Abstract: Perhaps the best known and most influential of Jacques Derrida’s early, linguistically-oriented critiques concerns the relationship between writing and speech. This inquiry is directed towards a certain thread in the history of philosophy in which priority is given to spoken language over the written. It is Saussurean linguistics in particular that allows Derrida to posit the interdependence of phono centrism, or the privilege of speech over writing, with logocentrism, or the desire for a true and universal experience of the world in the mind prior to the introduction of language. However, a close reading of this engagement suggests that Saussure might be phonocentric but not logocentric, and indeed, that it is possible to be phonocentric but not logocentric.
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Keywords: Saussure, Derrida, phonocentrism, orthography, philosophy of language, history of linguistics

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The Passion of Saussure

Perhaps the best known and most influential of Jacques Derrida’s early, linguistically-oriented critiques concerns the relationship between writing and speech. Derrida’s inquiry - which features most centrally in Of Grammatology - is directed towards a certain thread in the history of philosophy in which priority is given to spoken language over the written. An essential proximity between the voice and the mind is always contrasted with the inessential and external quality of writing. For Derrida, the interiorisation of the vocal and the exteriorisation of the graphic is not an accident of history, but rather a necessary condition for metaphysics if it is to allow the mental, internal voice an immediate and pre-linguistic relationship with experience, nature, and the truth. The relationship between writing and speech would be established simultaneously with the birth of philosophy:

The idea of science and the idea of writing - therefore also of the science of writing - is meaningful for us only in terms of an origin and within a world to which a certain concept of the sign (later I shall call it the concept of the sign) and a certain concept of the relationships between speech and writing, have already been assigned. (Derrida, 1974, p. 4)

In readings of Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Husserl, and Saussure, Derrida observes this universal privilege given to spoken language over the written. In this way, Derrida reveals, in contemporary philosophies claiming to break from classical approaches, the ongoing desire to preserve the priority of the voice as that which is closest to sense, to consciousness, and to truth.
Derrida’s critique of the relationship between writing and speech appears in *Speech and Phenomena*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Margins of Philosophy*, among others. In *Of Grammatology*, the argument is made most clearly in regard to Saussure’s well-known privileging of speech over writing as the proper basis of linguistics. Saussure’s entire engagement with language and signs is, according to Derrida, dependent upon a presumed and uncritical primacy of speech:

Saussure, for essential, and essentially metaphysical, reasons had to privilege speech, everything that links the sign to phonē. He also speaks of the ‘natural link’ between thought and voice, meaning and sound (46). He even speaks of ‘thought-sound’ (156).

(Derrida, 1981, p. 21)

Saussure’s insistence on the priority of spoken language is useful to Derrida, for it allows him to demonstrate the interdependence of phonocentrism, or the privilege of speech over writing, with logocentrism, or the desire for a true and universal experience of the world in the mind prior to the introduction of language. Derrida’s situation of Saussure within this epoch of classical metaphysics radically changed the way in which Saussure is read to this day. Robert Young’s gloss is typical: ‘Saussure’s theories remain clearly within the logocentric tradition. ... For Saussure, as for Aristotle and Plato, speech is privileged because it seems closest to the self-presence of consciousness’ (p. 16). But does such a view follow from the text of the *Course in General Linguistics*? If it is clear that Saussure privileges speech over writing, can we say that this results from a desire to keep the voice closest to the sense experience of the world? This essay will review Derrida’s analysis of the relationship between writing, speech and the logocentric voice, and attempt to bring this assessment to bear against Saussure’s belief in the priority of spoken language. If something of Saussure’s position escapes
Derrida’s framework, then what does it tell us about the relationship *in general* between phonocentrism and logocentrism?

**Writing, speech, and the voice**

Following the close textual analyses of Derrida’s earlier work, the broad historical sweep of *Of Grammatology* is as unexpected as it is penetrating. Derrida’s object of study here is not simply Saussure or Rousseau, but an entire history of philosophy in which the voice is joined to truth. Before bringing Saussure to the discussion it is important, therefore, to understand how Derrida formulates, or establishes, this epoch. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida’s interrogation of the phonocentric tradition in Western philosophy begins with a quotation from the opening few lines of Aristotle’s *On Interpretation*:

Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words. Just as all men have not the same writing, so all men have not the same speech sounds, but the mental experiences, which these directly symbolize, are the same for all, as also are those things of which our experiences are the images. (1955, p. 4)

On the scene of language, in the Aristotelian view, and in a certain order, are: ‘things’; ‘mental experiences’ (which are the *images* of things); ‘speech sounds’ (which are the *symbols* of mental experiences); and lastly, ‘written words’ (which are the *symbols* of spoken words). A ‘thing,’ for example, a tree, is the same for all people, and hence the mental impression (experience, image) of a tree is the same for all people. Speech is the first symbolisation of mental experience, and writing a symbolisation of speech. Derrida formulates this as follows:
Between being and mind, things and feelings, there would be a relationship of translation or natural signification; between mind and logos, a relationship of conventional symbolization. And the first convention, which would relate immediately to the order of natural and universal signification, would be produced as spoken language. (1974, p. 11)

The relationship between things and the mind is a natural one. The relationship between the mind and the word, however, is by convention, as not all men have the same speech sounds. But the most intimate, most interior expression of the feelings of the mind is spoken language.

Derrida observes that, in Aristotle’s formulation, the spoken or written signifier is ‘derivative’ in regard to sense. In other words, the relationship between the thing and its mental image is established prior to the introduction of language. In this way, the signifier can be regarded as secondary or derivative in that it follows an original coupling, and hence also that it has no bearing or influence on that original coupling. The signifier is useful only for transporting the signified - which is understood as the mental image of the thing - from one person or place to another, that is, for communication. Such a transportation by signifiers would leave the signified unaffected in its relationship with the thing itself. And this division between the external, derivative ‘signifier’ (Aristotle’s σύμβολον, or ‘symbol’) and the internal, essential ‘signified’ (Aristotle’s παθεματα, or ‘mental experience’), would form the classical concept of the ‘sign’:

All signifiers, and first and foremost the written signifier, are derivative with regard to what would wed the voice indissolubly to the mind or to the thought of the signified sense, indeed to the thing itself ... This notion remains therefore within the heritage of that logocentrism which is also a phonocentrism: absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning. (1974, p. 11-2)
Therefore, the philosophical epoch of *logocentrism* (the natural expression of the world in the mind prior to the introduction of signs) is also that of *phonocentrism* (the relative intimacy of the voice, and the relative externality of writing).

The ambition of *Of Grammatology* is to critique an epoch of metaphysics in which a certain relationship between speech and writing had already been assigned. Written at the same time as this critique, *Speech and Phenomena* connects phonocentrism with the metaphysical drive to expel signification in general from what is essential in the human experience of the world. This reading, this first and most substantial argumentation against the internalisation of the voice, is made in relation to Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*. In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida will say of Husserl that he ‘believes in the existence of a pre-expressive and prelinguistic stratum of sense’ (p. 31), and ‘will ceaselessly strive to keep signification outside the self-presence of transcendental life’ (p. 31). The method by which Husserl achieves this is, according to Derrida, the exteriorisation of ‘indication’ - which is the use of signs in communication - and the interiorisation of ‘expression,’ which functions ‘even in *isolated mental life, where they no longer serve to indicate anything*’ (Husserl, 1970, p. 183). Husserl suggests that if we:

reflect on the relation of expression to meaning, and to this end break up our complex, intimately unified experience of the sense-filled expression, into the two factors of word and sense, the word comes before us as intrinsically indifferent, whereas the sense seems the thing aimed at by the verbal sign and meant by its means: the expression seems to direct interest away from itself towards its sense, and to point to the latter. But this pointing is not an indication in the sense previously discussed. The existence of the sign neither ‘motivates’ the existence of the meaning, nor, properly expressed, our belief in the meaning’s existence. (Husserl, 1970, p. 190-1)
Against Husserl’s drive to reject the assumptions of Western metaphysics, the Aristotelian conception of language seems to emerge from out of the deepest commitment of phenomenology, in the process of reduction to intuitive sense. Husserl suggests that if we reflect on the relation of the word and sense, the word is indifferent, intrinsically indifferent, whereas the sense is not. Or as Aristotle phrases it, all men do not have the same speech sounds, and hence they are immaterial to what they signify, but mental experiences are natural and non-arbitrary images of the things themselves. For Husserl, as for Aristotle, the existence of the sign follows an originary intuition, an intuition that signification can neither ‘motivate’ nor alter our experience or belief in. As Derrida concludes, it is only on the condition of the: ‘absolute proximity of the signifier to the signified, and its effacement in immediate presence, ... that he will be able to reduce it without loss and assert that there exists a pre-expressive stratum of sense’ (1973, p. 80).

But can this critique be made equally well for the Saussurean sign? In Speech and Phenomena, Derrida invites us to compare the Logical Investigations with the Course in General Linguistics: ‘The operation by which Husserl proceeds in the First Investigation would also have to be systematically compared with Saussure’s delimitation of the ‘internal system’ of language’ (p. 46-7n). Derrida suggests that the Logical Investigations can be compared with the following passage from the Course:

the linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image. The latter is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our senses. The sound-image is sensory, and if I happen to call it ‘material,’ it is only in that sense, and by way of opposing it to the other term of the association, the concept, which is generally more abstract. The psychological character of our sound-images becomes apparent when we observe our own speech. Without moving our
lips or tongue, we can talk to ourselves or recite mentally a selection of verse.

(Saussure, 1959, p. 66, qtd in Derrida, 1973, p. 46, Derrida’s italics)

Derrida cites Saussure’s description of the *image-acoustique*, literally the sound-image, or the sound-pattern, as a way of incorporating Saussure into the history of the logocentric voice. Certainly, this passage indicates that we need to proceed with such a comparison only on the basis that Saussure does intend that mental speech is possible, and that it is mental rather than physical articulation that is his primary object of study. However, whilst the sound-pattern can function ‘without moving our lips or tongue,’ it is not clear whether this mental speech is, for Saussure, pre-linguistic or intuitive in the way it is for Husserl. Can we say - for this is what *Speech and Phenomena* implies - that the Saussurean sign consists of a signifier which effaces itself in the moment of signification, allowing the signified to merge with intuition? As a first step, as Derrida suggests, the resources of the *Course* must be exhausted in beginning to make this comparison between Saussurean speech and the logocentric voice that Derrida finds first in Aristotle and Husserl.

**Writing and speech in the *Course***

Saussure’s discussion of the relationship between writing and speech takes place in chapter six of the *Course*, titled ‘Representation of a Language by Writing.’ This discussion, however, immediately follows and relies upon Saussure’s definition of what is ‘internal’ or ‘external’ to a language. In Chapter five of the *Course* – titled ‘Internal and External Elements of a Language’ – Saussure lists ethnology, political history, cultural institutions such as school and church, and geography, as external elements. It is important to understand, then, the definitions of ‘external’ and ‘internal’ which appear in the chapter’s opening and closing sentences. Saussure begins with:
Our definition of a language assumes that we disregard everything which does not belong to its structure as a system; in short everything that is designated by the term ‘external linguistics.’ (1983, p. 21)

And ends with:

Everything is internal which alters the system in any degree whatsoever. (1983, p. 23)

These are important definitions, for they allow Saussure to acknowledge the great influence that ethnology (‘a nation’s way of life has an effect upon the language’), political history (‘major historical events such as the Roman Conquest are of incalculable linguistic importance’), cultural institutions (‘a language has connexions with institutions of every sort’), and geography (‘every language in existence has its own geographical area’), have on a language (1983, p. 21-2). But what Saussure is attempting here is a delineation between language-as-a-system and language-in-its-totality. For Saussure, systematicity and internality are synonymous, as his example illustrates well:

It is sometimes claimed that it is absolutely impossible to separate all these questions from the study of the language itself. That is a view which is associated especially with the insistence that science should study ‘Realia.’ Just as a plant has its internal structure modified by outside factors, such as soil, climate, etc., in the same way does not grammatical structure depend constantly upon external factors of linguistic change? Is it not difficult to explain technical terms and borrowings, which commonly appear in a language, if we give no consideration to their provenance? (1983, p. 22)

Saussure responds that:

The main point here is that a borrowed word no longer counts as borrowed as soon as it is studied in the context of a system. Then it exists only in virtue of its relation and opposition to words associated with it, just like any indigenous word. (1983, p. 22-3)
In essence, what Saussure is naming as ‘internal’ to a language is its systematicity, that is, its operation as a differential structure.

Having established this definition, Saussure then turns to the most contentious division between what is internal and external to a language, that is, the division between speech and writing. Saussure states that: ‘although writing is in itself not part of the internal system of the language, it is impossible to ignore this way in which the language is constantly represented’ (1983, p. 24). Saussure elaborates this relationship as follows:

A language and its written form constitute two separate systems of signs. The sole reason for the existence of the latter is to represent the former. The object of study in linguistics is not a combination of the written word and the spoken word. The spoken word alone constitutes that object. But the written word is so intimately connected with the spoken word it represents that it manages to usurp the principal role. As much or even more importance is given to this representation of the vocal sign as to the vocal sign itself. It is as if people believed that in order to find out what a person looks like it is better to study his photograph than his face. (1983, p. 24-5)

The remainder of chapter six documents the many instances when orthographic priority has led to pronunciation changes; in other words, where writing has affected speech. Of course, as we have seen above, the ability of writing to affect speech is no reason at all to include it as an internal element of language. However, it must also be acknowledged that Saussure does not expend much effort justifying his claim that the sole reason for the existence of writing is to represent speech. There is something of the ‘self-evident’ in Saussure’s claim to the priority of speech, and as such, Derrida’s critique enters at exactly the right point. He asks:

Why does a project of general linguistics, concerning the internal system in general of language in general, outline the limits of its field by excluding, as exteriority in general,
a particular system of writing, however important it might be, even if it were to be in fact universal? (1974, p. 39)

This is, in general, an excellent question. However, in wondering why Saussure would exclude writing from linguistics, Derrida’s question could lead one down the difficult path of trying to reconstruct Saussure’s intentions and motives from the collective production of the Course. And despite his claim, elsewhere, of ‘caring very little about Ferdinand de Saussure’s very thought itself’ (1974, p. 329), this is exactly what Derrida does. It becomes necessary, then, to enter this discussion of Saussure’s motives, before we can consider in closer textual detail the arguments for and against Saussure’s justification for the priority of speech over writing.

The passion of Saussure

Across Derrida’s diffuse engagement with Saussurean linguistics, the particularity of Of Grammatology rests upon its extensive critique of the division between speech and writing. Derrida’s approach to the Course here is, however, from the outset, personal and psychological. He claims that Saussure’s exclusion of writing is not simply procedural, but is instead a response to the exigency of expelling the impurities and risks of writing from the natural and safe bond between voice and mind:

Writing would thus have the exteriority that one attributes to utensils; to what is even an imperfect tool and a dangerous, almost maleficent, technique. One understands better why, instead of treating this exterior figuration in an appendix or marginally, Saussure devotes so laborious a chapter to it almost at the beginning of the Course. It is less a question of outlining than of protecting, and even of restoring the internal system of the language in the purity of its concept against the gravest, most perfidious, most permanent
contamination which has not ceased to menace, even to corrupt that system, in the course of what Saussure strongly wishes, in spite of all opposition, to consider as an external history, as a series of accidents affecting the language and befalling it from without, at the moment of ‘notation’ (45), as if writing began and ended with notation. Already in the Phaedrus, Plato says that the evil of writing comes from without (275a). The contamination by writing, the fact or the threat of it, are denounced in the accents of the moralist or preacher by the linguist from Geneva. The tone counts; it is as if, at the moment when the modern science of the logos would come into its autonomy and its scientificity, it became necessary again to attack a heresy... . Thus incensed, Saussure’s vehement argumentation aims at more than a theoretical error, more than a moral fault: at a sort of stain and primarily at a sin. (1974, p. 34)

It is difficult to know why Derrida finds chapter six of the Course ‘laborious.’ But I can at least provide the data that the chapter occupies pages 45 to 54 of the 317 pages of the Cours. Such data might serve to warn the reader that Derrida’s indignant language should not be confused with evidence. Derrida’s ambition is to arrest Saussure’s ‘tone’ in the chapter ‘Representation of a Language by Writing’ and to reveal it to be in alliance with Plato’s view of writing as the ‘mere image’ of the ‘living, ensouled speech of a man of knowledge’ (2002, line 276a). Derrida will also say that:

 has it ever been doubted that writing was the clothing of speech? For Saussure it is even a garment of perversion and debauchery, a dress of corruption and disguise, a festival mask that must be exorcised. (1974, p. 35)

And that:

 For Saussure, to give in to the ‘prestige of the written form’ is, as I have just said, to give in to passion. It is passion - and I weigh my word - that Saussure analyzes and criticises here, as a moralist and a psychologist of a very old tradition. As one knows, passion is
tyrannical and enslaving .... That tyranny is at bottom the mastery of the body over the soul, and passion is a passivity and sickness of the soul, the moral perversion is pathological. (1974, p. 38)

Saussure, as a moralist of a very old tradition, seeks to protect the purity of the living, ensouled voice from corruption, contamination and the fall into the world by exorcising the sinful and bodily excesses of writing.

A brief but serious response to this must be that Derrida ought to have weighed the word passion and found it too heavy by far. A longer response would be necessary if Roy Harris hadn’t already allowed himself a passionate response:

Of all the artful misrepresentations displayed in Derrida’s interpretation of Saussure, none is more insidious than the attempt to portray the Cours as the fire-and-brimstone tract of a puritanical doctrinaire. (2001, p. 186)

Against Derrida’s interpretation of Saussure’s ‘tone’ in ‘Representation of a Language by Writing,’ Harris counters with:

Writing as sin. Saussure as the Calvin of linguistics. (For Geneva, read ‘centre of reformed Protestantism, hotbed of Calvinism’ ....) Sin, heresy, redemption: Derrida, as self-appointed Grand Inquisitor of Western culture, is well qualified in the art of extracting self-condemnatory confessions. (2001, p. 186-87)

In the section which Derrida cites, Saussure is attempting to address ‘the prestige of writing’ in the linguistics of his time. That is, he is attempting to reproach linguists who have interpreted the literary evidence of a language without first taking the precaution of checking for changes in its relationship with spoken language. The full paragraph reads as follows:
A language, then, has an oral tradition independent of writing, and much more stable; but
the prestige of the written form prevents us from seeing this. The first linguists were
misled in this way, as the humanists had been before them. Even Bopp does not
distinguish clearly between letters and sounds. Reading Bopp, we might think that a
language is inseparable from its alphabet. His immediate successors fell into the same
trap. The spelling *th* for the fricative *þ* misled Grimm into believing not only that this was
a double consonant, but also that it was an aspirant stop. Hence the place he assigns to it

Saussure’s passion, to the degree that it exists, is directed against fellow linguists who make
simple errors of analysis because of their failure to compare literary and phonetic evidence.
The *Course* is filled with such examples of erroneous scholarship and Saussure’s tone is
similar throughout. Contrast, for example, the mildness of Saussure’s tone on writing with his
comments on folk etymology: ‘There is something in it which may be regarded as perverted,
pathological’ (Engler 2670B, qtd in Gadet, 1989, p. 101). The recently published *Writings in
General Linguistics* also supports the view that whatever passion exists in Saussure’s writing
was reserved for his contemporaries. Unless contradictory evidence can be found, Harris
would appear to be justified in feeling that Derrida’s interrogation of Saussure’s character and
motives recklessly exaggerates anything that can be found in the *Course*.

The effect that Derrida’s psychological profile of Saussure has had can only be guessed
at, but the frequency of its citation would indicate that it is the dominant view of Saussure
today. Christopher Norris, for example, writes that: ‘Saussure’s metaphors suggest all manner
of evil, degenerate effects brought about by this exposure of language to the dangers of
writing’ (p. 87). Geoffrey Bennington goes further:

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1 See, for example, Saussure’s contempt for Alexander Kurschat, 2006, p. 142.
If writing were indeed merely the kind of external representation that Saussure claims (44-7), how could it bring with it what Saussure calls ‘dangers’ (44) which need to be pointed out and even denounced in a tone which is more one of moralistic indignation than of scientific description? (p. 189)

Bennington has well learnt the art of the one-word citation. From the single word ‘dangers,’ he will mount an increasingly hysterical attack on Saussure, rising from ‘Saussure’s tone of indignation’ (p. 190) to ‘Saussure’s angry complaint’ (p. 190) and finally to ‘Saussure’s manifest outrage’ (p. 190). The ease of Bennington’s procedure shows how comfortably Derrida’s speculation has been naturalised as fact.

**The symbolic relation of writing to speech**

Having staged this exchange of views, which has at least allowed us to scrutinise the received knowledge of Saussure’s motivations for privileging speech, there remain at least two arguments in *Of Grammatology* against the division between speech and writing that are due careful consideration. The first point of Derrida’s to consider, which he makes in the second half of the chapter ‘Linguistics and Grammatology,’ is that Saussure’s own theory of the arbitrariness of the sign should prevent him from posing a natural hierarchy between writing and speech. Derrida’s reasoning here requires a lengthy quote:

The thesis of the arbitrariness of the sign thus indirectly but irrevocably contests Saussure’s declared proposition when he chases writing to the outer darkness of language. This thesis successfully accounts for a conventional relationship between the phoneme and the grapheme (in phonetic writing, between the phoneme, signifier-signified, and the grapheme, pure signifier), but by the same token it forbids that the latter be an ‘image’ of the former. Now it was indispensable to the exclusion of writing as
‘external system,’ that it come to impose an ‘image,’ a ‘representation,’ or a ‘figuration,’ an exterior reflection of the reality of language.

... What matters here is that in the synchronic structure and systematic principle of alphabetic writing - and phonetic writing in general - no relationship of ‘natural’ representation, none of resemblance or participation, no ‘symbolic’ relationship in the Hegelian-Saussurean sense, no ‘iconographic’ relationship in the Peircian sense, be implied.

One must therefore challenge, in the very name of the arbitrariness of the sign, the Saussurean definition of writing as ‘image’ - hence as natural symbol - of language. Not to mention the fact that the phoneme is the unimaginable itself, and no visibility can resemble it, it suffices to take into account what Saussure says about the difference between the symbol and the sign (101) in order to be completely baffled as to how he can at the same time say of writing that it is an ‘image’ or ‘figuration’ of language and define language and writing elsewhere as ‘two distinct systems of signs’ (45). For the property of the sign is to not be an image. (1974, p. 45)

To summarise: Saussure’s theory of the arbitrariness of the sign demands that the relationship between phonemes and graphemes be arbitrary, and yet Saussure will at the same time define writing as an ‘image’ of speech; this is contradictory because the property of the sign is to not be a symbol. In this passage, Derrida appears to cite Saussure describing writing as an ‘image,’ a ‘representation,’ or a ‘figuration,’ of speech. Hence that relationship is a ‘natural’ representation, a ‘resemblance,’ a ‘symbolic’ relationship in the Saussurean sense; the ‘image’ is a ‘natural symbol.’ If so, then this is quite a collection of synonyms. It is necessary then to go back to chapter six of the Course in an attempt to determine exactly what was the postulated semiological relationship between writing and speech. We begin with the title to the chapter in question:
although writing is in itself not part of the internal system of the language, it is impossible to ignore this way in which the language is constantly represented. (p. 24)

A language and its written form constitute two separate systems of signs. The sole reason for the existence of the latter is to represent the former. (p. 24)

As much or even more importance is given to this representation of the vocal sign as to the vocal sign itself. (p. 25)

Certain very subtle linguistic features can long survive without the assistance of written notation. (p. 25)

For most people, visual impressions are clearer and more lasting than auditory impressions. So for preference people cling to the former. The written image in the end takes over from the sound. (p. 26)

In the end, the fact that we speak before learning to write is forgotten, and the natural relation between the two is reversed. (p. 26)

Two letters, for example, will be used to designate a single sound. (p. 28)

Thus when people say that a certain letter should be pronounced in this way or that, it is the visual image which is mistaken for the model. (p. 30)

Saussure repeatedly describes writing as the ‘representation’ of speech. He never uses the word ‘symbol’ - a word which Derrida uses three times in the passage above. On the two occasions that he uses the word ‘image’ - a word which Derrida uses five times in the passage above - it is clear that Saussure is merely distinguishing something which can be seen from something which can be heard. Despite its widespread and uncritical acceptance (cf. Gaschê,
Derrida’s reading of a ‘symbolic’ or ‘iconic’ relationship between the grapheme and phoneme is an invention. Having said that, there remains much that is ambiguous about this relationship: Saussure’s position is that writing exists only to represent speech, and that writing and speech are two different sign systems. It is possible, however, that writing has a direct and independent relationship with thought, and hence is a sign system in its own right. It is also possible that writing is partially dependent on and partially independent of speech. Perhaps Saussure’s statement that: ‘The essence of a language, as we shall see, has nothing to do with the phonic nature of the linguistic sign’ (1983, p. 7) indicates that no such division within language needs to be made.\(^2\) For myself, I am prepared to follow Saussure – at least some of the way – in his privileging of speech over writing. After all, the statement ‘writing exists only to represent speech’ is more plausible – from empirical evidence – than the statement ‘speech exists only to represent writing.’ As Harris observes, the priority of speech can be justified ‘by the simple fact that only a very small proportion of the world’s languages had ever been written down’ (2001, p. 177). And Saussure himself refers to the learning priority of speech in children as evidence for the natural priority of speech. That Saussure, as a practicing linguist, was interested in evidence that pointed to the priority of speech in human communication should not be surprising. And whether or not such a clear-cut phonocentrism was an appropriate foundation for the science of general linguistics is a question that must remain open. Such questions are important. But the issue at stake in Derrida’s interpretation is not whether Saussure was right or wrong to distinguish speech from writing and to give priority

\(^2\) Indeed, Saussure’s notion of writing as existing purely to represent speech may be in contradiction with his claim, elsewhere, that writing is a sign system in its own right. See Harris (1995, p. 58-63) for a discussion of Saussure’s problematic definition of writing and speech as separate sign systems, and my own (Daylight, 2011, p. 81-4) thoughts on this issue.
to studying the former. The issue is whether this choice is a result of the desire to allow the voice intimate access to the transcendental sense.

Writing as crisis

The second point of Derrida’s to consider, which reprises his work in *Speech and Phenomena*, presents the thesis that Saussure’s exclusion of writing is made in order to maintain a pre-linguistic intuition, and hence, to maintain the possibility of truth.

What Saussure does not question here is the essential possibility of nonintuition. Like Husserl, Saussure determines this nonintuition teleologically as crisis. The empty symbolism of the written notation ... is also for Husserlian intuitionism that which exiles us far from the clear evidence of the sense, that is to say from the full presence of the signified in its truth, and thus opens the possibility of crisis. This is indeed a crisis of the logos. (1974, p. 40)

What we know about Saussure is that he *does* treat writing as external to linguistics proper, and that writing is ‘empty’ in the sense that it does not form part of the double articulation of sound-pattern and sense. Written signs follow an originary production of linguistic semiology, and do not add anything to meaning. At least, if they *do* add something to a linguistic sign, they do so as part of language-in-its-totality, not as an element of the language-as-a-system. However, the remainder of Derrida’s assertions here are more contentious: that Saussure, like Husserl, determines ‘nonintuition’ as a crisis of truth; that writing exiles the clear evidence of the sense.

In *Speech and Phenomena* Derrida invites us to compare Husserl’s reduction of indication with Saussure’s externalisation of writing. The closest Derrida comes to following through with this suggestion is in his most direct and technical engagement with the
The Saussurean sign: his interview with Julia Kristeva in *Positions*. Derrida’s critique of the Saussurean sign here is, however, indistinguishable from his critique of Husserl:

When I speak, not only am I conscious of being present for what I think, but I am conscious also of keeping as close as possible to my thought, or to the ‘concept,’ a signifier that does not fall into the world, a signifier that I hear as soon as I emit it, that seems to depend upon my pure and free spontaneity, requiring the use of no instrument, no accessory, no force taken from the world. Not only do the signifier and signified seem to unite, but also, in this confusion, the signifier seems to erase itself or to become transparent, in order to allow the concept to present itself as what it is, referring to nothing other than its presence. (1981, p. 22)

In Derrida’s reading, Saussure would want to say that spoken language is the direct symbolisation of mental experience, an experience that takes place before its symbolisation in language. There is nothing in this description, then, to suggest that the Saussurean sign might contain some development or contradiction of the Aristotelian or Husserlian ‘sign.’ Despite this, there is in fact much in the *Course* which suggests not only a revision of this particular aspect of the sign, but its opposite. First, we can note that Saussure seems intent on establishing the impossibility of thinking a concept prior to, or without, signifiers:

Psychologically, setting aside its expression in words, our thought is simply a vague, shapeless mass ... . [W]ere it not for signs, we should be incapable of differentiating any two ideas in a clear and constant way. In itself, thought is like a swirling cloud, where no shape is intrinsically determinate. No ideas are established in advance, and nothing is distinct, before the introduction of linguistic structure. (1983, p. 110)

And continuing this theme:
The characteristic role of a language in relation to thought is not to supply the material phonetic means by which ideas may be expressed. It is to act as intermediary between thought and sound, in such a way that the combination of both produces a mutually complementary delimitation of units. Thought, chaotic by nature, is made precise by this process of segmentation. (1983, p. 110)

And furthermore, directly challenging the possibility of signifiers effacing themselves, leaving behind a pure signified:

Any linguistic entity exists only in virtue of the association between signifier and signified. It disappears the moment we concentrate exclusively on just one or the other.

(1983, p. 101)

Derrida’s characterisation of thought as a self-present intuition, able to dispense with its signifying material, would seem to be compromised by Saussure’s statements here, at least superficially.

Second, Derrida’s characterisation of expression as depending only ‘upon my pure and free spontaneity, requiring the use of no instruments, no accessory, no force taken from the world’ would seem to be challenged by what Saussure says about the passivity of the individual in relation to the social communality of la langue.

A community is necessary in order to establish values. Values have no other rationale than usage and general agreement. An individual, acting alone, is incapable of establishing a value. (1983, p. 112)

And that:

in order to have a language, there must be a community of speakers. Contrary to what might appear to be the case, a language never exists even for a moment except as a social
In Saussure’s sign system *everything* is taken from the world. The individual is unable to have clear and constant thoughts prior to the introduction of linguistic structure. What’s more, this structure is not produced from within, but passively accepted from without, so that one’s most intimate thoughts are *made possible by* and *structured by* the collection of social agreements called *la langue*.

The difference between Saussurean and Husserlian semiology is perhaps most evident in Husserl’s consideration of soliloquy:

> Shall one say that in soliloquy one speaks to oneself, and employs words as signs, i.e., as indications of one’s own inner experiences? I cannot think such a view acceptable. (Husserl, 1970, p. 190)

For Husserl, one’s inner thoughts and experiences can be articulated without the need for language and signs. There exists a stratum of sense prior to the introduction of language. For Saussure, however, one’s very *experience* of the world is dependent on one’s particular language system. Here, he offers the example of how verb tenses in Slavic languages allow one to differentiate between a single-moment future action and a developing-action taking place over time. For Saussure:

> These categories are difficult for a Frenchman, because his language does not recognise them. If they were predetermined categories, there would be no such difficulty. In all these cases what we find, instead of *ideas* given in advance, are *values* emanating from a linguistic system. (1983, p. 115)

In other words, it is difficult or even impossible to think certain thoughts if one’s language does not suggest or allow it. All of these citations above, and many other examples and
argumentation in the *Course*, strongly suggest that Saussure explicitly attempted to overturn those characteristics of classical signification that Derrida critiques in *Speech and Phenomena*. And whether or not this attempt was ultimately successful, Derrida perhaps ought to have spent more time with, and made a more cautious and careful example of, Saussure’s efforts here. For when the *Course* is compared with the *Logical Investigations* in the manner suggested by Derrida, it is quite impossible to say that Saussure would ‘want to maintain’ or to ‘assert’ that there exists a ‘pre-expressive substratum of sense,’ or that speech depends only upon ‘my pure and free spontaneity’ and ‘takes nothing from the world.’

**Conclusion**

To conclude, I want to return to Derrida’s question of why a project of general linguistics excludes writing on an *a priori* basis. For all the reasons given above, I do not accept Derrida’s explanation that Saussure does this in order to maintain a pre-linguistic relationship with experience, the truth, or *logos*, or that Saussure would see the alienation of the natural evidence of the senses as a crisis. Without wishing to become a Saussure apologist, it appears to me that Saussure’s reasons for excluding writing are more mundane than Husserl’s, more disciplinary than philosophical, and more about maintaining the possibility of his science than maintaining the proximity to an intuitive consciousness. As Chiss and Puech suggest, to deny Saussure a phonocentric orientation at this point is not only to “deny the Saussurean project its coherence and its pertinence” (p. 100), but also to “maintain the confusion between general linguistics and universal linguistics” (p. 100). The confusion, in other words, between language-as-a-system and language-in-its-totality. We can accuse Saussure of scientism, among other things, but conflating his intentions and motivations with Husserl’s or Plato’s is excessive. By focusing on a single sign system,
Saussure is able to formulate the role of difference in producing linguistic values. And it is precisely a metaphysics of difference that Derrida would most want to retain from Saussure’s work (cf. Derrida, 1981, p. 18; 1982, p. 10).

If any kind of comparison between the *Logical Investigations* and the *Course* has been made, then the first finding would be the disparity of evidence that each text provides for the exteriorisation of language and signs. Husserl writes that ‘the word comes before us as intrinsically indifferent, whereas the sense seems the thing aimed at by the verbal sign and meant by its means,’ and that ‘the existence of the sign neither ‘motivates’ the existence of the meaning, nor, properly expressed, our belief in the meaning’s existence’ (Husserl, 1970, p. 191). In chapter six of the *Course*, ‘Representation of a Language by Writing,’ Saussure attacks what he calls ‘the prestige of writing’ on the grounds of poor scholarship: that Bopp’s errors in his analysis of the evolution of language are caused by a failure to distinguish between the spoken and written language. The chapter is presented as a defence of spoken language against what Saussure believes to be the ascendency of the written form in nineteenth-century linguistics. But it still falls to Derrida to show how this chapter reveals that Saussure felt that the voice was closer to some kind of transcendental intuition. Derrida wants Saussure to see writing as a crisis, to see the rupture of the natural bond between speech and thought as a crisis, but cannot demonstrate this from the text of the *Course*, except by assigning to Saussure the phenomenological voice, and Husserl’s motivation for dividing indication from expression. The *Course* might privilege a linguistics of speech, but it could never be made to support ‘the effacement of the signifier in the voice’ (1983, p. 20), or ‘the signified producing itself spontaneously, from within the self’ (1983, p. 20).

What Derrida mainly fails to demonstrate is the logical or linguistic co-dependence of phonocentrism and logocentrism. Derrida undoubtedly demonstrates that Saussure shares a phonocentrism with Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, and Husserl. But phonocentrism and
logocentrism are very different ideas, even if they are often found together. Saussure’s belief in the priority of spoken language – a belief which has some empirical legitimacy – does not necessarily confer a belief in the possibility of pure mental essences, prior to the introduction of language. The alternative conclusion is that Saussure is phonocentric but not logocentric, and indeed, that it is possible to be phonocentric but not logocentric. The core of Derrida’s observations, therefore, is that Saussure excludes writing from his study of language-as-a-system, and treats it as an external element which can affect the language. Writing is empty notation in the sense that it does not participate in the double articulation of sound-image and sense. This much is undeniable. However, the remainder of Derrida’s observations - of the self-presence of signifieds, of the crisis of nonintuition, of the effacement of signifiers - are a reflection of how much of Derrida’s interrogation of Saussure relies on a pathological profile of the linguist from Geneva, rather than on any evidence from the Course.

Works Cited


