

# Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari and the Rhuthmoi of Language - Part 1

Sunday 18 July 2021, by [Pascal Michon](#)

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Chapter 4 offered a critique of “linguistics” and the contours of an alternative theory of language which developed the few elements already presented in Chapter 1 and at the end of Chapter 3. Deleuze and Guattari targeted four “postulates” which they discussed thoroughly. As we will see, their critique was quite legitimate when it aimed at Chomskyan and mainstream-Saussurean forms in the name of *pragmatics*, but it was much more debatable when it developed into a *hyperpragmatism* which played Austin against Benveniste, came sometimes quite close to Meschonnic without yet ever mentioning him, and reduced language to a purely practical means of action.

## From Structuralism to Pragmatism

Deleuze and Guattari’s first target was the “postulate” according to which “language [*le langage*] is informational and communicational” (pp. 75-85). We remember that Morin had already discussed the reductive use of these concepts within the framework of cybernetics, biology and evolution theory. A large part of his criticism was aimed at the reduction of information to “program” and “command,” and of communication to “transmission.” This reduction, on the one hand, abusively bracketed the “apparatuses” or “the “original arrangement” which tied the processing of information to actions and operations, and, on the other hand, illegitimately erased the self organizing power of the “machines” using information.

Based on a similar line of arguments, Deleuze and Guattari criticized the extraordinary diffusion of “information” and “communication,” this time, in linguistics. Language was not a neutral medium which was used by humans to convey information concerning the world, nor a tool used to exchange feelings or thoughts. It had primarily the function of asserting power. The very first lines of the chapter thus caricatured “a schoolmistress”—what about university professors?, one was tempted to ask—who forced semiotic codes upon, or better yet, into her students, gave “orders or commands.”

When the schoolmistress instructs her students on a rule of grammar or arithmetic, she is not informing them, any more than she is informing herself when she questions a student. She does not so much instruct [*enseigne*] as “insign,” [*“enseigne”* = force into signs] give orders or commands. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 75)

Only a few years before, Barthes had similarly argued, in his inaugural lecture given at the Collège de France, that “the tongue is fascist – *la langue est fasciste*.” According to Barthes, it compelled speech and, as soon as it was uttered, it immediately entered the service of power.

[The tongue] [*La langue*], [as performance of language] [*comme performance de tout langage*], is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is quite simply fascist; for fascism does not prevent speech [*de dire*], it compels speech [*à dire*]. Once uttered [*proférée*], even in the subject's deepest privacy, [the tongue] [*la langue*] enters the service of [some] power [*un pouvoir*]." (*Leçon inaugurale au Collège de France*, 7 janvier 1977, published as *Leçon* in 1978. Trans. by Richard Howard, my mod.)

Barthes' argument was still mainly based on a structuralist view of *la langue*, a firm "structure" which imposed its rule, its "dominating, stubborn, implacable voice," upon the speaking subjects who, consequently, had no room for exercising their freedom. This persistent structuralist spirit is unfortunately erased when *la langue* is translated by *speech*, which artificially "pragmatizes" Barthes' thought and makes it difficult to understand his real argument since *dire* is simultaneously translated by *speech*. Hence my suggestion to translate *la langue* by *tongue* in order to clearly distinguish it from *la parole* which in turn may be acceptably translated as *speech*.

He [Ernest Renan] realized that [the tongue] is not exhausted by the message engendered by it. He saw that [it] can survive this message and make understood within it, with a frequently terrible resonance, something other than what it says, superimposing on the subject's conscious, reasonable voice the dominating, stubborn, implacable voice of structure. (*Leçon inaugurale au Collège de France*, 7 janvier 1977, published as *Leçon* in 1978. Trans. by Richard Howard, my mod.)

But Barthes also called attention to two pragmatic features of speech: "assertion" of oneself and "repetition" of signs already used by others. Blunt assertion was the dominant form of speech although it could present itself under softer modalities, but at the same time, speech had to use signs that had already been heavily loaded with signification by previous usages.

[Once uttered] In it [In the tongue] inevitably, two categories appear: the authority of assertion, the gregariousness of repetition. On the one hand, [the tongue] is immediately assertive: negation, doubt, possibility, the suspension of judgment require special mechanisms which are themselves caught up in a play of linguistic masks; what linguists call modality is only the supplement of [the tongue] by which I try, as through petition, to sway its implacable power of verification. On the other hand, the signs composing [the tongue] exist only insofar as they are recognized, i.e., insofar as they are repeated. The sign is a follower, gregarious; in each sign sleeps that monster: a stereotype. I can speak only by picking up what *loiters* around in speech. Once I speak, these two categories unite in me; I am both master and slave. I am not content to repeat what has been said, to settle comfortably in the servitude of signs: I speak, I affirm, I assert *tellingly* what I repeat. In [the tongue], then, servility and power are inescapably intermingled. (*Leçon inaugurale au Collège de France*, 7 janvier 1977, published as *Leçon* in 1978. Trans. by Richard Howard, my mod.)

Deleuze and Guattari developed a similar series of pragmatic arguments tying the assertive power of the "compulsory education machine" and its "commands" with the power of repetition or "redundancy."

A teacher's commands are not external or additional to what he or she teaches us. They do not flow from primary significations or result from information: an order always and already concerns prior orders, which is why ordering is redundancy. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 75)

However—quite inconsistently, we must say, since they openly targeted structuralism—they also referred to the “power” of the grammatical structure and its semiotic differentials, which sounded actually as a vestige of Guattari's own Lacanian previous orthodoxy.

The compulsory education machine does not communicate information; it imposes upon the child semiotic coordinates possessing all of the dual foundations of grammar (masculine-feminine, singular-plural, noun-verb, subject of the statement-subject of enunciation, etc.). [...] A rule of grammar is a power marker before it is a syntactical marker. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 75-76)

Despite some relapse into the very theory which they intended to criticize, this analysis led to a finer reelaboration of the concept of “statement,” which had already been presented in Chapter 3 in the larger context of an interaction between “regime of signs” and “regime of power.” Let us note, first, that Deleuze and Guattari did not talk about *la langue* any longer but about *le langage* in its entirety, i.e. including its pragmatic side. “Language” was not composed of signs but of “statements,” that is, they said, of “*mots d'ordre*,” which was a play on words by which they wanted to draw attention to the radically political nature of these “elementary units of language.” Besides using it in its common meaning, “slogan,” or “political guiding principle,” they also used *mot d'ordre* literally as “word of order.” As a result, as Brian Massumi rightly noticed, a “statement” was both “a word or phrase constituting a command and a word or phrase creative of order” (note 1 of the trans. p. 523).

The elementary unit of language [*du langage*]*—the statement—is the order-word [Mot d'ordre]. [...] Language [le langage] is made not to be believed but to be obeyed, and to compel obedience. (A Thousand Plateaus, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 76)*

Language was entirely composed of pragmatic units called “statements.” Information or meaning, that is, the referential function of language, did not disappear altogether but it was only an evanescent support of power performances.

The order does not refer to prior significations or to a prior organization of distinctive units. Quite the opposite. Information is only the strict minimum necessary for the emission, transmission, and observation of orders as commands. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 76)

According to Deleuze and Guattari, language was actually utterly opposed to “life,” which “[did] not speak” but only “listen[ed] and wait[ed].” This statement presented in a nutshell the epitome of Deleuze and Guattari's pragmatic critique of what they called “linguistics”: language was only a much overestimated layer that covered, overcoded and ruled over life which, surprisingly, was by

itself mute and passive.

Language is not life; it gives life orders. Life does not speak; it listens and waits. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 76)

Of course, Deleuze and Guattari could not stop at such a basic level of analysis, especially because of their metaphysics of expression which was based upon the model of life itself and its creative and active nature. They conceded that the “*mot d’ordre* – the order-word” was “only a language-function” among others (p. 76). But they surprisingly—and quite inconsistently—re-affirmed a strict exclusion of the referential function to ideas, feelings or things. Language was certainly not closed upon itself but it consisted only in “transmitting what one has heard, what someone else said to you.”

Language does not operate between something seen (or felt) and something said, but always goes from saying to saying. We believe that narrative consists not in communicating what one has seen but in transmitting what one has heard, what someone else said to you. Hearsay. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 76)

Against the excessive valuation of “metaphor” and “metonymy”—which was a transparent allusion to Lacanian psychoanalysis—Deleuze and Guattari advocated “indirect discourse.” Indeed, whereas the former resulted from a structuralist conception language as a differential system in which one could switch, in poetry, or slide, in a slip of the tongue, from one difference to another and in which action was only secondary, they presented language firstly as a pragmatic activity making metaphor and metonymy secondary to indirect discourse.

The “first” language, or rather the first determination of language, is not the trope or metaphor but *indirect discourse*. The importance some have accorded metaphor and metonymy proves disastrous for the study of language. Metaphors and metonymies are merely effects; they are a part of language only when they presuppose indirect discourse. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 76-77)

As Barthes, but for different reasons, they concluded that language was not “communication of a sign as information” but transmission of *mots d’ordre* or commands compelling the receiver. It was primarily pragmatic.

Language is not content to go from a first party to a second party, from one who has seen to one who has not, but necessarily goes from a second party to a third party, neither of whom has seen. It is in this sense that language is the transmission of the word as order-word [*mot d’ordre*], not the communication of a sign as information. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 77)

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