smoke is for fire)

❖ Word "rabbit" has no inherent relationship with the animal it describes (meaning only derived by consensual usage; learning language requires memorising of signifiers and corresponding signifieds)

❖ Language systems based on difference:

   3. "A language is a system of differences with no positive terms."
                                                                  **Ferdinand de Saussure**

❖ Words only have meanings in relation to one another, but have no inherent meaning; it is only by what they are not that they attain their meaning

❖ Regards signifying systems as culturally variable but the deep laws that govern these as universal, even as rooted in unchanging structures of the human mind

❖ These structures invariably rely on binary oppositions (beautiful vs ugly; ugly is not beautiful and vice versa)

❖ Structuralists argue that language does not simply reflect the world but shapes it ("*how* we see is *what* we see")

### Poststructuralism

- ❖ Poststructuralism can be seen both as a continuation/ development and as a rebellion against Structuralism

- ❖ Poststructuralists argue that consequence of Structuralist beliefs is that we have no access to anything which is beyond linguistic processing (without language, there is no meaning)

- ❖ If structuralist arguments are followed through, there is no single fixed intellectual reference point

- ❖ A literary text, for example, cannot have a definite meaning that lies outside of the system of signification as that meaning would always have to be explained or conceived through more signification, i.e. language.

- ❖ Poststructuralism distrusts notion of human being as independent entity (i.e. disputes humanist notion of the subject):

    4. "The individual [or subject] is really a product of social and linguistic forces, that is not an essence at all, merely a 'tissue of textualities'".
       **Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002, p.65**

- ❖ According to Jacques Derrida, no system can be autonomous in the way that structuralism requires

- ❖ For a system (such as that of binary opposites) to be logical, its terms and concepts must be unambiguously defined

- ❖ Dichotomies (or binary oppositions) on which structuralist systems are based describe distinctions which are in fact not rigid or definite at all

- ❖ Derrida coined term *différance* (*différer*, v. = "to differ" and "to defer") to contest binary opposites as described by Saussure and to further explain their relationship

- ❖ Binary opposites are not binary opposites at all; they "differ" but they also "defer" to each for their meaning; meanings often overlap rather than existing in mutual independence

- ❖ Most importantly perhaps, binary opposition insinuates equality of terms which, in fact, doesn't exist

- ❖ Terms always exist in a hierarchy of value depending on cultural norms

- ❖ Structuralist resolve any contradictions in a text by arguing that and explaining how these contradictions function as a logical part of the ultimate, definite meaning of a text (so even ambiguity has a fixed purpose)

- ❖ Poststructuralists say that texts do not have clear or definite meanings, but they

    5. "... maintain that texts do have real meanings underlying their apprent or 'manifest' meanings (which often contradict or cancel out one another). These underlying

meanings have been distorted, disguised, or repressed for psychological or ideological reasons but can be discovered through poststructuralist readings."

**Peter Beidler (ed.), 'Poststructuralism',** *The Turn of the Screw*
**(Boston: Bedford/ St Martin's, 2010), p.422**

❖  Focus on idea that reality is textual


## **Deconstruction**

❖  Not synonymous with poststructuralism; it is a practice of many (though not all) poststructuralists and relies on poststructuralist arguments

❖  "Deconstructionists" argue that process of signification itself produces irreconcilable contradictions:

6. "Undecidability [...] is never reduced, let alone mastered. Though a deconstructive reading can reveal the incompatible possibilities generated by the text, it is impossible for the reader to decide among them.

**Peter Beidler (ed.), 'Deconstruction',** *The Turn of the Screw*
**(Boston: Bedford/ St Martin's, 2010), p.410**

❖  This does not mean texts don't have any meanings or that anything you say about them is valid; rather deconstruction carefully teases out the paradoxes, ambiguities and undecidabilities of a text

❖  According to Peter Barry, poststructuralist and deconstructionists, then, do the following when reading and interpreting a text:

• They Read the text against itself so as to expose what might be thought of as the 'textual subconscious', where meanings are expressed which may be directly contrary to the surface meaning.

• They fix upon the surface features of the words - similarities in sound, the root meanings of words, a 'dead' (or dying) metaphor and bring these to the foreground, so that they become crucial to the overall meaning.

• They seek to show that the text is characterised by disunity rather than unity.

• They concentrate on a single passage and analyse it so intensively that it becomes impossible to sustain a 'univocal' reading and the language explodes into 'multiplicities of meaning'.

• They look for shifts and breaks of various kinds in the text and see these as evidence of what is repressed or glossed over or passed over in silence by the text. These discontinuities are sometimes called 'fault-lines'.

**Peter Barry,** *Beginning Theory***, 2nd ed. (Manchester:**
**Manchester University Press, 2002), p.73**