

# Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari and the Rhuthmoi of Language - Part 4

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## Discourse Singularity and Variation vs Universal Language System

The third “postulate of linguistics” discussed by Deleuze and Guattari affirmed that “there are constants or universals of the tongue [*la langue*] that enable us to define it as a homogeneous system” (pp. 92-100). Instead, they wanted to prove that “every [linguistic] system is in variation and is defined not by its constants and homogeneity but, on the contrary, by a variability whose characteristics are immanent, continuous, and regulated in a very specific mode” (pp. 93-94). In short, the tongue is not a persistent system, it is intrinsically changing, shifting, innovating, in motion.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, linguists claimed that human language [*le langage*] universally involves a series of distinctive “phonemes,” a series of “fundamental constituents of syntax,” and a series of “minimal semantic elements.” They similarly alleged that each “tongue” [*langue*] has specific phonological, syntactical, and semantic characteristics. All these constituents would be linked to each other by “trees” and “binary relations between trees.” Moreover, the implementation of this universal human capacity of language under its various specific forms (languages) would imply that each speaker would possess a “competence” which enables him or her to respect the grammatical rules of his or her tongue during his or her “performance” (p. 92).

All of these characteristics would, according to them, establish the theory of language on a much too narrow basis. Deleuze and Guattari pointed out that “abstract” does not necessarily mean “universal” or “constant.” On the contrary, language characteristics would always be local, singular, changing, and variable.

There is no reason to tie the abstract to the universal or the constant, or to efface the singularity of abstract machines insofar as they are built around variables and variations. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 92-93)

To support their view, Deleuze and Guattari cited the debate between Noam Chomsky’s generative grammar (1928-) and William Labov’s variationist sociolinguistics (1927-) on the nature of language and, consequently, of linguistics. While “Chomsky ask[ed] only that one carve from this aggregate [the heterogeneous nature of a language] a homogeneous or standard system as a basis for abstraction or idealization, making possible a scientific study of *principles*,” Labov insisted, on the

contrary, that the “lines of inherent variation” were essential in any language. With the same idea in mind as Morin when he introduced the concept of “machine” which implied variation and creativity, to replace that of “system” which remained closed in on itself, Deleuze and Guattari concluded from that suggestion that linguistic systems were not closed wholes but open flows which continuously varied.

He [Labov] refuses the alternative linguistics set up for itself: assigning variants to different systems, or relegating them to a place outside the structure. It is the variation itself that is systematic, in the sense in which musicians say that “the theme is the variation.” Labov sees variation as a *de jure* component affecting each system from within, sending it cascading or leaping on its own power and forbidding one to close it off, to make it homogeneous in principle. Labov does consider variables of all kinds, phonetic, phonological, syntactical, semantic, stylistic. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 93)

However, the very last sentence of this quote showed that variation did not mean, in Labov’s view, getting rid of all formal features. On the contrary, those remained comparable from one language to another, even if in constant variation. Variation was meant *of* formal characteristics. Labov argued, for instance, that African American Vernacular English should not be stigmatized as “substandard,” but respected as a variety of English with “its own grammatical rules.” Whatever level considered, “phonetic, phonological, syntactical, semantic, or stylistic,” system and variations were not separate, the latter being exterior and secondary to the former, but variations were the real base of the system itself, which did not imply that the notion of system disappeared altogether. Similarly Benveniste thought that human beings are endowed with “the ability to reproduce certain models while varying them infinitely” (1974, p. 19).

Instead, Deleuze and Guattari wanted admittedly to “harden” Labov’s position (p. 93), even if it meant “overstepping the limits Labov [set] for himself” (p. 94). Unlike Morin, they ruled out any improvement of the concept of system, which should be abandoned altogether and replaced by those of heterogeneous assemblage and unorganized variation. In order to oppose structuralism and systemism—which they rather quickly amalgamated—they opted for the complete opposite perspective based on sheer disorder and chance.

Must it not be admitted that every system is in variation and is defined not by its constants and homogeneity but on the contrary by a variability whose characteristics are immanent, continuous, and regulated in a very specific mode. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 93-94)

Significantly, Deleuze and Guattari took musical tonality as an example of this kind of assemblages and free variations. Although music did not imply any articulation of sound according to phonemic rules, nor syntax, nor semantic content, in short although it was utterly foreign to language, they thought that musical variations of sound could be used as an illustration of the generalized variations which they were aiming at.

In the Western tradition, music was mainly based on “tonal or diatonic system,” however this basis

had been successively enriched by integrating “the minor ‘mode’ which [gave] tonal music a decentered, runaway, fugitive character,” “tempered chromaticism” which developed “an even greater ambiguity [by] stretching the action of the center to the most distant tones, but also preparing the disaggregation of the central principle, replacing the centered forms of continuous development with a form that constantly dissolves and transforms itself,” and finally, a “generalized chromaticism,” which “turn[ed] back against temperament, affecting not only pitches but all sound components—durations, intensities, timbre, attacks” (p. 95). This brief history of sound in Western music was supposed to show that “highly complex and elaborate [sonorous] material” made audible “nonsonorous forces.” The world’s forces were directly expressed through human-made sounds.

It becomes impossible to speak of a sound form organizing matter; it is no longer even possible to speak of a continuous development of form. Rather, it is a question of a highly complex and elaborate material making audible nonsonorous forces. The couple matter-form is replaced by the coupling material-forces. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 95)

Naturally, Deleuze and Guattari recognized that this argument proved nothing about language which was, by their own admission, based on difference between phonemes and not on variation of pitch, tonality, or atonality. But they still argued that music rather than language should be taken as a theoretical model to account for the world in its constant becoming.

Once again, the objection will be raised that music is not a language, that the components of sound are not pertinent features of language, that there is no correspondence between the two. We are not suggesting any correspondence. We keep asking that the issue be left open, that any presupposed distinction be rejected. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 96)

They strangely imagined, without giving the slightest hint of what it might have resulted in, that, if “the Voice-Music relation proposed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau” had been taken seriously, “it could have taken not only phonetics and prosody but all of linguistics in a different direction.” (p. 96). Hence a very twisted reasoning: although this comparison of language with music had been rejected by all specialists at least since Saussure, they argued that linguistics could have been different if it had not rejected it, which naturally was true but of no theoretical consequence, precisely because it had not happened. Besides, it ignored Meschonnic’s current reflection on voice in poetic discourse as well as ordinary language, which clearly distinguished it from any musical consideration (see below the chapters on Meschonnic).

Deleuze and Guattari cited Luciano Berio’s (1925-2003) and Dieter Schnebel’s (1930-2018) works on voice timbre as examples of entirely “continuous variation” and “generalized ‘glissando’” freed from any linguistic concerns.

Only when the voice is tied to timbre does it reveal a tessitura that renders it heterogeneous to itself and gives it a power of continuous variation: [...] it belongs to a musical machine that prolongs or superposes on a single plane parts that are spoken, sung, achieved by special effects, instrumental, or perhaps electronically generated. This is the sound plane of a generalized

“glissando” implying the constitution of a statistical space in which each variable has, not an average value, but a probability of frequency that places it in continuous variation with the other variables. Luciano Berio’s *Visage* (Face) and Dieter Schnebel’s *Glossolalie* (Speaking in tongues) are typical examples of this. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 96)

However, this was not what Berio himself suggested. On the contrary, he clearly intended to preserve a link between his apparently free reelaboration of the human voice and the ordinary spoken language. Anyhow, they claimed that Berio’s and Schnebel’s works attained “that secret neuter language without constants” that they imagined. Once again—as with Heidegger or Gadamer—the artist’s testimony about his own work, grounded in both practice and theory, was underestimated by philosophers who better understood the true meaning of his practice. The result of this condescension was to dissolve the relationship between music and language, however carefully described by Berio, into a vague and obscure notion implying secrecy and neutrality.

And despite what Berio himself says, it is less a matter of using pseudoconstants to produce a simulacrum of language [*de language*] or a metaphor for the voice than of attaining that secret neuter language without constants [*à cette langue neutre, secrète, sans constantes*] and entirely in indirect discourse where the synthesizer and the instrument speak no less than the voice, and the voice plays no less than the instrument. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 96)

However, since the notion of “secret neuter language,” which suddenly arose in this argument, might recall Heidegger or even certain mystics, Deleuze and Guattari gave a few examples taken from ethnologists or sociologists. “Secret languages, slangs, jargons, professional languages, nursery rhymes, merchants’ cries,” they claimed, were supposed to develop into “chromatic languages, close to a musical notation.” According to them—but not to specialists—secret languages did not have any systemic form but were pure variation.

It is perhaps characteristic of secret languages, slangs, jargons, professional languages, nursery rhymes, merchants’ cries to stand out less for their lexical inventions or rhetorical figures than for the way in which they effect continuous variations of the common elements of language. They are chromatic languages, close to a musical notation. A secret language does not merely have a hidden cipher or code still operating by constants and forming a subsystem; *it places the public language’s system of variables in a state of variation*. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 97)

Based on these rather fantastic arguments, they called for a linguistics entirely freed from the notions of system or formal constants, “a chromatic linguistics according pragmatism its intensities and values.” Such a linguistics would consider each language not any more as a differential system but as a pure flow composed of variable molecular intensities.

Linguistics in general is still in a kind of major mode, still has a sort of diatonic scale and a strange taste for dominants, constants, and universals. All languages, in the meantime, are in

immanent continuous variation: neither synchrony nor diachrony, but asynchrony, chromaticism as a variable and continuous state of language. For a chromatic linguistics according [*qui donne au*] pragmatism its intensities and values. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 97)

Since it introduced a *rhuthmic* perspective, the idea seemed at first quite innovative, but it had the fatal defect of unduly subjecting language to the physical paradigm. In fact, language could not be reduced to molecules and the articulation between the physical and the poetic *rhuthmic* paradigms could not be envisaged at the cost of the erasure of one by the other.

However, we will see later in Chapter 10 that Deleuze and Guattari introduced literature as a second example of "continuous variation" of language, explaining—this time in a very appropriate, albeit limited, way—how some poetic phenomena well known to writers and poets could account for it.

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